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ALTERNATIVE PEDAGOGY: EMPOWERING TEACHERS THROUGH REAL TALK

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ABSTRACT

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EMPOWERING TEACHERS THROUGH REAL TALK

By

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Academic success is a crucial component of an individual's ability to be successful in American society. Those who do not succeed in school stand as polar opposites to those who do succeed and often experience limitations in obtaining occupational and economic growth opportunities. Due to disparities in academic achievement, these "at risk" students have negative experiences and performances in schools. Helping this population to succeed is a major obstacle for teachers yet seems to be an elusive goal.

At the Michigan State University High School Equivalency Program, I worked closely with "at risk" students over the course of two and a half years. My intent was to increase student passing rates and success. During this time, I focused on developing a pedagogy informed by existing literature and my own sociological insight that supports students' learning and development towards success. This approach is based on a student oriented, inclusive classroom following an established structure to engage students to be integral in their own learning process. This approach not only resulted in increased student passing rates, reduced misbehavior in the classroom and aided me in connecting with the students, and further helped reveal effective techniques used when working with "at risk" students.

My dissertation summarizes the techniques I used with participants and examines the extent to which they were successful or unsuccessful. Using literature from the

Sociology of Education and other sources, I examine what factors produce "at risk" students. I examine these factors and their impact on the educational experiences prior to and during the student's participation at MSU HEP. Characteristics of my pedagogy are reflected on by students and colleagues alike to affirm positive attributes of the approach as well as identify areas needing improvement.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Education has a major influence on economic success in the United States. Unfortunately, academic success is difficult to obtain for students who fall into the "at risk" category. This population poses a major dilemma for schools as teachers and administrators who struggle to facilitate academic achievement. Scholars agree that high school drop out rates pose a serious issue amongst "at risk" students (Lee and Burkam 2003). The term "at risk" is best described by Professor Arthur Pearl in Richard Sagor and Jonas Cox' book of *"At Risk" Students* as:

> Any child who is unlikely to graduate, on schedule, with both the skills and self esteem, necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, inter/intra personal relationships, [and who may drop out of school because of low academic performance]. (2004:1).

"At risk" students often present behavioral problems in the classroom that disrupt the learning process for themselves and others. Many teachers describe these students as a burden in the classroom and feel hopeless in trying to teach them successfully (Sagor and Cox 2004). Common characteristics of "at risk" students include low self-confidence with school work, avoidance of school, distrust of adults, limited notions of the future, discouraged learners, fragile home life, and viewing success in school as a matter of luck rather than hard work.

In addition to facing challenges academically, many "at risk" students are in danger of juvenile delinquency and high rates of teen pregnancy. A majority of "at risk" students live in low income households, which means that they are limited with regard to resources, social capital and parental guidance for them. A reduced level of supervision increases the likelihood for their involvement in negative activities. Since poor,

dilapidated neighborhoods which often house many "at risk" students are plagued with crime and violence, many of these students become involved in activities that promote disconnection from classes and a loss of interest in school. In fact, "sociological research on education clearly shows that delinquency [and teen pregnancy have] negative associations with school grades and retention" (Tanner, Davis, and O'Grady 1999:253). Given these challenges, I argue that an alternative pedagogy must be created in order to more successfully educate "at risk" youth.

The focus of this dissertation is to explore the successful creation and implementation of an alternative teaching pedagogy which I have titled the Pedagogy of Real Talk. The foundation of this pedagogy explores methods of connecting teachers and students with curriculum through a style of dialogue regarding real life experiences. This approach was used to target the underlying trend of low passing rates among Michigan State University High School Equivalency Program (MSU HEP) students. The goal was to increase passing rates on the General Educational Development (GED) exam. I used a case study method to explore the impact of my pedagogy by focusing on the learning issues surrounding the "at risk" learners of the MSU HEP (henceforth HEP) population.

The HEP program is housed at Michigan State University (MSU). HEP is designed and intended to assist migrant and seasonal farm workers who have not completed high school to obtain their GED. HEP has two main objectives: 1) an increasing percentage of HEP participants will receive their GED diploma; 2) an increasing percentage of HEP recipients of the GED will be placed in postsecondary education programs, upgraded employment, or the military. HEP participants are eligible if they or an immediate family member have worked a minimum of 75 days in

agriculturally related employment (migrant or seasonal farm work) in the last 24 months; through participation in a Migrant Education Program Title I, Part C, eligible for services under the Workforce Investment Act, Section 167 Program; are at least 17 years of age; and do not have a secondary school diploma. Admission to the program is not based on race or ethnicity, rather occupation, hence not excluding any race from admission.

The HEP program was created and structured to capitalize on the college environment to best serve all HEP participants in reaching the two main HEP objectives. HEP's GED passing rate goal is 75%, though the achievement of this goal has historically fallen short. To target this shortfall, the program has established many student services within its structure to assist with transitional and academic issues that often arise as barriers for student success. HEP offices are located in the same MSU dormitory which houses all program participants. These offices accommodate the HEP staff, which consists of a director, associate director, recruiter, secretary, administrative assistant, 4 instructors, 15-25 tutors, 2-3 residential mentors, 2 testing coordinators, and a varying number of student workers, interns and volunteers. Of this group, the instructors have the most intimate and consistent daily contact with the HEP students. Four instructors provide in depth instruction for five GED subject areas (Math, Reading, Writing, Science, and Social Studies) in English and Spanish. Additionally, a Career Development course offers in depth practical knowledge of and preparation for careers, college, or post-HEP pursuits. Twice weekly, students attend official GED practice test sessions which simulate actual GED testing. Lastly, mandatory study sessions and learning labs offer support through one-on-one and small group tutoring or instruction.

One important HEP feature is that all students are presented the option to take GED classes in either Spanish or English. The core curriculum is the same whether taught in English or Spanish. Typically, the majority of participants speak both languages, however, in order to accommodate the comfort and confidence levels of all students, a language choice is provided. Traditional schooling systems often separate students who do not speak English by placing them in English as a Second Language classes. This division may then indicate a separation of cultures when compared to their English class counterparts. This is not the case with the HEP students. The HEP program serves the migrant community which presents a very specific cultural and ethnic demographic. The most common race/ethnicity/culture of migrant workers is Mexican or Mexican American, thus HEP students follow this same trend. Therefore, comparing the classes in English and Spanish is relevant as they serve the same cultural population. Throughout the dissertation, I will make comparisons between the GED courses offered in Spanish and English.

The majority of HEP students represent a specific component of the Latino population which is part of the rapidly growing and materially poor overall U.S. Latino population (Cordero-Guzman and Quiroz-Becerra 2007). Further, this population is inclusive of the increasing numbers of Latino youth dropping out of school in the U.S. The high school drop out rates for Latinos fall between 21% (Fry 2003:3) to 29% (Martinez 2010:5) accounting for 40% of the entire U.S. drop out population despite the fact that Latinos make up only 17% of the total youth population (Child Trends Data Bank 2006). These percentages show a variance because drop out rates tend to vary among states and cities. The overlying theme of stimulating Latino youth to leave school

follows an alarming and consistent trend. This study attempts to share insight into a successful approach, applicable when working with this unique group. Although this study focuses on the specific migrant, Latino population, I attempt to address the broader pedagogical challenges that instructors face when working with "at risk" students.

This case study focuses on an effective pedagogy used with HEP students; a student population referred to as "at risk". In this study, this term is not only based on those who were low achieving academically and dropped out of school, but for those students who had life circumstances that forced them to leave the educational system. This includes participants who are pushed out of the educational system due to age, lack of credit transfer between school districts and states, and differing educational systems between Mexico and the United States, all leaving students with a need for high school completion. Many HEP students have been stigmatized and viewed as "at risk" youth while in school due to their experiences and/or performance. Their past academic history usually reflects very low passing rates and grades. Even upon entering HEP, due to the intensity of the courses and the variation among teaching styles of instructors, many do not successfully obtain their GED. HEP's biggest obstacle is students not passing the GED subject area exams and/or students leaving the program before completing their GED. The HEP participants come to this program to be put through a rigorous process for GED preparation and to pass the GED exam. Unfortunately, this end result has not been the predominant trend. Although the HEP staff is committed to student success, there seems to be a missing link in preparing students effectively to pass the GED.

I developed the Pedagogy of Real Talk to address this insufficiency. The approach is based on a combination of the theories of Freire (1970), Mastropiere and

Scruggs (2001), and Meyer (1968), all three of which have proven effective when working with "at risk" populations. The process of combining the three theories was the first step in creating this unique pedagogy. The second part of my methodology was to integrate the established theories with new concepts and my personal conceptual contributions to complete the development of a new pedagogy. I introduced concepts that were not used by the three examined theories to create an alternative approach which focuses on improving passing rates.

During this study, I will interchangeably refer to my case study focus as "approach" and "pedagogy" staying true to the pedagogical roots of Freire (1970) and based on the theories of Mastropiere and Scruggs (2001) and Meyer (1968). Because I discuss pedagogy throughout this study, it is important to clarify its definition. "Pedagogy refers to the transmission of knowledge, usually through structured curricula," (Ballantine 1997:205). Sociologist Basil Bernstein expands on this notion specifying that this transmission of "pedagogy is constructed through a relationship between teacher [and student]" (McFadden and Munns 2002:357). Further contributing to my understanding and use of pedagogy is the definition discussed by Panagiota Gounari, "[Pedagogy] has Greek roots, meaning 'to lead a child' (from pais: child and ago: to lead). Thus the term 'pedagogy' illustrates, education is inherently directive and must always be transformative" (Freire 1970:25). Pedagogy involves the process of developing and implementing lessons, in-class assignments, homework, study guides, reviews and other forms of exercises that help emphasize and reinforce a teacher's approach. Specific in class assignments may reflect lessons being covered in the class curriculum but it is the pedagogical approach that determines how lessons are executed. My focus when using

and developing pedagogy is founded in these fundamental understandings of the concept. Now that I have defined pedagogy I am able to provide further discussion in regards to my case study.

My pedagogy focused on the student and teacher developing and learning from one another through dialogue in the classroom. Establishing an environment of open communication from day one provided me unique insight into my students. As an active listener, this allowed me to better relate to students and create an engaging, exciting, and worthwhile classroom environment. My communication with students was not superficial, but genuine, allowing them to teach me about their perspectives regarding their "realities", world views, and experiences. The information learned from my students' perspectives led to lectures, lessons, and assignments focused on their experiences. Students were extremely receptive to my pedagogy upon noticing that the material covered in class was intended to directly relate to their lives. However, although the students often enjoyed class, this alone did not guarantee they would succeed in passing the GED.

Further developing my approach, I aimed to ensure that all class activities were inclusive towards integration of the core concepts of the class curriculum, in turn, enhancing student learning and reinforcing skills to support the GED exam. This integration was crucial because the standardized GED test does not focus solely on the information learned from the "real talk" foundations of the alternative pedagogy. While students were engaged in class and receptive to learning, they needed to develop a deeper understanding of concepts relating to the GED exam. As lessons were created and

connections were made with students, I focused on integrating GED concepts and providing a consistent classroom structure throughout the semester.

It is important to highlight some specific differences of my pedagogical approach when compared with more traditional classroom approaches to explore its effectiveness when working with "at risk" youth. For example, in *Differentiating the High School Classroom,* Kathie Nunley (2006) states, "Teaching is the input part. Students listen to lectures, watch videos, read text, or participate in an activity. The point here is to get new information into the brain" (p. 130). My approach differs in that it is two-sided as students also teach me, thus, giving me insight about their lives and perspectives. Although I also teach them, it is neither a one-sided, teacher-led process, nor focused on simply filling them with information. Also, in *Thinking Like a Teacher* by Meisels et al. (2002), teachers approach getting to know students as a learner using a more technical, bureaucratic strategy through:

> … systematic and ongoing observation, through thoughtful and rigorous documentation of meaningful learning, and through the continuous assessment of the achievements and the learning opportunities provided for [students]. (P. 2)

This strategy is set up for teachers as a baseline structure but is not necessarily directly applicable in the classroom because of its very rigidity. Unlike these inflexible approaches, I get to know students by virtue of meaningful dialogue, not solely observation. By engaging who they are as people outside of their role as student, I am able to structure the class according to students' needs and abilities to relate curricular concepts to their lives. Another example, found in Meisels et al. (2002) is that, "…[teachers] develop the skills to find their own answers to the teaching dilemmas embedded in practice…by fostering the ability to determine from among a range of possible solutions" (p. 2). This implies that the solutions will be sought out and found

within the teacher's perspective. In contrast, my focus is not on the instructor finding solutions within themselves, but on finding solutions to classroom challenges using the students' perspectives.

Conducted over the course of two and a half years, the Pedagogy of Real Talk helped HEP students pass the Reading and Writing sections of the GED with increased rates and provided methods to other teachers to help them connect and build rapport with students. Students not only achieved significant increases in passing rates, they were more engaged while in class decreasing classroom misbehavior. Off topic, personal conversations during class diminished and daydreaming or sleeping became non-existent as students were eager to participate in lessons and discussions and completion rates of assignments increased because they felt personally connected with the topics. They wanted to offer their experiences and insights because they could see it was valued and incorporated into the curriculum. With decreased disciplinary issues, lessons became easier to set up, students' willingness to engage in learning increased and my job as instructor became easier. Thus, rather than spending a large portion of time managing the class or disciplining students, I was able to work closely with students in the specific skill areas needing the most assistance.

I argue that the Pedagogy of Real Talk is feasible for others to learn and utilize. Success with "at risk" students can be achieved by developing an inclusive, structured, student oriented learning environment; the very foundation of this study. Teaching through methods and strategies that build better connections with students, improves "at risk" youth performance academically. To support others putting this pedagogy into practice, I will share sample lessons, lectures, and general outlines created to aid teachers.

Rather than simply stating that there is a problem with low passing rates, or discussing theoretical implications, I will supply empirical data acquired and teaching methods applied during the development of this approach that can be directly used by teachers. Although I work with a specific population, my pedagogy as defined is founded on theoretical stances that can be potentially applied to any "at risk" student population (e.g. race, class, sexuality, etc.). Therefore, the manner in which I gather insight, create lessons and care for students can be adapted by any teacher willing to implement the process.

CHAPTER 2: THEORY AND LITERATURE

In order to understand the perspectives of HEP students I use Herbert Blumer's sociological theory, symbolic interactionism. This is the most appropriate theory as it, "[focuses on how] humans' use symbols to communicate with one another" (Turner 1998:361). Blumer's development of symbolic interactionism was focused around the idea that humans create and use symbols. More specifically Blumer established that symbolic interactionism rests on three simple premises:

> The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world—physical objects [or] other human beings… The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (1969:2)

Human beings respond, interact, and react in regards to the meaning that things have for them which is created based on how other people respond to them regarding this meaning (Blumer 1969). In this study, I explore how HEP students communicate and interpret the world around them in pursuit of success towards obtaining their GED. By using a symbolic interactionist approach to communicate with students, I am able to create dialogue in a manner to which students are receptive. Additionally, this sociological theory allows me to focus on and analyze the school experiences of HEP students. In essence, the literature used provides further insight in to how HEP students and I communicate and interpret each others' perspectives.

The theories and concepts used in my case study are Paulo Freire's liberation education, Margo Mastropieri and Thomas Scruggs' S.C.R.E.A.M. variables (Structure, Clarity, Redundancy, Enthusiasm, Appropriate Pace, and Maximized Engagement), and

characteristics of successful teachers by Joan Meyer. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* a book dedicated to the poor of Brazil, served to create a revolution against those in power during the writing of his book. I adapt many of Freire's classic ideas in a more modern sense while upholding his original work which has, "outlived its own time and its authors" (Macedo 2000, Introduction). This book offers a major pedagogical approach for teachers to use when working with disadvantaged populations. Many educators within the U.S. have used this pedagogy but have adapted it into a methodological approach rather than the dialogue he initially intended. Freire's intentions focused on, "the fundamental goal of dialogical teaching [which creates] a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about experiences shared in the dialogue process" (Macedo 2000, Introduction). The liberation education model focuses on a pedagogical form wherein the teacher takes a role with the students relating to their perspectives and lives.

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Freire 1970:80)

Thus, the teacher begins to teach students by learning about them through the established dialogue. As the teacher learns about the students' lives and what is pertinent to them, the teacher is able to teach in a manner that is relevant to their lives. By approaching students in this manner, the types of lessons and lectures created are based on the experiences and lives of the students rather than introducing a strict approach to curriculum that is not effective with the oppressed (hence forth "at risk" students). The focus of Freire's pedagogy is to develop a learning environment which is dedicated to the lives of "at risk" students by connecting their life experiences to learning. Using an

approach similar to that which Freire uses to understand students and their perspectives, I incorporate the terministic screen concept as described by Rockler (2002), targeting how people view the world around them further deepening this understanding.

> When I speak of terministic screens, I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were different photographs of the same object, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so 'factual' as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending on which color filter was used [to make the photograph]. (Rockler 2002:400)

The terministic screen impacts the manner in which people use their vocabulary in communicating and how people accept and deflect certain aspects of society as originally defined by Kenneth Burke:

> Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality. Insofar as the vocabulary meets the needs of reflection, we can say that it has the necessary scope. In its selectivity, it is a reduction. Its scope and reduction become a deflection when the given terminology, or calculus, is not suited to the subject matter which it is designed to calculate. (Winterowd 1985:177)

The terministic screen can be influenced by the group membership of a person; for example, socioeconomic status, race, education, political affiliation, etc. As Freire discusses how to understand students, he in essence is trying to determine their terministic screens. Therefore through dialogue, the teacher begins to understand the terministic screens of his/her students, and as a result, the students no longer simply listen but engage in building an effective pedagogy.

This dialogue feeds a problem posing approach allowing the instructor to "constantly re-form his reflections in the reflection of the students" (Freire 1970:80). Thus a problem posing approach turns the students into critical investigators through dialogue with the teacher. This continuous state of interaction and active listening creates a classroom that constantly fosters critical development while challenging students and

maintaining engagement of the "at risk" students as they learn the introduced subjects or concepts. Thus, according to Freire:

> Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obligated to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (1970:81)

Using this approach with "at risk" students, Freire was able to set up learning environments that were effective with this population whereas the students remained interested and committed in the classroom.

Contributing to my usage of Freire, I use Mastropieri and Scruggs' (hence forth M & S) concept of S.C.R.E.A.M. variables. The S.C.R.E.A.M. variables are used by M & S as part of the general effective teaching skills needed by teachers to be successful with students. "[Effective teaching] skills include… structure, clarity, redundancy, enthusiasm, appropriate pace, and maximized engagement… [These] elements have been seen to be of great importance in inclusive settings" (Mastropieri and Scruggs 2001: 266). Inclusive classrooms using these variables provoke more engaged and active student involvement in the classroom and throughout the learning process. Structure (S) is important in setting up the classroom with students. This includes using appropriate curriculum, targeting students' learning styles, understanding and knowing the short and long term goals of the class and how the instructor can assist students in achieving these goals. Clarity (C) is imperative to assure understanding of the instructor's expectations of the students and student's expectations of the instructor in the classroom. This variable greatly reduces any misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Redundancy (R) focuses on having students practice assignments in a variety of manners to approach a

concept in a multitude of ways. Redundancy includes repetition, reiteration and reinforcement. Enthusiasm (E) is essential for teachers when approaching "at risk" students and should occur from the beginning until the end of all classes. Enthusiasm needs to be present daily as new material is introduced or older material is reviewed. Teachers must carefully consider student needs and learning as the class progresses to determine an appropriate pace (A). By structuring a needs based pace, students feel comfortable and can keep pace with the teacher as they learn the material in class. Maximized engagement (M) is the final component to support the engagement of "at risk" classrooms. It maintains student attention and upholds the goal of keeping all students involved in the class.

M & Ss' S.C.R.E.A.M. variables and Freire's pedagogy enhances the final piece of my theoretical foundation: the characteristics of successful teachers as defined by Joan Meyer. Meyer's results are based on two experimental case studies that focus on:

> … high school dropouts [and] the assumptions that positive interpersonal relationships and an initial emphasis on nonverbal learning were necessary to counteract the rejection and verbal weaknesses experienced by those from a poverty culture. (Kaufman, Lewis & Gumper 1968:89-90)

Meyer found three characteristics that determine a teacher's success with these students: the ability to relate to students personally, the ability to teach the students, and the teacher's attitude towards the students (Meyer 1968). Meyer's (1968) definitions of the three concepts are as follows:

> …[R]elating to students includes a student-oriented approach to teaching, insight, personal flexibility, critical self evaluation, and willingness to [play] the role of 'listener' and even of counselor when necessary. [The ability to teach the students] depends on his flexibility and creativity [in teaching], his personal dynamism, and willingness to expend effort and energy beyond the minimum required. [Finally], the attitude which the teacher brings to the classroom [is] fostered and reinforced by personal characteristics and interaction with the students. His success in approaching the [students] as a teacher and a person is contingent upon the projection of a positive, accepting, and caring attitude. (P. 1)

By identifying and incorporating these successful characteristics, I am able to determine their effectiveness in promoting student GED performance. These characteristics aid in my evaluation of pedagogies used by HEP teachers whose student's success rates were minimal. Additionally, these characteristics have been observed and identified by students in their course evaluations. In understanding how the teacher's approach impacts the HEP students, both successful and unsuccessful teacher characteristics are viewed through the lens provided by Meyer.

A further literature review of multiple case studies conducted by various scholars regarding pedagogy and "at risk" students will support the strength, importance and relevance of case study research. "Popular Media, Critical Pedagogy, and Inner City Youth" by Leard and Lashua, focuses on a case study that encompasses building respectful and reciprocal relationships between students and teachers. Leard and Lashua's case study took place in an inner city setting working with two alternative school programs. They viewed how teachers used popular culture in the classroom to connect with students and analyzed student's narratives in the form of student-written rap songs. The activities within their case study established results of positive relationships in the classroom between teachers and students. When working with "at risk" students, this reciprocity is crucial for teachers to find avenues which allow students to relate to them to, in turn, build trust and social capital in the classroom.

Similar to Leard and Lashua, Ladson-Billings' (1995) article on culturally relevant pedagogy allows me to analyze other teachers' pedagogical approaches by highlighting eight exemplary African American teachers and how they were successful with their students. Ladson-Billings found in her case study that culturally relevant

pedagogical approaches were effective when working with students in low ranking school districts. The teachers she observed used examples and lessons that their African American students could relate to culturally. This made the lessons more appealing, effective, and led students to perform at higher levels. These case studies focus on similar populations of students to those in my case study which exemplify and support similar facets of information allowing for development of research to aid "at risk" students.

Although the work of Freire, M & S, Meyer, and the case studies I use offer strong foundations when teaching "at risk" youth, they all have limitations. Freire offers wonderful approaches and powerful tools on how to teach non-traditional students but provides no insight on how to create or structure a classroom in which to achieve effective outcomes through teaching. Similarly, although M & S created a structure that could be effectively used in a classroom, they did not propose any suggestions on pedagogy but simply focused on the organization of the classroom. Meyer carefully studied and documented characteristics of successful and unsuccessful teachers but she did not offer anything applicable beyond the discussed characteristics. Finally, the mentioned scholars or case studies examined, though all have similar foundational characteristics as my case study, do not focus specifically on connecting their work with alternative student populations or the teaching necessary to enhance student's performance on standardized tests.

Through this case study, I connect my pedagogy through sociological insight and create an approach that improves student outcomes on standardized testing. My study builds on the aforementioned approaches to establish a single, more encompassing

pedagogy that benefits both students and teachers in the classroom. Using aspects of the incorporated literature, I have created the concept of "real talk" in the classroom and discuss how others can modify it to create their own version of "real talk" to achieve effective outcomes. To date, there is virtually no sociological or scholarly literature relating to HEP students. This study contributes as literature in education and sociology regarding this unique population and begins to establish scholarly discussions regarding the special educational needs of this group.

To further support my research, I have chosen an array of other scholars in areas that will strengthen my case study. Much of the literature analyzed yields supplemental information framing the HEP case study. The collected literature explores the diverse factors impacting student experiences in school which reflect reasons for dropping out. These factors encompass race, social class, teacher influence, and "at risk" student perspectives. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (*Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*) analyzes race through an understanding of modern race relations. Bonilla-Silva focuses on the concept of "color blind racism" as the new racial ideology supporting racism (Bonilla-Silva 1999 & Winant 2000). Color blindness is a perspective that emphasizes "that segregation and discrimination are no longer an issue because it is now illegal for individuals to be denied access to housing, [quality education], public accommodations, or jobs because of their race" (Gallagher 2007:132). Color blindness has become the modern norm in America as a way to approach race. Experiencing this notion of color blindness, many HEP students shared stories which they feel evidences the current issue of rampant color blindness existent in schools today. To their detriment, many of these students were also witness to

or victim of overt experiences with racism while in school. Gallagher refutes the idea of racial equality as something that has already been achieved in the U.S. by emphasizing the U.S. as a society that no longer views the color of people. Unfortunately, by simply ignoring race, the inequalities built into the structure and institution of America do not disappear (Bonilla-Silva 1999). Racism is an experience which many HEP students openly discussed as part of their previous school routine; therefore, resulting in their decision to dropout.

Student's direct experiences with racism have negative effects on their grades and performance in school. In fact, it is important that race not solely be viewed as a variable to partially explain variance in schooling outcomes, but as a part of the production and process of schooling. Once "at risk" students have experienced racism in their school it affects their willingness to participate and often leads to low student success. Cammarota (2006) identifies detrimental impacts of racism on "at risk" students in schools. "This broad history of racial discrimination engenders an ideological field of perceptions in schools, which influences not only how students of color perceive themselves but how school personnel perceive – or rather ignore – their intellectual potential" (Cammarota 2006:4). At times, schools fail to understand the needs of these students and the impact of racial inequalities that occur daily.

Scholars have consistently noted the effects of social class on "at risk" students in regards to academic achievement thus, literature focusing on social class directly reflects experiences of HEP students. "Socioeconomic disadvantage accounts for about half of these children's academic shortfall…in the standard measures of socioeconomic well being (e.g., parental education, household composition, books at home)" (Gosa and

Alexander 2007:287). This disadvantaged environment obstructs access to educational resources and increases student distractions making completion of educational endeavors difficult. These results play a major role in how students are unable to acquire sufficient test taking skills (Hunter and Bartee 2003). With no other seemingly obvious options, many students turn to crime and violence for survival which negative influences are impeding a student's ability to develop as successful test takers in their schools. Suzanne Bianchi (1999) supports this issue when she states that "...poor children are twice as likely...to be victimized by violent crimes. [Additionally the affects of this violence]...flow from the limited financial resources of poor children's families" (p. 326). In their biographies and interviews, HEP students revealed that involvement in crime and violence was a factor preventing academic success in school prior to attending the HEP program. This limited success resulted in extremely low success rates on standardized tests.

In *Teachers Influence on Students' Attachment to School*, Maureen T. Hallinan analyzes the teacher influence on "at risk" students. Hallinan discusses how students' feelings about school likely influence how much they learn (2008). This is further supported by "Marcus and Sanders-Reio who reported that liking school enhances the likelihood that a student will complete school" (Hallinan 2008:272). Scholars discuss that teachers play a major role in shaping and impacting students experiences in school (Hallinan 2008, Marcus & Sanders-Reio 2001, Muller 2001). Many teachers struggle to connect with "at risk" students; therefore this incorporated supporting literature is important because it highlights the specific aspects of the struggles that teachers experience. For example, many "at risk" students feel that no one is listening to them

while simultaneously, teachers feel that many "at risk" students are not truly listening to them (Leard & Lashua 2006). Issues such as this are further examined in order to not only show how HEP students felt in school with teachers, but how I overcame this challenge through the Pedagogy of Real Talk.

The process of understanding student perspectives is aided by authors such as Paul Willis (*Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*) who provides research that further substantiates my case study. Willis' ethnographic study contributes significant insight into students' perspectives. For example, one of the young students interviewed shares his perspective on teachers with Willis, "They ought to treat us how they'd like us to treat them" (Willis 1977:11). Many of the HEP students shared their concern regarding how, in their opinion, teachers in school treated them unfairly. This treatment led to HEP students responding with actions and attitudes towards teachers that mirrored how they felt they were treated by the teachers. In many cases, students viewed teachers as disrespectful and thus would respond with comparable disrespect to teachers. HEP students often viewed teachers as enemies which parallel Willis' interaction with students in his study, "PW: You think of most staff as kind of enemies? [Students:] Yeah!" (Willis 1977:12). This view is extremely detrimental to the teacher's ability to connect with students and support student success. Like Willis, Michael O'loughlin also analyzes the perspectives students have of teachers and further substantiates the importance of acknowledging their views. O'loughlin states, "It would appear that if we are to hear students' voices, we must be willing to explore culturally relevant forms of teaching" (1995:110). This reflects the experiences shared by HEP students in why they felt they could not connect with their teachers; a lack of relevant

teaching. Overall, the literature surrounding student's perspectives is crucial in supporting what HEP students shared about their views on teachers and schools.

The theories of Freire, M&S, and Meyer discussed in this chapter are the foundation of my approach in this case study. Combining the approaches of these scholars and introducing the concept of terministic screen, adds to the uniqueness of attempting to create a powerful approach to use when working with "at risk" students. The remaining literature discussed in the chapter compliments my study by offering insight and understanding into what HEP students experienced while at MSU HEP. The theories and literature used will also help the reader understand the depth and complexity behind this 2 ½ year case study. Having established the theories and literature used in my study, the following chapter focuses on the methodology used in gathering and analyzing the data for this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research explores the success of an alternative pedagogy implemented in a case study with HEP students. "Does this pedagogy have a positive impact on student passing rates and student experiences in the classroom?" There are many ways to attempt to answer this question. I have chosen to conduct a case study because I find it to be the most encompassing approach in uncovering the answers to this research question.

In order to gather rich, in depth data for the case study, a variety of data collection methods were identified and used. Case studies involve an array of data collecting methods "by systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions" (Berg 2004:251). One benefit of this study is the access to clear insight to how an alternative pedagogical approach may benefit student's passing rates. Throughout this study, data was collected through participant observation, interviews, personal student biographies, surveys, auto-ethnography, and quantifiable measures. Together, all of these methodologies support and reinforce the overall case study objectives.

A case study approach provides a guide for my research (Berg 2004). Although I have gathered data regarding my students' passing rates, it is not the focal point in determining the success of my pedagogy. Analyzing HEP student perspectives and allowing them to have a voice offers an understanding of their opinions regarding the effectiveness of my approach. By conducting this qualitative research and gathering in-depth information from all involved in this study I "attempted to find the macro within

the often mundane micro" (Krane 2000:31). I am hopeful that the development of a larger societal understanding of how the pedagogy was effective will allow for contributions toward a deeper understanding of how to work effectively with "at risk" students.

I was fortunate to stumble across the opportunity to conduct a case study with HEP. I discovered HEP when a friend forwarded me an instructor position announcement from HEP for which I applied and went through the program's formal interview process (emails, phone interview, and formal face to face interview). After my hire, I gained knowledge about the students served by the program. Although knowing from the onset that I would create and implement an alternative pedagogy to try to accommodate the special learning needs of this "at risk" student population, there was no thought to the specific development of this case study. However, after a conversation with the program's Recruiter the motivation and inspiration to conduct a formal study emerged. The Recruiter was a well respected individual within the program and among the HEP student community. My view of him/her was as a major asset whom I respected tremendously. He/she and I spoke regularly but during this conversation, there was seriousness and urgency to his/her voice that I had not previously heard. He/she said to me:

> Paul, the students speak very highly of your teaching style and that is not usual for instructors in this program. The students hold you in high regard and say that you are not just preparing them to pass the GED but you are changing their lives for the better. I have also been watching you and I agree with the students. I believe you are doing something special in your classes. But, I want to encourage you to share that with others. No one knows anything about how to teach this population of students and you would be helping many others if you shared your teaching style. I don't want you to become one of those special teachers who has a powerful impact on students but when you leave, that impact and success with students is lost. Think about what you are doing Paul and share your approach to teaching with others so they can help students be successful like you have.

His/her words were the motivation that spurred me to begin this study with HEP.

A week after the Recruiter and I spoke, the Director and Associate Director held a staff meeting regarding research and the HEP program. They pointed out that they recently had returned from meetings with the Department of Migrant Education and they had news to share with us. The Director relayed:

> There is virtually no scholarly research regarding our population of students. I encourage any of you to consider conducting research that will help the federal government and our program gather data regarding our students. It is a necessity and urgent matter to gather research information regarding our students so we can help serve their needs.

In that instant, I requested to speak with both directors regarding my research idea.

In a private meeting with the Director and Associate Director, I informed them about my idea of conducting a case study and explained my ideas asking if they would allow and be supportive of my research. They were both excited about my ideas and, not only did they allow me to conduct the research, but the Associate Director volunteered to play an intricate part in assisting with my research. The Associate Director was in charge of the details of the program's daily operations leaving no other person more knowledgeable about the program. It was through his/her help that I was able to freely conduct my case study over the course of five semesters. Immediately after gaining the support and approval from the directors, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application with the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCHRIS) was filed.

METHODS

In order to capture and measure the data within the case study in an effective manner, triangulation was used to incorporate a variety of methods. Triangulation is described:

> ...for many researchers, [as] restricted to the use of multiple data-gathering techniques (two or more methods of data collection) to investigate the sample phenomenon. This is interpreted as a means of mutual confirmation of measures and validation of finding... the important feature of triangulation is not the simple combination of different kinds of data but the attempt to relate them so as to counteract the threats to validity identified in each. (Berg: 2004:5)

The use of this approach reinforces the effective analysis of my Pedagogy of Real Talk when working with HEP students. The limitations of my methods include a lack of concrete large scale quantitative data. The methods used and the nature of the case study make it difficult to compare or generalize my study to larger mainstream society as a whole. However, through the methodological approaches used in regards to the developed pedagogy, effective results have been yielded with the HEP students.

The first of the multiple methods used was participant observation. As the Reading and Writing instructor for the case study population, my interaction with the participants was that of instructor-student relationship. By using participant observation, I was able to "observe the naturally unfolding worlds of the population under study" (Berg 2004:129). Beyond collecting data through the student-teacher relationship, I was able to gather information using other methods. In many instances, spontaneous conversations, discussions, and arguments were stimulated by interactions between students and I outside of the classroom, thus, allowing me to gather insightful data (Berg 2004). I prepared students for their GED exams by teaching them through the use of the curricular foundations of the academic structure used by the HEP program. Overall, through participant observation, data has been gathered regarding my pedagogy in conducting classes (e.g. lessons, homework, lectures, etc...), student progression within the classes and the final outcome of students' GED results.

In order to gain a deeper, more detailed understanding of the experiences and perspectives of HEP students, in-depth interviews were conducted. In-depth, one-on-one interviews with HEP students helped enrich the validity of the case study by providing first hand testimonies of student opinions and experiences. Although students volunteered to be interviewed regarding their experience in HEP, due to the voluntary nature of the interviews and limitations caused by the intense schedule of the program, not all students were able to participate in the one-on-one interviews. Ultimately, 28 HEP students were able to be formally interviewed. The interview questions were liberally structured around 10 primary areas:

1) Life history: individual history, age, place of birth, where they grew up, family history, birthplace of parents, age of parents, parent's occupation, parent's income, number of siblings, and number of people in their households
2) Self identity: how they identify themselves, how they were identified by their communities, and how they were identified by teachers and administrators
3) Past school experiences: whether they liked/disliked school, what they liked/disliked about school, what were their experiences with teachers/administrators like, whether they faced any disciplinary issues, and their reasons for dropping out of school
4) Social adjustment: their comfort level at MSU
5) Self identity at MSU: is their identity the same as it was prior to their arrival to MSU or has it changed while at HEP
6) Social network at MSU: who are their significant friends, mentors, and people they respect
7) Racism at MSU: did they personally experience racism, did they witness any HEP students being racially discriminated against, and did they hear of any HEP student who experienced racial discrimination
8) Perspectives on instructors: attitudes and perspectives towards HEP instructors, did any instructor positively or negatively stand out from all others, favorite instructor and why
9) MSU vs. Home: how is MSU different than their "homes", do they have a preference between the two, and would they be willing to stay at MSU or would they rather go home
10) Overall experience at MSU: what was their overall experience while at MSU

The interview questions were open-ended and additional time was spent on questions that evoked stimulating, elaborate responses. Additional informal conversations with students allowed clarification of any vague responses that were or statements needing further inquiry.

The idea of using personal biographies was coincidently brought to my attention by a student while pondering the usage of this methodology. There are some students who are willing to discuss their experiences in school and other personal matters, but struggle to verbalize their perspectives and feelings. These students feel it is easier to express their experiences through writing rather than through dialogue. Therefore, I collected personal biographies from some students regarding an abundance of topics, for example, about previous experiences in school, reasons for dropping out of or leaving school and/or family struggles with migration for work preventing consistent education. All students were asked to write personal biographies in Writing class but were given the option to permit the usage of their biography for the case study.

Another method employed was the use of surveys. Semester evaluations (provided in survey format) were completed by students at the end of each semester. The Associate Director met with students to avoid any bias potentially caused by instructor presence to distribute the evaluations regarding the instructors and each class environment. After collecting all evaluations, the Associate Director typed up summaries and statistics regarding the surveys and provided a copy to each instructor, per their individual classes. The surveys were anonymous, requiring no identifiable or personal information from students, allowing students more comfort to answer honestly regarding the instructors and the classes.

The method of auto-ethnographic data collection was used to highlight my life experiences and how they potentially played a positive and/or negative role in the application of my pedagogy. Auto-ethnographies can be defined as "…a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Burdell & Swadener 1999:22). The social contexts of my personal experiences encompass living in deep poverty, gang involvement (deviance), race (Latino), and being an "at risk" student who dropped out of school. I framed my life experiences, "in the context of the bigger story, a story of society" (Chang 2008:51) in order to determine what larger societal connections I had with HEP students. My life experiences were part of my methodological approach because of the highly personal relationships I developed with the students through my position in the HEP program.

The final method in which data was gathered were quantifiable measures which used several factors to further establish and strengthen the effectiveness of my pedagogy. First, the trends of passing rates from semesters prior to my tenure as the Reading and Writing instructor at HEP were examined. Next, I compared my Reading and Writing classes to Reading and Writing classes taught by different instructors within the program. Lastly, I compared the subjects I taught to all other subjects taught by other instructors in the program.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

In order to determine the effectiveness of the Pedagogy of Real Talk developed through the case study, I analyzed the data collected using varying approaches to clearly and accurately decipher the gathered information. The first form of analysis followed the illustrative method used as a basis to determine how all collected data proved the ways

wherein my pedagogical approach was similar to the theoretical approaches examined. The purpose of using the illustrative method was to employ a preexisting theory that provided, "empty boxes. [I] will analyze to see if evidence can be gathered to fill them. The evidence in the boxes confirms rejects or confirms the theory, which [I] will treat as [my] useful device for interpreting the social world [within HEP]" (Neuman 2000:427). As the boxes were filled with data, the effectiveness of my pedagogical approach was evidenced.

The second data analysis approach was conducted through the traditional qualitative approach of content analysis. All methodological approaches brought together an immense amount of data, which in order for results to take shape and form, were analyzed through the process of content analysis as Berg (2004) states:

> Interviews, field notes, and various types of unobtrusive data are often not amenable to analysis until the information they convey has been condensed and made systematically comparable. An objective coding scheme must be applied to the notes or data. This process is commonly called content analysis. (P. 265)

The method of content analysis allowed for methodical comparisons to be created and conclusions to be established.

I analyzed my data through the usage of content analysis, more specifically through the incorporation of two forms of content analysis. The first of the two used was the social anthropological approach. This approach is most commonly applied when case studies are being conducted (Berg 2004). The analysis using this approach focuses on:

> …behavioral regularities of everyday life, language, and language use, rituals, and ceremonies, and relationships. The analytic task, then, is to identify and explain the ways people use or operate in a particular setting; how they come to understand things; account for, take action, and generally manage their day – to day life. (Berg 2004:266)

Analyzing the data using this approach was crucial for understanding the population with which I worked. In order to develop an effective pedagogy fostering strong connections

with students, it was necessary to understand their norms, perspectives on school, past experiences, current experiences, and their overall insights toward education. As I progressed through the analysis to determine what encompassed students' behavioral regularities and constructions of reality, I integrated the second social anthropological approach of collaborative social research.

The collaborative social research approach is relevant to my research as it focuses on participants in a given setting concentrating on achieving some sort of change or action (Berg 2004). This approach follows six main qualitative procedural steps modified from John Creswell's *Research Design* (2003). Step 1 includes an in depth organization and preparation of all data. In particular, transcription of all interviews, observation notes, and student biographies, and arranging and sorting qualitative, comparative program and survey data. Step 2 involves the process of reading through and analyzing the data to yield a general sense of all of the data in order to reflect on its meaning. At this stage, I took notes and organized all data into categories arranged through the meaningfulness of all data information. Step 3 further detailed my analysis through a coding process. This process entails additional organization of data into categories facilitating the process of bringing significance to the data for usage in a functional manner. With extensive qualitative findings, this step is essential in applying the information gathered. Through step 4, I used the coding process created in step 3 to generate descriptions of the setting, people, categories, and themes analyzed. The coding of my data aided in the description of my case study and the presentation of the major findings. The themes and descriptions uncovered during step 4 revealed how they could be represented in and throughout the qualitative narrative. Using a narrative conveyed

the findings of my analysis by "discussion of [some] chronology of events, the detailed discussion of several themes…visuals, figures and or tables" (Creswell 2003:194). The final step within this approach was to formulate an interpretation or meaning of the data. In other words identifying what lessons were learned and/or what results of the data were found. This step was completed through my individual interpretation of the data and findings, comparisons with other program data, and the process of asking more questions stimulated by the results. Through this manner I was able to view my findings as supporting past theories and also showed how my Pedagogy of Real Talk approach built on, as well as contributed to, past theories. My contribution to the larger field of sociology offers a unique manner in which to successfully work with "at risk" students.

Within my case study, I used a variety of methods to gather needed data. Analyzing the data as part of the research process has been described in order to understand the manner used to decipher meaning from the vast amounts of gathered information. Overall, I feel that the chosen methods and data analysis were the most appropriate for this study. Having established my methods, the next chapter will detail a discussion regarding what the Pedagogy of Real Talk entails and how it was used in the classroom.

CHAPTER 4: PEDAGOGY OF REAL TALK

The objective of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of my instructional approach and an explanation of how it was implemented in the classroom. This case study was initially established as an attempt to fulfill the need for a teaching style that could help "at risk" students pass the GED. Witnessing the struggles of other teachers who work with "at risk" student populations, I wanted to create a way to benefit students and aid teachers in overcoming their struggles. I am hopeful that this approach can help others learn new strategies to apply with students and/or stimulate new ideas and discussions. As Freire stated, "I will be satisfied if among the readers of this work there are those sufficiently critical to correct mistakes and misunderstandings, to deepen affirmations and to point out aspects I have not perceived" (Freire 1970:39).

Pedagogy of Real Talk is a teaching approach founded on a combination of three different, existing models of education: Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Mastropieri and Scruggs' S.C.R.E.A.M., and Meyer's Characteristics of Successful and Unsuccessful Teachers. Throughout the literature examination, I did not find any other pedagogy that combined all three of these approaches. This combination allowed me to maximize the strengths of each approach while using them to complement one another, thus, making my pedagogy more encompassing than the use of any individual model.

Each model contributed a concept which I incorporated to create the Pedagogy of Real Talk. I then added three additional concepts geared toward assisting individuals working with "at risk" students in the classroom. The result was a new, powerful educational approach based on six core concepts.

First, I examined Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed which focuses on a liberation education model. This model is defined as education that "...must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire 1970:72). Emphasizing the concept of dialogue, this model fosters teachers and students to learn from one another. By integrating students' input and perspectives in the learning process, lessons become more relevant to their lives while encouraging them to become an intricate part of the classroom. Students' voices are recognized and affirmed; thus, creating an environment where students and teachers grow together.

The second applied approach used is Mastropieri and Scruggs' S.C.R.E.A.M. variables (Structure, Clarity, Redundancy, Enthusiasm, Appropriate Pace and Maximized Engagement). This concept creates a structure that aids in establishing an inclusive learning environment. By analyzing a teaching course in light of each of the variables, teachers can identify the use and effective implementation of each variable within existing structures, and identify strengths and weaknesses for further development.

Meyer's Characteristics of Successful and Unsuccessful Teachers is the third model from which I gleaned one of the six fundamental concepts of the Pedagogy of Real Talk. Meyer asserts that a successful teacher must encompass an ability to relate to students personally, an ability to teach students, and a positive attitude towards students. These characteristics are crucial for the optimal usage of any successful pedagogy when working with "at risk" students.

In addition to the unique combination presented with these three existing models, I added three additional concepts that contribute to the overall strength of the Pedagogy

of Real Talk. The first added concept is Kenneth Burke's terministic screen. Burke defined terministic screen as how individuals view the world (Winterowd 1985). This view is formed and reflected by perspectives based on an individual's ascribed or achieved status within society (Rockler 2002). Through the examination of each student's terministic screen, teachers are able to create a meaningful, relevant curriculum and learning environment, inclusive of the learning needs of each student.

The second concept is my addition of (F) flexibility to the S.C.R.E.A.M. variables. My emphasis on flexibility, allows for the adaptation of core concepts to the unique needs of all students in order to achieve consistent results over time with different sets of students. My definition of flexibility is for a teacher to be supple enough to incorporate every aspect of S.C.R.E.A.M. across multiple classes with a variety of students while always maintaining the possibility of change. Flexibility fosters an environment inclusive to all student's unique needs and characteristics for learning.

The last concept is my creation of "Real Talk" discussions. "Real Talk" is an instructor-led discussion surrounding a series of broad, engaging themes which motivate student oriented outcomes (See Appendix A for sample themes and teacher-led initiations used in "Real Talk"). "Real Talk" can be further understood as an approach created to establish connections, understanding, trust, empathy, and caring for one another which is then linked to an established curricula. Some of the themes I used to initiate "Real Talk" discussions were straight forward sociological concepts such as (but not limited to) experiences with race, gender, social class, deviance, and sexuality. However, "Real Talk" themes are intended to be identified and established by each individual teacher stemming from the terministic screens of both teacher and students.

"Real Talk" sessions require an instructor to select topics which he/she can then personalize from life experience and use to invoke feelings or stimulate memories in students. The focus is not on the exact experience an instructor shares, but the student's relation to the feelings evoked (for example: triumph, helplessness, happiness, victimization, stigmatization, or mistreatment). Positive and negative experiences are used in these discussions creating broader connections with students even when there are no direct similarities shared between the experiences of students and the teacher. These connections link to each student's feelings of passion, hate, love, despair, bitterness, pain, happiness, joy, etc…, depending on the chosen theme. The entire process is based on dialogue which confirms understanding and relation to the material in the classroom, therefore, elevating students' genuine interest, engagement in class, and motivation to learn.

An example of a "Real Talk" lecture in the classroom begins with the teacher choosing a topic as their "Real Talk" focal point (See Appendix B for an example script of a "Real Talk" lesson). In this example, I chose adversity. The teacher begins the "talk" by lecturing about what adversity means in general, providing a clear definition for students. By beginning broadly, the instructor can funnel the "talk" down to a more detailed, meaningful discussion about a direct experience that begins to evoke emotions in the students that relate to the theme. The first connection occurs when the teacher shares an experience he/she has had with adversity in his/her life. It is optimal and preferable for teachers to share their own authentic experiences. However, teachers can authentically apply or share experiences of others with whom they are close or can use biographies, events, or experiences based on popular culture or media. The point of the

teacher sharing these experiences is to further connect the understanding and reality of the experience with adversity and the feelings and emotions evoked. This pushes the students to see the teacher as a person beyond their position in the classroom. As the teacher shares his/her experiences of adversity, the next step is to ask the students if they have ever experienced adversity.

In this step, it is not essential that students confirm their experience with adversity by raising their hands rather; any form of agreement such as verbal comments or physically nodding their heads are sufficient to acknowledge their involvement. The next step is to ask students to volunteer to share any specific examples of dealing with adversity. In the first "Real Talk" lecture, few students will volunteer, but I typically had at least two to three students offer specific examples. Once they share their experiences or perhaps the experiences of someone close to them, the teacher must then step in again to build and create connections with what the students are sharing with the class. The teacher must begin to show the different types of adversities we all go through and how each student brought that to light. This method helps the students feel empowered in the class as if they are contributing to the overall experience and knowledge of the class.

The final step in "Real Talk" falls once again on the teacher to create more connections for the students. Once the teacher has gathered insight from students and their experiences, the final step is to connect "Real Talk" to what is being taught in the class. In this example, the topic of adversity must be connected to the class curriculum. The teacher can show the students that by passing the class, they are overcoming a form of adversity that the class poses for some students. Connecting adversity (or whatever topic is used) to the class and the lives of students is integral, but more important is

building connections to the curriculum through the lessons of the day. For example, I assigned students to write about an experience of dealing with adversity in my Writing class (See Appendix C for a sample of the writing response from the "Real Talk" lesson). Their experience was the focus, but simultaneously students had an opportunity to practice their writing skills. I linked the discussion with the lessons and concepts surrounding a unit from the textbook regarding paragraphs, topic sentences, transition sentences, and the many other writing fundamentals of the curriculum. The same was done in my Reading class as I connected the adversity topic to a chapter, for example, on symbolism (See Appendix D for examples of how the theme of adversity was tied in to specific lessons for the GED Writing and Reading texts). The focus was on what things the students see in their everyday lives that symbolize adversity. I then connected the understanding of symbolism according to their books and how it applied to their everyday lives. Usually, this led to other lessons and concepts that connected the lecture with adversity.

Overall, the focus of "Real Talk" is to connect with students, build rapport, and gain insight into their terministic screens through dialogue in order to teach them effectively. Although I was able to optimize my connection with some students based on shared personal experiences, it is important to note that the foundations of my pedagogical approach enable others who may not share similar experiences with their student population. My background is relatively similar to that of many HEP students in that I grew up within the feminization of poverty in this country and was involved with gangs as a youth. Similarly, I was labeled as an "at risk" student throughout school and dropped out of school multiple times before finally graduating. Lastly, while identified

as Latino and with fluency in the Spanish language, my background serves as a powerful connection with the majority of HEP students. At times, these similarities helped me connect with students, but I learned that I could not rely on this shared background as a means to connect with individual students. In fact, at times, this backfired. Similarity in race, language and experience with poverty and delinquency do not ensure connection with students. Rather, instructors of any background must begin with listening and authentic sharing. A key to utilizing "Real Talk" discussions is the realization that their purpose is to gain insight into student's thoughts, feelings and terministic screens and to authentically share oneself so students can gain insight into the instructor and begin to establish trust in the student-teacher relationship. During my case study, there were Latino instructors who shared background similarities with students but were not able to make meaningful connections in the classroom.

Establishing "Real Talk" is essential during the first week of a course or class to begin the process of building rapport. With more experience, to maximize "Real Talk" it could be integrated the first day of class. "Real Talk" doesn't necessarily depend on the students for their direct insight, but induces the process of dismantling negative stereotypes of teachers in the eyes of "at risk" students. This process helps impact each student's terministic screen and by understanding their views, leads to the next step in the approach.

By engaging the student's terministic screens through the dialogue of "Real Talk", I gained an understanding of the students' perspectives which led to enhanced lessons that were appropriate for and specific to students. For example, in some classes, students shared negative perspectives about specific racial groups based on past negative

experiences or incidents. I used their terministic screens on race relations as a foundation for discussion on this topic. Lessons utilizing student's terministic screens were always based on the GED curriculum and were adapted to involve student experiences with race or other themes as a tool in practicing their needed curricular structure. Seizing the moment of students' heightened levels of attention, I further transitioned lectures into a lesson or assignment which connects the discussion and personal experiences to the GED academic curriculum. The "Real Talk" lessons are used to help develop a foundation to reveal and extract the terministic screens of many students.

Giving students a voice by incorporating their perspectives and experiences in class lessons is very important to get them engaged in their learning process, but more so is the teacher's ability to connect their students' perspectives to the academic curriculum to assure the final academic goals for the course are met. As the students' terministic screens are discovered, it is the teacher's responsibility to create lessons based on this discovery, however, it is crucial that the material not become watered or "dumbed down". In fact, Meyer (1968) perfectly describes alternative lessons and their potential outcomes:

> It should not be inferred from the above discussion that what teachers were actually doing was watering down course material to elementary levels so that the subject matter would be palatable, for this frequently was not the case. Bringing topics close to home does not imply simplifying the materials. For example, one teacher, when confronted with the Problems of Democracy book, found the section on 'Now you are a big man ready to face the world' so inapplicable to these life-hardened youth that he taught them basic sociology instead. He tried to present sociology as it applied to them, using the caveman and the institution of the family to discuss why the male did not go over the hill to the next woman. He integrated these concepts with the students' contemporary relationships within society, and the test results were amazing. The students had completely mastered a new vocabulary and set of concepts because it was something that had meaning for them. (P. 22-23)

Lessons that remain relevant to students' lives are engaging, realistic, and pertinent to students while the teacher connects them to the core concepts. Having established "Real

Talk" and terministic screen, it is essential to be able to connect with students and create relevant lessons consistently semester after semester.

Identifying specific "Real Talks" and terministic screens of one group of students offers great insight into that group; however, the information gathered may not be appropriate or applicable for another group of students. Although my "at risk" students shared a common stigmatizing label, they were very different as individuals. S.C.R.E.A.M. too readily accepted that all students would learn the same which easily ignored the diversity found amongst students. Although I do agree that S.C.R.E.A.M. can be implemented in every class, it is up to the flexibility of the instructor to incorporate it in every class reinforcing and emphasizing the various components as needed by each group of students. The teacher must be willing to change based on the needs of the students rather than the students adjusting to a potentially rigid instructor using the S.C.R.E.A.M. approach. Students may not be receptive to certain approaches and if the instructor can adjust the approach then he/she will be more successful with S.C.R.E.A.M. + F. In essence, the teacher is using this concept as a flexible framework and will develop it further as he/she adapts to his/her students. It is very important to keep in mind that by being flexible, teachers can easily adapt and implement S.C.R.E.A.M. + F in many different classes.

Through my experiences applying the concepts of my pedagogy, I truly grasped the necessity of S.C.R.E.A.M. + F. In the fall of 2006, my first semester with HEP, I struggled with students learning the material even though they were engaged and well behaved in the classroom. I had established a positive rapport with the students, but they were simply not learning as much as they needed to in the short time they had to prepare

to pass the GED. Although the students enjoyed the lectures, lessons, "Real Talk", and reviews, the information was not being learned or absorbed. I provided practice tests and the students' performance was very low. I became extremely frustrated and in a few instances even lashed out at the class. It was in that instant that the students asked me what was wrong and why I was acting differently. I shared my frustration with them in regards to their scores and how I blamed myself because I knew they were working hard. The students were pleasantly shocked when they heard me give them recognition for hard work, but they felt I was being too hard on myself. In class that day, we brainstormed what I could do to help them improve their grades. We finished the day with no clear cut solution, but sparked the idea of being flexible in the classroom.

That night, I decided that I would alter my lesson plans to create a clearer way for students to understand and learn the concepts in the class. I decided to teach some lessons through the use of games allowing students to work and compete in groups. I also had students participate at the chalk board to teach and share their ideas and understanding of the concepts and skills they were learning. We went from a predominantly lecture and individual based learning environment, to a more varied learning environment encompassing group work (of different sizes), students teaching concepts (with assistance when needed), and more interactive activities such as playing many types of games, all to reinforce learning (See Appendix E for examples of activities and games used for learning reinforcement). To a visitor, the class may have seemed chaotic, but it was an active, student-engaged, intentional learning environment. About two weeks after I integrated the changes in the class structure, I noticed that student test scores and class averages began to rise considerably. The trend of rising

scores continued throughout the semester therefore I continued to change and modify lessons over the remainder of the semester. This was one form of flexibility used in my classroom that yielded positive results. Although these changes may be perceived to take an abundance of effort or time, ultimately I spent merely a few days making alterations and it was well worth the effort when viewing the progress of student learning as evidenced by the increases in practice test scores. In addition, students themselves provided ideas which reduced preparation time and it further reduced spending any crucial classroom instruction time on discipline. Another instance requiring flexibility was when I discovered that a structure that was successful for me over two consecutive semesters, was not suitable for a third group of students.

Over my two first successful semesters, I established meaningful "Real Talk" sessions that focused on experiences of racism and class discrimination that were revealed by students' terministic screens and experiences. Across different sets of classes, the majority of students revealed fairly consistent terministic screens which allowed me to develop a structure with which I felt comfortable and was effective. However, during a third semester with a new class, when I tried to apply these lessons that had been very powerful and successful with two previous groups of students, I did not have a positive response. With the first two groups, I emphasized racism and class discrimination since those were common themes reflected in their terministic screens and yielded impactful lessons that connected with students. The new set of students however, divulged perspectives that revealed discriminatory views of other racial and social class groups rather than a focus on their own experiences of being discriminated against. This made my previous structural focus irrelevant and ineffective for this class and forced me

to refocus and change my structure in order to better fit and compliment the class's perspectives. I restructured to accentuate how stereotypes are created and implemented, and how they have a negative impact on people. All of my lessons, "Real Talk", sessions and reviews related to this new structural approach lead to more receptiveness and involvement by the students and it became much easier to teach and have this set of students learn.

For both examples provided, it is imperative for the reader to keep in mind that every day, the internal structure of the class varied. By this I mean that within a one hour class, I constantly kept the students engaged by changing the lessons, games, lectures, and type of work performed in class. I followed a general structure, but flexibility was also fostered by the daily occurrences of my classes assuring that students were not lost in boredom or "shut off" to what I was teaching them within the class period.

Overall, this chapter was dedicated to the description and clarification of my approach. The Pedagogy of Real Talk encompasses a variety of concepts all of which are emphasized as equally important for success in applying the pedagogy. First, a teacher must possess Meyer's characteristics of a successful teacher. Next, a class must be structured using all of the S.C.R.E.A.M. variables, plus flexibility which is crucial to assure student needs are accommodated and integrated. With a prepared teacher, classes can then be approached in a manner in which there is simultaneous engagement of both the teacher and students as described by Freire. Through this mutual teaching and learning, the terministic screens of students are revealed. Once this revelation begins, "Real Talk" can capture the essence of each student and tie in the academic curriculum. I am hopeful that teachers, researchers, professors, and other types of instructors can use

the Pedagogy of Real Talk as a starting point to build successful classrooms and help "at risk" students succeed academically.

CHAPTER 5: STUDENT BACKGROUNDS - DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

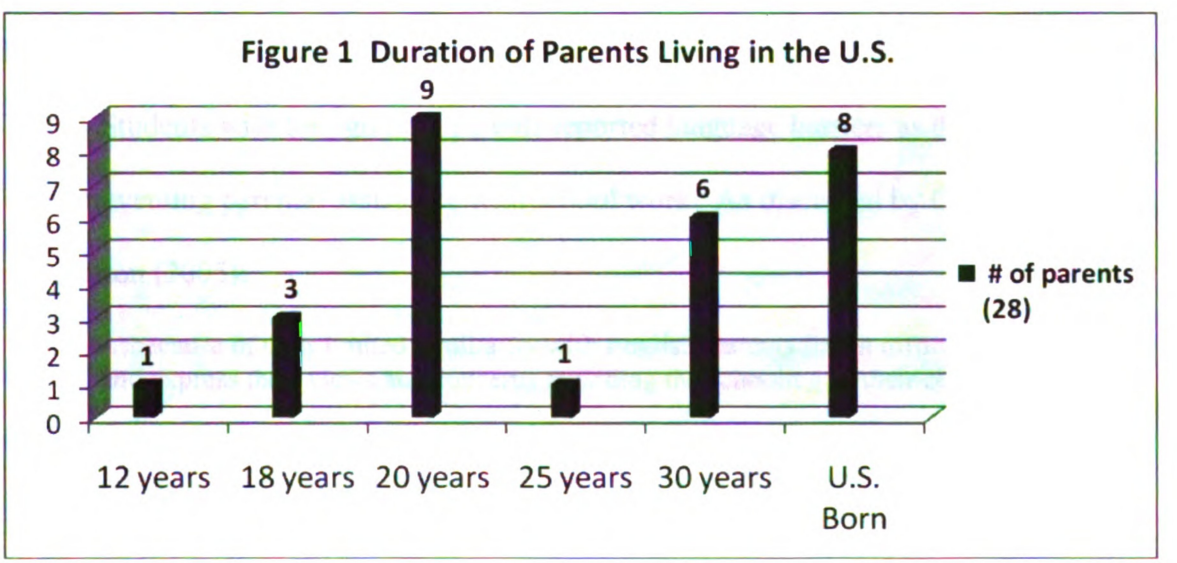
American school standards and standardized tests are geared and directed towards European American middle class students, giving students from certain racial and ethnic groups and lower social classes a distinct disadvantage (Gosa and Alexander 2007, Hunter and Bartee 2003, English 2002, Cammarota 2006). It is imperative to discuss the backgrounds of HEP students to understand why they were not successful in their traditional schools which led them to eventually drop out of school. In this chapter, I share and explore each interviewed student's family history, personal identity, and past school experiences. Family history is examined to view the birth locations, education levels, number of people in households and overall social class of HEP student's families. Personal identity explores, through student perspectives, who they define themselves to be. Lastly, past school experiences are shared by the HEP students to determine why they disliked school and eventually dropped out. An in-depth view of HEP student backgrounds demonstrates the need for an alternative pedagogy which will maximize each student's learning experience and minimize the struggles often experienced in the traditional educational system.

FAMILY HISTORY

For many years, social class in America has influenced the quality of education children receive (Rubin 2003). In addition to determining access to wealth, social class shapes the nature of family interaction for students. There is an abundance of scholarly support regarding the correlation between social class and the level of family support students receive, and the impact this has on student performance in school (Lareau 2003

and Horvart, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). This section discusses the family backgrounds and social classes of the HEP students.

The first factor in considering HEP students' family backgrounds is the national/ethnic origins of the parents. The majority of HEP students grew up in Latino, farm worker families. However, more reported having parents who were born in the U.S. than I initially expected. Of the twenty eight interviewees, eight students (28.5%) had parents who were U.S born (Mexican American) and twenty (71.5%) had parents who were Mexican born. Finally one student's parents were born in Haiti. Although the majority of parents were foreign born, they raised their children in the U.S and as such enrolled their children in U.S. schools. Overall, student responses regarding the duration their parents have lived in the U.S. fell among six categories.



With a large number of foreign born parents, the issue of language affected many families. The twenty students who had foreign born parents indicated that Spanish, and Haitian Creole in one case, was the language of preference and was most frequently used at home. Students also indicated that their parents spoke and/or understood English but had limitations communicating in English. For example, Sal said:

> My mom speaks enough English to get by but she struggles to speak it to White people because she can't speak real good English. She understands things that are said to her in English but she struggles with it. It's just a lot easier for her if she can speak Spanish instead of English.

Sal felt that although his mother has been living in the U.S. for over thirty years, she was never able to help him with school because of her limitations with the English language. Parental contribution to academics is an important part of student success. In fact, according to a study, "Social background is the driving force behind differences in educational attainment between Mexican origin and non-[Latino] students" (Warren 1996:145). HEP student parents typically offered limited academic contributions, as best described by Ed, "Shit, if the work in school would have been given to me in Spanish, my parents could have tried to help me but the work was in English. Paul, I was their translator whenever they didn't understand stuff in English, so how were they going to help me with school?"

Students with foreign born parents reported language barriers as the predominant issue preventing parental assistance with school work. As discussed by Carreon, Drake, and Barton (2005):

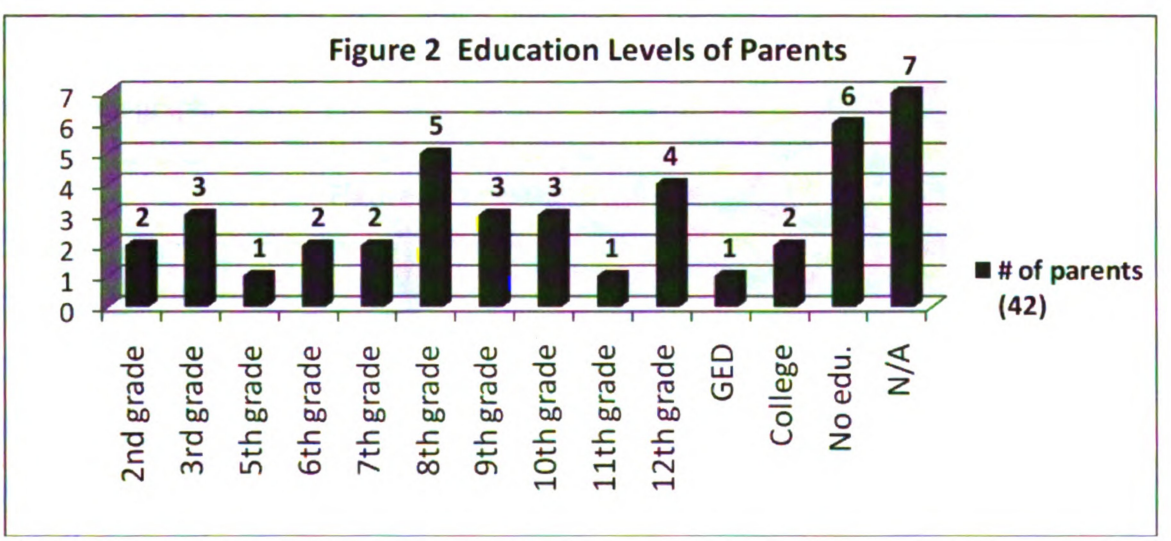
> ...because of their limited familiarity with English, parents find it difficult to understand and express their views and concerns regarding the schooling of their children. Language is also an instrument of identity and power, and thus immigrant parents lose some of the authority they had in their home countries because they lack knowledge of the nuances of language called for in particular situations, such as talking to a teacher or requesting a schedule change. Immigrant parents often must rely on their children as translators with other school actors, altering the natural power structure within both the family and the school. (P. 470)

These scholars reflect what many HEP students experienced with their parents during their academic pursuits.

Parents' education levels, family income, and the number of people in households were investigated to show why both U.S. born and foreign born parents of HEP students

struggled to help their kids in school. Many students interviewed had parents who never completed high school. This negatively impacted their family income. High school dropouts generally have a serious disadvantage as they enter the work force because the economy offers few jobs for laborers and growing numbers of skilled jobs which require an education. As summarized by Warren (1996), "...children whose parents are better educated, make more money, have higher-status jobs, and are living with one another tend to attain higher levels of education" (P. 143).

The overall education levels of the forty two parents reported by the interviewed students ranged from no formal education, to completing only lower elementary grades, to high school graduates. As seen in the graphs below, an overwhelming majority (83%) of the HEP students' parents did not complete high school, therefore, impeding their ability to assist their children academically.

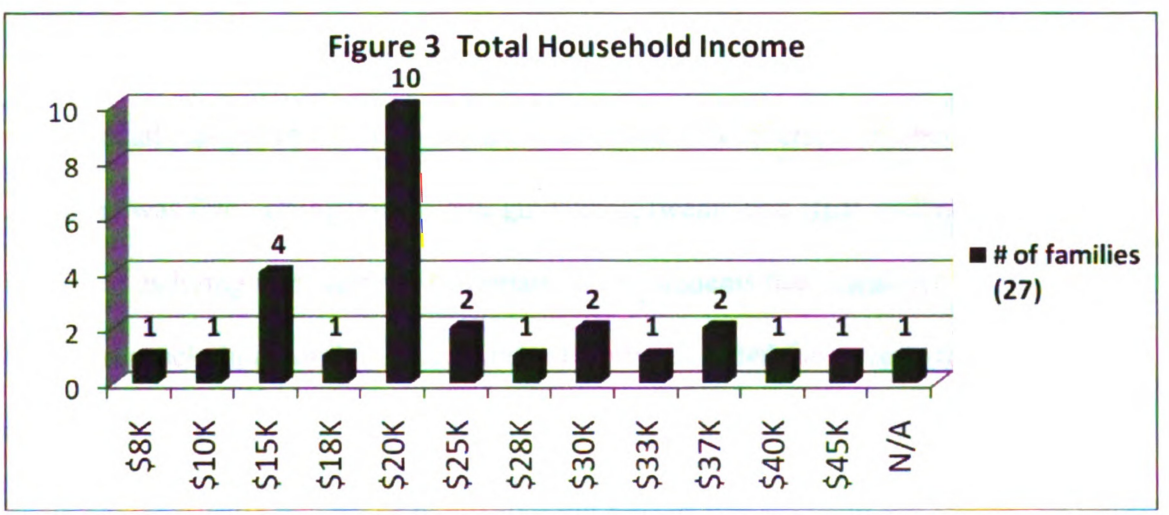


Deebo discussed his American born mother and her attempt to help him with school. "She just couldn't help me. When I was in elementary she could, but as I got older it was just too hard for her so I didn't have anyone at home who could help me with school work." According to research focused on factors regarding low educational levels

of parents, the lack of parent education may cause parents to be, "less involved with school material…[have] lack of familiarity with educational jargon, [and have] their own negative educational experiences," which may all contribute to parent limitations in helping their children develop academically (Lee and Bowen 2006:198).

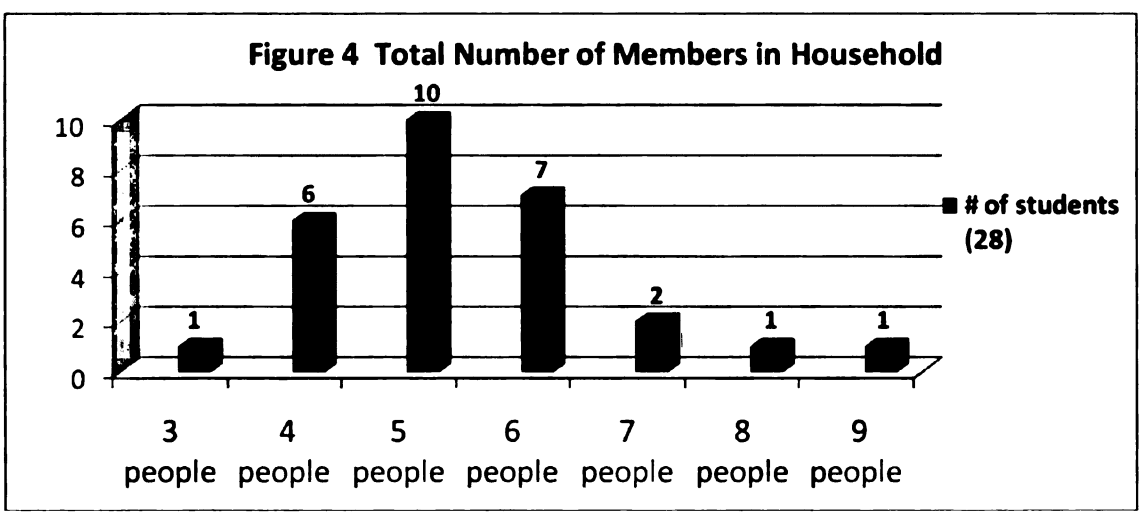
In fact, all HEP students interviewed discussed how their parents were not able to help them with their school work. Despite this, none of the interviewed students were ever bitter or angry at their parents regarding their limitations because, as Big T stated, "It just is what it is, playboy." The parental lack of assistance academically was simply an accepted part of life.

Without at least a high school education, dropouts find it increasingly difficult to find work with compensation above minimum wage. This consequence of low educational attainment by the parents of HEP students is reflected in their low income. There were a total of thirteen responses regarding annual income as shown in the following graph.



The diversity in the household incomes surprised me as some households earned over $25,000 despite the results in completed education levels. The average household

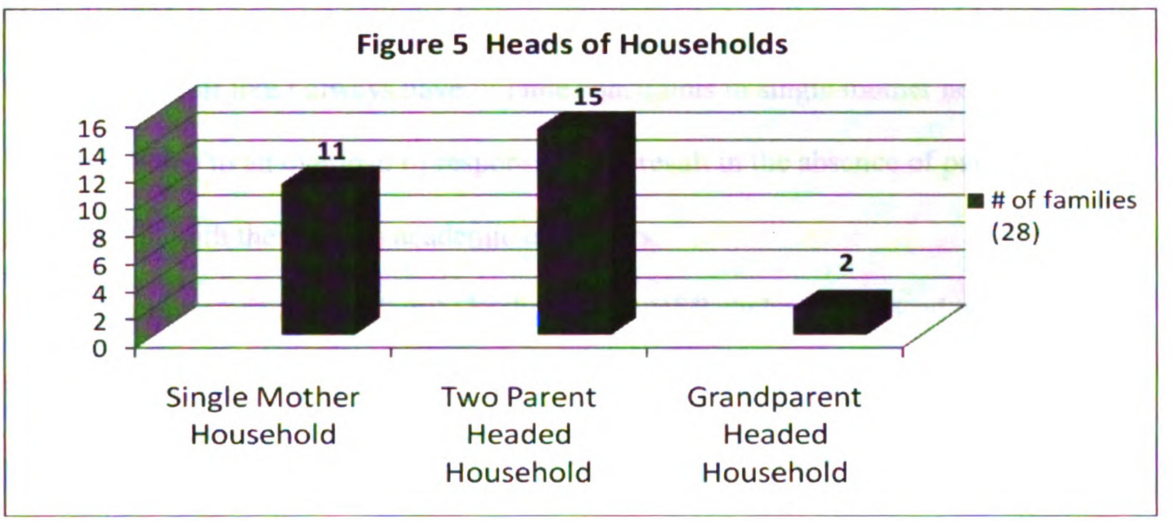
income calculated from the twenty seven incomes provided is $21,888. All of these HEP students' parent incomes fell within the threshold of poverty which is likely a result of their educational attainment. To understand how these families are considered to be in poverty, the poverty guidelines provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services were used, which also includes the number of individuals in the household (http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/09poverty.shtml). The HEP student family household breakdowns are charted below.



By viewing the number of financial dependents of each family, a clearer picture of the social class of most HEP students is revealed. The average number of household members was five. Using the poverty guidelines, twenty one HEP student families were identified as living in poverty. The remaining six students that fell above the poverty line, when including family size and income, only exceeded the poverty threshold by an average of $4,346 dollars. Through the strict rules of measuring poverty, these families are not categorically labeled as in poverty, but I argue that they still fall within this class. Willie, whose family earned $470 dollars above the poverty limit, commented, "Man we

are poor as hell. I mean I don't know how we be making it every day but my family works hard as hell and we just trying to survive."

During my tenure at HEP, colleagues constantly discussed the importance of family for many of the HEP students, but rarely referenced the significant factor of single parent families. Two parent households were often inferred or assumed; however, through examination of household size, a significant number of single mother households were revealed. The twenty eight HEP participants interviewed identified three categories of heads of their households.



Single mother households are common in poor minority communities (Erera 2002). Within HEP student households, this trend was also prevalent, shedding light on the home life of these students. This finding could produce information regarding the family situations of HEP students allowing better service for their unique needs while also revealing the type of poverty they face, not only economically, but also academically. The effects of being part of a single mother household are best summarized by Errera (2002):

> Mother-headed single parent families are the poorest of all family groups… numerous studies have found that children raised in single-parent families manifest a host of

> adverse behaviors, most commonly in...academic performance [and overall children of single-parent families] have more behavioral problems and academic problems [than other children]. (P. 120)

Many HEP students with a similar family structure as that described by Errera experienced similar circumstances and concerns regarding school. Beyond language limitations and low formal education levels, the issue of time scarcity arises for single mothers. Kay describes how her single mother did not have the time to help her. "I mean you know even if my mom did want to help me with school or whatever, she don't ever have the time with all the shit she be doing." This issue is further elaborated on by Michelle, "My mom ain't got time for me. She is raising all them kids and I have to just look after myself like I always have." Time constraints in single mother headed households due to an overload of responsibilities result in the absence of parental involvement with their child's academic endeavors.

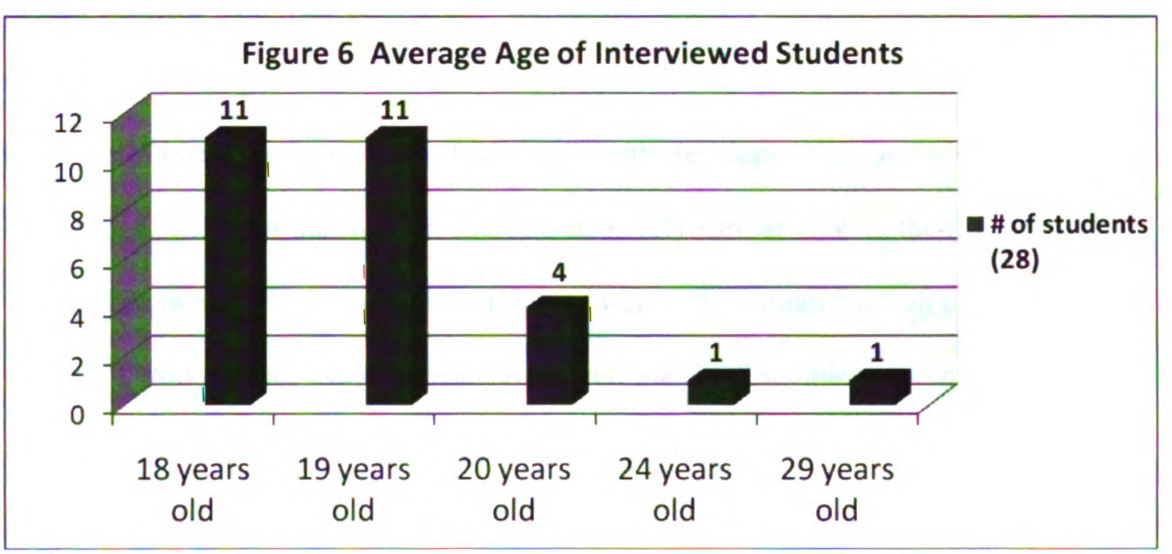
Stemming from their family backgrounds, HEP students are faced with a plethora of disadvantages within the U.S. high school system. Low status or minimum wage jobs, nominal levels of education, single mother headed households, and living within or very close to the poverty threshold, all define disadvantaged families within U.S. society. Poor performance in school resulted in the identification of all interviewed HEP students as "at risk". With little support at home, difficulties with school work and stigmatization in school based on their home life, HEP students face major obstacles acquiring their high school diplomas. These disadvantages further highlight the need for an alternative pedagogy when working with this underprivileged, unique population.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

This section explores the individual identity of the interviewed HEP students and also discusses how students felt they were perceived by their teachers and administrators.

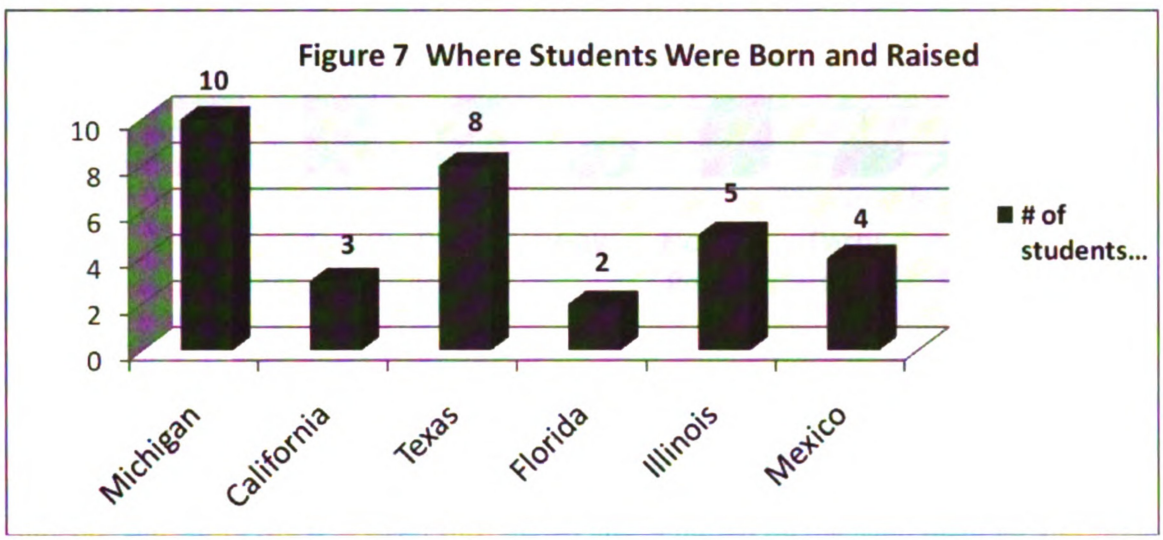
All of the HEP students revealed a common theme of struggles in school due to experiences with personal discrimination based on their identity, both who they considered themselves to be and who others perceived them to be. To obtain information of this topic students were asked, "Who are you?" and "What does that question mean to you?" This inquiry created a set of background questions (e.g. age, born and raised, life history, etc.) that focused on students individually rather than on their families. After the background questions, students were asked how they identified themselves. The rich, in-depth information students shared regarding their identities helped further understand their struggles.

Before discussing how students identified themselves, it is imperative to contextualize the information with demographics. The average age of the twenty eight students interviewed was nineteen years, with ages varying from eighteen to twenty nine.



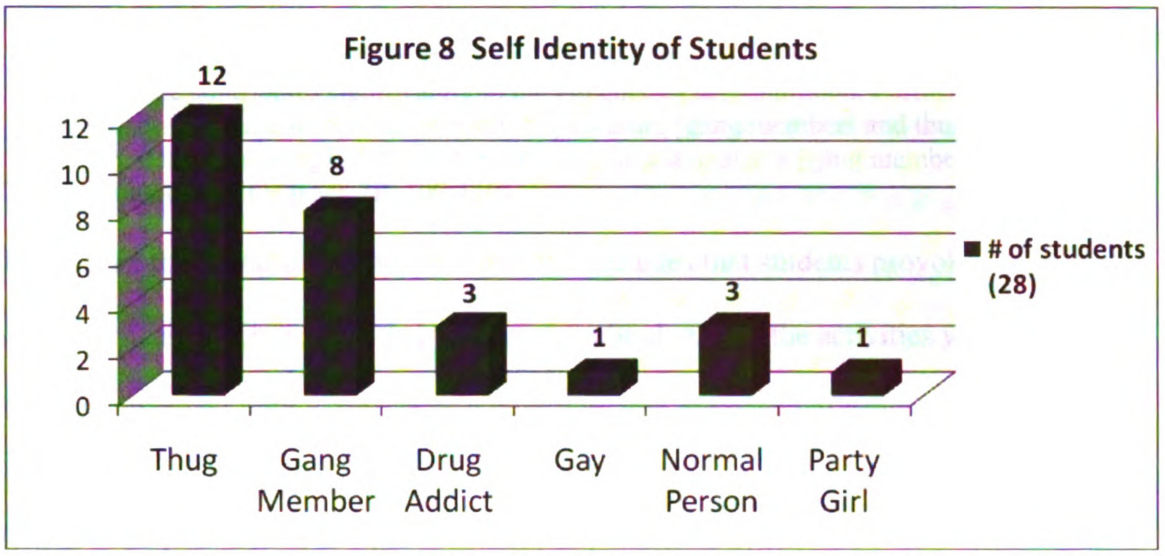
As reflected in the sample, there are always outliers in data collection. Occasionally students in their thirties, forties and up to their sixties were the peers of much younger students in the HEP classroom.

The locations of where the students were born and raised varied geographically. HEP students were most commonly born and raised in Michigan, Texas and Florida but also represented Illinois, California, and Mexico as shown in the following graph.



The students interviewed were typically raised where they were born with the exception of four students who were born in Mexico but raised in the U.S., and one student who was born in Michigan but raised in Illinois. By establishing the ages of students and locations of birth, the foundation of where students developed their self identities can be determined. Many of the students shared a strikingly similar view of their identity.

The twenty eight students interviewed were only a small fraction of the many students I worked with while at HEP. However, the small sample was representative of the larger MSU HEP population. There were six different responses regarding self identity provided.



The majority of interviewed students considered themselves thugs or gang members with the remainder falling into a variety of self identities. Similar to the HEP students, my entire life was lived surrounded and engulfed by the gang member and street thug lifestyle. When first meeting the HEP students, I realized that many had a style of dress, vernacular, and overall demeanor that was very familiar; that which I identify with gang members or thugs. James Diego Vigil (2003) described his definition of gang life when he stated, "My self-reflexive life history, involvement with various facets of street and gang life and the life histories of different types of contemporary gang members provide insight and nuances and shifting levels of [auto-ethnography] analysis to this perspective" (p. 2). Similar to Vigil, further insight into the students' responses by can be gained by making a distinction between thug and gang member for the purposes of this study. Different than a gang member, a thug does not formally belong to a gang but is involved in the many different facets that are associated with being a gang member. Thugs can be involved with drugs, drug dealing, theft (on multiple levels), vandalism, and overall, "not giving a fuck about no one" (Big T). As Elijah Anderson (1999) further expanded on this idea:

> Because [deviant behavior] is organized around a code of conduct approximating the code of the streets and employing violence as the basis for social control, the [deviant] culture contributes significantly to the violence of neighborhood. Furthermore, many inner-city [and in some cases rural] boys admire [gang members and thugs] and emulate their style, making it difficult for outsiders to distinguish a [gang member or thug] from a law-abiding teenager. (P. 109-110)

It is within the spectrum of these actions and attitudes that students provoke negative consequences which impede their success in school. Often the activities which define their involvement with a gang or as a thug flow into the personal actions of each individual in and out of school. These actions and identities lead educators to stigmatize these students in school resulting in their limited academic success.

The remaining students interviewed were representative of the diversity found among HEP students overall. This diversity of self identities included "normal", gay or lesbian, drug addict, and party girl. Regardless of their identities, all interviewed HEP students struggled or had difficulty with school because part of who they identified themselves to be included having a Latino identity.

Similar to gang members and thugs, the self identities of each student permeate the manner in which they navigate the educational system, therefore influencing their academic processes. There is an abundance of research discussing the concept and negative consequences of "acting black" or more appropriately in the case of the HEP students "acting Latino" (Ogbu and Simons 1998 and Lewis-Peterson and Bratton 2004). "Acting Latino" is the process of taking an oppositional stance to school success or a rejection of "acting white". This is similar to Paul Willis' (1977) analysis of the "lads" who also took an oppositional approach to school:

> Time for the 'lads' is not something you carefully husband and thoughtfully spend on the achievement of desired objectives in the future. For the 'lads' time is something they want to claim for themselves not as an aspect of their immediate identity and self-

> direction. Time is used for the preservation of a state – being with the 'lads' – not for the achievement of a goal-qualifications [in school]. (P. 28-29)

This does not necessarily mean that minorities seek out low grades, but it is in the specific actions they take in "acting Latino" where they begin to see affects on their grades. Common types of behavior exemplified by students when trying to avoid "acting white" are, "skipping class, not doing school assignments, and emphasizing non-academic priorities by being street smart instead of school smart, [and] trying to impress friends rather than doing what is necessary to achieve" (Lewis-Peterson and Bratton 2004:87). All of the behaviors mentioned are highly correlated with low grades and overall academic failure. Many HEP students were stereotyped into the category of "acting Latino" by nature of "being themselves." Interviewed students shared how they exhibited certain poor behaviors as a result of being true to the Latino identity they had created for themselves.

The connection with not "acting white" was best described by Lilly, "I was not going to be all preppy like the white kids 'cause they hated me so I just wanted to be me. Just do what I do and not be like them." In essence, Lilly was rejecting what Albert K. Cohen (1955) referred to as middle-class norms established by the people who "run things." According to Cohen (1955), teachers are:

> ...hired to foster the development of middle-class personalities. The middle-class board of education, the middle-class parents whom they represent and, it is to be presumed, many of the working-class parents as well expect the teacher to define his job as the indoctrination of middle-class aspirations, character, skills and manners. Second the teacher himself is almost certain to be a middle-class person, who personally values ambition and achievement and spontaneously recognizes and rewards these virtues in others. (P. 113-114)

Detrimental to the HEP students, they did not fit into these expectations, thus stigmatizing them in school. The behaviors exemplified by many of the HEP students

were considered by their teachers and schools to be normal for youth who "acted Latino," further creating the disconnection between schools and HEP students. HEP students acted in response to challenging obstacles faced in their schools with behaviors which led to negative consequences. It is clear that students from non-white and low social classes struggle to express themselves in a traditional educational setting that favors a particular set of social behaviors associated with white upper class populations.

Being subjected to racism was another common experience for many HEP students which impacted academic performance. Often I hear colleagues, students and laymen alike discuss the gradual disappearance of racial/ethnic discrimination and at times, its nonexistence. Many think the idea of experiencing discrimination because of personal identity is virtually unheard of today in the U.S. However, these students rejected that view and claimed that discrimination is especially prevalent in schools. Bonilla-Silva (1999) supports the students' rejection of these claims as "race is a real and central social vessel of group affiliation and life in the modern world" (p. 899). High schools are theoretically filled with tolerant teachers who care about all of their students regardless of race, class, gender, and sexuality; educators who do not focus on, but accept these differences. Unfortunately, the experience of the HEP students in developing their self identities, whom they identify themselves to be, has been impacted by countless negative experiences and interactions during school. Many HEP students claimed to feel stigmatized and marginalized by teachers based on their race, socioeconomic situations, gang involvement, or other factors which excluded them from the norms of the educational system. These feelings ultimately exacerbate students' involvement with activities that hinder their academic success which further increases the vicious cycle of

student failure. This section of the interviews revealed some of the most powerful experiences and similarities shared by students. These testimonies provided a clear understanding of their experiences in terms of how they have been viewed by teachers and administrators, such as when Jerry shared an experience of a teacher treating him as "if [he] ain't shit." Students often felt stigmatized and discriminated against by their teachers and administrators. In fact, even students who considered themselves "normal" people were victims of racism in their schools.

Frank, who considered himself a "normal" guy, shared his experience. "People in school always talked shit about me being Mexican and they would call me a Mexican a lot and it created problems for me because I defended myself." The term Mexican has unfortunately become and has historically been embedded in the American language as a label of derision and stigma (Gutierrez 1993). Frank was labeled as a troublemaker because of the challenges he faced in school, but according to Frank, this label was a result of the discrimination he faced. He felt as if no authority figure in the school believed him or helped him.

The effect of discrimination and its overtly negative consequences were most clearly stated and felt by those who identified themselves as thugs or gang-members. The majority of the students interviewed self identified as either thugs or gang-members and they consistently reported feeling the effects of teacher assumptions and discrimination. For example, El Cholo says:

> The way I dress, the way I talk, my tattoos, and the kind of shit I was involved with made me an easy target at school for teachers and administrators to know I am a gang-member. But it is fucked up because I wouldn't do shit in school because I didn't want any drama in school but I felt and was treated like a moving target by teachers and administrators.

Through El Cholo's self identity, he was targeted and stigmatized as a potential troublemaker even if he was not involved in any issues in school. This sentiment was shared by many HEP students with this type of identity.

The interviews also made clear that the traditional educational setting does not allow for an understanding of why students might be involved with gang associations or related behaviors and has no capacity to alter its pedagogical approach when dealing with such students. Identifying as a gang member or thug often led to behaviors that were disruptive to academic success. However, students experienced that teacher stereotypes prevented educators from looking for causes of such behaviors and trying to remediate them. Instead, in the interviewed student's experiences, teachers tended to lump all students who identified as a gang member or thug into the same category and considered them all a detriment to the academic process despite their individual circumstances or efforts.

This situation is exemplified by Dee's characterization of her drug use in high school.

> In school teachers and students viewed me as a Mexican. It was real bad because I always experienced racism because it was just me and my brothers and sisters who were the Mexicans in school. It was so hard to deal with. I turned to drugs 'cause it was just easier to deal with shit and then I just got strung out on that shit. So I didn't do good in school, but it was because of shit that happened in school that I rather just get high.

Dee's drug behavior stemmed partly from school, and then she struggled academically in school because of the consequences of being involved in heavy drug use. Similar to Dee, an enormous amount of information and data was shared by other students contributing to the understanding of why they did not do well in school. Many of these students did not discuss race directly, but rather their identity as thugs or gang-members. However, a student's choice to associate in gang related activities is not synonymous with a lack of

educational desire, as was often assumed by the educators of HEP students. The majority of students interviewed reported that their involvement in gang activities stemmed from the impoverished situations they experienced at home. According to Papachristos (2005):

> The National Youth Gang Center estimates that 34 percent of all gangs are actively involved in organized drug dealing. Gangs that do sell drugs essentially fill a void in the postindustrial urban [or rural] economy, replacing the manufacturing and unskilled labor jobs that traditionally served as a means for social mobility. (P. 50)

For many HEP students, involvement with drug dealing outside and within school occurred to alleviate their need for money to help sustain their families. Andy stated, "I mostly dealt with weed and cocaine but it was the way I made my money 'cause I needed to get mine. School was whatever but money was a necessity in my life and there were no jobs paying me enough money to survive." The focus of the thug or gang member affiliated HEP student was most basically, a mode of survival.

Unfortunately, this method of survival led students to low success in school, while frequently encountering stereotyping and stigmatization by teachers, further exacerbating their poor academic performance. According to Ed, "Man, Paul, even when I didn't do nothing in school like any illegal shit or anything, I was still treated like nothing. So if I did bad things I was in trouble, but what really made me mad was that even when I didn't do anything I would get in trouble." Understanding HEP student identities and the consequences experienced in school from these identities leads to further exploration of the HEP student's school experiences and why they dropped out of school. The next sections examine what experiences students had in school and ultimately, what reasons were integral in their decision to drop out.

PAST SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Understanding past school experiences of the HEP student population is extremely important in gaining insight into their association with schools and teachers. I began by gathering students' perspectives regarding how they feel they were identified by their teachers while in school. I underestimated the students' understanding of the label "at risk". My prior belief was that schools were required to maintain confidentiality of labels attached to students. I found that students have their own understanding and insight in regards to how they are placed and tracked by schools. Andy elaborated plainly and powerfully, "They had me in classes with all the fuck ups in school." In essence, Andy recognized what Erving Goffman defined as stigma, "an attribute that is deeply discrediting and reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Link and Phelan 2001:364). Similar to Andy's case, other interviewed students described their academic label solely from their perspective, however, some knew the significance of the official "at risk" label. El Cholo shared, "They always say I am "at risk" of dropping out but they act like it's my fault and never look at themselves and how it's their [teachers'] fault too."

Of the twenty eight students interviewed, all stated that they were identified as "at risk" while in school, and while the reasons for this label varied, all shared that it made them feel stigmatized. For Michelle, the "drama" of working six days a week for up to eleven hours a day while trying to maintain her school responsibilities caused poor attendance leading her to receive an "at risk" label. Additionally, Ed discussed, "I was more interested in finding ways to make money. So I never did good in my classes and had really bad grades." Dee shared how her teachers viewed her as "at risk". "I was

addicted to all sorts of drugs because the point was for me to get high. But they found out at school because I was high while in school. Teachers treated me like shit and figured I was just going to drop out because I was a drug addict."

By categorizing all "at risk" students together, the multitude of reasons behind each individual's risk in school is overlooked. Unanimously, the interviews yielded that students were stigmatized by the "at risk" label and unfortunately, all became part of the national drop out epidemic. This stigma of "at risk" devalues their identities and worth as students (Link and Phelan 2001). The students' perspectives on how they were identified by teachers also influence their perception of their teachers and schools.

Every interviewed student had negative perceptions of either teachers or their schools providing insight in to how many students did not like their teachers or the pedagogies used by them. Rob expressed his unhappiness in his classes, "School was boring and I never had anything to do when I was there so I didn't like it. I would not do the work and school was never interesting so I would not go." Rob's sentiments were echoed by Manny, "I was tired of school because the teachers were boring and I wasn't learning anything in the classes." When working with "at risk" students, traditional pedagogies are typically not successful (O'Loughlin 1995, Sager & Cox 2005, and Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm 1997). HEP students did not find relevance in what they were learning in classes with what was important in their immediate lives, therefore leading to their negative perspectives. Frank explained why he disliked class and how this led to problems he would encounter in school:

> I was always talking in class and throwing shit in class. You know, I wanted to make class interesting cause that shit was boring as hell! I would act up in class because everything the teacher said was so boring and I didn't even understand half the shit they would talk about. So, I just acted a fool in class but that got me in trouble all the time.

Often, dry, boring material with little or no relevance to students' lives was presented in the classroom, making the process of coming to class painful for students. A teacher's execution of lessons is crucial to engage the interests of "at risk" students and help them succeed. James elaborated on this, "Teachers knew I would drop out because I was not interested in school and they wanted me to drop out. There was nothing in class that was interesting and that was relevant to my life." If the classes and teachers would have offered engaging classroom environments, these students could have potentially experienced a much different outcome.

Unfortunately at times, monotony of classes even occurred with HEP instructors. If students found classes to be boring or non-engaging they would struggle to focus, complete their class work, or even pass their individual subjects. Although HEP instructors presented the students with a new opportunity for learning, the students would struggle in classes where they encountered instructors with similarities or resemblance to their previous teachers. Irrelevance and boredom are only small facets of why HEP students had negative perceptions of teachers and schools. Other perceptions emphasized issues of discrimination from teachers, administrators, and other students.

Beyond ineffective pedagogies experienced by HEP students, discrimination was a common theme negatively influencing student perspectives on school. As Jay shared, "These fucking teachers treated me and my friends like shit compared to how they treated the upper class white kids in school." Experiencing discrimination in school from teachers has drastic negative consequences on students overall (Lewis 2001). Sal experienced a very direct form of discrimination when a teacher shared his/her view of

Sal for being Mexican American, "A teacher called me a loser." Lilly discussed how she felt discrimination not only by teachers, but also by students.

> In my school the teachers and students discriminated against me a lot because I was a farm worker. The students called me racist names and were real mean to me. Teachers treated me like I was stupid because I worked in the fields and they didn't do anything about the other students calling me racist names.

Teachers control the arena of the classroom where the environment is intensely personal and where teacher-student relationships affect students' grades and overall eventual success (Gosa and Alexander 2007).

Having teachers listen and find ways to help students is extremely important, but in the case of Vincent, we see an unfortunate trend shared by HEP students alike. Vincent expressed:

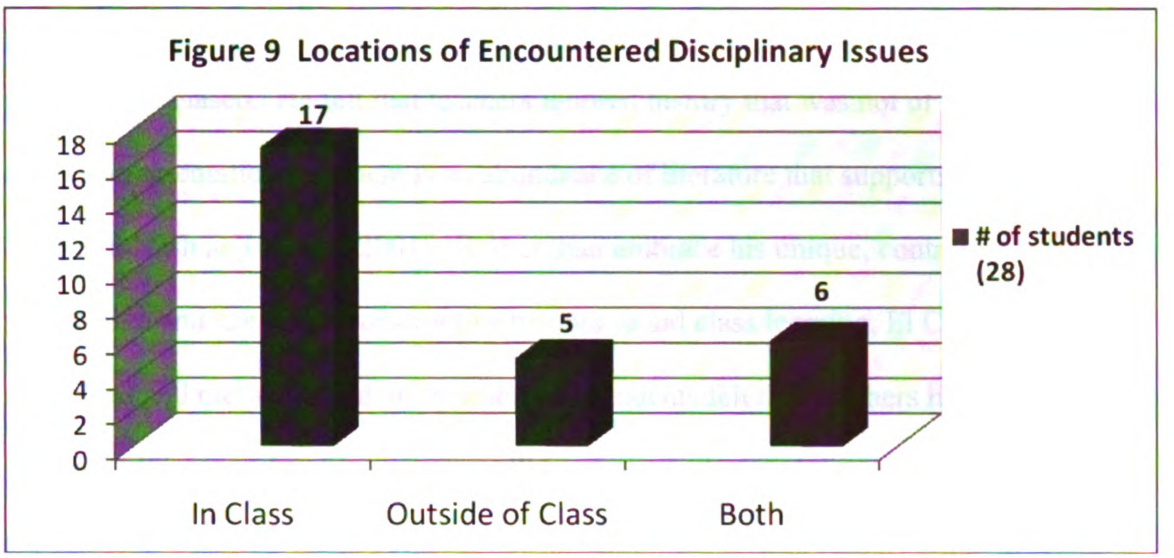
> I never went to school because I had problems with gangs in school. Teachers didn't care about what I would tell them I was dealing with. I mean I pretty much asked them for help or some advice on what I could do and they would just ignore me or say they couldn't help me. They didn't give a fuck about me or my life.

In Vincent's case, he sought out teachers, the authority figures in school to find help, but was disregarded and felt discriminated against because of their reaction. The impact on Vincent was evident as he shared what he felt were the teachers' perspectives regarding his life. Perhaps teachers find themselves with fear or lack an understanding of the severity of students' issues which could, therefore, impede their ability to assist the students. However, all teachers should be equipped with a professional ability to connect students in need with the proper resources for aid either through schools or the local community. Willie spoke clearly of how teachers simply "did not get it" as he explained to me:

> Teachers didn't know what was going on in the 'real world' with all the shit I had to deal with. I mean I really fucking hated teachers because they just didn't get it and still wanted me to do what they wanted. They also hated me 'cause I was Mexican and I wasn't stupid and knew they were racist by how they treated me.

Teachers' lack of connections with and understanding of many of the HEP students' lives is evident from the experiences shared by students. In fact, teachers who typically work with "at risk" students in schools are far removed from the issues the students face (Smith and Smith 2006). Combining the number of negative experiences shared by so many HEP students, it is reasonable that they would have formulated negative perspectives of their schools and teachers. Stemming from my understanding of why students dropped out of school and detailing their negative consequences, I asked students about disciplinary issues they dealt with while in school.

For many "at risk" students, disciplinary issues are a problem in school and with teachers (Cassidy and Bates 2005). The manner in which disciplinary issues are defined includes any problem (disrupting class, fighting outside of class, issues with teachers, drug involvement, etc.) that a HEP student was involved in that caused disciplinary action to be taken against them (e.g. sent to the office, suspension, detention, in-house suspension, parents called, etc.). At first glance, there is a general understanding that HEP students were troublemakers in school, but through a more in-depth view, it became evident that the situation of disciplinary issues is more complex. All of the interviewed HEP students discussed experiences with disciplinary issues which occurred with teachers in class and outside of class but on school premises. The following graph shows the categories "in class", "outside of class", or "both" in regards to where the twenty eight interviewed HEP students encountered disciplinary issues.



The majority of interviewed students (seventeen students or 61%) encountered disciplinary issues requiring action inside the classroom. A smaller group (six students or 21%) experienced issues receiving disciplinary action both in class and outside of class. Combined, these groups comprised 82% (23 students) of the students interviewed. These statistics are not uncommon with "at risk" students, in fact, behavioral issues in class are a major obstacle for teachers (Lee and Burkam 2003). Often, more time is spent by teachers trying to manage their "at risk" student classrooms than actual execution of teaching academic material. The pedagogy used by many of the teachers who worked with HEP students was ineffective for their learning needs which led to many issues in the classroom. HEP students shared what types of issues led to their negative behaviors and expressed why they behaved in such a manner in the first place.

Many of the HEP students had very different perspectives than their teachers regarding disciplinary situations and why they felt they were punished by the teachers. El Cholo explained, "I mean they would never hear me out and they thought I was fucking crazy. I didn't agree with the things teachers would say so I would challenge them and ask questions, but they would treat me like I was crazy." He especially

challenged his teachers in regards to history and the information being taught which he thought was biased. He felt that teachers ignored history that was not of European-American orientation and there is an abundance of literature that supports his view (Zinn 1995 and Nash and Jeffrey 2001). Rather than embrace his unique, controversial perspective and use it in a constructive manner to aid class learning, El Cholo felt he was ostracized and met with disdain by teachers. Students felt that teachers had a lack of understanding or perhaps even an unwillingness to understand them and therefore experienced a general lack of respect by teachers. This lack of respect led to many behavioral issues that would pin teacher against student resulting in negative exchanges for HEP students. As Ken said:

> Teachers wanted to treat me like a little kid but with the kind of shit I was doing outside of school and the experiences I already had, I just was not a kid. I hated being treated like one but the teachers would not respect me like an adult even though I had a more fucked up life experience than them.

Consequences for misbehavior in the classroom should occur to help maintain orderly classrooms and schools, however, the true roots of the problems need to be analyzed and understood before harsh judgments are implemented. HEP students felt, similar to minorities in school, that they were disciplined more readily and severely than their European American counterparts (Downey and Pribesh 2004). In Mary's case, she disturbed class simply by attending class because she spent more time being truant than in class. Mary felt this was a distraction for her teachers:

> Teachers preferred it when I was not in class because they said I just disturbed the class when I was in class. Teachers didn't want to work with me and just kind of put up with me. I am not stupid and I knew this so I didn't respect them because they didn't know me but they were judging me.

The most powerful person in the classroom is the teacher and in response to that power students often use their actions as their form of resisting that power (Willis 1977). The

interviews probed HEP students regarding their actions that led to behavioral disciplinary problems revealing that the root of the issues are a result of, or at the very least a partial result of, tension with their teachers in the classroom. The remaining 18% of students faced disciplinary issues that involved actions which violated school rules outside the classroom.

This group was not involved with issues that harmed their academic performance in the classroom; rather performance was hindered by their behaviors outside of the classroom. Student problems outside of class could have been avoided or minimized by teachers through involvement as a caring teacher (Meyer 1968). With a focus on understanding student experiences in school, the perspectives of students who are typically viewed problematic will be examined by teachers rather than teachers reacting and becoming potential contributors to the problems. Dee was constantly in trouble outside of class due to drug use and she was frustrated with teachers because, "They say they cared and would help us if we had any problems, but they never helped me with my issues." She did not expect teachers to solve her drug problem but she hoped that they would have served as a resource to find help. Similarly, El Gus found that teachers were not a useful resource when seeking information that could help him. El Gus was constantly involved in gang fights with rival gangs at school. He tried to approach teachers to make them aware of the issues he faced and explain why he was involved with so many fights. He sought out advice, referrals to resources for help, or understanding of the issues. Rather than receive help, he met unresponsive, non-empathetic teachers:

> When I would go to school I would get into all kinds of fights because of my enemies going to the same school. The teachers did not care about the drama that would go down as long as it did not happen in class. So they were happy whenever I would not go to

> class because whenever I would show up they thought something was going to go down. I tried talking to them about what the problems were but they always told me that I needed to take care of these things outside of school property and to not bring my problems to school (El Gus).

Although some teachers may not have an intimate understanding of gang violence, as an educated resourceful professional, they should be able to lead students to appropriate resources for help. HEP students fell victim to a common trend in schools; teacher's lack of willingness or ability to help or understand student problems (Meyer 1968). Teachers are not responsible for students' involvement in activities outside of school which lead to disciplinary consequences, nor should they feel a need to get personally involved. However, teachers should be an integral resource in preventing the development of situations or aiding students in confronting serious issues. This need for leadership is evident in the case of Manny where he was continually targeted and no action was taken by teachers:

> I just hated school. I also had to deal with a lot of drama with people talking shit because I am gay. I wouldn't just let people talk shit so I would call people out and fight because I was not going to let anyone talk shit about me. The teachers didn't do anything about punishing the people who would talk shit to me so I would handle it myself.

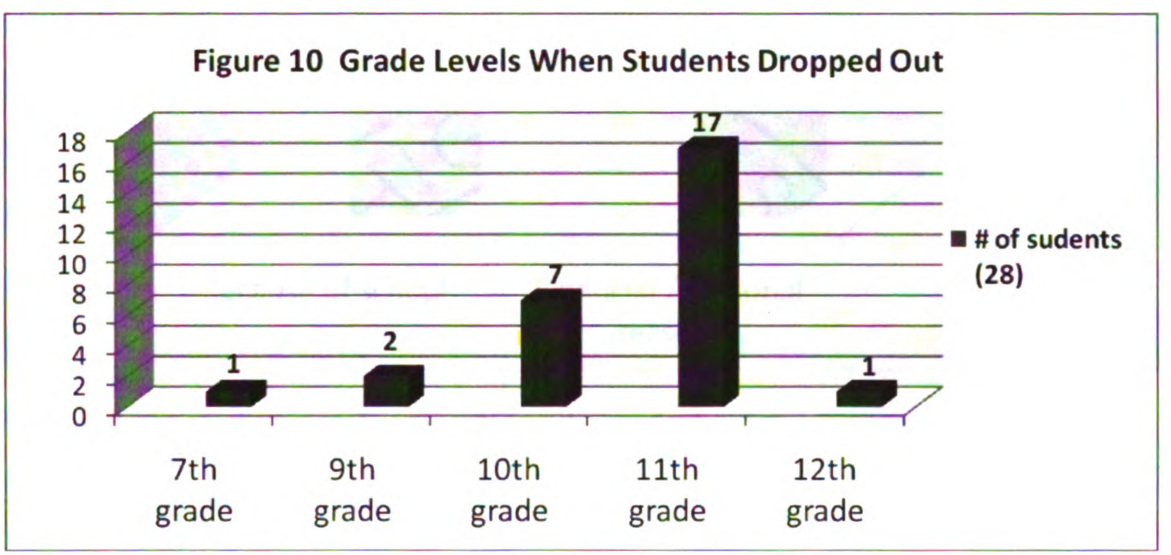
Programs and institutions are created to help students with issues that go beyond the classroom (gang intervention; Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgendered [LGBT] support groups; teen support hot lines; etc). Professionally, teachers serve as a resource for students; therefore it is surprising that for most HEP students, teachers as resources were not available. Lastly, this chapter discusses the reasons for and from what grade level, HEP students dropped out of school.

REASON AND GRADE OF DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

Though the negative experiences of HEP students while in school was already discussed, it is imperative to understand the "last straw" in their decision to drop out.

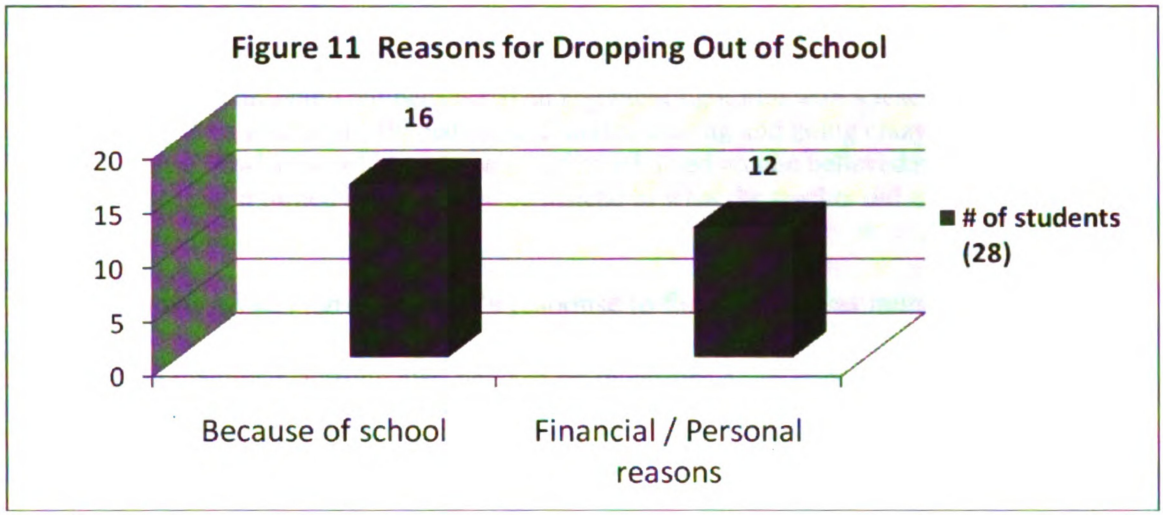
Dropping out of school is a pandemic that has plagued this country for many years (Kao and Thompson 2003 and Rumberger 1987). In the case of HEP students, there have been nationwide discussions seeking a clearer understanding of the reasons behind why they drop out. This section uses student perspectives in an attempt to answer and shed some modest light on this ongoing question of why HEP students drop out of school.

The varying range of grade levels during which students dropped out of school are as follows:



The majority (17 students or 61%) of the twenty eight interviewed students dropped out of school in the 11th grade, but in the HEP program, this can vary dramatically semester by semester. Two categories were developed to uncover the reasons behind why HEP students dropped out of school. The first category includes dropping out "because of school." In this category students shared that they dropped out because of a teacher, administrator, and/or general negative experiences in school. The second category combines financial and personal reasons for dropping out of school. Although the two could be separate reasons, financial reasons for dropping out were personal in nature, thus would be most effective in the same category. Students who dropped out for

financial reasons directly responded that they needed money for survival. Getting married, gang problems, legal issues out of school, and general personal problems that were not directly connected to school were identified as personal reasons for dropping out by students. The following graph further exhibits the results of this categorized inquiry.



57% of the students stated that they dropped out of school "because of school" leaving 43% dropping out due to personal reasons.

In most instances, from an outside perspective, a student's decision to drop out of school is connected to the failure of the student (Lee and Burkam 2003), but this case study gathers the perspectives of the HEP students to determine accurate, specific reasons. A large percentage of HEP students dropped out of school because of their negative interactions with teachers, further contributing to the literature of the influence teachers have over students (Hallinan 2008). As explained by Jay, valuable insight regarding the power over what teachers say versus students is provided:

> I ended up dropping out in the 11th grade because I was kicked out. I was kicked out because of a fucking teacher. The fucking guy claimed that I threatened to kill him. He said he read my lips and he knew I said I would kill him.

Years later, Jay helplessly and frustratedly expressed, "Man Paul, I have no reason to lie about it. I never told that teacher I would kill him, but they believed him and not me." A teacher fearing a student in school is not uncommon, but the truth behind the extent that this violence actually exists from students against and toward teachers must be examined (Smith and Smith 2006). Like Jay, Sal was also familiar with the power of teachers versus students:

> I ended up dropping out because of an argument I got into with a teacher. A teacher called me a loser and I flipped out and started cursing and going crazy on the teacher because of what he told me. Because of how I acted no one believed me that he called me a loser and it turned into how I acted instead of what the teacher did to start the whole thing.

Although many would agree that Sal's response to the teacher was inappropriate, in this situation the teacher's actions also need to be questioned. In both cases it would seem that the teachers had little regard for the students and expected the worst from them. Big T suffered a comparable fate during a similar situation to the two previous HEP students:

> I dropped out in the 10th grade because of a huge riot they say I started. There was this white guy who was a senior and was a big time racist. He would call all of us Latinos Spics, dirty Mexicans, Beaners and all kinds of racist shit. Well I got tired of his shit and 'called him out' after school one day. All the Latinos in the school were tired of his shit cause this motherfucker tried terrorizing us and the school didn't do shit. So I decided to do something about it and he met me after school to fight. News spread around school real quick and I didn't even know what was going to happen because I was planning to kick this guy's ass one-on-one style. When we met up after school I was surprised when I saw about 50 Latino students show up to confront this guy and before you know it a huge riot broke out. This guy got hurt real bad and shit went down; but at the end of the day it all fell on me. The school held me responsible and I was kicked out. I never went back because I felt that it wasn't fair because I was just standing up for myself because no one else would. But the school didn't give a fuck so I just stopped going.

Falling victim to racism, Big T felt cornered and responded in the manner that he felt was best, given that authority figures in the school (e.g. teachers or administrators) did not take action. Facing the situations encountered in school regarding racism, Big T responded in a manner he felt was his only option even though this was an unacceptable

solution according to the school. Unfortunately, the school never took action against Big T's agitator. The end result for Big T was deciding never to return to school because of his negative experiences with the school.

Lastly, Maggie shared her painful experience which influenced her to drop out of school. Maggie discussed, "Teachers were always rude and mean to me and were always judging me. I fell too far behind in my school work and a teacher told me I would never graduate; so I decided to drop out after she told me that in the 11th grade." Although her experience was different than the previous student, the end result was the same; she dropped out of school due to an interaction with a teacher. Teacher influence on students is well documented (Lee and Burkam 2003) and in the case of the HEP students, this influence played a clear role in their decision to not continue toward completion of their education.

The second category of reasons for dropping out, at face value seems different, but is still connected to teachers and schools. The first group of HEP students in the financial/personal category for dropping out is a group of students who dropped out for financial reasons. This group of students did not directly attribute their dropping out to the school or teachers, but rather to personal issues regarding financial situations that required them to join the work force to support their family's survival. In the case of Jerry, monetary issues were the driving force behind his decision to drop out:

> I mean, me and my family was starving and we needed money and teachers didn't give a fuck. So I ended up dropping out in the 11th grade because I needed to make steady money for my family. I didn't care about school though Paul, I just hated that fucking place cause the teachers always tried to make me feel stupid.

Poverty severely impacted Jerry and his family impeding his academic pursuit. Dropping out of school to accommodate time for work in order to support familial sustainability is

not uncommon for some of the poorer social classes in the U.S. Interestingly, Jerry still commented regarding teachers but, ultimately, finances were the largest obstacle blocking his education. Alex also dropped out of school due to financial reasons because he married early in his life, "I ended up dropping out in the 11th grade... I decided to get married and go work so I could support myself and my wife instead of wasting my time in a place (school) that I hated." Again, Alex did not identify a direct connection with teachers or school as the reason he dropped out, but the ill feelings toward school were mentioned. Rather than serving as a resource for future success, school was viewed as more of an obstacle for students' lives. For these students, responsibilities outside of school played a major role in leading them to drop out of school. Within the financial/personal category of reasons for dropping out, there is a group that was plagued with other issues that were personal in nature, but different than those previously mentioned.

The remaining HEP students declared that drugs and problems with gangs were predominately the most influencing personal issues in their decision to drop out. Most "at risk" students confront issues surrounding substance abuse, legal problems, and overall involvement in deviant behavior (Tanner, Davis, and O'Grady 1999). For example, Casper was addicted to drugs which led to his demise in school, "I hated going to school and I found being in the streets more fun. I mean that's where life was happening, but not in fucking school. So I dropped out in the 10th grade and just ran the streets getting high and doing stupid shit." Although Casper does not connect his academic choices to teachers, rather with drug use, the common theme of disliking school rears up again. Unlike Casper, El Gus was not involved in drug use but was involved in

gangs. Gangs in many schools, urban and rural alike, have a negative impact on the lives of gang and non-gang member students. As a gang member, El Gus dealt with gang member violence on a daily basis which affected him drastically in school:

> The final straw for my dropping out was when I knew there was a set up that was going to happen against me but I did not know when it was going down. I told my teachers and the school and they just ignored me. So the school pretty much told me to fuck off and I figured they probably couldn't do shit anyway. So I just stopped going to school because I knew if I kept going I would be killed by my enemies. School was something I never liked anyway.

Although teachers are not at fault regarding gang violence in schools, in El Gus' case he reached out for help and was ignored. Perhaps the constant issue with gangs in some schools would render some teachers or administrators helpless, but through the eyes of students like El Gus, authority figures in the school did not serve as a resource in any fashion. Ultimately, drug use and gang involvement is not something for which teachers are at fault, but serving as a helpful resource for students is something that is inherently involved in their positions (Meyer 1968). No matter what reasons are behind a HEP student's decision to drop out of school, the end result typically has a negative impact on their lives.

Throughout this section, an attempt is made to show how insightful student perspectives support an understanding of why HEP students drop out of school. In many cases, teachers and schools emerged as a common reason HEP students dropped out of school stemming from negative interactions and experiences or a general dislike of school. Every student interviewed took responsibility for their action of dropping out. However, the reasons behind their actions were difficult to disregard. Through the sharing of their experiences in school, scholars, teachers, and laymen alike can now have greater insight in understanding why HEP students drop out of school.

Overall, this chapter examines vital information regarding HEP students through a sociological lens using discussion and analysis of student perspectives. Each student's background serves as a starting point in understanding why they have not succeeded in traditional school systems which use traditional pedagogical approaches. More importantly having the HEP students share their school experiences and perspectives regarding teachers allows them a voice in helping educate others about factors influencing their academic lives. Nationwide, there is little gathered personal information from HEP students; therefore, this chapter is a useful contribution. The information provided on family backgrounds, personal identities, and past school experiences can help the government, along with HEP programs nationwide, achieve a better understanding of HEP students. This understanding could result in better services targeted for HEP students' specific needs and their communities. The variety of information on HEP student personal backgrounds gathered here sets a backdrop for the foundations of this dissertation not only by providing a clearer understanding of the students, but how my pedagogical structure connects well with them.

CHAPTER 6: THE EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY AND RACISM - DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Observers might assume that HEP students experience a smooth transition when they come to MSU to a positive environment which makes it easy for them to succeed in passing the GED. However, through the summary of student backgrounds in the previous chapter, I offered an understanding of the experiences which led HEP students to leave their previous educational pursuits. This understanding and description of HEP student experiences at MSU revealed that HEP students actually faced many challenges. This chapter discusses the factors associated with the challenges encountered by HEP students during their transition to MSU. One factor was the drastic difference between the MSU environment and the HEP student's origins. Another factor was that at MSU, many HEP students encountered discrimination and/or racism that further exacerbated their inability to adjust to campus living. Furthermore, these experiences and challenges impacted the development and clarity of their individual self identities making it even more difficult to find comfort at MSU.

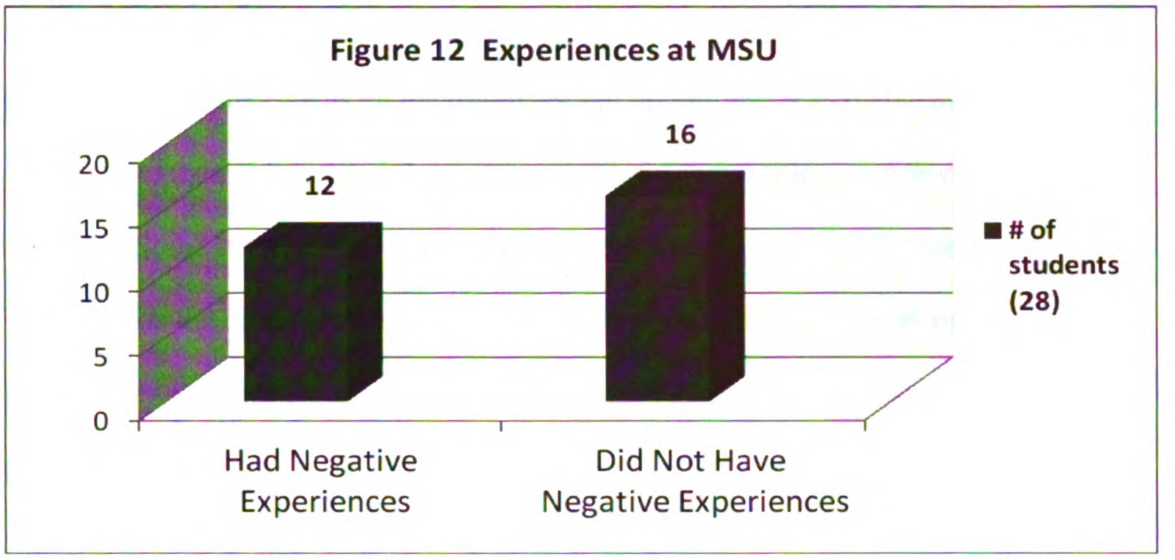
These challenges produced difficult obstacles for HEP students that distracted their focus from academics and the GED. As they struggled to adjust, they became reliant on the classroom environment for acceptance and support to prepare for the GED. Pedagogical approaches of the instructors were integral to assist the student transition and have a pleasant and successful preparatory class environment. This chapter will focus on the HEP students' experiences at MSU and, through their interviews and my observations as a HEP instructor will highlight the difficulty of their transition.

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

At first glance, it would appear that having HEP students move to MSU's campus would provide a wonderful learning environment with few negative aspects. The reality however is that many of the students I worked with during my tenure at HEP experienced discomfort at MSU. In essence, many students experienced the classic sociological concept of culture shock where they experience a rapid change surrounded by a new cultural setting (Anderson and Taylor 2009) of MSU. This not only leads to culture shock, but requires an extended social adjustment period while at HEP. Interviews with HEP students revealed the nature of student experiences in regards to their positive or negative social adjustment while at MSU. For the purposes of this study, social adjustment refers to whether students felt comfortable at MSU and why.

During the fourth week of the program student interviews were conducted to assess HEP students' social adjustment. This was an appropriate start date since it allowed ample time for students to adapt to the new setting and reflect on their feelings regarding their new surroundings. These interviews yielded valuable information regarding how their experiences impacted their adjustment and their feelings toward MSU. Some students had positive experiences and liked the program, while others did not.

Of the twenty eight students interviewed, 57% felt comfortable and were able to adapt well at MSU by at least the fourth week of the program, leaving 43% who reported negative experiences. The breakdown during the adjustment period for these students is as follows:



The HEP program emphasized their goal to assist all HEP students toward a comfortable experience at MSU which influenced the pre-interview assumption that all HEP students had encountered negative experiences and struggled to adapt while at MSU. However, the interviews proved that for the majority of students, this was not the case. Those who were comfortable at MSU shared reasons supporting their perspectives. For example, Andy shared,

> I feel good here at HEP. I mean like I can really succeed in school. I can do better stuff here than I couldn't do back home. I feel good about myself here because I just feel that there are opportunities here that do not exist back home. I think I have a future here.

Andy focused on the opportunities that were available to him while at MSU and from his involvement with the HEP program. He was genuinely excited and practically glowed every time we sat down to discuss his progress in the program. He never focused on negativity. Rather, he was driven by the opportunities in front of him. Similar to Andy, Dee was excited about the opportunities available to her, reinforcing her positive comfort level at MSU. Dee expressed, "I feel like I belong here. I feel very happy and comfortable here at HEP. I think I can really make it here and not be stuck in the ghettos anymore."

Many other students offered similar descriptions of their comfort level at MSU corresponding with a focus on the resources and opportunities available at MSU compared to their lives in their home towns where opportunities were few and far between. Some students who expressed contentedness while at MSU based their sentiment on the direct impact from the HEP program and their connection to it. Others based their sentiment on simply having the opportunity to distance themselves from their previous environment.

The HEP program dedicates an enormous amount of effort to their students to assure comfort while preparing to take the GED exams. This is made evident as the Associate Director shared, "We are here to help them find a balance of how to deal with problems while trying to reach their goals." As an instructor with HEP for over 5 semesters, I witnessed the action behind this statement as it was constantly emphasized in interactions with students to help their adjustment process. Although this was a difficult task and many times not functional, I discovered through my interviews and informal discussions with students, that the program was indeed effective. Deebo affirmed that he was able to overcome his discomfort with MSU because of HEP:

> I feel like I am a new person with a new life here at HEP. HEP really has made me feel like I have a chance at making it in school. I mean, being at MSU is strange and I don't like it but I am here for HEP, not MSU. But I am getting used to being here and with time I think I could get used to being here at MSU.

The HEP program helped Deebo feel at ease during his time on campus. However, he specifically focused on attending HEP rather than being an MSU student, thus he did not seek to become part of the larger MSU community.

In Sal's case, the HEP program served as a foundation for comfort similar to Deebo. Over a cup of coffee in my office after hours, Sal articulated:

> I feel special. I am grateful and very glad that I am here. I am trying to keep with my dreams and the resources here at HEP really help me out. I would not have had another chance at school if it was not for HEP. I feel comfortable both at HEP and MSU.

Sal constantly emphasized the greatness of HEP at helping their students with issues faced while adjusting to the MSU environment. Given that HEP exists to serve these students, it is imperative that their voices be heard. These voices enable me to determine HEP's effectiveness in helping students adjust and enhance the clarity of insight for integration into an alternative pedagogy to be a functional tool for future instructors.

In contrast to the already shared experiences, a number of students never adjusted or felt comfortable while living at MSU and attending HEP. Some HEP students shared that their discomfort while in the program was a result of being stared at and/or feelings of being out of place on campus because of how they were viewed and treated by MSU students. For example, Michelle commented:

> I feel uncomfortable here because I am different here at MSU. I mean, me and the HEP students are real similar like real "hood" and shit, but to the larger group of people we [HEP students] just stick out like crazy. Back in Detroit I walk around and I am normal but here I walk around and people call me a Mexican [in a derogatory manner]. I have many mixed emotions here and I am trying real hard to just focus on my work but it is hard. I just find it hard to be someone I am not.

Michelle struggled with discomfort from feeling out of place her entire semester at MSU. Although she was a very bright, young woman, Michelle simply found it difficult to adjust at MSU. Similarly, Ed felt like an outsider while at MSU:

> I feel like an outcast here. I know I am here at HEP, but HEP is in MSU. I don't have any friends here. The HEP students are cool to hang out with so I won't be alone but, I mean that's all I got. The MSU students just look down on me so I feel like an outsider so I just don't feel comfortable here.

The overall impact of MSU students and/or the MSU community on these students was negative. Albeit perhaps the stares were not intended as negative but rather of interest, such actions were still interpreted and understood as negative by HEP students, thus,

instigating discomfort. I observed this marginalization when witnessing some MSU students giving "dirty looks" towards HEP students who while being stared at, completely changed even their body language. Much of these marginalized feelings were caused by their surrounding environment but some were also self-induced. Some HEP students, although they never experienced negative looks or body language from others, simply felt they were being ostracized. In addition to discomfort stemming from how they felt they were perceived and treated by MSU students, arose the issue of students missing home.

Homesickness was common for all HEP students but for some, adjustment was more difficult because MSU was very different from the homes where they originated. This category of HEP students did not focus on how they were interpreted by others but on what they disliked at MSU in comparison to their homes. Homesickness and the adjustment process proved to be a major challenge.

As James explained, "It has been very hard coming here because it is so different. I mean, MSU and all the students are just tripping me out because it is not like back home. I mean, I walk around here and I am a minority and it's not like that back home." Students like James focused more on the differences between their homes and MSU which they saw as negative, rather than on the overall positive opportunities stemming from MSU's differences. This attitude, displayed by some HEP students, falls into character with what Paul Willis discussed regarding the lack of academic preparation of working class youth in schools. Within Willis' context, for these HEP students, MSU represented an experience for which they had never been formally prepared and for which they had not developed the appropriate practical skills for success. In their home

environments, on the other hand, they are able to apply their "street" skills in a more effective and rewarding manner (Willis 1977). Another example of this view was expressed by Maggie:

> I don't feel comfortable at MSU because it is way different than back home. Back home things are normal for me and I come here and things are strange. I don't feel like I fit in here but back home I fit in just fine. Here everything is so different and I don't really like it because I am more comfortable back home.

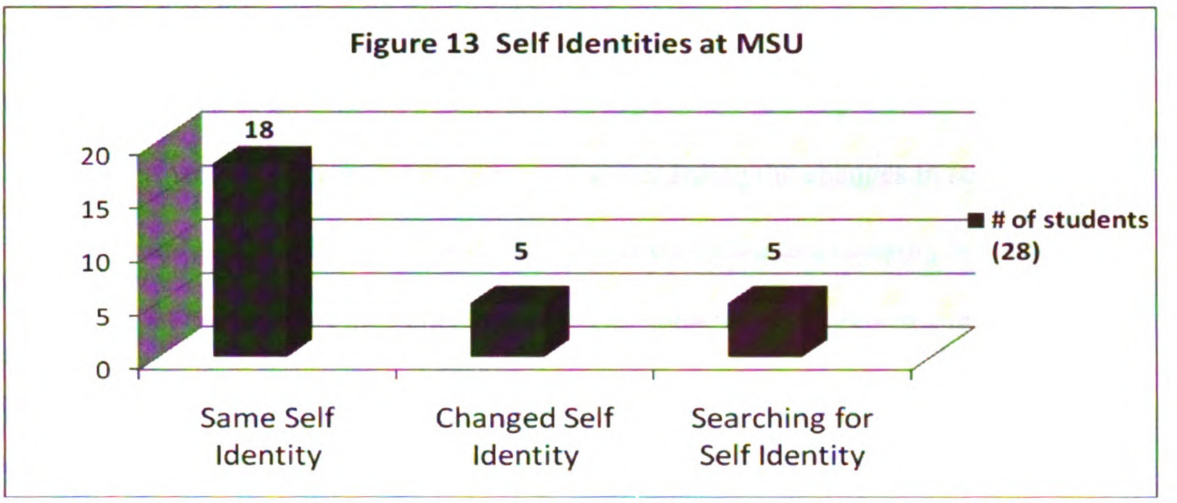
Throughout the twelve week semester of GED preparation, struggles occurred for students who were focused on the missed attributes of home. With limited time to adjust, these feelings made it difficult for students to focus on their classes. For this reason, the Director emphasized the importance for instructors to develop creative methods to connect with students in the classroom to help them overcome negative feelings which could inhibit their focus on the GED. Regardless of why these students experienced discomfort, it is the instructor's job to seek out ways to aid students in overcoming these barriers.

Much insightful information was shared through the student interviews which allowed for the exploration and understanding of the reasons behind HEP student's levels of comfort while living at MSU. Overall, the students' comfort level was only one facet of being able to focus clearly on achieving the goal of passing the GED exam while attending HEP. By allowing HEP students to voice rather than assume their opinions and experiences, instructors and others who are involved with the HEP community gain a powerful tool to help students learn. The next section will focus on the identity of HEP students while at MSU emphasizing how they are impacted when they move into and live in MSU housing.

IDENTITY WHILE AT HEP

The previous chapter shared how the HEP students self identified. To further explore these identities, the question was asked "What is your identity here at MSU?" to see if a change existed in how they identified themselves at MSU versus at home. It is generally accepted within the field of sociology that where one is socialized can impact a person for the duration of their lives, even if they move to or experience new and different settings and circumstances than the place where they were initially socialized (Anderson and Taylor 2009). Through student testimonies, this section reveals how a new environment impacted HEP student identities.

There were three resulting categories created from the answers shared by the interviewed students when asked to define their identity at MSU. The first is "self identity stayed the same", meaning the self identity for the student while at HEP did not change from how they viewed themselves at home. The second category is "changed self identity" whereas the student discussed that his/her identity differed at HEP from his/her identity prior to HEP. The third category is "searching for self identity" implying that their self identity at HEP was different than while at home but they had not yet formulated a new self identity. The breakdown of the twenty eight students interviewed consisted of the three different categories as follows:



The HEP students were very articulate and creative in helping me understand the reasoning behind their self identities; therefore, I am able to provide rich examples.

The majority (64%) of students interviewed responded that their self identities did not change while attending HEP. Although the environment to which they were accustomed was drastically different than that of MSU, the difference did not affect their identities. Kay explained:

> I see myself as the same person I am back home. The only difference here is that I tend to look at things more positive with school. Back home school was a negative and here it is a positive. But overall I am the same person here as I am back home.

Although she discussed how nothing about her had changed, Kay acknowledged that the opportunities available and treatment towards her while at HEP was better for her than at her previous schools back home. Similarly, Deebo shared:

> I am viewed as a thug here by the MSU students but none of them actually get to know me. I feel like a normal guy here trying to get my education. Back home it's just finding a way to get money and just living that thug life but here I am trying something different and it feels positive and good. I guess I am a thug at heart but I am also a good guy who is just trying to live a normal life, getting his education here at HEP.

Deebo's statement reflects a similar sentiment shared by many of the HEP students regarding their time at the HEP program; confused. While they identified themselves as unchanged from at home to HEP, they acknowledged the positive atmosphere and

opportunities offered by HEP. The second group which stated a "changed self identity" at HEP consisted of five students (18%). Although small in comparison to the first group discussed, it yielded very pertinent perspectives regarding the changes in student self identities during HEP. Every student who identified within this category was genuinely excited about the changes they encountered, with some students expressing drastic changes. This excitement projected an appreciation of being given a "clean slate" at HEP with an opportunity to re-construct themselves in a manner which prior to HEP had seemed impossible. El Cholo was one student who expressed this sentiment clearly:

> I see myself as a normal guy out here. I mean not as a gang member but as a guy who is trying to get his education. I guess the difference between who I am here versus back home is that here I feel like I have an opportunity to get my education and back home I didn't. So it makes me feel like a normal guy. I want people to view me as an equal, like a normal guy. But people out here, well white MSU students look down on me, but I just want them to see that I am just a normal guy and I ain't looking for no "pedo" [problems]. I am not walking around here gang banging or claiming anything with gangs but just being a normal guy.

El Cholo's sincerity and honesty reminded me of the plethora of my friends and family with gang involvement who, after finally being released from prison after many years, felt as if they had an opportunity to start a new life. Similarly, El Cholo was excited regarding his new dedication to and focus on education rather than on gang life or gangs themselves. Although his style of dress and vernacular were still very much perceived by others as gang related, his attitude and perspectives changed in accordance with his self identity. El Cholo's experience was very powerful and profound. As he discussed the details of his experience, he became "choked up" many times and even shed some tears. His tears were not a result of sadness, rather happiness and humility in the face of an opportunity for a new lifestyle. This included a life that no longer required him to "hang on by a thread" as he described his way of life during his previous involvements.

Another student who experienced a powerful change in his self identity was Jay:

> My identity here is a lot different than back home. Here I focus on my studies and I am a guy with a purpose. I am not trying to look for all the parties, women, and trouble. My identity here is just a regular hard working college student. I am just a regular student like everyone else and that's just the way I see it.

He emphasized the impact of his new environment in inspiring him to want to succeed. This inspiration was something he lacked at home and was therefore very grateful for his experience with HEP. Jay made a commendable effort to focus on his "new beginning" despite the obstacles and struggles he faced throughout the entire process of his semester at HEP. In an attempt to shed his old perspectives and habits, he constantly sought out help and guidance from the HEP program staff, to help him accomplish his transition. Unlike the students who were able to establish, or had already identified, their self identities while at HEP, the final group of five students (18%) were still in the process of searching for their identities during HEP.

Over my tenure with HEP, I had many conversations with staff and administrators regarding current and past students who were seeking definition of their identities. This search signified that they had changed from the person they felt they were at home, but were also not comfortable with or sure of who they were while at HEP. The opportunity to interview students in this category offered insight into student's feelings of why they were searching for their identity while at HEP. One of the most powerful interviews occurred with Michelle, a very charismatic young woman who expressed herself clearly. Michelle shared her feelings about the uncertainty of how to define her identity as follows:

> I have not found an identity here at HEP yet. I am trying to make a new identity and leave my bad habits from back home as a thing of the past, but it is really hard. I still have my bad habits and I know they can get me into a lot of trouble out here. It is really hard to try and be a new person. But I am just trying to get rid of all the bad shit I am used to doing

> because I have no reason to do bad shit here at HEP. I know I can be something more here.

As she was trying to succeed in the program, she felt that her old habits or self identity developed throughout her life in Detroit were not conducive to her success at HEP. However, she was fearful of becoming something or someone with which she was not fully comfortable. She wanted to still be herself but understood that there must be a transition and process to adapt to her new environment to avoid negative consequences that historically came along with the actions associated to that self. Comparable to Michelle, there were other students who felt lost regarding their self identity while at HEP.

Hank knew who he was while in his Florida hometown, but his experience at HEP created an obstacle regarding the clarity of his self identity. Hank knew he wanted to succeed in the program. Unfortunately, struggles with his identity while at HEP made that difficult for him as it led him to question himself daily. When Hank was asked about his self identity, he answered, "I really don't know. I am not sure. I have not found my identity here because I know I am different here than I am back home. But I am struggling to find it here." Finding his self identity was no easy task and through out his entire HEP semester, he struggled with this issue. Although there were a low percentage of students searching for identities, they represented an important part of the general HEP student population. The two students chosen as examples embodied the responses received by students in this category. It is crucial to be aware of and understand the importance of the student's perspectives of themselves and the various self identities students deal with while attending the academically intense program of HEP.

Understanding and awareness aids instructors and those working with HEP students to create meaningful curricula which will connect with and support specific learning needs.

Beyond the daily challenges that HEP students encountered with their identities or the process of adapting to life at MSU, another issue affecting students is discrimination. The amount of discrimination that HEP students experienced on a daily basis was detrimental to their success. The following section focuses on student experiences with discrimination while at MSU.

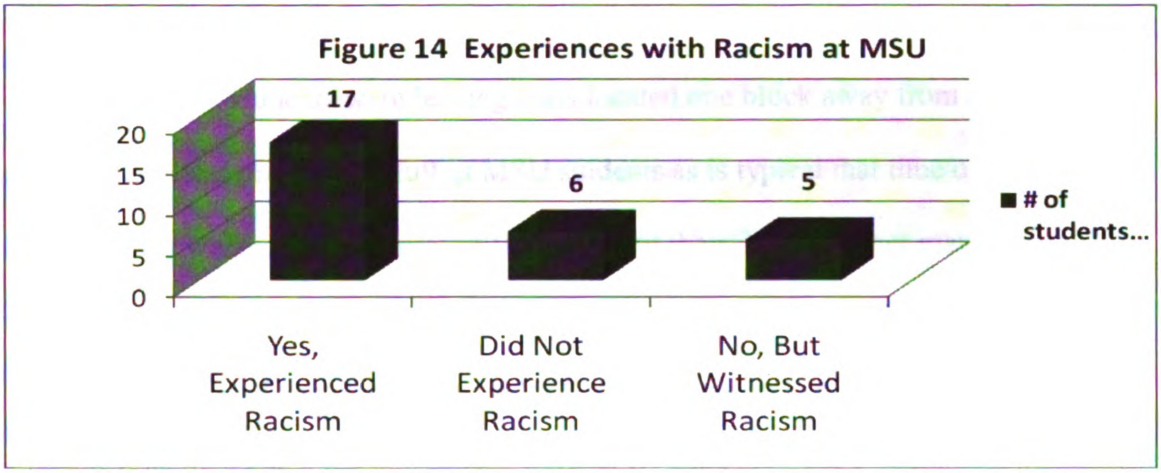
EXPERIENCES OF DISCRIMINATION WHILE AT MSU

As a new instructor with HEP along with the program introduction, was a clear cut description of the students that attend HEP. From this description and view through my terministic screen, I expected this population of students to face some discrimination at MSU but not to experience overtly negative forms of discrimination given that this specific type of discrimination has become more uncommon over the years (Evelyn Nakano Glenn 2002). It was especially surprising to find this type of discrimination at a higher learning institution that, like many others like it, stresses and professes that they are an Equal Opportunity Institution.

Although the acts of racism did not stem from the university itself, they originated from non-race specific MSU students residing at the institution; European American, African American, Asian American and other racial groups of students. While the discrimination was felt from individuals of various racial groups HEP student accounts indicate the bulk came from European American MSU students. It is not only extremely important to point out the racial injustice, but also for the reader to understand that HEP

students faced large scale racism. As mentioned in previous chapters, these types of experiences had negative effects on the academic performance of students.

From the responses of the twenty eight students interviewed, three categories emerged; those who experienced racism, those who did not experience racism, and those who did not experience racism directly, but witnessed it happening to other HEP students while attending MSU.



Semester after semester, HEP students identified and reported various types of racism that they commonly experienced. Exploration of experiencing discrimination is important for two reasons. First of all, discrimination shows another component of the adversity that HEP students must overcome in pursuit of their GED while at MSU. Secondly, it illustrates issues with contemporary racism, inequality, and overall discrimination in a day and age where it is sometimes argued that racism is coming to an end.

HEP students discussed diverse and plentiful experiences with racism while living on MSU's campus. The stories, discussions, and interviews brought to light the seriousness behind this problem. Student testimonies evidenced racism as a constant issue for HEP students. Although the HEP program and university personnel are aware

of and offer resources to help deal with racism, the severity of the experiences still led to a feeling of helplessness and victimization on the part of many HEP students. As their instructor, even I felt powerless in many instances when students shared their experiences and issues with discrimination.

One of the most frustrating experiences shared by HEP students occurred during my first semester teaching at HEP. The incident took place during fall semester at MSU; the time of the year when there was pleasant weather to walk around campus. It was midday and HEP students were leaving class located one block away from their dormitories. The streets were full of MSU students as is typical that time of day. The HEP students walked in small groups talking about their day and other matters that concerned them. In broad daylight, a car that was described to be full of European American MSU students drove past the HEP students multiple times. I asked my students how they knew the individuals were MSU students. They mentioned that the car had stickers indicating "Sparty On" and an "MSU" bumper sticker with big, green letters and the vehicle occupants appeared of college age leading them to conclude they were MSU students. The remaining details of the incident are best communicated using student interview responses.

Michelle was one of the students who felt she was a victim of this racist attack. She described, "It was a guy driving around in his car with some of his friends and he circled me and the other HEP students a few times as he drove back and forth. They would point at us and laugh at us and eventually they gave us the "finger" and yelled 'you fucking Mexicans you need to go back home!'" Even for a young person as well spoken as Michelle, she struggled to explain how she felt regarding the situation. Jerry

on the other hand, expressed what many in the academic community may view as deviant behavior. He explained how he felt regarding the incident, "He drove off after he said that and I just wanted to chase the fucking car and get my hands on this motherfucker and fuck him up." It is difficult to reflect on and find solutions for situations at the instant they occur. After this happened, many of these students ran back to the classroom to tell me what happened. This was an experience that loomed in many HEP students' minds but was only one of many examples of discrimination that constantly bombarded HEP students.

Writing on the doors of HEP student dorm rooms also has been a serious issue directly connected to racial issues. Jay commented, "I found writing on my dorm room door saying, 'Go home back to Mexico'." Similar to Jay, Big T shared, "The first week we were here we had comments written on our walls outside of our dorms saying, dirty spic go home." In one case, the perpetrators of the writing were caught in the act when a student walked into the hallway. Frank explained, "I caught some white MSU students writing on my dorm room door. They started to run when they saw me. But they wrote 'Go home Mexican!'" This form of racism was not uncommon for HEP students as was learned through the interviews. Unfortunately, cases where people were caught in the act were rare. Beyond the writing found on dorm room doors, there were many reported incidents of derogatory terms and comments being written on the walls and bulletin boards in the residential halls where HEP students resided. Overall, unwelcoming messages of intimidation were sent clearly by the authors of the comments written on doors and walls. Although Frank caught the perpetrators, the majority of written

discriminatory cases were not connected with a specific racial group. Regardless, the language used and directed towards the HEP population was racist in its intent.

Additional direct forms of racism were experienced by HEP students. Two incidents of this nature took place where HEP students observed direct acts of racism, and by their own accord, tried to deal with the situations. Deebo was saddened as he shared his experience with me, not because he did not enact any vengeance, but because he couldn't believe he had encountered this type of experience at MSU. Deebo shared the experience that was witnessed by other HEP students who were with him that night:

> ...I was in my buddy's dorm room and we were playing video games like everyone else pretty much does but I guess the volume was too loud for people. Two white MSU students walked in and asked us to lower the volume. We didn't trip and we lowered the volume. Well all of a sudden we could hear a bunch of white students talking real loud. So we got close to our door to see what was up and there was 5 white MSU students talking shit. They said, "These fucking Mexicans need to go back to the other side! Fuck these border hoppers!" I was so fucking mad because since there was a bunch of them they were all brave and shit. So we called the other HEP students and they ended up coming to the floor to "back me up". There were 20 of us Latinos and the white boys all shut their doors and would not respond or open their doors when I went knocking and asked them to repeat what they had said. It is so frustrating and it makes me so mad. But what am I supposed to do out here?

As an instructor for HEP, I was thankful that no violence occurred and that no one was hurt in this tense situation. There were many other incidents comparable to Deebo's experienced by HEP students of face to face discrimination.

Verbal attacks were encountered by many HEP students over several semesters while walking past large groups of MSU students. Frank shared his experience, "...a bunch of white MSU students were walking on the opposite side of the street as us HEP students and there was a bunch of them, like twenty people. Well they yelled, 'Fuck you, you fucking Mexicans!' as they were walking away from us." Another face to face

encounter occurred in the dorm cafeteria. This incident was shared by Manny and other HEP students:

> I have white MSU students always making nasty comments about my race and my sexuality. I heard three white girls in the cafeteria who got next to me and other HEP students talk shit. They said very loudly, 'Who are all these Mexicans?!' Then they started saying all loud, 'Taco! Taco! Taco!' I couldn't believe it so I just got up and left because I felt so powerless. I wanted to bash their faces in, but I knew I would be the only one losing cause they wouldn't get in trouble.

These types of situations were not uncommon for many HEP students while living on MSU's campus.

It would be incorrect to assume that HEP students only experience racial tension and/or racism from or with European American students. In fact, a specific incident took place with Kay and some African American MSU students. Although I feel it is seldom discussed, tension and discrimination between minority groups exists. In this example, discrimination occurred in the form of a few African American students against HEP students. Kay is a young woman who was in a relationship with a young, African American man who did not attend the HEP program. I point this out because Kay felt that seeing African American students on campus could possibly lead to potential camaraderie according to what she discussed with me. Contrarily, she encountered something she was not prepared for. Kay explained:

> There was a situation with black MSU students that was bullshit too. There was a big group of black MSU students in Holden Hall and we figured we would say what's up because we wanted to make some new friends. Well this one bitch told us, 'What you talking to us for, ain't you happy with your own kind? Why don't you go back with your Mexicans?' I couldn't believe this shit and I just let it go because I was just ready to fuck this bitch up.

Kay shared her anger and disappointment with the situation and again, rather than dealing with the issue with direct violence, she was able to walk away from the situation.

Unfortunately, this experience negatively impacted Kay's perspectives of all MSU students as it did for many of the HEP students in the program.

Sharing these examples of MSU students, who committed racist acts, is not to say that all MSU students are racist. There are also many MSU students of different races, who have worked, contributed, and became friends with and helped HEP students. The focus in this case was to point out that although MSU may be interpreted by some as a place of higher learning with little or no issues regarding overtly negative racist attitudes, this was not the case regarding some of the experiences of HEP students. However, given that MSU is a part of the larger society, the experiences with racism and discrimination therefore reflect the values of society, both positive and negative, which includes racism. Overall, negative racial experiences are contributing factors in the difficulties faced by HEP students both while attending HEP and in society which impacts their focus on passing the GED. This further exemplifies the need for an alternative pedagogy that can help students stay focused and be successful in their classes without being lost to the challenges they face while living at MSU.

CHAPTER 7: PASSING RATES BEFORE AND AFTER MY ARRIVAL

This part of the case study, examines the effect of my pedagogy on students' GED performance, their ultimate goal at HEP. An analysis of the passing rates on the actual GED tests for my class subject areas: Reading and Writing was made to sufficiently judge its effectiveness. In order to be all encompassing with the student performance, it was necessary to examine the passing rates for all of the subject areas. Therefore, GED testing results both prior to and during my employment with HEP were compiled. The collected results included the program's Reading and Writing classes taught in Spanish, and the remaining three GED subject components (Science, Math and Social Studies). Through all of these comparisons, the highlighted GED performance results and statistical differences evidence the effectiveness of my applied pedagogical approach.

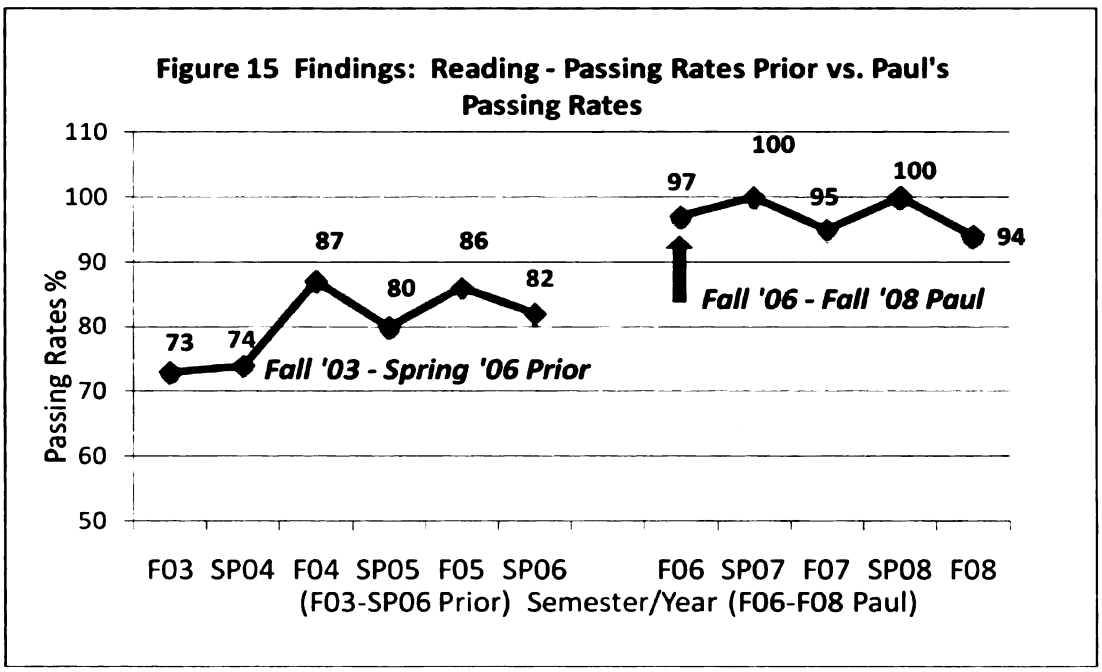
RESULTS PRIOR TO MY ARRIVAL TO HEP (READING AND WRITING)

I joined the HEP program in the fall semester of 2006. The program had previously experienced inconsistent passing rates. Upon inquiring about the reasons behind this inconsistency, the Associate Director replied:

> Passing rates in the program have been inconsistent and they seldom, if ever, have been close to or above 90%. Ideally our goal is for all students to pass all subjects, but unfortunately instructors have struggled with our students. The majority of our students have unique learning needs which make it difficult for teachers to adapt at first.

The underlying message conveyed by the Associate Director was that the program needed to diversify teaching styles to meet the unique learning needs of students. This idea was kept in the forefront of my mind while developing and applying my pedagogy. The end result was students in my classes yielded higher performance on the GED exams than students in other comparable classes within the HEP program.

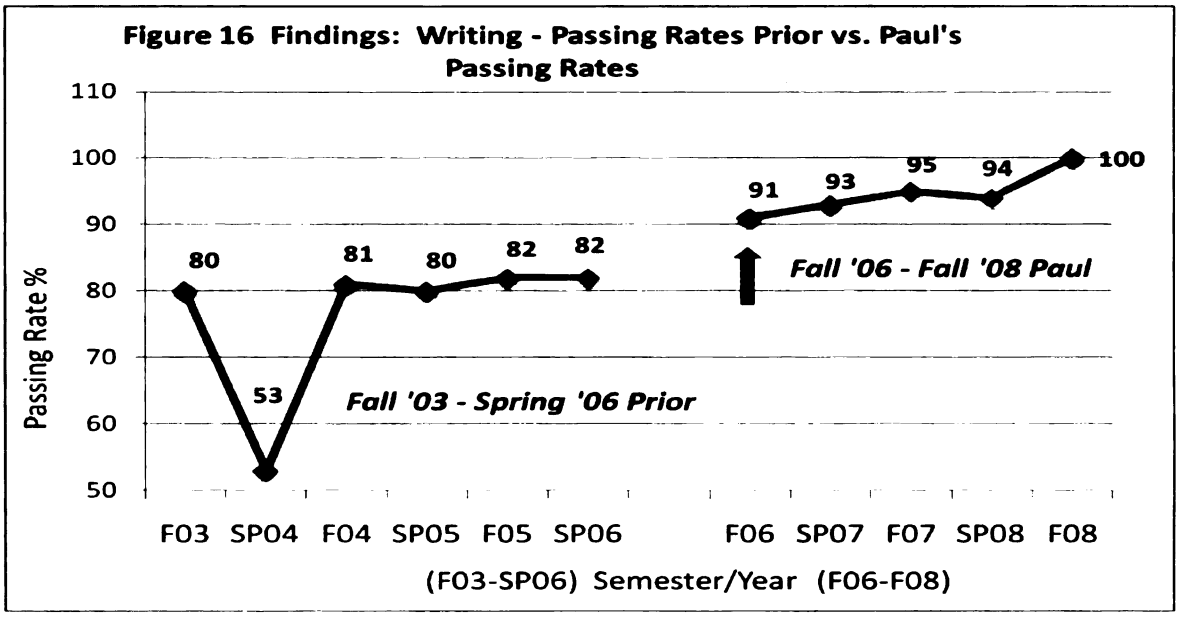
Having taught the Reading and Writing sections of the GED, information on the passing rates for these subjects from the inception of the program through my final semester with HEP were gathered. The following graph indicates the passing rates from the fall 2003 semester through the fall 2008 semester (5 semesters) for the GED Reading classes at HEP. The arrow indicates the semester that I began teaching the class.



From the fall 2003 semester to the spring 2006 semester, the Reading class experienced a wide range of passing rates that never reached a 90% passing rate. The Associate Director's statement regarding inconsistency proved true when the GED Reading results were analyzed. Although the passing rates were not negative, the program's target is a consistent student pass rate of at or above 80%, with an ultimate goal of 100% of its students passing the GED. Many of the instructors indicated those percentages seemed impossible to reach. However, during my first semester with HEP (Fall 2006), my pedagogy made an immediate impact, resulting in a passing rate of 97% in the Reading class. Over the course of five semesters with HEP, my students averaged a 97.2%

passing rate in Reading. During two semesters, my Reading class reached a perfect 100% passing rate. The HEP administration was thrilled at improved results of the Reading class and even more so with the performance of my Writing classes, since it is considered by many instructors one of the hardest subjects to teach.

According to HEP administration and staff, Writing and Math were typically the two most difficult subjects for HEP students. Data on the passing rates for the Writing section of the GED was examined to ascertain the overall trends of the subject performance before and after my employment. The graph below shows the passing rates for the Writing subject area from the Fall semester of 2003 though the Fall Semester of 2008 with an arrow indicating the year and semester I began to teach the class:



Although the Writing classes overall passing rates for the first three years averaged near 80%, the program still sought out ways to increase student performance. My first semester with HEP ended with a 91% passing rate in Writing. Over the course of the five semesters teaching the Writing class, passing rates steadily increased averaging 94.6%, eventually ending with a 100% passing rate performance by students my final semester.

The results yielded in my Reading and Writing classes were higher in comparison to all of the prior semesters. Not only were there improved passing rates, but the rates were consistently above 90%. To further illustrate the effectiveness of my pedagogy, comparison was made between the outcomes of my Reading and Writing courses with the subjects taught by other instructors at HEP.

READING AND WRITING PASSING RATE COMPARISONS WITH OTHER SUBJECTS

This case study began during the fall semester of 2006. A second set of Reading and Writing classes (taught in Spanish) were not created until the fall semester of 2007. The program had long wanted to develop a set of classes in Spanish, which would mirror the English classes, because the GED is offered in Spanish nationwide. In the fall of 2007, HEP created Spanish classes for all five GED subjects to address the unmet needs of the migrant community and prepare participants for the Spanish GED tests. Once the classes were created, comparison was available for the performance results of my Reading and Writing classes to the Spanish counterparts.

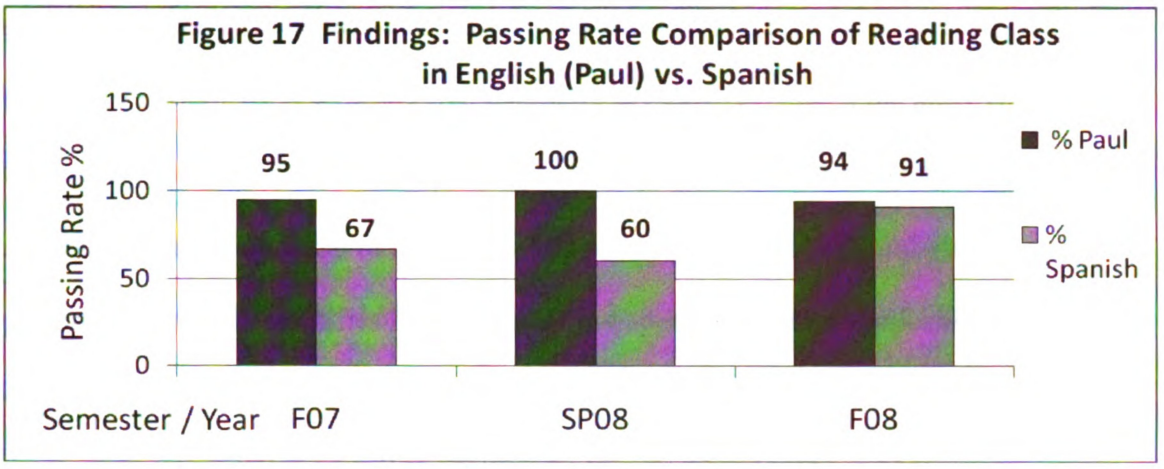
The creation of the Spanish classes was an exciting time for the program. This idea had never before materialized because of a lack of funding for additional personnel, especially bilingual staff members to teach the classes. The first step was ordering the Spanish version of the Steck-Vaughn textbook curriculum used in the English classes. The Spanish books were an exact translation of the English books thus making collaboration between teachers in the different languages feasible. The next step in developing the Spanish courses was to hire bilingual instructors and have them work with the English instructors to prepare for their classes.

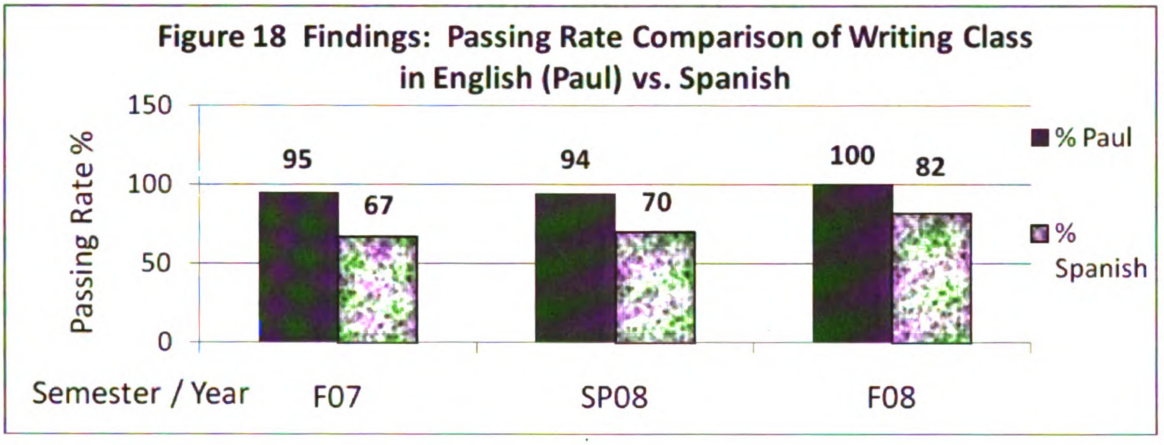
The need for bilingual faculty to teach the Spanish classes was twofold. The Spanish instructors needed to speak English to communicate with the rest of the HEP students, staff and administration. Secondly, many HEP students spoke "Spanglish" (mix of English and Spanish) inside and outside of their classes. HEP students had a choice to take all their classes in either English or Spanish. This separation did not create a polarity between students as it would in a traditional school where students can be put in E.S.L (English as a Second Language), or tracked curriculums which sometimes instigates feelings of segregation. Both languages were offered and students had the final say in which class they felt most comfortable to successfully pass the GED exams. There were rarely any students who spoke no English; at the very least they spoke some "Spanglish". Thus, the HEP students, whether in the English or Spanish classes, all connected as a united group. A clear description of this decision process was explained by Izzy:

> Well you know Paul, I get all of this stuff in English, it's no problem pero puedo leer y escribir (but I can read and write) better in Spanish. I mean I speak and understand English perfectly, but I want to be positive I pass the GED and en Español creo que mi oportunidad para pasar es mejor (in Spanish I think my opportunity to pass is better).

Personal choice was the deciding factor in creating the two separate classes.

Once the classes in Spanish were established the passing rates of both classes for three semesters were examined. The following graphs reflect a direct semester to semester comparison of Reading and Writing classes I taught in English and the same class taught in Spanish by another instructor:





There was a clear variance between the passing rates of the two classes. The passing rates of my classes compared to the Spanish classes for the fall 2007 and spring 2008 were up to 40% higher, further contributing to the unique success my approach had with the HEP students.

In addition, during my final semester with HEP in the fall of 2008, I worked closely with and trained a new instructor who taught the Reading and Writing classes in Spanish. I taught the instructor portions and fundamentals of my approach for which she/he was extremely receptive and was willing to implement. The instructor sought out my help and mentorship throughout the fall semester and was able to apply and teach using my alternative pedagogy with relative ease. This instructor was able to

significantly increase the passing rates from the Spanish Reading and Writing classes. At the end of the fall 2008 semester, the instructor personally thanked me and expressed how crucial and successful she/he felt my approach was with the students. The fact that another instructor was able to implement my pedagogical approach and yield performance results solidifies the success of my approach and its applicability for other instructors.

OVERALL PASSING RATES ON THE GED EXAMS (INDIVIDUAL FIVE CLASSES)

Further supporting the success of my pedagogy also is a comparison of GED scores from my Reading and Writing classes to the other three GED subject areas: Science, Social Studies and Math. The comparison shows the disparity of results between the subjects taught using my approach versus those taught in a different manner. Although the subjects are entirely different in content, teaching approach is the only significant factor that explains the consistent discrepancy. For example, all five subject areas were scheduled comparable amounts of classroom time per week throughout the semester. Also, all instructor/classes had access to extra tutors to assist during their subjects or to assign one on one tutoring for students in need of additional assistance.

All instructors attended weekly staff meetings with the Associate Director. A review of these meetings provides insight into the pedagogical approach of instructors and confirms that my pedagogy was not being implemented in the other subject area classes which yielded poorer test results.

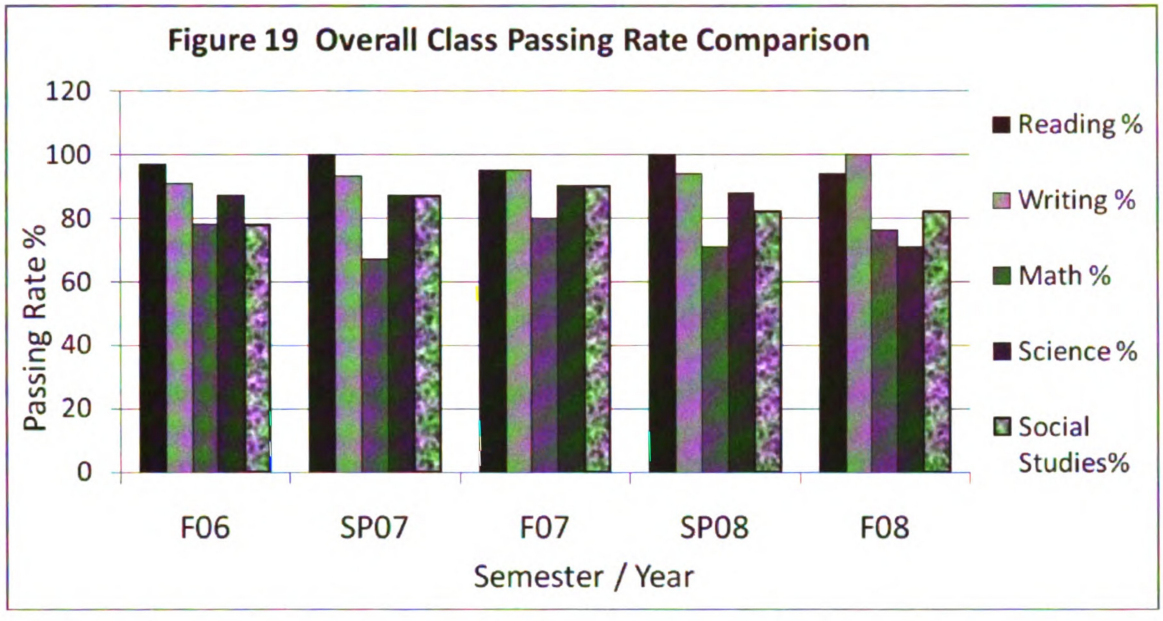
In the weekly staff meetings, instructors would share updates on how their individual classes and students were progressing. In all of the five semesters working with HEP, the meetings included discussions of problematic students and decisions on

disciplinary action needed. The lone voice consistently offering constructive ideas on how to improve classroom behavior and passing rates through pedagogy was the Associate Director. Although instructors could have followed this lead and utilized this meeting to share and improve their pedagogical approaches, this was often not the case. Instructors seldom wanted to discuss how they taught their classes. The Director and Associate Director on multiple occasions requested I share my successful strategies with the other instructors but each time I was met with contempt from my colleagues in what they interpreted as trying to "tell them how to do their jobs." Thus, a majority of each meeting was spent discussing students that were not performing well, placing blame on that student, and seeking disciplinary solutions.

My pedagogy is applicable to all subject areas. Instructors of any subject can genuinely care for their student's success, relate to students while viewing and treating them as equals and dedicate time to understand their students. These fundamental aspects of my pedagogy can be applied to any of the five subjects offered by HEP. In fact, when serving as a substitute instructor for my colleagues, using their teaching plans and materials, I was still able to apply my approach.

Overall, all five subjects were necessary for students to pass and receive their GED. A passing score for an individual GED subject exam is 410 and an overall average score of 450 on all five subject area exams is needed to pass the GED. Therefore, if a student doesn't pass all five subject area exams with a minimum score of 410, they will not receive their GED. However, students can benefit greatly from a high score on one test if a score of 410 is earned on other subject tests because it contributes to their overall

average and might allow them to pass the total average score needed of 450. The passing rate comparisons are as follows:



Looking at the five GED subject areas from Fall 2006 through Fall 2008, the students' performances in Social Studies, Math and Science were steadily lower in comparison to the Reading and Writing subjects. Through conversations, several instructors of various subjects shared that for them, achieving passing rates consistently above 90% seemed impossible. Other instructors frequently asked about my passing rates and I provided a listening ear for them to voice their frustrations with the results of their classes. One instructor stated frustratedly, "I spend 60 hours a week trying to figure out how to improve passing rates but it just can't be done because the students do not care." A second instructor mentioned, "I can't think of anything more that I can do to improve their [students] grades. Every semester the student' academic levels vary greatly and I just don't know what else to do to help them all."

These instructors were invited to observe my classes and were later asked what they felt made an impact on student engagement and success. One instructor expressed

his/her shock upon observing my class, "I was surprised by the rapport and connection you have with the students! I couldn't believe my eyes how they paid close attention to everything you said during almost the entire class, and did the work." Another colleague, who taught Reading and Writing in Spanish commented, "The students speak very highly of you and respect you. They are excited to attend your class. It is evident to me that the additional content which you add to the textbook curriculum enhances the lessons." Having access to observe all instructors and classes, the Associate Director commented on the characteristics of what made classes successful. He/she observed:

> You have a unique ability to get the students involved in what you are teaching. It almost appears from the outside, that there is not a specific Reading or Writing lesson at times, but an imaginative discussion. It is incredible to see these students, which are typically guarded, open up and tell their stories and opinions in front of all the others. The students feel that you care and you are able to inspire them daily. That is what makes a difference.

Another colleague who observed my classes during a visit to our program stated that he/she experienced the "pin drop effect" while participating in my class. He/she explained this as "all students are so engaged that he/she could've heard a pin drop." These conversations helped me further understand the disparity between the testing passing rates for the five subjects.

In addition to GED passing rates, the program used "think tanks" to evaluate the program structure and efficiency at the end of every semester. They were created by the Associate Director in order to reflect back on each semester and adapt the current structures or procedures to potentially create new ideas, in an effort to yield higher passing rates and improve student success. It was a powerful and useful tool that was typically conducted in two, four hour sessions. In these meetings, the staff shared the immense difficulties they encountered in achieving their passing rate goals. Again, as in the weekly meetings, the focus of the staff tended to stray to how to "deal" with students

rather than how to "adapt" to help students. The biggest obstacle mentioned by staff for achieving higher passing rates were the students themselves. Rather than the focus being on their own pedagogical deficiencies improving or altering their approaches, they placed blame on the students. The instructors looked primarily for more effective ways to discipline and control students, despite the fact the Associate Director attempted to redirect the teachers' focus. She/he challenged them to try different approaches with students and supplied countless resources for them to do so. The Associate Director was focused on assisting the instructors with their teaching approaches rather than blaming students who did not pass the GED. She/he once mentioned in a meeting:

> If students are not passing our subjects, we must ask ourselves what we are not doing in order to help them pass. We must view ourselves critically and help one another in order to work most effectively. Some instructors have accomplished tremendous passing rates, amazing rapport and relationships with students, and seldom ever spend time trying to control their classrooms. We should be focusing on what's successful and constantly be continuing to strive to improve for the sake of our students. We must share our tools to improve overall. We are only as strong as our weakest link and in this team; we must strive to have a strong chain.

Her/his words would have an impact on the instructors in that moment, but after time, many instructors reverted back to blaming the students. The instructors would personally discuss with me that they felt they could not work any harder in trying to achieve higher passing rates. They struggled each semester with feelings of exhaustion and frustration. As a whole, the "think tanks" produced some useful information for program improvement, but instructors struggled to find ways to continue to develop and grow innovatively within their classrooms.

My involvement in the "think tanks" was minimal, preferring to observe and share information typically when asked a question or to offer my insight. I constantly felt my involvement in the meetings, aside from the Associate Director, fell on deaf ears.

The teachers would dismiss my success with the students by simply saying, "Well, that's just Paul and how he is." Although the approach of sharing my personal experiences was unique, my pedagogical approach was not uniquely structured for me alone, rather anyone who would be willing to implement it. Many of the instructors dismissed my success with students as an anomaly that would end with my departure from the program. The few supporters in pushing and encouraging me to try to assist and train my colleagues were the Associate Director and the Recruiter. They felt my approach had much to offer students and other instructors, but due to time constraints and lack of communication with other instructors, this did not happen until my final semester at HEP. During my final semester, I was able to work loosely with a colleague who had sought out and requested my help to provide training and mentoring. Indeed, this instructor experienced improved passing rates by implementing my pedagogical approach.

An analysis of GED passing rates across all subject areas taught in the HEP program showed significance of my approach within this case study. Although I analyzed the results in this study using my best interpretation of the passing rate findings, there could potentially be other factors or explanations that impacted the varied outcomes in student success rates. A mirrored curriculum was the foundation of the GED classes taught in both Spanish and English, but perhaps stronger comparisons could have proven useful by comparing English to English classes of the same subject areas. When working with "at-risk" youth, I feel strongly that one must always remember that there are a multitude of factors impacting each student's personal development and academic perspectives which could potentially influence their performance outcomes.

The success of the program and the instructors was measured heavily by student passing rates; however, I argue this is not the only method to measure instructor success. Having discussed and displayed passing rates, I may now incorporate other components of what makes an instructor successful in the classroom especially when working with "at risk" students. This success beyond passing rates was not determined by me, but by the students themselves and colleagues at HEP. The students' perspectives and earnest opinions regarding my teaching approach is the focus of the following chapter. This will help complement and further elaborate on the multidimensional success of my alternative pedagogy.

CHAPTER 8: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON INSTRUCTOR EFFECTIVENESS

The focus of this chapter is to establish an understanding of the effectiveness of teacher instruction by examining student perspectives. Although the passing rates of the HEP students are highlighted in the previous chapter, there is no discussion of student perspectives regarding the teaching approaches of HEP instructors. The majority of student interviews discussed their opinions surrounding the effectiveness of my pedagogy based on the "real talk" discussions fostered in class. Ultimately, the students impacted this effectiveness by allowing me to teach them, rather than resisting learning as they had with previous teachers. By examining the reasons behind the student receptiveness of my approach, I am able to decipher its effective, successful components. To supplement the depth of insight provided by these student perspectives, I facilitated discussions with and reflections from other HEP staff and colleagues. Both the student and staff views allowed me to gather information which strengthens my pedagogy to better establish and share effective strategies to those working with and assisting at risk learners.

Through both structured and informal interviews, HEP students were asked questions regarding their perspectives on their instructors to gather what approaches and tactics in the classroom were most effective for them. Within this dissertation, I solely applied Pedagogy of Real Talk with students in my classes. As I was the only teacher applying my pedagogy during this case study, I acknowledge the limitations presented within the results of this chapter stemming from the fact that all interactions with "Real Talk" were unique to me and my classes. The majority of the responses provided by students reflect a relationship created between myself and my students, but it is important

to note that the creation of such rapport is a primary objective of my pedagogy, so such feedback further supports the effectiveness of Pedagogy of Real Talk. In attempt to diminish any bias that may arise by collecting data from students personally regarding my pedagogy and teaching style, I engaged my colleagues, specifically the program's Associate Director, to assist in interviewing students. To further minimize bias, I also utilized varied means to collect the data of students' responses. The use of additional methods of collecting student and staff opinions such as surveys, formal and informal interviews and small and large group discussions yielded informative perspectives which helped construct an understanding of student views regarding effective teaching. By using these varied methods of collection and employing the assistance of colleagues, students were able to respond uninhibitedly and comfortably without my presence influencing their responses.

Respect was a baseline objective in my pedagogy. Discussed by HEP students this reoccurring theme highlighted how respect was felt in my classes as I never tried to control or force students to learn. Rather, I included and integrated them as part of their own learning experience. A teacher of any background can use mutual respect as a starting point for their instructional focus. Michelle reinforced the importance of such an atmosphere when she shared, "In Paul's class, it feels like everyone is equal and we all get involved to make it a real fun experience." The focus of the class was to thoroughly get to know students in order to maximize their engagement in the learning process. To accomplish this, I treated and respected students as my equals; yet, always maintained my professional position as the teacher. This was similar to what Leard and Lashua (2006) discussed regarding the importance of students feeling comfortable and connected to their

teachers. "Openness in interactions with students... listening to students and creating an atmosphere that [is] non-judgmental... [helps teachers] establish relationships where youth [feel] comfortable talking with [them]" (p. 257). As the students and I began to develop a mutual level of respect, they felt that my desire to hear their opinions and backgrounds was genuine leading to a drastic increase in their interest to learn. Andy explained it best when he shared:

> Paul's class is my favorite because I learn every day. The way class is it's like he understands what I need to learn like no teacher ever has. I can say whatever I want in class and he doesn't make me feel stupid. Shit, he turns whatever I am saying into a smarter way of saying things, but it's cool 'cause he knows exactly what I am trying to say and helps me by how he puts it and relates it to things in class. It's a trip 'cause he makes me realize that I am a lot smarter than I think I am and makes me want to learn in his class. His class is positive and it doesn't seem like boring stuff like in my past classes. What we talk about just seems 'real', not from any book. It's almost like he teaches us by using us to teach.

"Real Talk" discussions allowed me to speak with students on topics meaningful to them and tap into their terministic screens, fields of expertise and experiences to tie in with class lessons. The expertise and interests of each student varied from musical or instrumental talents such as singing or rapping, to artistic expression like drawing or painting, to active endeavors such as boxing, athletics or cars. Regardless of the specific interest, the objective of finding each student's strengths and weaknesses was to peak their involvement in the class. Interestingly, and supportive of what Freire discussed regarding his problem posing approach (found within his liberation approach), was that students connect their talents and interests to the struggles and successes they encounter in their everyday lives. I typically discovered the student's personal issues and connections during class discussions which I then used as a tool to create recognizable links that would associate back to the GED curriculum. Rather than hinder or discourage the discussion surrounding these issues, I found the most effective way to reconnect

students to learning was to use these issues as teachable moments. El Cholo duly noted this:

> His class connects with us and I just feel like he really understands my pain and helps me learn from it. He has been there before in our shoes and he has made it out of the gutter. He knows how to take his past and my past experiences and turn them into some 'real' ass lessons in the classroom.

Regardless of the students' background in relation to an instructor's, by listening and engaging students to share their thoughts and emotions, a teacher can find connections to make their learning meaningful. Approaching the students in this alternative manner allowed me to break through the student's first line of defense of resisting teachers. The first line of defense refers to how students view and stereotype the teacher as if he/she is not a person at all, but an oppositional force they must face. Establishing a positive relationship with students helped since, "students who [have] more positive views of their teachers [do better] and [have] fewer problems in school, while those with more negative views [do] worse and [have] greater problems" (Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder Jr. 2004:75). Once I ventured past this issue, I was able to begin the process of incorporating other facets of my pedagogy.

Befriending students was not the intent or focus of my approach; rather I aimed to find ways to relate the curriculum to their emotions or experiences. Prior to meeting students, it is a daunting task to try to identify ways to try to connect with or relate to them. At times with HEP, I felt overwhelmed and privately would admit feelings of defeat after discussions with HEP colleagues regarding the students. The Director placed a strong emphasis on connecting with students in order to have success in the classroom. In one of our first meetings the Director stated, "If you cannot connect with these

students, then you will not be successful with them." This message was further reinforced by the Associate Director when he/she shared with me:

> Paul, all instructors must find a way to relate to the students in order to overcome any barriers in their learning. This is probably one of the biggest issues we have faced; instructors not being able to relate with students or find ways to connect the material to be meaningful to them. This has forced many past instructors to spend a large part of their time managing their classrooms rather than expending their time teaching the students. I can't stress it enough; you must find a way to relate with students in order to connect with them. Once you connect, you will see, they will want to learn. Entirely traditional approaches towards these students will not be effective. You must think outside the box.

Her/his urgency and sincerity behind her/his message was apparent when we spoke but I noted that it was up to the instructors to discover the very methods needed to be able to make learning meaningful for students. The Recruiter routinely invited me to engage in conversations regarding students. As he/she prepared me for my first semester, he/she echoed a familiar message to me:

> Paul, you must connect with them because if you do not, they will not be receptive to you or what you are trying to teach them. I try to tell instructors this all of the time but they cannot seem to find a way to do this. You must do something different than they had when they were previously in school. I wish I could tell you how to do it but I can't. It will be a difficult task and I pray to god that you will find a way and be successful with all of our HEP students. Other teachers have managed to find connections with students, so I have faith that you can too.

These messages were clear to me. After two and a half years of continual work with the HEP program and students, I have gathered information through discussion with and testimonies of my students and colleagues to be able develop a replicable pedagogy that guides teachers in fostering connections with students in the classroom.

Stemming from these discussions and remaining in line with Meyer (1968), I based my pedagogical approach on three main premises; relating to and connecting with students, maintaining flexibility in my teaching strategies, and upholding my willingness and eagerness to work with students. Relating to students was not merely a matter of

having some similarities with students rather, "In isolating the teacher's ability to relate to the students the focus is upon his success in developing a rapport with the students, talking with them, laughing with them, counseling them, reaching them on their own level" (Meyer 1968:3). While I do share a similar background with some HEP students, this alone does not account for my success in teaching them. There were a variety of instructors before and during my tenure that had many similarities with some HEP students, but only some of which related and connected with students well. At the time of being their instructor, I was years removed from the setting in which I grew up and was in a position of authority. My similarities could have easily been rejected by students if they felt like I was attempting to pose or relate on false premises. Rather, it was most important that I was authentic and listened without judgment, and then focused on relating whatever subjects were important to the students' lives to the curricular material. I believe the foundations of my pedagogy were what empowered connections among me and students. El Cholo commented on this:

> I really like going to his (Paul's) class, it's my favorite class in the program. The other instructors are okay but they just don't do what happens in Paul's classroom. Paul really knows how to teach us like no other teacher has done before. I am just talking from the heart and I give my respects to that vato (guy). I like learning with him.

Most important to this case study, is to understand how and why students had these feelings. In relating to the students, Deebo clearly stated his feelings, "I have really connected with Paul's class 'cause I just know I am understood. I can talk about the really hard shit I've gone through in life and no one judges me. In the class though, we bring all that "real shit" from the streets and our lives and for some reason I really get it. It's like class ain't class, like I really get things." In the case of Deebo and others like him, the stories shared in class were effective in helping us all relate and better connect.

As the instructor, my only job was to foster a safe environment in which students felt comfortable sharing. I chose to allow students to speak in their own vernacular and about difficult topics. In many cases, I used my experiences as a tool to show students that I could "feel" their pain and empathize with them regarding their experiences even though my specific experience was quite different from theirs. It was not difficult, however, to recall an experience in which I experienced a similar emotion. Every human has felt frustration, ostracized, insecurity, betrayal, joy, accomplishment, etc. With each and every student, I tried to seek out what would help me connect with them to formulate lessons and discussions to reach out to those characteristics. The main point was to find each students connection point through an emotion, event, feeling, and/or experience, etc.

I engaged students and focused on these experiences by tying in some of my own personal experiences, borrowing stories from friends or family and/or using themes from current news, events, or biographies. Leard and Lashua (2006) discussed the importance of teachers sharing their own experiences in the classroom:

> [Teachers] came to believe in the necessity of contributing to the relationship [of teacher-students] through sharing of [their] own stories. These stories emerged from different social locations yet offered many points of connection that youth readily responded to. By opening to [students], spaces [are] created whereby youth [can] offer their knowledge. (P. 257)

Big T was another student that shed light into how I tried to relate to students and made him feel comfortable to open up in class, "I really respect him as a teacher, a person, and as an OG. He is not a hater and doesn't try to control us in the class. He just works with us, takes his time to explain things and we get our shit done with him." Notice that many of the excerpts from student interviews comment on my teaching style and the way they viewed how the classroom/teaching was structured. The fact that students reported respect for their instructor and engagement in class is indicative that the

Pedagogy of Real Talk fostered a different attitude toward the class and the teacher than is typical in the traditional teacher-"at risk" student relationships. By focusing on general emotions and struggles that are commonly experienced by most human beings, connections were developed with many of the HEP students. These connections were felt by the majority of students as most could relate to emotions and struggles from their lives and/or experiences in school. Maggie explained:

> He (Paul) brought up stories from his life and let us bring our lives to the class and it became really interesting. I learned a lot in his class. Even when I had tested out of his class I didn't want to leave because his class was so awesome. I was always excited to come to his class because I wanted to hear what he and the others had to say and I wanted to always give my opinions too. I couldn't believe it when I passed the tests because I didn't even feel like I was learning the GED stuff but I did it not even knowing it.

She clearly shared her enjoyment of the class, but most importantly, she emphasized what she felt was important in connecting with and relating to the teacher, other students, and eventually, the material. Through Pedagogy of Real Talk, our lives became a big part of the class.

Students began to see me as a person beyond my position as a teacher—someone with feelings, thoughts, and emotions—which allowed us to further connect. For example, Manny explained, "Even though we all had different life experiences it was cool how we all got to see how no matter where we are from, everybody has had tough times and good times. Everybody has a story even though you think no one understands." The relationships that developed motivated students and resulted in an eagerness to come to class so they could share their opinions and expand on the various topics discussed in class. In the classroom, the connectedness of the teacher-student relationship was a result of mutual efforts; at first led by me, followed by a growing drive by the students. As Hallinan (2008) discussed, "If ['at risk' students] feel that their

teachers have regard for them, approve of their behavior, and are interested in their welfare, they will react positively [in the classroom]" (p. 273). A positive outcome resulted from the non-traditional, teacher-student relationships that developed in my classroom.

There is a difference between simply relating to students and teaching students a set curriculum using personal connections. Although students enjoyed attending my class, it was important that I seize the opportunity of their eagerness to learn by integrating the curriculum needed to prepare for the GED. Successful teaching in this case refers to flexibility, creativity, personal dynamism and willingness to put forth effort (Meyer 1968). I never approached a class one dimensionally because students were not always receptive to lessons as planned. In order to accommodate student's learning, I continually created lessons and curriculum that were easily adaptable during the class and constantly critiqued and evaluated myself to push toward more effective teaching. This provoked opinions such as was shared by Ed:

> Man, Paul is my boy because he has really helped me get to a place I have never been able to get to in school. He is always coming up with stuff for us to do. If I don't get something he can always come up with a new way about it on the spot! He always makes me feel ok about it too. I never feel stupid in his class man. With his help I'm gonna pass reading and writing.

If students did not understand a lesson or a pre-determined lesson was not working, I tried to create or adapt the lesson in class to make it more understandable. Adaptability is not a unique characteristic of my teaching style, rather is a skill that can be incorporated by any willing educator with a drive to engage a student who does not understand the material at hand. In fact, if an instructor is willing, it is often the students themselves who will express the need for adaptation and even contribute ideas as to how to restructure the lesson to make it more effective.

This adaptability required constant flexibility and attention to the student's needs and levels of understanding in order to truly help them.

> ...Authentic measures of assessment probe students' understanding of material far more thoroughly than multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank tests. In particular, authentic measures allow students to show what they've learned in context—in other words, in a setting that closely matches the environment in which they would be expected to show the learning in real life. (Armstrong 2000:88)

One way I evaluated student's learning to measure a need for modified plans during lessons was to lead class discussions based on topics chosen by the students. During a lesson regarding making inferences, comparing and contrasting, students were struggling to grasp the concepts. To assist their understanding, I led the discussion toward the student's dream cars. I then extracted the three most popular dream cars for an in-class assignment that evaluated the cars side by side. By using the internet (http://autos.msn.com/research/compare/) and classroom projector, we examined them. This website allowed students to see the vehicle's prices, photos, engine and performance, interior, exterior, safety features, and reviews by experts and car owners alike. This type of lesson was engaging, unique, and different from what the students were used to and subtly reinforced the areas of confusion from the initial lesson. However, it did not require hours of pre-planning on my part. The students had already given me the information that particular dream cars were something they often thought about through "real talk" discussions. The internet resources to enrich the lesson were instantly available. This impromptu lesson took little more than listening to student responses in order to recognize their confusion and ineffectiveness of my planned lesson, and a willingness to be flexible and change the lesson context while still delivering the necessary lesson content.

As Lilly explained, "In Paul's class, I learn about the most interesting stuff, so I guess his class is my favorite. It's almost as if he sneaks in the boring stuff so it isn't boring anymore." In line with my pedagogy, I executed these types of activities in my classes while always trying to present the material in a dynamic, enthusiastic manner. This helped foster a fun learning environment for students while constantly engaging the core concepts needed to pass the GED exams. In this specific lesson, some of the integrated core concepts from Reading class included comparisons and contrasts, summarization of main ideas, making inferences, drawing conclusions, applying ideas, and identifying style and tone. Lastly, to reinforce the skills needed for the Writing GED exam, all assignments and activities in the class were lead-ins for writing assignments. For example, after the dream car discussion, students were asked to write regarding how and why they picked their dream car, applying some of the above concepts.

Another component of effectively teaching students was my willingness to put forth effort. Effort refers to not only completing the bare minimum with students, but truly being available at times convenient for students such as before, during, and/or after class (Meyer 1968). Considering that an overwhelming number of HEP students shared that in their previous educational experiences they felt like teachers and school personnel were people who did not care about them, teachers working with "at risk" students can make great strides in breaking down typical learning barriers simply by making themselves available as advocates to students. Some teachers may struggle with having broad availability because it could potentially infringe on their personal time or impede their already lacking time for planning during their work days. However, as I employed the Pedagogy of Real Talk, I found that my time was better spent allowing for extra

student time than using it for pre-planning or wasting class on discipline. This extra time spent with students was extremely effective in helping to create connections which made my job easier and the classroom more enjoyable for all.

El Gus recognized the effort and time I spent with students, "[Paul] always answers questions and spends extra time with us so we get it and I have never had a teacher break things down like he does. It don't matter if we need it five different ways, he'll get it to us one way or another." I emphasized making time to work with students regarding questions about class or other issues they needed to discuss. Clear and honest communication with students helped avoid offending students in cases in which I was unavailable to meet. "Through honest, sensitive, insightful discussion, teachers bring out the best in 'at risk' students" (Meyer 1968:31). I found this to be true of my HEP students in the classroom.

On occasion, to accommodate their special needs, I even met with students during my personal time. Jerry provided further reflection on my willingness to exert effort inside or outside of class:

> Man he has really tried everything he can do to work with us and he makes sure we get it. School has always been really hard for me but not in his class. I honestly think his classes are the only ones I'm going to pass because I feel real confident in his classes 'cause I understand all of the work and he makes time to help me when I need extra help.

The extra time taken with students was actually minimal considering the powerful results that were yielded. Many questions of students regarding the class seemed difficult or overwhelming for them, but by knowing the curriculum and being prepared professionally, were simple for me to answer. This allowed me to quickly and effectively work one-on-one with students; involvement that paid dividend. By sharing my time

with students, their confidence increased while their doubts decreased. Vincent contributed his perspective on my effort and involvement with students:

> My confidence has really gone up because of Paul's class. I feel like Paul teaches me about life in his class and it gives me this deep understanding of life besides the GED stuff. He has always made time for me and I really appreciate that. It makes me work harder in his class.

A small time investment paid off with positive impacts on the students over a 12 week semester. Students gained a unique perspective and experience with the meaning of what a teacher is to them and they shared with me how different it was to meet a teacher who made time for them. In the case of my approach, effort and involvement are crucial for success with students.

As part of my pedagogy, these positive characteristics (Meyer 1968) helped me effectively connect with and teach students. For the most part, students shared that they felt the majority of the HEP staff genuinely cared about them; though rarely discussed; there were some students who shared opinions about issues with some HEP instructors who displayed negative attitudes towards students. Students shared an experience with one instructor who they felt was blatantly negative towards them in and outside of the classroom despite the similarities shared regarding race, language, and background in poverty. Hallinan (2008) discusses the consequences of this negativity, "if ['at risk'] students feel ignored, misunderstood, devalued, or disrespected by their teachers, they are likely to react negatively [in the classroom]" (p. 273). Stemming from these feelings was a lack of student performance in this instructor's classes resulting in passing rates as low as 54%. More importantly, students throughout his/her tenure would continually complain about the instructor's attitude towards them and how he/she mistreated them. Maggie explained:

> He/she hates us. He/she won't let us speak. He/she won't let us ask questions. He/she goes along and doesn't make any sense and blames us if we don't have the right answer but we ain't got no idea what he/she's even talking about and can't even ask. I hate going to his/her class but I get in trouble if I don't, and I get in trouble if I do.

This particular instructor and I often discussed his/her perspectives and issues with students. I witnessed his/her negative attitude towards students when he/she made comments such as, "These brats must learn from me because I am the expert in the class", or "These pieces of shit do not want to learn in the classroom." Although these are extreme examples of his/her negativity, students often mentioned how they felt he/she projected subtle, yet dangerous forms of negativity towards them. Examples of this negativity relayed by students were that this instructor would not allow students to use the bathroom during class, ask questions about his/her methods of teaching, would kick students out of class if they spoke without raising their hands, would accuse students of sleeping or not paying attention if they slouched in their seats, rested their heads on their hands, showed signs of frustration or misunderstanding during class, and/or other similar scenarios that led students to feel mistreated in his/her class. This instructor often inferred that the students were unworthy of his/her help and acted superior to the students. This instructor never made an effort to get to know the students nor their interests or backgrounds. This rejection and disrespect towards students provoked them to respond with hostility and withdrawal towards him/her. Students spoke to me in confidence regarding how much they disliked this instructor because they felt disrespect and a general lack of caring from him/her. The more I spoke with this instructor and heard the testimonies of the students, the more I witnessed the heightening levels of negativity between this instructor and the students. This was one of the more unfortunate cases of an instructor with a negative attitude towards students that resulted in harmful

consequences for student success. More commonly the program was supported with instructors that had positive attitudes towards students.

Multiple students throughout my tenure discussed feelings of inclusion from most HEP teachers wanting to help students obtain their GED. The Associate Director helped by interviewing the students in my study to gain insight into what students felt regarding my attitude towards them. The consensus was that I had a genuinely positive attitude towards all of my HEP students, however from my perspective; with a few students at times it was difficult. I will elaborate on my shortcomings later in this chapter. My positive attitude towards students was reflected by Big T:

> Paul has come in to class and changed my life. He has opened my eyes to how important school is and he has mad respect for me and all the other students. He has helped us reflect on so much real life shit that we can use in our lives and somehow he still connects that shit to Reading and Writing... He really cares about our lives and teaches us the shit from the GED but it goes beyond that. It's real hard to explain.

The positive effects of students knowing that their teacher's cared about their lives led to lessened behavioral issues in the classroom (Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder 2004, Lipka 1991, Meyer 1968, and Muller 2001). By building a positive rapport with students, they completed class assignments and homework without complaint rather than making excuses of why they could not do the assigned work. My focus, in line with my pedagogy, was consistently about listening to the students and providing them with different methods of how to refocus or deal with their obstacles. At times when students struggled to pay attention and/or would interrupt class, discipline was required. Even with some discipline, students typically did not respond negatively. An environment reflecting S.C.R.E.A.M. + F yielded clear expectations and fairness helping students understand what was required of them in class. In fact, Jay helped clarify why students were receptive to my reprimands:

> He is patient and never gets mad at us without reason. I mean he has to put us in our place when we be slippin' but we need that and I know he doesn't do it 'cause he's trippin' but because we be slacking sometimes. I really respect him but I know he really respects me too.

The students recognized that discipline was not personal rather they understood that I held all students equally accountable. I viewed and treated HEP students as my equals; yet, maintained myself as an authority figure in the classroom. Students listened to and worked well with me because my attitude was one of respect, admiration, care, and concern for their well-being. For example, James stated, "I know I really respect him [Paul] and it is not easy to earn my respect, especially for a teacher." Although every HEP semester was different, I was able to consistently produce positive results by following my pedagogical structure.

Each semester after applying every facet of my approach, I reflected on the effectiveness of each area. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, I used S.C.R.E.A.M. + F to set up and create an inclusive classroom. Every semester, the curriculum virtually remained the same given that the goal was to pass the GED and the curriculum was based on the Steck-Vaughn GED textbook series. This structure helped me target all students' varying styles of learning by implementing a series of teaching tools and strategies when teaching my class. In a performance evaluation, the Associate Director stated, "Paul, you do a great job of structuring your class so it's well developed every semester. Your solid structure really allows you to reach out to the different learners." I tried to assure a variety of assignments for the students to avoid dull or low points during the semester. Alex summarized this, "He is fun and really creative in class. We watch some really cool clips on the internet and he connects everything we do to the class." Echoing Alex was Vincent who stated, "I think it's cool that we never waste time in [Paul's] class because

we are always doing something interesting and I really like that." Every semester was set up with assignments, homework, group and individual activities and projects, but permitted academic additions and flexibility to move and alter plans, accommodating student needs and interests. The flexibility embedded in my classroom structure allowed for what Nunley (2006) discussed, "The more you can let students play around with ideas and concepts, the better chance they have for real learning to take place" (p. 104). Generally, the students grew accustomed to the reliability of the structure of the class and seemed to enjoy and follow class easier. The Associate Director commented to me, "The students have shared with me how they can always count on your class being a consistent part of their day. They say there is always something to do and actually enjoy themselves in class." After establishing the structure, I made sure to clarify everything associated with the students and class.

Clarity was an important aspect of my classroom. Students echoed how important it was for them to understand the material, understand me, and know my expectations of them. Hank acknowledged, "[Paul] be real clear with us and it makes it easy to understand all of the things said in his class." There was seldom any complex language used in class and upon usage, I would take time to teach them the meanings and proper usage. Discussions in class were led by attempting to use a combination of the student's and my vernacular to find a middle ground to assure clarity. At times, my honesty with students surprised my colleagues because they felt I was too open about myself. I argued that it was through this openness that I was able to begin to develop relationships with the students which stimulated the student's engagement in their learning. A clear understanding of who I was as a person, not only an instructor, was beneficial as Willie

explained, "Paul is straight up. He really cares and that really has helped me because I know I can trust him and I pay attention to the cool shit he teaches." By opening up and sharing about myself, students felt more connected, wanted to listen, and shared more about themselves and their experiences through discussions in class (Leard and Lashua 2006). More importantly, clarity led to students understanding my expectations of them in the class. For example, Sal explained:

> Paul is straightforward with what he expects from us in class with doing our work so we can pass the GED. He also tells us what's okay and what's not okay in class. I used to be confused in classes in the past because teachers would never make any sense, but with Paul, I know what he expects from me and I know what to expect from him.

Through open and honest discussions, I focused on assuring that every student had no confusion regarding the expectations. The clarity of the messages I conveyed to students was strengthened by the next step in my structure which was redundancy.

I practiced redundancy in the classroom through multiple approaches to teach the students the GED concepts. Redundancy is emphasized by teaching lessons in a variety of manners which support the varying learning styles of each student. As found in Mojica (2006), "[reiteration occurs] where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent of another....whether they have the same referent or whether a referential relationship exists between them" (p. 110). Therefore, it is crucial to maintain interconnectedness with each lesson and the core academic concept. For example, Hank shared his insight, "We be watching video clips on YouTube, cool documentaries, we be reading song lyrics from 2pac and this man be tying everything to the GED stuff." The concepts from the GED were taught to the students numerous times but in different formats allowing students to understand the concepts in a variety of ways. James

summarized the effects of the redundancy approach with how quickly time seemed to pass in class:

> He makes us laugh a lot and that really makes his class go easy and it doesn't feel like we are pressured. I mean, his class is intense because we learn so much about each other and the class stuff, but time flies in his class and it's a trip because the other classes feel like they take forever. I know I am going to pass reading and writing easily because I really feel prepared.

I was surprised how quickly the class time passed when we were engaged deeply in the lessons.

The most difficult and exhausting aspect of the structure for me personally was enthusiasm. I attempted to arrive to every class I taught with an enthusiastic attitude. Although I was genuinely happy to be in the classroom with the HEP students, as any person, there were some instances where it was difficult to conjure true outward enthusiasm. When presenting material to the students, I tried to make the lessons interesting by mixing them in with other concepts. Upon sharing the information with the students, I showed them my excitement by how I spoke about the material and how I connected it to them and their passing the GED. I was eager to answer student questions and would exemplify how excited I was when they asked questions to help minimize their fears. Even though maintaining enthusiasm was difficult when I did not feel well physically, emotionally, or mentally, by being authentic with students I was usually able to still enthusiastically teach and lead the class. Jay discussed my enthusiasm and how it impacted him:

> He is excited to be in class with us, makes things fun and I laugh in his class. Man I have never laughed in any teacher's class, but this class is different. I enjoy his class and I know he likes being in class with us. I'm kind of sad thinking about that it will be over soon because I have to move on, but Paul has really changed my life in a positive way. For the first time in my life, I been a part of my own education.

Interestingly, on the days that I seemed "off" or lacked enthusiasm, students were concerned about my well-being. When appropriate, I turned what I was experiencing into a teaching moment for the class. Otherwise, I simply shared that I was feeling tired or "down" and the class respected that and took my feelings into consideration. In one case, Ed shared the impact I had on him and how my enthusiasm in the class helped him connect with me:

> Man, Paul is my boy, man! He is the best teacher I have ever had and he just 'feels me'. I don't know how to explain it sometimes, but Paul comes into class so excited and just makes me feel like I can do anything in class. I mean, I actually care how he is doing cause when he isn't his normal self I wonder what's up and just ask him if he is doing alright. I mean that's how much I respect him as a person 'cause I actually care about how he is doing 'cause he gives us so much.

Through my pedagogy, by developing rapport with students and a mutual respect, a genuine desire to know what was "wrong" with one another evolved. This enthusiastic involvement and rapport with the students in the classroom also helped me determine the appropriate pace for the class.

Determining appropriate pace is a task that requires constant attention throughout every semester. Since the passing rates of the students in my classes were consistently above average, it can be concluded that the pace at which I worked with students was appropriate. Unfortunately, not every student passed my class every semester, therefore, the appropriate pace for all students may not have been achieved. With only 10 weeks of class to prepare students, I had to determine the pace quickly and efficiently, immediately after getting to know students and their learning needs. The first week of class I focused on three main things to determine appropriate pace: inquired with students about the pace of the class, assigned students to write how they felt about the class pace, and used

weekly exams and/or assessments to monitor the pace of student learning. I incorporated what Meiseles et al. (2002) discussed regarding assessing appropriate pace:

> Rather than holding each [student] to an absolute standard according to which all [students] are expected to demonstrate performance in exactly the same way, assessment that guides instruction focuses on the performance of each [student], her strengths and weaknesses in different domains, [their rate of learning], and the particular ways she demonstrates her learning [over time]. (P. 102)

Beyond these methods, all students attended mandatory, weekly official practice testing sessions in all five GED subject areas. These assessments and methods, combined with daily discussions with students during and after class helped me determine the appropriate pace of the class.

For the most part, discussions with the entire class regarding the pace were helpful to understand the appropriate pace, but more so were one-on-one talks with students. Every day I spoke with at least two students for a few minutes before and after class individually regarding their feelings on the class pace. These discussions also served as an unexpected source of information about other students for example, one day after class Big T shared:

> Nah, dog I'm straight. I get everything we are doing and I'm feeling real confident. But it's Sal who just isn't getting shit and he is embarrassed to talk about it in front of others. I try to help him but I think you should talk to him 'cause it would really help him out.

Many students expressed their favor of the discussions as they gave them a voice in their progress. Antonio's response to my question regarding the pace of the class was, "I think the whole class is doing pretty good and for myself I get everything and it is not too slow or fast. But I think I want extra work outside of class so I can practice even more. I just want to be prepared." These types of responses allowed me to determine the class pace.

A weekly writing assignment assessed the appropriate pace for my students. This assignment included a one-page, written reflection surrounding how students felt the

class was progressing to determine if the class pace was moving too fast or slow. Though a broad range of answers were provided, by the third week of the semester, usually there was consistency in student responses about the class pace. In addition, the assignment helped determine the progress of each student's writing skills.

To reinforce assessment of student learning, the program conducted weekly practice tests in all five subjects for all students. The scores were listed in a shared database for evaluation by all HEP staff. These scores, combined with the interviews and written responses, also helped me accurately assess the pace of class. Overall, determining the appropriate pace of the class was tedious, but worthwhile as Jerry commented:

> Man Paul, you be poundin' us every week about how the class is moving and at first I got annoyed but now I appreciate it, 'cause now I ain't slippin' or nothin'. I feel solid and know what I need to improve for the GED. This the first time, I am pumped up about this stuff!

My efforts to appropriately assess the pace of the class paid dividend according to the student responses and the GED exam results. Through the course of establishing appropriate pace, I also focused on maximized engagement.

Engaging the class was strongly emphasized by HEP administrators. I learned though that the idea and intent of maximizing engagement was easier than its implementation in my classes. McFadden and Munns (2002) explained, "Student engagement is a process rather than a product" (p. 362). I did much self-reflection on how I engaged the class and how I could improve this engagement throughout the HEP semester. Connecting concepts to both student's and my life stories was a key point in engaging students. For example, when discussing the concept of symbolism, I provided examples of symbols from my life and then engaged students to share symbols from their

lives. Students were eager to share their stories and without realizing it, became intensely engaged in the class. Interestingly, this process fostered the development of positive rapport with students. Thus, I learned that maximizing engagement included stimulating students to share parts of themselves, learn about others, and learn about me in class. Maximized engagement did not simply focus on how students viewed the world or on how to help them develop for the GED exams, but turned the classroom into an arena for students to feel free: free of judgment and harsh punishments over their perspectives and experiences, and free to engage in their own learning process. "G" shared a powerful perspective regarding his engagement in the class:

> Paul. He is my inspiration here because he really cares about us. He is humble and respects us all. He always wants to hear what we have to say in class. He encourages us to be saying stuff and I never feel stupid in his class. Reading and Writing are my hardest subjects but I'm over that fear 'cause Paul be teaching me this stuff in a way I understand. I am having fun in class with him.

"G" references how I encouraged students to participate, respected them, and had genuine interest in their opinions. These were the fundamental steps supporting maximized engagement. I combined the aforementioned steps with lessons that incorporated student engagement and at times I was overwhelmed with positive results. Creating unique classroom lessons is not a new concept per se (Ladson-Billings 1995, Leard and Lashua 2006, and O'Loughlin 1995), however, engaging an entire class of "at risk" learners are unique. By applying the fundamental concepts of Pedagogy of Real Talk, practically any lesson can entice students to want to be involved. Students like Joe helped solidify the importance of these fundamental steps in establishing maximized engagement:

> Paul's class is cool as hell. He really teaches class in a real cool way. He brings the book and boring shit to life. He makes everything interesting in the class he brings stuff to life because he uses so many examples from our lives. I end up talking a lot in the class

> because I feel like I can say shit that will help the class learn. I have never felt this way in any class I have been in. It is a really cool feeling because I feel like I am a big part of the class and we all get involved.

Every Monday during each semester, my first class began with a discussion surrounding each student's weekend activities. This discussion was followed by an in class writing assignment of at least two pages describing the weekend activities. This led to students inquiring about my weekend activities as well. Although some of my colleagues shared that they would not feel as comfortable as I was in revealing personal information with students, each instructor can determine their own comfort level and answer student questions as appropriate. Allowing students insight into some personal aspects of life helps build rapport and engage the students. Mondays became exciting, fueled by fun stories which would often set the tone for the entire week. Maggie expressed the impact of the Monday approach and unknowingly shed light on the class engagement:

> I love Mondays because class is crazy with all the stuff people talk about. I'm always anxious to hear what Paul did 'cause he can be so boring at times 'cause he reads a lot and works all the time. But sometimes he does other things and it's cool to hear about them. We all laugh a lot at everyone doing their crazy stuff over the weekend, but it's cool to see everyone so involved and getting along. In school before, Monday's were the worst. I wanted to skip Monday's 'cause they were a waste of time.

Notice from Maggie's comments that my sharing had to in no way match student experiences of their weekend. I didn't try to "act" like the students or pretend we had similar experiences. I simply shared my actual life, even it appeared "boring" to students, they could sense I was telling them the truth and they looked forward to relating to me on that level. Colleagues and friends discussed Mondays as being the most difficult day of the week to teach because of the student's lack of interest, engagement,

and eagerness to be back in class. Contrarily, the Monday exercise was exciting, powerful and fun for me and students alike and peaked engagement for the entire class.

Another strategy used in class which helped maximize engagement was the assignment of presentations by each student regarding their favorite song or songs (limit 2 songs per student). Students would typically be very excited to share what they titled "A Piece of Themselves." After playing the song(s) to the class, the student explained the meaning of his/her song(s) and what that meaning meant to them. During the student presentations, I paid close attention, took notes, and asked questions. I was careful to always provide positive feedback and tried to help them further express themselves when they struggled. This positivity yielded good results such as when Manny explained how he felt after this assignment, "I don't feel judged. You listen to me and you respect me. This is all I have ever asked from people and teachers." Manny shared this with me after he presented his songs to the class for which I showed my excitement for the content of his presentation. Even though at times some students joked and/or slightly badgered other students regarding their songs, students were always attentive to one another during this activity. This was never done disrespectfully, but in good spirit with a class that was engaged and having fun while learning. This exercise didn't require me to be familiar with the styles or genres of music that the students played; only a willingness to listen to what music was important to the students and seek out the reasons why. I'll admit that I had to adjust my idea of what is typically considered "appropriate" as some student's musical tastes included curse words and explicit topics. However, an instructor's willingness to compromise on such pre-conceived standards allows students to express themselves naturally and more authentic connections to be forged.

During this musical exercise, the questions I asked the students were based on core connections with the GED curriculum. Overall, the lesson took several days to complete, but through all of the presentations, the class covered many core GED concepts such as interpreting theme, interpreting figurative language, making inferences, finding the main idea, restating information, identifying style and tone, and recognizing author's point of view. This assignment, like all of my assignments, led to an exercise in Writing class: linking the songs with the implemented aspects from all four textbook units (sentence structure, organization, usage, and mechanics). Jay explained his thoughts on the lessons:

> His [Paul's] class is fun, exciting and we learn all kinds of things in his class. Straight up, he is just 'real' and doesn't come with any 'fake' shit to class. He breaks things down to our level and not some complicated ass shit that we don't understand. He can take complicated things and make them so simple for us.

Lessons like the favorite songs assignment helped reinforce the GED material in an interesting and engaging manner while encompassing a variety of important concepts. This activity sought out student opinions, feelings, and points of view which were then restated within the lessons. Engaging students to want to learn became a surprisingly trouble-free, enjoyable task. This was especially surprising with students like Vincent as he shared:

> It's hard for any teacher to keep my interest because they always just talk about the textbook, but in Paul's class it's been really easy for me because I actually learn. I can give my opinions in his class and he doesn't judge me or make me feel stupid. He actually tells me I do real good when I ask questions or make comments about things. I actually like learning this stuff because it makes so much sense now.

Maximizing class engagement through varied lessons was crucial for overall successful preparation with the Reading and Writing subjects of the GED.

After incorporating all of M&S's variables, I introduced and added the variable of flexibility in the classroom. This flexibility was implemented during any given semester and also between semesters, all dependent on the students and their learning needs. The Director of the HEP program helped me reflect on the importance of flexibility with the students when he said, "Paul, I am not sure how you are doing it, but every semester you are successful with the students. The students always speak very highly of your teaching and you seem to adjust well to their needs." In a diplomatic fashion, the Director acknowledged my flexibility with the students while forcing me to reflect on my flexibility.

Flexibility was evident through my willingness to change and adapt lessons based on the students' needs, comprehension, comfort, and overall receptiveness with assignments. With a large amount of creative freedom in the development of class curriculum, I was able to develop exercises which at times, were considered controversial. For one assignment, I wore a t-shirt labeled with a few choice words to support the GED concept of making inferences. The t-shirt was black with a front image that reflected an old western, traditional style posting that read "WANTED" such as when sought after by the law. Listed on the t-shirt directly underneath the word "WANTED" were three words: "Meaningful", "Overnight", "Relationship". Walking into the classroom wearing this t-shirt, students noticed and read the t-shirt. As they read, they began to smirk and make comments. When asked what was funny, a few students pointed out that my shirt was insinuating something; perfectly initiating the planned discussion regarding inferences. Although the t-shirt activity was a success with most groups, this was not always the case.

Stemming from the success of the t-shirt activity with the first set of students, I decided to try it again with another group. The exercise had a much different outcome when the class first read my shirt. Immediately, many of the female students took offense to the shirt and explained its offensiveness. This stimulated a gender based debate. The tension quickly rose. I seized the opportunity to be flexible in my approach by redirecting the attention of the class to how gender, race, class, and sexuality have an impact on how symbols and language are interpreted. However, depending on the group or if used by another instructor, the talking points must be adapted to fit the interests of the students. I pointed out that although the t-shirt had no reference to gender, it may be interpreted differently if worn by a man versus a woman. As we discussed these ideas, tempers settled and the focus was brought back to making inferences. Over this entire conversation, the discussion never lost focus of learning towards the GED. Pedro's comment to me as the students left class that day made an impact, "Almost thought we were going to fight today, but you still turned it into a lesson Paul." Students like Pedro helped me understand the importance of flexibility in the classroom. Flexibility in terms of adapting lessons and ideas from one semester to another was always in the forefront of my structure. This assured that I never forced students to adapt to rigid lessons that worked well with one group of students but may not fit the needs of a new group. Changing my lesson was reminiscent to what Ladson-Billings (1995) found in a teacher who had a similar experience, "In the midst of a lesson, one teacher, seemingly bewildered by her students' expressed belief that every princess had long blond hair, swiftly went to her book shelf, pulled down an African folk tale about a princess, and shared the story with the students to challenge their assertion" (p. 479). These ad hoc

changes helped in successfully working with different sets of students consistently over time.

Amid each semester flexibility was required numerous times. One challenging assignment I developed for my students focused on a multitude of concepts relating to the GED Reading and Writing subject areas as well as other skills such as public speaking and teamwork. The assignment was based on the book *Malcolm X* by Alex Haley using the introduction, epilogue and nineteen chapters. I assigned each student one chapter, or two students per chapter, depending on the class size. The students had two weeks to read and prepare a presentation focusing on their section's main ideas. On presentation day, the students presented their chapter in the sequence of the book. To understand the entire book, the students had to depend on one another.

> In the world beyond school, working productively in teams is a basic skill necessary for success... We also know that cooperative groups are a powerful tool for enhancing learning and retention of content... For these reasons, the teacher must teach cooperative work skills and give students practice in working productively together. (Benson 2003:38)

In theory, this type of assignment should teach teamwork and reliability, however on the days of the presentations there were a number of absences making the lesson very difficult and non-sequential. Rather than abandoning the idea behind the lesson, I adapted the lesson into a writing assignment surrounding the respective chapters. More importantly, as a class we viewed the movie *Malcolm X* by Spike Lee. Students enjoyed the movie as they pointed out what they recognized from their readings and discussed missing aspects from the movie that were discussed in the book. Although I adapted the project, the main concepts of the GED curriculum were never minimized.

In general, being flexible aimed to improve student learning. Allowing students to have a voice in the class helped guide my flexibility as I kept a close eye on what was

successful with them and tweaked lessons as necessary. Although flexibility was my focus, I also tried to introduce students to flexibility as a characteristic needed beyond my class when working with different types of instructors or employers.

The HEP recruiter was consistently one of the program's most influential figures for the students. This position was insightful when it came to students and their perspectives as the recruiter was the person who first met and heard the stories of each student. The recruiter asked me for time to speak regarding some students. Although I thought this was a meeting to discuss issues of students who were struggling, I was surprised to learn positive, insightful information:

> Every semester I hear very similar things from the students and it is very powerful stuff. They say your class changes their lives and helps them tremendously. Not just for the GED, but in life as well. I do not know how you do it or what exactly you are doing but I want to thank you. Accomplishing what you did for one semester would be great, but you manage to do it every semester with new and different students. Your willingness, dedication, heart, and flexibility with them are amazing.

I took this recruiter's comments to heart as she/he was a respected individual in the program and community. She/He helped me identify my flexibility with students by sharing her/his perspectives and rejuvenated my dedication to and implementation of constant flexibility within my pedagogy.

The most powerful tool used within my approach was what I referred to in Chapter 4 as "Real Talk". Many HEP students defined their former teachers as "fake" and stressed the importance of the teachers who were "real" with them. The clearest explanation of a "fake" teacher was articulated by Jay:

> First of all, they don't want me in the class and the way they treat me I can tell they don't like me. Teachers have tried to talk to me about shit other than school, but they feel sorry for me, judge me, and try to tell me what to do. They don't 'feel me', care or understand my struggles and pains. They were about how they sound and look to others not about really helping me out. It's about what they gain by trying to help me and I can see right through all that. They never really put themselves out there so I could see who they truly are. Shit Paul, they focus on supposedly trying to help me, but they always keep their

> judgmental eyes on me to see how I respond. I am not stupid and neither are the other HEP students, but this is what we have always dealt with, these 'fake' ass teachers our whole lives.

Jay's explanation of a "fake" teacher characterized the opinions that many of my HEP students openly and eagerly shared about teachers. Their perspectives of a "fake" teacher led to their acknowledgement of "real" teachers. In this specific case study, students used the term "real" any time they discussed me as an instructor to my colleagues or other students. The "realness" factor stemmed from the in class discussions of real life feelings, emotions or events.

My approach of how I treated and taught the students was not the only factor which made my class seem "real" to them. Rather, students defined my specific, strategically placed lectures fostering open discussions as what made the class seem "real". These lectures as coined by the students became "Real Talk." Michelle described these lectures:

> He [Paul] connects everything in class to real life stuff that we have all experienced somehow. His class inspires because of the kind of things we talk about. The subjects we talk about are just so inspirational to me and it makes me feel like I can do anything. He is so inspirational to me when he drops his 'Real Talk' on the class.

These lectures were created and intended to have positive effects on the students and help them engage in their own learning. Other students also commented on the lectures as they solidified the name "Real Talk". Mary suggested:

> He always talking about that 'real' shit. He tells it like it is and lets us say what we want in the class as well. He does not hide anything from us when doing his 'Real Talk' and it really opens me up to listening and sharing my 'real' life situations outside of HEP. I wish teachers would have done what Paul does when he does 'Real Talk' in class.

Mary's comments highlight that it was not that my opinion or experience necessarily matched hers that mattered, but my willingness to "not hide" and listen to what it was the students themselves had to say. Creating and delivering the "Real Talks" was exhausting

at times, but every discussion I facilitated was worthwhile as it had a remarkable impact on the students and their learning.

Using "Real Talk" in the classroom helped me tremendously to keep students focused, dedicated, inspired and driven which are characteristics rarely representative of "at risk" students (Cassidy and Bates 2005). Using "Real Talk" in my classes stimulated these characteristics such as was shared by Manny:

> He really breaks things down so I understand them. He gives examples straight from his life and our lives (students) as well. Like not exact experiences from our lives but shit that we can relate to in life. Like he talks about the struggles in life, being broke, working hard and not getting nowhere, experiencing racism, and just all kinds of shit. Every time it's different. I mean, I can really connect with that stuff. It keeps me interested in what is going on in class because you never know when that real stuff is coming.

"Real Talk" created a genuine interest in the class that helped maintain student's attention and focus on what was being taught. I integrated multiple "Real Talks" throughout each week to keep students alert and constantly tie in their thoughts, feelings and emotions in with the curriculum. The students expressed that they looked forward to the "Real Talk" discussions further helping them become an intricate part of the class such as Dee described:

> He just is on some 'real shit'. He really teaches us about life, how to get ready for the future and what's on the GED. It's strange because he combines everything so well in our classes. I love it when he gets in front of the class and he leads our special talks. He digs deep and gets us all sayin some of the deepest shit I have ever heard in a class. I mean he is right about shit when he talks about us having to deal with shit in the past and in the future but he keeps us motivated and ready to pass his classes. Our talks are a part of what makes the class so real to me and why I love going to class.

As semesters progressed "Real Talk" became a component of the class stimulating students to share their thoughts with and open up to the entire class. Students began taking initiative in class through "Real Talk" as they shared their experiences and connected them to the class while helping to inspire other students. Maggie once led a "Real Talk" regarding pain:

> I have had situations in my life where I was in so much pain. I mean I worked in a bar once and a guy wanted free drinks and because I didn't hook him up he got mad. Later that night when I was walking home that same guy and some of his friends drove up to me in their car. I was scared but I was ready to fight. They jumped out of the car and they beat the shit out of me. I was in so much pain and so fucking mad. But anyway, this shit here at HEP is nothing because we have all been through more painful things than this. Being here away from our families hurts, but we are going to achieve something great.

When students took this initiative through "Real Talks," others were often inspired. I always tried to integrate the student led discussions in with the remainder of the class. Another example of a student engaging the class by initiating "Real Talk" was "G":

> I think when everyone talks about helping families, it hits me hard. Man, I want to just help my family. Especially my daughter 'cause she is just a little girl and I love her so much. You guys all talk about helping your families and so do I but we don't always do what we have to do to help them. I have fucked up a lot my whole life and now I am ready to step up and get my GED. With doing this I will be able to really help my daughter and family with getting a better job. We talk about shit all the time, but it's time we all just do it.

He silenced the entire class with his statement and with time other students responded encouragingly. I allowed and encouraged students to share their insight which would create a powerful, positive environment in the class. These "Real Talk" discussions became not only something I introduced to the class, but an aspect for which the students also took ownership.

With every "Real Talk" discussion, I tied the conversation back to the GED concepts by reintroducing them within the discussion. For example, Maggie's topic of pain was connected to concepts like summarizing major ideas and analyzing tone. These connections were summoned from the students through questions to summarize how Maggie felt based on her tone of voice and the main ideas of her story. Students shared their thoughts and then we transitioned to the lesson in the book that dealt with the concepts. Several students helped enlighten me about the impact of "Real Talk" in the classroom, for example Willie explained:

> Paul always making class fun and interesting. Everything about class is like 'real' life. It ain't no boring ass teacher shit, but some stuff that we can use when we go back home. I never been in a class that I really understood until I came into this class. He be making it all easy for us and I be talking in that class because I want to learn more. I ask questions and tell everybody what I think because he don't hate on me. I feel like I am part of the class like I help by being involved and it helps me because I get my questions answered.

Willie's enthusiasm in the class was only matched by his dedication to learning and passing the GED. Mary also shed light to the impact of "Real Talk" on the students:

> He is just 'real'. He don't judge me and works real hard for me and the class. He inspires me because I feel like I can do anything in his class and out in the world... It is just a lot of fun to be in his class. Learning things in his class is so easy because it is all about real life and we just be doing work in there like it is easy. Paul really cares about us and he pushes us to be the best so we can pass the GED. My confidence really has gone up because he keeps showing me that I really am smart and not dumb like teachers have always made me feel.

Preparing students to pass the GED was the ultimate goal of the class which became a powerful arena for students to rebuild themselves after many past negative experiences with school and teachers. Class was no longer a tedious duty or obstacle for students, rather a place they wanted to spend time. Kay summarized her sentiments regarding the class when she said, "I never thought I would be so into a class like I have been in Paul's classes."

As I gained a better understanding of the Pedagogy of Real Talk, each semester I was able to effectively work faster to establish connections with students in a program that did not have the luxury of time. By expediting the process of establishing a positive rapport with students, I was able to maximize their preparedness for the GED. Ultimately, the focus of the program and classroom was student success, therefore, each semester the pedagogy was adapted to reinforce that very goal. By applying the strategies of the pedagogy, and adapting them to their own personal style, I am confident that teachers will be empowered to create connections and relate to students in a variety of settings. Regardless of the teacher's background or beliefs, by engaging students with

real life emotions in an open setting, and allowing students to get to know them as people, not just a teacher, walls will break down and relationships will begin to develop. These relationships will in turn, provide the foundations for successful teaching and learning.

RESISTANT STUDENTS

Although my approach yielded successful passing rates, there were some students who did not pass my classes or were not receptive to my approach. In this section, I will focus on students who seemed resistant and will examine how the pedagogy, and I as its facilitator, fell short of their needs. There is often discussion among professionals in regards to how and why "at risk" students may fail academically or, due to their surroundings, may be disadvantaged which could lead to failure in school (Cassidy and Bates 2005). Little emphasis has typically been placed on how teachers may fail in their classrooms with these "at risk" students. As Donna Olge (1997) discussed, teachers often fail to provide needed education to "at risk" students as "students identified as being at risk of educational failure often receive a watered-down curriculum... All students—especially those at risk—need to be engaged in interesting and challenging learning that goes beyond basic proficiencies" (p. 1). If teachers don't have high expectations to challenge and engage these students to learn, the students will not have success academically. Teachers provide the leadership needed for students to succeed and students will only reach the expectations set forth for them. For this case study, I will examine three instances where I feel I may have failed students. A critical look at my interactions with these students will determine how my pedagogy was not effective with them as well as what they actively did to resist my approach and prevent their success.

The first case I examined was with PB. PB was a quiet student who was always well dressed and groomed. In fact, he had issues with being punctual for his first class of the day because as he described, "I want to look good when people see me and that takes time." He relied on his quietness to help him, what we at HEP called, "fly below the radar." He did not disturb class and when he did not attend class, it was easily overlooked. Although the program was very thorough and weekly meetings were held with staff and the Associate Director to discuss student progress, PB was not discussed until midway through the semester. PB often did not complete or turn in his work and would normally do the bare minimum and give little effort in class to avoid attracting attention. He did not develop relationships with many of the other students and appeared more focused on the happenings in his hometown than at the HEP program. PB was unique with some of the issues he faced and regardless of what approach I attempted to use to connect with him, he remained resistant.

I first noticed PB's withdrawal from class when he began to not turn in his work early in the semester and performed poorly on in-class "mini tests" and activities. When a student does not feel comfortable in school or a classroom he/she may withdraw by investing less in academic activities (Johnson, Crosnoe, Elder 2001). I pulled him aside after class one day and told him I was concerned with what was going on with his work. He simply said that he was struggling and that he would try harder. At the time, it seemed a sufficient answer, but very soon after I noted no improvement. I also noticed that he was not receptive to the "Real Talk" discussions, as he withdrew from the class by looking away or up at the ceiling as if in a daze. I again spoke with him after class to discuss his work, attitude and body language in regards to "Real Talk" conversations in

the classroom. He simply answered, "I don't know. I would just rather be back home when you guys start talking about things." PB was not receptive to any of our one-on-one talks regarding his work therefore; he began to receive pressure through program consequences for his failure to comply with his HEP responsibilities.

PB continued to do the bare minimum with his work and in class. Although he developed a few friendships within the program, he went to his hometown almost every weekend. Unfortunately, I did not spend sufficient time with him during the semester to be successful in connecting with him and the little time I did have was focused more on disciplinary issues. As I reflect back, I could have been more positive and flexible in my approach with PB. I had opportunities in class to foster PB's needs, for example, in week six of class when I saw him smile and laugh for the first time. The class was joking around with one another as normal. As I implemented my inclusive approach, I chose one of PB's comments for an example. He mentioned in class, "I've got all kinds of women on me here at MSU and I'm loving it." At the time, I thought it was a perfect opportunity to engage PB into a class lesson leading to a writing assignment. Just as he finished his comment, I stated to the class, "Well it looks like we just found our topic to write about in class today." The class stayed quiet and confused as I made my statement. I referred back to PB's statement regarding women "being after him" as I said:

> PB just said women are after him and his tone of voice and body language seemed as if he was confident and comfortable with this. But PB, you have spoken of your dedication to your girlfriend back home all semester. So, what is it PB? Where is your dedication and passion? Your girlfriend back home or the girls here at MSU? So class, that is your question, what is the focus of your passion and dedication?

Although the class was quiet and understood the question, I mistakenly helped the class at the expense of PB.

I took great pride in providing clarity with students and creating questions from their own examples of life or their personal lives. However, in the case of PB, his example was good for the class because they understood the question, but was offensive to PB. I remember looking over at him as I finished my statement and immediately saw that I had left a negative impression and that I had made a mistake. He looked down at the ground, turned red in the face, hesitated to start the writing assignment and maintained stiff and uncomfortable body language for the reminder of the class. Although I thought using his comment as an example would provoke him to start critically thinking about his own comments and engage in the class, I was wrong. By offending him, I shut him off to my class for the rest of the semester. What further solidified that he was no longer receptive was that he went to the Associate Director to discuss his feelings regarding my example. The Associate Director brought it to my attention that PB felt that he was being singled out in my class. Although that was never my intent, it was nonetheless the manner in which I made PB feel. Unfortunately, PB continued to detach himself from not only my class, but from the entire program. By the end of the semester after taking the GED exams, PB did not pass several subjects including Reading and Writing. The end result, PB did not achieve his goal of earning his GED diploma.

My approach of openness regarding my life, often through "Real Talk," worked against me with a student in one particular instance. Jessie was a young woman who was soft spoken, shy and introverted. Although she was bright academically, she lacked confidence in her abilities which affected her performance in the classroom.

Jessie was never a distraction in the classroom, but I noticed that her performance overall declined with time. This was an abnormal trend. Although she was shy and unconfident, I discovered that this was not the main issue in her performance. Other students confided in me, "Paul, Jessie is scared of you. That's why when you call on her she gets red and just says she does not know the answer." Jessie's friends who were concerned for her informed me more regarding why Jessie was scared of me and how I was contributing to her decline in my classes.

The students pointed out that she found me intimidating. I was not expecting to hear this and was determined to figure out how I became a scary figure to Jessie. One of her program friends mentioned, "She thinks that you're scary because of all of the stuff you have been through in your life." Another student mentioned, "She thinks that you're too real to be a teacher, so it freaks her out." As the discussions furthered, I was able to determine that through my approach of "Real Talk," I'd intimidated Jessie. As mentioned in previous chapters, I used "Real Talk" in a manner that allowed students to see many aspects of my personal background evoking many feelings and emotions of students. In Jessie's case "Real Talk" served as a negative catalyst in trying to connect with her.

The experiences that I sometimes shared with the class were terrifying and different to Jessie. Throughout the semester, I invited her to stay after class to discuss her performance. Each time she stayed after class but always asked one or two friends to stay with her, which of course I welcomed. Slowly but surely, Jessie showed indication of her feelings of intimidation. Jessie once said to me after class, "Your life sounds really scary. I don't know how you don't just hate everyone." Comments like this gave me

insight into how she viewed my experiences and me as a teacher. One day, she further elaborated during a program luncheon, "Paul, I did my work for you and I will turn it in today. I don't want you to be mad at me cause I'm nervous going to your class even when I do my work." I did not probe Jessie into further elaborating how she felt because I felt it would be counterproductive for her.

As the semester progressed, I paid specific attention to Jessie during "Real Talk" in the classroom. Normally, students were receptive and engaged with "Real Talk". Jessie would typically seem physically uncomfortable and would make facial expressions that showed her discomfort. During one "Real Talk" discussion I revealed that I was a boxer as a young man and tied it into the lesson for the day while establishing a powerful connection with discipline with work while attending school. Jessie made a comment to her neighbor as I finished and I asked her what she said. She became extremely red in the face and said, "Nothing." I smiled and asked her to share with the class. She said out loud, "I said I would never want to make you mad because you would probably kill me." I smiled and said that I would never be violent in an academic setting or with my students. She nervously laughed as I said this to her but I could clearly see her uncomfortable demeanor. I was not successful in connecting with Jessie nor was I able to speak with her in-depth regarding how she felt about me and the impact I had on her preparation for the GED.

In Jessie's case, the use of "Real Talk" was not only unsuccessful, but it had a negative impact on her as a student. I stayed focused on using "Real Talk" because of the positive impact it had with so many students, but ultimately I was not able to find a

solution with Jessie. Although she did not pass any of the five subjects of the GED, I acknowledge that in the subjects I taught, she was impacted negatively by my approach.

LB was the third student for which my approach was unsuccessful. He was a young man who entered HEP one week late, missing the orientation process. Upon entering my classes, he quickly established his resistance to my approach. When I would delve into "Real Talks" or use creative lessons that were not directly from the GED curriculum, LB would purposefully look down or away from me. His body language and his purposeful avoidance of me as I spoke were indicators of his lack of interest. A positive student-teacher relationship between LB and I was missing which led to higher rates of disciplinary problems unlike situations where students feel a protective force and comfort stemming from positive student-teacher connections (Crosnoe, Johnson, Elder 2004). As the semester progressed, signs of resistance became clearer and more severe. During one class exercise focused on comparing and contrasting "dream cars," we determined the cost of vehicles and connected them to what students felt they needed in order to afford their "dream car." This transitioned into a writing exercise regarding success in school leading to high paying careers. As the discussion ended and a writing assignment began, LB spoke out, "This is stupid because ain't nobody in here ever gonna own any of those cars." I smiled at him and said, "I never thought I would get out of the 'hood' but I did." His response was, "Well, we all can't be like you and I rather just be me." I kept him after class and inquired about his negativity and disrespectfulness. Apologetically, he said he would watch himself and not let it happen again. The same week of the previously mentioned incident, he lashed out again. HEP has a strict policy about punctuality to class and if a tardy arrival occurs; students are not permitted to enter

class. If tardiness becomes a reoccurring issue then the students receive disciplinary consequences. As LB walked in fifteen minutes late, he swung the door open so hard it slammed against the wall. He then grinned and said, "Hey, what's up? I'm here." I immediately stopped him from entering further into the class and asked him to leave and go directly to the Associate Director's office and wait for me per procedure. When class ended, I met LB so we could speak in private, not in front of the class. I approached him directly as I told him that his attitude and behavior would not be accepted nor tolerated in my classes. I then asked him what I could do to help him adjust to prevent future incidents. He again apologized and simply stated that his behavior was his fault and it would not happen again. I pointed out that apologies were not necessary; rather we needed to prevent this behavior from occurring again. He said nothing and sat hunched over with a serious look on his face as he stared at the ground. He simply said he was sorry and assured me there would be no issues after that day. Other HEP students made comment about his negative attitude that week and shared frustration and distraction from his behavior.

Other students confided information regarding LB and negativity he was displaying outside of class. Very upset, one student spoke in confidence with me:

> LB is a fucking bitch. He talks a lot of shit about everyone in the program and thinks he is a bad ass. Paul, this guy ain't ready to change or be here and it makes me mad. I don't appreciate that he talks behind your back either. He says that you ain't shit and that he would kick your ass. That he has been through more shit than you can ever imagine. Paul, this guy is digging a hole 'cause people are turning their backs on him because he is talking shit. I mean you are the realist motherfucker here and this dude don't even know you.

A female student divulged her concerns and feeling regarding LB and the same issue using great detail:

> He talks about you all the time and how much he does not like you. He says that your 'Real Talks' are full of shit. That he is real and you are fake. He says that he ain't scared of you and that if you call him out on his behavior again he going to call you out and put you in your place. Paul, he doesn't like that you bring real life into the classroom because he says that you don't really know anything about his life. I'm just telling you 'cause I don't appreciate what he says and I think people should know when someone is talking shit behind their back.

Many of LB's peers ostracized him because of his overall poor attitude and as a teacher, it was hard to help him because his actions were not only negative in class but outside of class. HEP students began to distance themselves from him which provoked him to lash out even more in class.

In the classroom, I continued to try to involve LB in assignments and discussions and spoke to him before or after class in attempt to connect with him. Over the semester during "Real Talks," he was resistant with his body language, the faces he made and his general lack of participation. I tried to remain flexible with him but his behavior continued to spiral downward as he inappropriately disrupted others from doing their work. I repeatedly pulled him aside to discuss the issues but it only resulted in apologies; no change in behavior. Ultimately, LB was resistant to my approach. I believe my approach even angered him and contributed to his resistance in the classroom. LB was not receptive in any of his classes and displayed inappropriate behaviors. He was dismissed from the program because of his attitude, lack of responsibility, and overall work ethic.

Although there were a small minority of students with which I failed to be effective, it is crucial to examine their cases to continually improve my pedagogical approach. My approach was challenged by these students and I tried every strategy within my approach to try to connect with and help these students, however, ultimately I did not have success with them. Seemingly it was because of my specific approach that

each student was resistant towards me. Thus, although the pedagogical approach was effective with many students it still proved to have negative effects on a select few. It is important to note that in these cases, my personal background was an impediment to connection with students rather than an asset. This is evidence that an instructor must rigorously employ pedagogy, and constantly assess it, rather than rely on assumed factors of connection such as race or background. Students respond most dramatically to authenticity: both in an instructor's presentation of self and in their communicating their care for students.

All teachers who utilize Pedagogy of Real Talk will need to engage in such rigorous analysis to continue to hone their use of the pedagogy and reach as many students as possible. In the example of Jesse, I am able to see that perhaps I shared an overabundance of a particular type of experience. Better results could have been yielded by me altering my approach and sharing a different side of myself and my life experience that would have aided her comfort level. With LB, I only questioned him in terms of his performance, without directly confronting his resistance to me personally and my methods. Perhaps if given the chance to express his suspicions about my authenticity, I could have uncovered why my class sessions were threatening to him and allowed him to drop the resistance that prevented him from successfully completed the program. Depending on individual circumstances, other teachers might realize they have similar shortcomings in the utilization of the approach, or opposite difficulties, but there is no substitute for this type of reflection and refinement to further enhance the pedagogies' effectiveness.

Throughout this chapter I have discussed the effectiveness of the pedagogy when applied in the classroom through feedback of students. Although many teachers have different life experiences, this does not hinder their ability to be successful with students in the classroom. In fact, the Pedagogy of Real Talk allows for teachers to implement their own personal or learned experiences in their individual fashion. Teachers have the ability to connect with the students at the level of universal emotion, and can use the Pedagogy of Real Talk as a tool to help create the connections. My "Real Talk" discussions came into existence by using the pedagogy as a tool to incorporate pieces of myself into the classroom. Students were receptive to my approach because I demystified the traditional position of a teacher and authentically showed them glimpses of my life and connected things to their lives. Once the students witnessed the person behind the position, a new avenue for connecting in the classroom was opened. The students, in return, allowed me to see and learn from their realities beyond their positions as students. I learned about the multiple identities they have outside of the classroom. This was the key component to gaining insight into the terministic screens of the students and developing a powerful learning environment with few distractions. Overall, the Pedagogy of Real Talk allowed me to create a powerful and successful experience in the classroom.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters include an analysis of interviews, biographies, discussions, ethnographic reflections, and observations that attempt to distinguish the experiences and backgrounds of students prior to their enrollment in and during their participation with MSU HEP. After gathering student perspectives on the difficulties experienced in their lives and in school which prevented their academic progress, I developed an alternative pedagogy to address and try to accommodate the needs of "at risk" students. Each chapter surrounds components of the developed Pedagogy of Real Talk that help identify its foundations and explain how it was used and implemented with students. In this conclusion, I weave together the entire dissertation to clearly illustrate characteristics and useful strategies which are the basis of this case study to further advance research and focus on the educational needs of a growing number of youth in our nation.

I utilized Freire, Mastropieri and Scruggs, and Meyer to develop the foundations of my pedagogical approach in order to accommodate the unique educational needs of MSU HEP students. I created lessons by gathering information about the students' rich life experiences, past encounters with teachers, and their struggles at MSU, all which were infused into the classroom instruction. The manner in which I fostered the sharing of personal experiences was through my usage of "Real Talk". I strategically implemented "Real Talk" throughout my classes which served as a powerful tool to help me build rapport and connections with HEP students. "Real Talk" further led to the

enrichment of class lectures and assignments by drawing on the student's lives and perspectives as part of learning process.

Lessons and homework became important tools to connect the information needed to pass the Reading and Writing sections of the GED with student's personal lives outside of school. The classroom became a highly efficient learning environment with only rare instances requiring control or discipline of the class due to disruptive behavior by students. The norm became that students wanted to engage in their own learning. Rather than using a traditional pedagogy of simply filling my students with knowledge, as I gained more insight from my students, I applied components of Freire's liberation approach by using my student's life experiences in the classroom. As a result of "Real Talk", students were more engaged and active in the learning process because they were able to link their personal lives to the lessons.

Although my personal experiences helped support the creation of constructive lessons, it was through gaining an understanding of my student's terministic screens that helped me lead successful classes. It is less important to share specific, common experiences with students, than it is for a teacher to discuss authentic and personal experiences that convey universal emotions and feelings and have a willingness to listen to student responses in order to determine their terministic screens. The implementation of terministic screen into my pedagogy was intended to emphasize the benefit of gaining a clear understanding of each student's view of the world. Such an understanding allowed me to employ the most strategic aspect of my pedagogy: tailoring instruction to accommodate their views. Integrating student views established a comfortable learning environment while helping me to see each student beyond their role as a student, rather as

people who played multiple roles in society. Applying this learned information, I presented and posed all class work in a language that was relevant and understandable to students. Terministic screens complimented the bridge built with "Real Talk" and the complemented preparation for the end goal of passing a standardized test.

Classroom consistency and structure helped balance all of the components of my pedagogy. The S.C.R.E.A.M. variables of Mastropieri and Scruggs, combined with my addition of F (flexibility) provided a basis for classroom consistency. The responsibility of implementing S.C.R.E.A.M. + F was a daily process, although complicated at times, was crucial to effectively achieve an inclusive learning environment for students. The element of flexibility not only functioned within each semester, but semester to semester as well. Flexibility was required across all facets of teaching and learning in order to adapt or create new lessons to best serve students.

Before applying any part of my approach, I incorporated what Meyer discussed as a positive teacher's attitude towards students. Genuinely caring about students cannot be taught to teachers, but must be an embedded, innate perspective or learned by the instructor through his/her authentic interactions with students. Once a genuinely positive and caring attitude for students is established, the following steps that Meyer discusses may be implemented.

The ability to relate to students is a skill that is not easily taught. It is through actual face to face daily interactions with students that relatedness is established. Incorporating "Real Talk" aids in personally relating with students. For me, establishing a connection in the class through "Real Talk" helped tremendously. Relating to the HEP students allowed me to further understand their struggles in and out of the classroom,

however, the teacher-student boundary was never blurred. The fact that I could find ways to relate to students eventually made my job as their instructor much easier. Although the backgrounds and life experiences of the HEP students varied widely, I focused on relating to their struggles and learning what aspects of humanity they were interested in. I never pretended to have similar experiences as all students, rather I remained authentic by following the foundations of "Real Talk" by emphasizing various feelings and emotions felt by all human beings, maximizing the relationships developed within the classroom. I shared some of my struggles, pains, frustrations, joys, and a variety of other timeless emotions that I experienced over the course of my life. Students were able to relate to these emotions even if not to my specific experience and were inspired to share their experiences regarding these emotions, thus we began the process of uncovering their terministic screens to further fuel "Real Talk".

Establishing Meyer's first two components are crucial, but her third component of being able to teach students is key to successfully prepare students to pass the GED. I achieved this component by adapting lessons, homework, and lectures according to what was applicable to student's lives and empower them beyond the GED. By empowering students, they became more receptive to and responsible for their education and adapted easier to new material in the academic setting. The ability to teach the students combined with relating to and having a positive, caring attitude about them helped my approach become a powerful tool in this case study.

The position of being a teacher in society is very influential. Some would argue that the issues with a student's education stem from their unwillingness to learn or be taught, however, I argue that more focus should be directed on how teachers are

potentially failing "at risk" students. Teachers may indirectly contribute to poverty in society if "at risk" students are not being effectively taught or students drop out as a direct result of negative experiences with teachers. Annually up to 1.2 million high school students drop out and as a result, their annual income averages $17,299 compared to high school graduates who make $26,933 leading to a $9,634 income gap between the two groups (Alliance of Excellent Education 2007). This income disparity remains consistent for many high school drop outs over their lifetimes and contributes to the ongoing cycle of poverty among the children of high school drop outs.

The implementation of the Pedagogy of Real Talk within the U.S. educational system could potentially contribute to a reduction in drop out rates. I believe my approach is capable of increasing success rates for teachers and students; thus, lead to higher rates of high school graduates. Currently, only 70% of all high school students graduate (Alliance of Excellent Education 2007). The societal implications of higher graduation rates would be possible reductions in poverty rates, higher levels of educated Americans, and a potential economic benefit based on the increase of capable, educated workers. To make any of this feasible, there must be an emphasis on teacher-student relationships in our educational system. My approach can contribute positively to this relationship; thus, theoretically leading to the larger social implications discussed.

My case study was completed over two and a half years and, to this day, I still participate with HEP by training teachers and working with "at risk" students. Working with HEP required a tremendous amount of work to constantly adapt and mold my approach to integrate student experiences and backgrounds and to be most effective for the HEP students. Further demands on my time, beyond planning for and creating my

approach, stemmed from the connections made with students. Many students sought out advice and wanted to discuss many of the struggles and obstacles brought up in class through "Real Talk".

Fortunately, after my first academic year I had established strong foundations for my approach which diminished my work load enormously. I learned that my approach was not dependent per se on the amount of hours spent on preparation. It was based on the process of learning about and getting to know students hence, I more easily created lessons that were meaningful and relatable to students while still based on the curriculum. The pedagogy at its foundation used students as a resource to formulate lessons, lectures, and every component involved in learning. The structure of the pedagogy was a key tool used in my classes, but it was the students who determined how this tool was used. With flexibility embedded in the pedagogy, it was possible to continually apply it successfully semester after semester without an unusually heavy workload.

STUDENT BACKGROUNDS

Although a norm for the lives of students in this case study, the negative impact of poverty and the lack of parent's education was detrimental for HEP students' academic progress. Most commonly, students shared that they encountered teachers and schools that were not understanding, empathetic or accommodating of the disadvantaged living conditions that gravely impacted their progress in school. This lack of understanding led the majority of HEP students to drop out of school which could potentially have been avoided through more accommodating pedagogies aimed toward the needs of at-risk youth. Teachers who connect with at-risk youth and who are trained to apply inclusive pedagogies could potentially have more positive outcomes.

The disadvantaged background of HEP students and "at risk" students alike, does not have to result in a disadvantage in the classroom. Dread, intimidation or feelings of hopelessness do not have to exist for teachers who work with these students. Throughout my dissertation I discussed the backgrounds and lives of HEP students and how they were used and integrated as positive components in the classroom. As a result of the application of my pedagogy, the students' engagement fostered high levels of success in my classroom which, if applied by other teachers who work with "at risk" youth around the country, could also yield successful results.

The extracurricular responsibilities for most HEP students far exceeded those of the average, middle class high school student. Unfortunately, rather than attempt to understand the necessity and reasoning behind the burdens of additional responsibilities that impeded the academic performance of students, students shared that it seemed like teachers more frequently focused on their deficiencies in the classroom caused by these responsibilities. By ignoring the impact students felt from their experiences outside of school, teachers missed a crucial opportunity to help engage students in learning. Many of the teachers encountered by HEP students seemed ill prepared to deal with the issues that were brought to the classroom nor did they inquire about what the issues were. This lack of preparation made it challenging for HEP students to feel comfortable in class. Traditional pedagogical approaches were often applied despite their proven ineffectiveness with "at risk" students. Students were often expected to adapt to the styles of their teachers leaving vacant the crucial aspect of providing an avenue to connect to their learning. By not putting forth effort initially to understand and inquire as

to why students struggled in the classroom, many teachers were powerless in helping students overcome the obstacles blocking their success.

The issue of lack of training or preparedness to accommodate the special needs of "at-risk" learners should begin in teacher education programs where the curriculum must go beyond educational theory to presenting real-life teaching strategies and opportunities for future educators to practice their implementation in authentic settings. Current educators could gain the skills needed to address "at risk" students through attendance to seminars or teacher training workshops which could introduce alternative teaching approaches. Training opportunities highlighting alternative teaching strategies could empower teachers to be better prepared for their encounters with "at risk" students. Using the Pedagogy of Real Talk to train teachers could provide a foundation for teachers to develop the necessary tools to target learning needs in the classroom and build connections with their students. In addition, further training could help teachers learn about their student's needs and any accessible resources which could accommodate those needs. Teachers often incorrectly assume that students have access to academic role models or guidance at home. This lack of understanding overwhelmingly leads to negative experiences and consequences for students, eventually leading many HEP students to drop out of school.

In general, the experiences shared by HEP students regarding school were overwhelmingly negative. Even those students who did not drop out of school directly as a result of relationships or experiences with teachers or administrators still shared a dislike for school and generally held negative perspectives on education. With these negative experiences contributing to conflict and tension between teachers and students,

students presumed that teachers lacked the ability, motivation or skill required to break down negative barriers between them. Rather than focus on school success and critical development, students perceived the teachers' focus to be on controlling or ostracizing the students in the classroom. HEP students described repressive, humiliating, and painful experiences when they spoke of their previous teachers and schools, rather than comfortable, safe arenas for learning. Feeling hopeless in the shadow of their challenges, obstacles, constant struggles, and tensions with teachers, HEP students turned to what they felt was their best alternative; to drop out of school. As a consequence, they became part of our nation's high school drop out epidemic. As the students left their schools, they eventually learned about and seized the opportunity of MSU HEP. Leaving their local schools, families and communities eliminated many issues, but presented a new set of challenges with their arrival to a new environment.

My approach may contribute to a larger social context, by creating a shift from teachers merely managing, oppressing and controlling "at risk" classrooms to connecting, teaching and learning with "at risk" students. A structural shift in "at risk" classrooms could contribute to the development of opportunities for students through learning rather than remaining developmentally and academically stagnant. When students remain stagnant, they are typically removed from their traditional schools and/or sent to alternative schools. This interruption could be avoided if my approach were successfully incorporated by teachers who work with these students; thus, leading to opportunities of preparation for postsecondary education.

Arriving to a university environment, HEP students faced an entirely new set of challenges and issues being far removed from their home town environments which for

some included poverty, violence, lack of parenting and many ill equipped teachers. Culture shock, home sickness, and experiences with overt racism posed new challenges for students as they struggled to transition to their new environment. Some of the students viewed HEP as their last chance in education and felt enormous pressure to succeed which exacerbated their high levels of stress and tension in their GED preparation. The culture shock of living at MSU often did not subside during the semester adding to the difficulty of attending the program. To minimize homesickness, students often made daily phone calls and weekend hometown visits creating a difficult balance between the demands of home and HEP. In addition to homesickness, some students fell victim to racism which put them at a disadvantage in transitioning and adapting to college campus living. Some of the students despised MSU because of experiences they faced on campus with racism which negatively impeded their ability to concentrate in their classes. However, although students did not always find complete comfort at MSU, the majority learned how to adapt to the campus life and community.

The broad array of struggles faced by students while at MSU challenged the job of the HEP instructors because these issues were present in all areas of the students' lives, even in the classroom. These issues affected the moods, drive, and confidence of students as they attended their classes, completed their work, and studied outside of class. Although HEP poured a plethora of resources into providing a seamless transition for its students, burdensome challenges were still faced.

Regardless of the distractions and challenges encountered by students, all instructors were expected to produce high passing rates for their classes. Comparisons of student passing rates between Reading and Writing during my tenure and prior to my

employment, Reading and Writing classes taught in English versus Spanish, and between all five GED subjects helped identify the success and effectiveness of the Pedagogy of Real Talk. When comparing the overall GED passing rates for my classes in comparison with other subject areas, there is a wide margin in passing rates evidencing a consistency across my classes. This further supports the effectiveness of my pedagogy in connecting with and teaching HEP students.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Gathering HEP student's interpretation of actions/symbols throughout this study was a major component in understanding their perspectives. For this is the reason, I used symbolic interactionism to try to understand the HEP students' perspectives and actions. Herbert Blumer (1969) was quoted within George Ritzers' *Sociological Theory* (1983) regarding symbolic interactionism:

> The essence of society is to be found in actors and action: 'Human society is to be seen as consisting of acting people, and the life of the society is to be seen as consisting of their actions' (Blumer 1961/1969:85). Human society is action; group life is a complex of ongoing activity. However, society is not made up of an array of isolated acts. There is collective action as well, which involves 'individuals fitting their lines of action to one another... participants making indications to one another, not merely each to him-self (Blumer, 1969b:16). This gives rise to joint action. (P. 317)

The premise of symbolic interactionism is the idea that within society, human beings work together to socially construct meaning. This meaning can lead to positive or negative outcomes as people interact with each other in the process of creating, interpreting, and defining symbols from joint action. It is through joint action with teachers and school authorities that HEP students developed their negative perspectives of authority figures in schools.

Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism was further evidenced as an important sociological theory through my findings in this study. The HEP students proved to have

their own symbolic perspectives that they brought to the HEP program, more specifically, their own set of cultural codes. "Cultural codes are defined as symbols and systems of meaning that are relevant to members of a particular culture (or subculture)" (Hyatt and Simons 1999:23). For the majority of students, school was not a norm and did not represent a cultural code connected to positive experiences. Within the families of the HEP students, a large percentage of parents did not have an education. In fact, school was something that was not emphasized directly by the parents because they had negative perspectives of the schools within their communities. This perspective on schools was more readily and recently experienced by the HEP students themselves through negative experiences in their schools. For example, many students had powerfully engrained perspectives regarding teachers prior to coming to HEP. These perspectives were evident in student responses such as Willie's as discussed in chapter 5, "I really fucking hated teachers..." A similar sentiment was echoed by Jay, "These fucking teachers treated me and my friends like shit..." For some students, teachers symbolized frustration and even hatred when they arrived at HEP. Although these were strong, negative perspectives, I attempted to challenge and even change them for many of the HEP students in my classes.

Within my classroom HEP students experienced a shift in what a teacher symbolized for them. I gained this insight through the student's perspectives on their classroom experiences in chapter 8. James stated, "I know I really respect him [Paul] and it is not easy to earn my respect, especially for a teacher." Jay also shared a sentiment that was new to students, "Man I have never laughed in any teacher's class, but this class is different." During HEP, students began to develop a new set of cultural codes regarding teachers. My pedagogy began to foster a change in students' views of education and schools towards

interesting, self-affirming, and an opportunity for them to succeed within their lives. There was a tremendous shift in their symbolic perspectives and cultural codes of what school represented for them as they progressed within the HEP program and were further exposed to my approach. Where historically in the classroom many students experienced negative interactions with teachers, my class began to provide drastically changed experiences and opinions. The symbolic meaning of teacher was no longer merely negative but one where the students viewed a teacher with respect and even a sense of camaraderie. This was a shift from their previous influential symbolic perspectives on teachers in the classroom. HEP students' cultural codes were also challenged in their experiences outside of the HEP program but within the larger community of MSU.

As with their cultural codes regarding teachers, HEP students also had norms and understandings of society stemming from the perspective of their communities. As I discussed in chapter 6, many of the HEP students experienced culture shock upon arriving to MSU. For example, students seldom felt like a minority within their communities because of the demographics of the area they lived. This was not the case at MSU as James shared, "I mean, I walk around here and I am a minority and it's not like that back home". This was a challenging new experience for many students. Their understanding of what it is to be a minority within a community was a first time experience and jolted their understanding of their status within a community like MSU. More specifically their experiences with racism on MSU's campus challenged the manner in which they were accustomed to dealing with conflict with others. Many students' cultural codes led to violence in response to acts of racism but this was not the normative response for conflict at MSU. As Jerry explained, "... I just wanted to chase the fucking car and get my hands on this [racist] motherfucker and fuck him up."

Although he wanted to respond with violence he ultimately did not as he mentioned, "They will trip on me here because people don't be fucking each other up here like they do back home but racism still ain't right." HEP students experienced a collision of symbolic meaning and actions while at MSU. This was a difficult task for many of them as their perspectives and actions were challenged by those of the larger MSU community.

Overall as suggested by Blumer and his symbolic interactionist perspective, students arrived at the HEP program with their own sets of meaningful symbols. These symbols were imbedded as a part of the students' understanding of their surroundings however, when faced with an entirely new surrounding at MSU and within the HEP program, their cultural codes were challenged. Students encountered a new set of norms and symbols with which they were unfamiliar. Students had to adopt, adapt, or reject the new set of norms and symbols as they tried to succeed within the HEP program while living on MSU's campus. The symbolic manner in which we communicate and interpret things around us proved to be a challenging and powerful component of the HEP students' experiences while at the HEP program.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CASE STUDY

The limitations of my study are those common to ethnographic case studies and qualitative sociological studies. The first limitation embedded in my study is the ability to generalize my findings to larger cross-section of society. The fact that I worked with a small, specialized group within the larger society is a limitation. The absence of quantitative data is another limitation because concrete large scale statistical findings would strengthen the validity of my study. Although I believe that with more studies, I

will be able to prove the applicability of my approach on a larger, more general societal stage, for now the results are specific to the HEP population with whom I worked.

Another limiting component is the lack of implementation of my approach by other instructors. Perhaps my approach would not have been as effective if implemented by another staff member in the HEP program. It is possible that my success was not solely based on my approach, but perhaps my individual life experiences. However, since the Pedagogy of Real Talk is founded on humanistic feelings and emotions, not the actual experiences shared, I believe other teachers can apply the approach successfully. I also lacked an English Reading and Writing class to use as an equivalent comparison which may have served as a limitation to my study. Overall, only I implemented the approach and perhaps it would have been more telling if I would have trained another instructor to also implement the approach during the study.

The case study also took place within the confines of MSU's campus and the HEP program. This created a controlled environment to which other traditional high school students would not have access. HEP provided housing for students on campus that likely impacted the students' class attendance. The students were not permitted to work while attending HEP and were provided a meal plan thus adding to their opportunities to maintain focus on their studies.

Although I was successful with many students, I encountered some situations with students who were either resistant to my approach or were affected by its' shortcomings. For some students, I represented something or someone that made them uncomfortable therefore, my attempts to communicate or connect with these students through "Real Talk" were ineffective in establishing positive rapport. In fact, through

these attempts, I further pushed them away which had a negative impact on them personally and academically. Because I was able to build a powerful connection with the majority of students through "Real Talk", these students sometimes took it personally when someone disliked me, sometimes even attempting to defend me by "putting the students in their place." Unfortunately, this resulted in the resistant students feeling further marginalized in my class, exacerbating their discomfort. Although I made every effort to alleviate stress on students by preventing such interactions, students continued to take a stand, such as when Jerry commented, "Fuck that Paul, even if they don't like you they gonna have to respect you. You do everything you can for us and really try to teach us and these fools gonna trip on you. Fuck that." Largely, the students for which my approach was ineffective experienced difficulty in succeeding or even remaining in my class. This was a shortcoming of my pedagogical approach.

FUTURE RESEARCH

I would now like to focus on future research that could confirm or challenge the success of my pedagogy in a broader societal context. A longitudinal study to track the results of the implementation of the pedagogy by other teachers would be an important step in establishing the success of or highlight improvements needed within this pedagogy. For this case study, comparisons were made between subject areas and instructors teaching the same curricula, however, it would yield valuable results to see the application of the pedagogy in varied academic settings led by various teachers to see how results may or may not vary.

Another area for future research that could strengthen the effectiveness of this pedagogy would be to test the pedagogy with various groups of non-HEP, "at risk"

students to see if it has larger societal implications when working with different groups. This might entail conducting research using the approach with more diverse (e.g. race and class) classrooms and schools. If the pedagogy could be implemented successfully by other instructors and remain effective in diverse school settings, it could truly serve as a powerful tool confronting the long standing societal dilemma of high drop out rates for "at risk" students.

The question of applicability among other curricula or academic settings leads to another area of future research. I believe this pedagogy, since foundationally it is dependent on the students and the extraction of their experiences and emotions through "Real Talk", can be applied as a tool with any subject or curricula. The pedagogy is not dependent on the teacher sharing a background or specific experiences with students, rather it is dependent on creating a classroom structure that allows students' terministic screens to be revealed and integrated within their learning. It is through the integration of information relevant to student's lives that teacher connections begin. Future research could apply this approach in a study to monitor multiple subject areas and academic levels to view its effectiveness across a broader academic arena.

Because I truly believe this pedagogy can be learned and applied by any teacher or individual who encompasses Meyer's characteristics of a successful teacher, I would like to conduct further training and workshops to empower others to use this approach. Through discussions and conversations with other professionals who work with "at risk" youth, I have discovered one of the biggest concerns is how to connect with students and how to engage them in their learning to keep them in school.

One colleague asked me, "How do I teach students who do not seem to want to learn? How do I show them the importance of school when it seems like school just doesn't fit in with their lives?" My answer is Pedagogy of Real Talk. Teachers must make the learning relevant to the students in their classes by engaging them in the teaching process. Teachers must learn from students equally as students learn from teachers. In the future, by training a group of teachers or individuals how to use and apply this pedagogy, I would expect to see a reduction in negative interactions in schools and see more "at risk" youth reach successful academic outcomes.

If this future research continues to reinforce the success of the Pedagogy of Real Talk, it may prove beneficial to provide an academic class for future teachers in colleges and universities that would empower future teachers through this approach to develop a better understanding of "at risk" students. Depending on the sociological setting, "at risk" can include a wide range of scenarios, situations, and characteristics. Teachers must have tools that will remain pertinent regardless of the setting. This approach could have the potential to help future teachers achieve higher success rates when working with any identified "at risk" student. In addition, I support all researchers and teachers to challenge the pedagogy in hopes of solidifying its success or improving it in order to help students achieve success academically.

APPENDIX A – SAMPLE REAL TALK THEMES AND TEACHER-LED INITIATIONS

Throughout each course, periodically "Real Talk" was used to engage students. I am providing various examples of the themes I used with my classes and a summary of the experience shared by me in order to evoke student emotions and involvement. However, it is important to note that any teacher using "Real Talk" will need to tailor his/her "Real Talk" themes to the terministic screens of their students and to their own personal experiences.

Victimization: An example used was an experience with a past teacher, Mrs. F in the seventh grade, who blamed me for throwing an apple into her classroom when I walked down a hallway and passed her classroom on my way to the school counseling office. Two male students ran past me and turned a corner out of sight. When I turned to see what they were running from, Mrs. F exited her room and began to yell at me. She said, "I know you threw the apple! People saw you throw the apple! Come here now! I am taking you to the Vice Principal's office!" I told her it wasn't me. She said, "There is no one else walking in the hall other than you!"

I tied this experience in with how I felt victimized by this teacher and the experience of receiving consequences for the actions of someone else. Students then shared their experiences with victimization.

Happiness: An example used was an experience of watching the first group of students with which I worked at HEP, pass the GED tests. After my first semester at HEP, I had the honor to get to know all of the students in my classes. Witnessing all of the hard work that they put in to their studies and the personal struggles that they had to overcome to get to the end of the program, I felt extreme happiness when I saw them finish the program and get their GED diploma. I felt so connected to the students in helping them overcome such large obstacles and helping them complete the program and reach a goal they had strived for.

I tied this experience in with how happiness is an emotion that is felt by most people and had students share their experiences of what made them happy in life.

Frustration: An example used was an experience of a police officer speaking to me in a condescending disrespectful manner. I was the passenger in a car with a group of friends when we were pulled over while driving on a major boulevard in Los Angeles by the sheriffs department. We were asked to exit the vehicle one by one as we were surrounded by sheriffs. They explained that they were pulled over because the car was in violation of a California Vehicle Law. The car was impounded and my friend the driver was detained. When the sheriff spoke with me, he told me I would have to find a way home. I asked if I could get back in the car to get my wallet and they said "No". I explained that my wallet was in the car and without my wallet, I would not be able to get a taxi or pay for the bus to get home. He said it was not his problem and that if I did not walk away I would be arrested.

I tied this experience in how frustrated I felt that I could not do anything about the sheriff acting in the manner that he did. I tied this into how frustration can be felt in many different places within society and then asked to share any experiences of frustration.

Triumph: An example used was my experience with graduating from community college. After being in community college for 2 years I finally had fulfilled all of the needed credits to transfer to a university, but I had also completed my credits to earn an Associate's Degree. I remember the feeling when I received the letter of congratulations for completing my community college degree which explained that I would soon receive my degree in the mail. I was extremely happy and felt as if I had truly triumphed in my life. I felt that I had achieved something that many people thought I would never achieve and I was happy to have accomplished my degree.

I tied this experience to how my students were trying to do the same while completing and achieving their GED. I explained that we would be able to feel this triumphant feeling at the end of the semester together as a group.

APPENDIX B - REAL TALK: ADVERSITY

(Teacher is in front of room as students enter the class. Informal conversation takes place between students and teacher as students settle in and prepare for the class.)

Teacher: Class, may I have your attention? How is everyone doing today? How are you doing today Jay? How was last night? You feeling alright?

Student Jay: I'm alright. I'm feeling a little tired because I didn't sleep much last night. But it's all good, because I was studying and I am ready for round two today.

Teacher: Good! I'm glad you are studying! If you have any specific questions, just holler at me. But try to find a balance because I want you to feel rested because I want you to keep learning. This goes for all of you. Work hard but find a balance so you feel rested and ready to work every day.

(Students are starting to listen intently and a few students are raising their hands to respond to the initial question)

Teacher: Big T (has hand up), what do you wanna share?

Big T: It's hard to find a balance. Sometimes I wanna work all night and sometimes I don't wanna do shit.

Teacher: That's a great point, I feel like that sometimes myself. Does anyone else feel like it's difficult to find a balance sometimes?

Students (5 students speaking at the same time): Yeah. Shit's hard. It's a struggle. For sure. Yeah sometimes, life ain't easy.

Teacher: You see, the thing we are talking about right now, is dealing with adversity. Adversity means hard times and we all go through hard times in this world. Regardless of where we come from, everyone struggles in their own way at some point in their lives to make it through a day, a week, a month, a year. For me, adversity has meant so many different things. Adversity when I was a kid, meant being homeless with my brothers. My mama was forced to work away from us and couldn't support us. She swore it was only temporary until she'd have enough money for us to find a place to live. But meanwhile, the daily struggle was being a little boy who was homeless with his two teenage older brothers. I didn't know how I would eat, or if I would make it another day. That was the type of adversity I dealt with as a kid. When I went to community college, adversity meant something else. I had to learn and teach myself how to pay attention,

take notes, and even care about passing a class. Just trying to focus, forcing myself to go to class after a whole twelve hour shift of work was a struggle. I mean, it was just so much easier to just give up, throw in the towel, walk away and put in overtime to make a few extra bucks. Trying to go to school, succeed in school, and make a dream come true was a daily challenge. I had no one to help me but myself. You feel me? You understand what I am telling you?

Students: Yeah, I feel you. You are right, it's a struggle. I can't believe you had to go through that. Yeah, man it has been tough.

Teacher: You see, I could tell you stories about my struggles all day, but the point of this is to figure out what struggles you go through so we can figure out how to beat them and succeed in the class. This ain't about me, it's about you. What's standing in your way to make this GED come true? What stood in your way in the past that makes you think or worry that you can't make it to MSU? 'Cause I am here to tell you that we are going to make this thing happen.

(Student raises hand) Hank: It's always been hard having so many people in the family and everyone being broke. It's hard to focus 'cause you just wanna help your family. You wanna go work and bring money home to make sure everyone can eat. This is the type of thing that was always riding my mind when I tried the school thing. I ain't gonna lie, I think about this all the time. That's why it's so hard being here.

Teacher: Hank, trust me when I say we all feel you. You are not the only one in this room who feels an obligation to our families. But it is what you are talking about that I need you all to be open about so we can figure out what doesn't allow us to focus on the work at hand.

Sal: Yeah it's hard, 'cause I think of my kids. And I want to be there and support them but I know I gotta be here to get my GED.

James: I'm worried that I'm out here trying this shit and all my people are proud of me but I'm not gonna make it. I ain't scared of shit but I don't wanna let everybody down.

Teacher: That's it. You see, every single one of us in here has these daily challenges. Our biggest challenge sitting here in this class, is preparing to pass this GED. Everything you guys have talked about we can improve by improving ourselves by passing and getting the GED. Getting the GED will be the manner in which we overcome adversity this semester. Getting the GED will open up new doors for us. These new doors, will allow you to better yourself with jobs, more schooling, that can help with your families back home. As a class, in my class, together we will overcome the adversity we face in the GED. Now, you feeling me? You see me? This is the kind of thing I wanna discuss in class in order to keep us motivated and focused in passing the GED. What we are

going to do now, is going to take these thoughts on adversity, these things you shared with me...and you are going to write them down. We are going to practice exactly what the GED writing wants you to know in order to pass. Don't worry about writing for them. Focus on getting all of your thoughts and emotions on paper. That's it. So let's take out a piece of paper. You will have 35 minutes to write about how you have faced a type of adversity in your life. And, how have you overcome this adversity? Give me as many details as you can because when I read it, I want to see it in my mind. That's what I want you to do. But, you must start practicing the fundamental writing techniques that will support your GED Writing as we discussed yesterday in Lesson 8 and Lesson 10 regarding a strong topic sentence in your essay, clear transition sentences and phrases.

APPENDIX C – SAMPLE OF STUDENT'S WRITING RESPONSE

(Typed from a student's hand written testimony)

There are many options in life you must make to survive I on the other hand went beyond the limit and for that I was stuck in a position where I needed help.

Before I decided to change my life I was at a point where I became a drug addict in a city which I didn't know anybody, it was hard for me because I didn't know how to get around where to go to no place stay, no family, no love from anybody.

I started hanging around with some guys I met there the wrong people they started doing crack offered me to do some I accepted and the problems came. I became an addict. I needed that day by day I would steal stuff for a piece of rock. Looking at my features I was not even recognized anymore.

My addiction was expensive. I wanted more and more everyday it was not cheap that was for sure. So I did what was my only choice, I started slanging to other addicts. I also started to break into people's home and just take everything I could. All that just to survive.

My pride was so big my mother wanted to help me my father wouldn't let her my daughter needed me but I still wouldn't take her help how stupid of me. At one point I couldn't take it anymore having no money, to sleep on the cold floors of empty streets, and the worst part having to sleep on strangers guys houses and for a female and a male both crack heads things were always getting out of hand.

I put my pride to the side and gave up on all my addictions. I took her help her hand and came to Michigan. I believe my mother was my angel. I didn't look the same I was a stranger to her now. But she put everything she had just for her daughter to be clean once again. I for sure needed help there but thanks to my mother and her support, I'm coming and I came out of that time I needed help.

APPENDIX D – "REAL TALK" CONNECTIONS TO THE GED CURRICULUM

Every time a "Real Talk" discussion took place, the theme was carried over to link in to the lessons in the GED curriculum being covered in the class. With the "Real Talk" theme of adversity, Lesson 8 (pages 103-105) and Lesson 10 (page 120) from the Steck Vaughn GED Writing Textbook and Lesson 22 (pages 182-183) from the Steck Vaughn GED Language Arts Reading Textbook were used to reinforce GED skills.

Day 1: Writing Class: Students were assigned to read Lessons 8 and 10 for homework the night before. Class completes in class exercises from textbook to reinforce the concepts in the Lessons (Paragraph Structure, Topic Sentences, and Transitions). Students create paragraphs and sentences using transitions in small groups and make corrections for other groups using the overhead projector.

Day 2: Writing Class: Class begins with "Real Talk" discussion on adversity. After the adversity "Real Talk", Lesson 8 is reinforced by asking the class to restate what a topic sentence is and if writing a paragraph about the adversity faced being homeless, what would be the topic sentence? Using their "Real Talk" experiences with adversity, several student are asked to provide examples of topic sentences. The class is given 5 minutes to create a topic sentence based on their individual experiences with adversity. Next, in small groups, an experience shared in the adversity discussion is chosen by each group. Each group then creates an introductory paragraph using a topic sentence. Groups read these out loud to the class and the class identifies the topic sentence. Next groups are asked to come up with 3-5 possible transitions that could be used within the paragraph or linking the paragraph to another paragraph. As a class, these sample transitions are shared verbally and by writing them on the chalk board. Lastly, students are asked to begin writing an essay regarding, "How you have faced a type of adversity in your life? And, how have you overcome this adversity? Students were reminded to utilize transitions and have clear topic sentences. The essay was to be completed as homework.

Day 3: Reading Class: Opened class with a continuance on the adversity "Real Talk" discussion. Led the discussion with asking if any student knows what a symbol or image is. Tie in to Reading textbook Lesson 22. After definition is

provided, bring up examples from the student responses from the day before. For example, Hank mentioned the importance of work. For Hank, what does work symbolize? Have each student brainstorm symbols in their lives and what about the adversity they faced was a symbol. As a class, each student shared their examples which led to discussion on further symbols. The lesson was then brought back in to focus with the importance of symbols and images in reading passages and written works. Students were asked to read a short excerpt from the text and then asked to extract the symbols and images.

APPENDIX E – EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES AND GAMES FOR LEARNING REINFORCEMENT

Interactive Activities

Activity 1: PowerPoint Picture Viewing: Create a PowerPoint that not only defines the concepts being covered in class but allows students to be a part of the presentation. For example, create slides that show students a variety of pictures with no words and ask students what each picture symbolizes to them and why.

Activity 2: Silently Viewing YouTube Clips: Carefully select a variety of YouTube clips and show them to the class without volume. Ask the class to make inferences about what is being discussed or what is happening in the clips based on the people's body language.

Activity 3: Watching Movie Clips: Select scenes in movies that show the personality/physical appearance/behavior of a character and ask students to analyze the character.

Activity 4: Weekend Experience: Every Monday students wrote about what they did over the weekend. After they wrote about their experiences, through class discussion and questioning, a few students would discuss their activities. I asked questions to the class about these activities which applied concepts learned in class. Students were reminded to refrain from discussing or writing about any inappropriate activities.

Activity 5: A Piece of Themselves: Students chose 1 or 2 of their favorite songs and played the songs for the class. They then answered two questions for the class: What is the meaning of the song(s)? What does the meaning of the song mean to them?

Activity 6: Malcolm X by Alex Haley: The introduction, epilogue, and 19 chapters were each assigned to individual students to read. If there were more students than the available chapters, 2 students were assigned to a chapter. Students were given 2 weeks to read their chapter(s) and then they each presented their individual chapters to the class. They depended on one another to understand the entire book. Once the presentations were completed, the class watched the movie Malcolm X by Spike Lee.

Group Work

Small group (groups of 3 to 5 students) / **Partner Activities** (2 students):

- Students worked together on solving a riddle

- Students created and wrote a short story
- Groups competed with each other in creating the most unique poem
- Groups completed study guides or worksheets
- Groups completed peer editing exercises

Concepts Taught by Students:

Student Teacher 1: Students were asked to draw on the board in front of the class. I explained that I wanted the student to draw a scenario for the class and allow the class to try and figure out what it was. The student would then explain the scenario to the class to confirm understanding or elaborate on the class's description.

Student Teacher 2: Student explained what their neighborhoods are like using figurative language to the class. They tried to focus on how their area was unique and different from other places.

Games:

Game 1: Quiz Bowl: The class competed with one another in a quiz bowl. A series of questions were derived from other GED preparatory books. Questions were projected on an overhead or PowerPoint screen and students rang bells to reveal the answer. The winner(s) won a small prize.

Game 2: Battleship: As a class the classic game "battleship" was played. The class was broken into 2 teams. The manner in which teams would get a direct hit on the opposing team was by getting a correct answer to an asked question (provided verbally and/or on an overhead screen). If the team did not get the correct answer, their battleships would take a direct hit instead of the opposing team.

Game 3: Jeopardy: The game was mirrored after the Jeopardy game show. The class was split in 2 teams and competed with each other in answering GED preparatory questions. At times this was done with a PowerPoint setup and others creating the money categories on the chalkboard with questions provided from the instructor or volunteer spokesman/woman.

Game 4: Chalk Board Competitions: These competitions focused on students competing by going up to the board, 2 – 5 students at a time. A verbal prompt would be mentioned and the first student to write down the correct answer on the board earned a point for their team. Another version would be to allow each team who answers correctly to earn a point for their team, minimizing speed based competing.

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