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2023

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Adult Secondary Learners' Transition to College and the Impact of Institutional Agency on Their
Trajectory

By

PATRICIA OLIVA

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Educational Leadership

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2023

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn from the perspectives of adult secondary learners (ASLs) and transition navigators (TNs) regarding how K–12 adult education programs serve ASLs as they prepare to transition to community college. In this study, ASLs are defined as adult students working towards their high school diploma or equivalency while balancing adult responsibilities and social, psychological, and economic roles expected of adults in their communities. TNs are institutional agents who assist students with enrollment, goal setting, career planning, and transitions to college, training, and employment. Purposeful sampling was used to select six ASLs and four TNs to participate in this study. In-depth one-on-one ASL interviews and focus group data with TNs revealed findings in four key categories: (1) ASLs exhibited agency over their educational trajectory, empowered by family, community, and peers. (2) Teachers supported ASLs by building confidence, meeting learning needs, and validating experiences. (3) Peer and community connections empowered ASLs to persist toward goals. (4) While ASLs found college transition support through adult education, they offered additional ideas to enhance preparation. Findings provide insight into how adult education programs can better support ASLs in preparing to transition to community college. This study provides insight and aims to inform adult education leaders, programming, and policies to improve outcomes for this unique population of learners.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to my dissertation committee for their guidance and support throughout this journey. I am especially grateful to my chair, Dr. Gloria Rodriguez, for her wisdom, encouragement, and dedication in advising me every step of the way. Thank you, Dr. Rodriguez, for pushing me to grow and believing in me. I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Paco Martorell and Dr. Natalia Caporale, for the time and insights they contributed to strengthen my research.

I am profoundly thankful for the love and understanding of my family and friends. Your patience and faith in me kept me motivated on the toughest days. I am blessed to be surrounded by such thoughtful, supportive, and caring people. I could not have done it without you.

I also want to acknowledge the adult learners and transition navigators who volunteered their time to participate in this research. Thank you for entrusting me with your stories. You taught me so much, and your powerful voices are the heart of this work. I hope I have done justice in amplifying and sharing your experiences.

This acknowledgment only begins to express my deepest gratitude. I am incredibly fortunate for the guidance, love, and support you all provided every step of this journey.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the adult secondary learners who have engaged in adult education in powerful ways, as captured in the following graduation poem.

I am inspired by you, who get up early and go to work eight hours or sometimes even more and come back home tired and hungry, and wanting to just take a shower and relax, but you still find the time to study and do homework.

You, who spend all day running around from school to school to pick up your children and taking care of them while doing laundry, cleaning, and making sure they have healthy dinners on the table when all you want to do is crawl to bed and rest but still find the time to study and do homework.

You, raising a family all by yourself, with nobody else to lean on but yourself, and having to make sure all the bills get paid every month no matter what, even though you had a lot on your shoulders, but you still found the time to study and do homework.

You, who had to start all over in a new place, away from your family and friends, with very limited resources, and sometimes with a language barrier but still found the time to study and do homework.

You, whose life took a different path from the one you wanted for yourself when you were younger, but you decided to turn it around, and despite all the challenges and obstacles, you still find the time to study and do homework.

You, who learn in a different way or at a different pace because you have different abilities and talents and might need additional support, but you still find the time to study and do homework.

You decided to better yourself and continue your education to build a better future for yourself and your loved ones. You are here today because you are your own inspiration. You don't need anybody to tell you that you did a great job because you know that in your heart. You know you did your best. And you know you will continue to do your best because now you know you can accomplish anything you set your mind on doing.

I will take all this inspiration with me today. I will treasure it the same way all your families and friends here with you treasure you and your accomplishments.

It is time to say hello to a new beginning, a new chapter of your life, and a new world of opportunities and open doors. It is time to say hello to a new version of yourself.

—Lidia Melendez (former adult secondary learner)

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE STATEMENT

Introduction

Adult education learners are a growing population who need diverse support as they move toward higher education (Karmelita, 2020; Moore, 2011). Adult education programs are in a unique place in the educational continuum between K–12 and higher education in that they provide adult learners, particularly those who have been underserved by traditional schooling, with elementary and secondary levels of education. These programs provide adults with opportunities to develop skills and training to move on to higher education or self-sustaining employment regardless of where they are in their educational trajectory (Steenhausen, 2012). However, low transition rates to college for adult learners continue to be an issue for adult education professionals and underscore the existing inefficiencies related to service delivery in the adult education system. Adult education is challenged by its broad mission of serving students with different educational needs, ranging from immigrants who want to develop English language skills to secondary education students transitioning to training, college, or the workforce. Adult education programs also provide educational services to older adults and adults with disabilities and provide programs for parents looking to learn skills to support their children. Statewide initiatives and legislation have tried to respond to the educational needs of underserved adult populations; yet, in the academic year 2019–2020, only 11% of adult education students in the Sacramento region transitioned to postsecondary education (California Community Colleges, n.d.). This underscores serious inequities in educational advancement and attainment of adult learners in the adult education system. Legislation and initiatives have been developed to improve outcomes for adult learners; however, these state-level policies have been inconsistent, leaving unresolved fundamental issues of governance and coordination in adult education (Steenhausen, 2012).

Statement of Problem

It is estimated that about 33.3% of people in the state of California have a bachelor's degree or above, 28.8% have some college or an associate degree, 20.7% have a high school diploma or equivalency, and 17.3% have not completed high school (California Adult Education n.d.). Education beyond earning a high school equivalency has become increasingly important (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA], 2015). Educational attainment is linked to upward economic mobility (Johnson et al., 2018), and having a college degree increases the possibility of accessing living-wage employment. Literature indicates that adult learners who have academic success in higher education tend to gain economic and personal benefits, which are more likely to provide social, political, and economic benefits to society (Ritt, 2008).

Research indicates that adult learners have multiple roles, responsibilities, and commitments that complicate their participation in educational programs. Moreover, they encounter barriers associated with a lack of resources, networks, and information (Iloh, 2018; Karmelita, 2020). Though there is research on underserved students transitioning from high school to postsecondary education, most of the work centers on students transitioning directly from the K–12 system to higher education (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Oseguera, 2013); research focused on adult secondary learners (ASLs) is scarce. Moreover, research that does address “nontraditional” learners tends to focus on student academic, situational, or dispositional barriers (Alamprese, 2004 Goto & Martin, 2009; Kallison, 2017). While prior research has explored academic barriers adult learners face, there remains a gap in understanding how institutional-level policies and systems within adult education programs shape adult secondary educational attainment and transition to higher education. Few studies explicitly examine how established program structures, guidance policies, and state-level coordination of adult education impact students’ progress and movement to higher education. (Kallison, 2017; Karmelita, 2018). Also, ASLs have typically been examined through the lens of educators and policymakers. To my knowledge, the perspective of adult learners has been limited in its representation in the

literature, so not much is known about how adult learners experience adult education programs and how these programs affect their movement to community colleges. Therefore, it is critical to insert the voices of adult students into critical policy discussions. These limitations in the literature undermine its usefulness to policymakers and practitioners.

Purpose of My Study

This study's purpose was to understand what college-bound ASLs experience in adult secondary programs and the impact of institutional practices and policies on students preparing to transition to higher education. This work is important because ASLs are diverse, have different needs and challenges, and experience education in ways that are different from those who enroll in college at a younger age. Moreover, there is a strong need to develop educational systems that support ASLs' unique academic experiences.

Research Questions

Specifically, this qualitative study aims to (1) understand how adult education programs impact ASLs and (2) understand how ASLs experience their trajectory from adult programs to community college. Correspondingly, my qualitative methods inquiry addresses the following two questions:

1. In which ways do adult education programs prepare, facilitate access, and provide support services to college-bound ASLs in the Sacramento region?
2. What do community college-bound ASLs experience while preparing to transition to community college?

This study is organized into six chapters. First, I provide a review of relevant literature, followed by an explanation of the theoretical framework and methodology for my study. Next, I substantiate the implications for policy and practice as concluding remarks for my proposed

study. Finally, I present a synthesis of learning based on my experience in the Capital Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership (CANDEL) program.

Context and Background

California Adult Education Mission and History

Adult education programs in California have a long history of providing adults with the basic knowledge and skills needed to respond to community, state, and national needs. These programs have delivered educational services to individuals seeking language, academic, and employment skills for over 150 years (Steenhausen, 2012). They also provide adults with the knowledge and skills needed to participate in civic life and the workforce (Steenhausen, 2012). Adult student needs range from English language acquisition to earning a high school diploma or equivalency. Providing services to address these needs has been central to the core mission of adult education.

The first documented adult school was supported by the San Francisco Board of Education in 1856. This program provided basic academic and vocational instruction to adults, many of whom were immigrants (West, 2005). As needs and interests grew, classes expanded beyond high school, English, and citizenship courses. Secondary school districts and junior college districts both supported education programs for adults.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the legislature transferred statewide governance of community colleges from the State Board of Education to the California Community College Board of Governors (Steenhausen, 2012), raising the question of which entity should be responsible for providing education services to adults. In response to this legislative mandate, many school districts took responsibility for literacy, high school diplomas, English as a second language, and citizenship programs. Many community colleges focused on providing instruction in areas such as vocational instruction, precollegiate (remedial) coursework, and transfer courses. Some schools responded by giving up their right to run these programs. In one case,

the community college provided all adult education instruction except for a joint high school diploma class with the school district (Steenhausen, 2012; West, 2005).

Relevant Legislation

Historically, adult education has fallen under the purview of community colleges and school districts, which is a quite unique location in the overall educational arena, as it spans two very distinct educational systems in terms of structure, funding, and mission. Adult education is comprised of multiple providers and adheres to state and federal policies. It serves a very diverse population of adults with different academic needs and goals. The state has attempted to support programs and services responsive to adult learners' needs. And though state legislation and regional policies have attempted to provide guidance to adult education providers with initiatives aiming to improve educational outcomes, the extensive scope of adult education's mission and services challenge the effort to serve adult learners (Steenhausen, 2012). Two main sources of funding and legislation are the California Adult Education Program (CAEP) and the Federal Workforce Investment Opportunity Act, Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (WIOA II).

The CAEP

The primary purpose of adult education is to facilitate access to postsecondary education or the workforce. School districts and community colleges are the main providers of adult education instruction and services (Steenhausen, 2022). In 2009, the requirements regulating K–12 district adult education programs and funding were made flexible. This allowed school districts to use general fund monies dedicated to adult education for any educational purposes, resulting in several K–12 adult education program closures and a reduction of adult education services.

In 2013, to address these gaps in services and promote greater coordination between adult schools and community colleges, the state, through Assembly Bill 86 (AB 86), restructured the California adult education system. Historically, adult education K–12 district adult schools and community colleges rarely coordinated their course offerings or offered pathways from adult schools to college. Assembly Bill 86 promoted greater collaboration and coordination among adult education providers to improve student services. Assembly Bill 86 charged the California Department of Education and the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office with jointly implementing an adult education planning process to support the delivery of adult education services. The legislation appropriated \$25 million to distribute to regional consortia to develop a plan that served students and fostered entry to college or the workforce (Mortrude & Cielinski, 2017).

In 2015, Assembly Bill 104 passed, and the state budget created the Adult Education Block Grant. The California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office was tasked with working with the California Department of Education to deliver a system aligned with community college district boundaries to support the growth and improvement of adult education in the state (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, n.d.). The Adult Education Block Grant provides ongoing funding to support and deliver educational opportunities to adult learners. The name of the Adult Education Block Grant program was changed to CAEP to convey a state commitment to an ongoing funding stream (CAEP, n.d.).

Since 2015, the annual budget for CAEP has been \$500 million, in addition to \$25 million for data and accountability support, \$5 million for technical assistance, and additional cost-of-living adjustments. Once CAEP funding for K–12 district and county Office of Education fiscal agents and direct-funded K–12 county office members is approved by the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, the funds are transferred to the 71 regional consortia composed of community colleges, K–12 adult schools, and county offices of education fiscal agents for disbursement (CAEP, n.d.). CAEP consortia report student enrollment,

demographics, and outcomes to the CAEP office. They also report the allocation of funds to members and track expenses connected to the seven CAEP program areas. The seven program areas aim to facilitate basic skill development to facilitate adult learner movement to postsecondary education opportunities or the workforce. The seven programs include (1) programs to develop elementary and secondary basic skills; (2) programs for immigrants eligible for educational services in citizenship, English as a second language, and workforce preparation; (3) programs for entry or reentry into the workforce; (4) programs to develop knowledge and skills to assist school children to succeed academically; (5) programs for adults with disabilities; (6) short-term career technical educational programs; and (7) preapprenticeship programs. Additionally, outcomes include adherence to the consortium governance structure, public meetings, and a three-year planning cycle to include an annual plan (CAEP, n.d.).

WIOA II

The CAEP works with state agencies to build capacity and leverage resources (Mortrude & Cielinski, 2017). Besides CAEP funding, some adult education programs also receive federal funding through WIOA II. WIOA II recognizes that the core purpose of adult education is to prepare individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce. WIOA II provides federal supplemental funds over a 4-year grant cycle to support adult education activities that facilitate individuals' transition to higher education, training, employment, and economic self-sufficiency. An eligible provider must demonstrate effectiveness through performance data and have a record of improving the skills of participants in reading, writing, math, and English language acquisition. An eligible provider is also required to report participant employment, secondary school diploma or equivalent, and transition to postsecondary education or training outcomes. Providers can be institutions of higher education, nonprofit institutions, local education agencies, public and private agencies, volunteer literacy, community-based or faith-based organizations, libraries, public housing

authorities, partnerships, consortia, or coalitions of those listed above (WIOA, 2015, Title II).

WIOA II is a variable pay-for-performance reimbursable grant. Available funds for 2021–2024 total \$97,632,668. Providers must meet all performance requirements and generate payment points to receive funding. Successful continuing applicants will be awarded funds based upon past payment points earned (WIOA, 2015, Title II).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Through the review of empirical literature relevant to adult education programs and varying aspects of college transition, I present background information about ASLs. This discussion is followed by how adult education programs serve and support students. I then examine the literature related to college choice and transitions to college among students whose profiles might resemble ASLs (e.g., first-generation college students), as well as literature that speaks directly to transitions to college as it pertains to college-bound ASLs. Finally, I contend there is a critical need to understand college-bound ASLs' experience in adult secondary programs and the impact of institutional practices and policies as they transition to higher education. My study aimed to deepen our understanding of students' experiences in K–12 district adult education programs as they prepare to transition to community college and how learners experience their trajectory to college in these programs.

Defining ASLs in Adult Education Programs

Given the limited research on ASLs, particularly those pursuing a high school diploma, it is necessary to consider how adult learners and “nontraditional” learners are defined. *Adult learners* can be those individuals who exhibit “the social, psychological, and/or economic roles expected of adults in their cultures and collective societies” (Hansman & Mott, 2010, as cited by Karmelita, 2020, p. 64) and who choose to participate in learning activities that will bring a sense of improvement in their lives (Karmelita 2020). *Nontraditional student* is a term used to describe adult students who often have characteristics of “adult responsibilities, such as working full time, being financially independent, having a nonspousal dependent, being a single parent, and having a nontraditional education trajectory, such as delayed enrollment into higher education on noncompletion of high school” (Chen, 2017; Horn & Carrol, 1996, as cited in Iloh,

2018, p. 231). Rendón (1995) defines nontraditional students more broadly to include first-generation, low socioeconomic status and minority adult students. ASLs share many of the same characteristics as these students. Individuals enrolled in adult education programs often are affected by the same characteristics that influence nontraditional and adult learners in their ability to advance their lives through education.

ASLs in Adult Education Programs

Research exploring factors that affect adult educational attainment provides insight into how ASLs¹ are perceived as persisting and navigate transitions to college (Cross, 1991). Goto and Martin (2009) ascertained that adults encounter challenges that make it complicated to advance in life through education (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, as cited by Goto & Martin, 2009). In a qualitative study of 15 students selected from two general education development (GED) classes, Goto and Martin (2009) sought to understand how adults negotiate education-related challenges as they go through an adult education program. They identified institutional, situational, and psychological barriers that impeded movement toward an educational goal. Based on their analysis of questionnaires, essay prompts, and small-group interviews, they found that students who overcome obstacles to education are highly motivated, have strong efficacy beliefs, and have a clear understanding of institutional pathways. This study implied psychological factors influence how learners respond to barriers and that self-efficacy is influenced by core people, such as family and friends.

¹ The terminology that researchers use to describe learners sharing characteristics of ASLs will be used in the literature review. For the purposes of this study, an ASL is a high school diploma student with “adult responsibilities” encountering social, psychological, and economic roles expected of adults in their communities; this can include minoritized high school students enrolled in traditional high school and nontraditional learners in postsecondary institutions.

Similarly, Karmelita (2018) examined the experiences and challenges of five students in a transition-to-college program through participants' journals, participant and instructor interviews, class observations, and class assignments. She combined Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Cross's (1991) descriptions of barrier types, including situational, institutional, and dispositional, to explore internal and external circumstances affecting adults' movement to higher education and found that dispositional barriers, such as lack of confidence and self-perception, hindered students' success in the program. She also identified situational factors such as technology, health, relationships, and self-perception that impacted students' movement in their education.

In contrast, other scholars have recognized that adult learners are motivated, responsible, and self-directed and have life experience they can access to make connections to learning (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011; Knowles, 1974; Wyatt, 2011). For example, Wyatt (2011) examined nontraditional student perceptions of satisfaction and engagement in campus activities and explored reasons and motivations influencing the pursuit of further educational activities through focus group data and the results of an online, quantitative campus climate survey that gathered data on nontraditional student experiences. Findings in this study indicated that nontraditional students value being treated like adults. Nontraditional students in this study reported that they benefited from a basic orientation to the campus, information about practices and policies, classes taught by faculty who understand nontraditional student learning styles, communication, and understanding of time constraints. The study underscored that institutional leaders need to understand their role as institutional agents and how their actions impact learners. It also highlighted the need to integrate and engage nontraditional students in higher education.

Scholars have asserted that adult learners are self-directed and have life experience they can access to make connections to learning (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011; Knowles, 1974; Wyatt, 2011). However, research attempting to identify what influences adult educational

attainment tends to highlight situational or dispositional barriers affecting students. Though the literature has recognized that students encounter institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers that impact students' transition to college, there is little research on how adult education programs, systems, policies, and procedures impact students' experiences as they go through their educational trajectory. Understanding and validating the attributes and strengths students draw from as they engage in educational opportunities is a critical piece missing from literature informing educators supporting ASLs pursuing a college education.

Adult Education Structures Supporting College-Bound Students

Transition Programs

Transition programs aim to support successful movement to higher education. They are designed to prepare students for entry or reentry to higher education while promoting academic persistence and completion. They are also intended to facilitate academic and workforce skill development and college readiness by providing academic support, guidance, counseling, and access to support services (Kallison, 2017; Karmelita, 2020; Zafft, 2008).

Kallison's (2017) quantitative study examined five transition programs to determine if accelerated instruction results in college-level coursework enrollment. Participants in these programs took pre- and posttests to measure content skill improvement, college readiness achievement, and skills awareness. The transition program included managed enrollment, where students entered and exited the program during specific time periods; college readiness curricula; direct instruction; career guidance; college knowledge instruction; learning framework instruction; enrichment activities; academic advising; and connections to higher education institutions. Pretests and posttests were analyzed to measure outcomes. Participants in this program showed an increase in content knowledge, perception of their use of study skills, and college matriculation. Though the study asserted that short-term intensive transition programs increase college readiness skills, it also noted that slightly over 50% of the participants reached

college-level proficiency in all competencies. Additionally, of the 20 pairs of pre- and post-program assessments measuring achievement gains, 18 resulted in significant increases, but not all participants reached college-ready benchmarks in all identified areas.

College preparation programs are designed to support transitions to college and careers. In a study of 397 adult learners enrolled in one of six programs studied, Goodman and Kallenbach (2019) examined a 2-year transition-to-college and career demonstration project that addressed academic and nonacademic barriers to college for adult learners to determine its effectiveness in supporting student transition to college or careers. The researchers analyzed student surveys, placement test scores, and staff focus groups and compared program completers and noncompleters. The study found that 66% completed the program, 69% attained college-level reading skills, and most participants enrolled in college. Participants in this study demonstrated noncognitive gains, including improved self-concept and preference for long-term goals. The research indicated that transition programs that focus on personal readiness skills such as self-advocacy, the ability to predict challenges and resolve conflicts, self-appraising strengths and attributes, and balancing responsibilities support academic attainment and enrollment in college. The research also showed that math instruction, online learning, proactive counseling and advising, and engagement with career centers, employers, staff, and peers also facilitate academic attainment and enrollment in college. The study also identified transportation, health issues, juggling multiple responsibilities, and health problems as challenges that impact students' abilities to transition to college.

Through narrative inquiry, Karmelita (2018) examined the experience of adult learners ages 24–64 enrolled in a college transition program. Participants were enrolled in a Transition Prep program open to anyone with a high school degree or equivalent. Qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Sources included journals, interviews, class observations, and class assignments. Participants in this study appreciated their transition course; however, data suggested that the positive sentiment about their experiences stemmed from the connections

they made in class more than from what was taught. The study also concluded that academic advising that adjusts to dispositional and personal barriers promotes transitions to higher education.

Smith and Gluck's (2016) five-year research tracked 227 adults enrolled in transition courses to identify factors influencing college outcomes and measure enrollment, persistence, and academic success. Data sources in this study included student surveys; tests measuring literacy skills; student, staff, and teacher interviews; transition program documents; intake and exit forms; and college transcripts. Researchers hypothesized factors such as goals and motivations, individual characteristics, supports, and obstacles that included health, academic, familial, financial logistical, college culture, and employment influencing college outcomes. The study showed that income and employment significantly affected educational trajectory but did not negatively affect enrollment or other college outcomes. Also, having children did not affect enrollment and was positively related to college outcomes. Surprisingly, literacy skills and self-efficacy were not related to college outcomes. Significantly, supports that positively influenced college outcomes included case management to connect students to public or other needed assistance to solve life crises, college transition support networks, meaningful academic feedback, and mentoring.

The literature in this section focused on transition programs supporting students' movement to college. The research often centered the responsibility of learning on students (Goodman & Kallenbach, 2019; Kallison, 2017) and emphasized psychological barriers and literacy development (Goodman & Kallenbach, 2019; Goto & Martin, 2009; Karmelita, 2018), suggesting that students need to adapt to established systems and ways of learning to move forward in their educational trajectory. However, Smith and Gluck's (2016) research suggested that literacy skills and self-efficacy did not significantly impact college outcomes. Building connections, support networks, mentoring, and meaningful academic feedback had a stronger

influence on positive college outcomes. This indicated that students benefit from institutional agents who acknowledge their experiences and structure their support around their needs.

Academic Advising and Counseling

Adult learners benefit from academic advising as they consider transitioning to higher education. In a “Transition” issue of *Focus on Basics*, a journal published by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Alamprese (2004) stated that counseling for adult learners interested in postsecondary education should offer individualized assistance in understanding the requirements for postsecondary participation, determining whether their life’s activities permit participation, and encouragement to identify skills to develop for successfully entering college. In “Bridging the Great Divide: Approaches That Help Adults Navigate from Adult Education to College,” Zafft (2008) stated that the goal of an advisory transition model is to raise learners’ awareness of postsecondary opportunities, the admission process, and support services such as financial aid.

Kitchen et al. (2021) analyzed qualitative data collected as part of a larger longitudinal project of a comprehensive college transition program to examine the relationship between a proactive advising strategy and student academic self-efficacy as it ties into academic and college success. In this study, academic self-efficacy was defined as “the perception of academic performance and abilities and the belief in one’s ability to execute actions necessary to successfully complete an academic task” (Kitchen et al., 2021). The data sources consisted of longitudinal interviews with 70 students who participated in a college transition program.

Kitchen et al.’s (2021) study resulted in the development of an advising model to promote academic self-efficacy in the context of college transition and student success programs. The study’s findings suggested that students linked their academic self-efficacy to the reflections and self-assessments during grade checks. Grade checks encouraged some students, but not all, to request and review feedback and consider their behavior and what they

needed to do to improve their grades. Also, student engagement in proactive planning and guidance from faculty and staff increased academic confidence for students. The authors also stated that the relationships students formed with advisors through grade checks helped students be more open to suggestions and support. Kitchen et al. asserted that an advising model that includes midsemester grade check-ins, reflection and self-assessment, emotional and interpersonal support, proactive planning, and instrumental guidance can help students transition to college. However, they focused the responsibility of academic attainment on students. Though the authors made the case for student advising, they underscored that students need to be aware and modify academic and personal behaviors impacting their grades, and that they should reach out and listen to staff and faculty if they wanted to be successful students.

On the other hand, Karmelita's (2020) five-student study suggested that academic advisors can mitigate the impact of barriers by being proactive in identifying learners' needs, assisting in developing a support network for learners, addressing institutional obstacles, and being aware of technology and health barriers. Academic advising focused on student experiences, perceptions, and challenges can help students reach educational goals. Karmelita's (2020) research is significant as it suggested advisors should adjust to the needs of adult learners as they assist students in their transition to higher education.

Academic advising can help students overcome socioeconomic and nonacademic barriers to educational attainment (Karmelita, 2020). Studies suggested that advising and counseling that connects learners to educational opportunities and offers flexible, individualized assistance focused on removing challenges can help promote successful transitions to postsecondary education (Alamprese, 2004; Karmelita, 2020; Kitchen et al. 2021; Zafft, 2008).

ASLs Experiencing Transitions to College

The literature presented in this section highlights students' experiences in the context of college transition. High school is part of an ASL's educational journey. It is where they start before stopping out and continuing in adult education programs to complete high school. ASLs also attend adult education programs to prepare for college and transition to higher education. However, literature focused on ASLs' experience as they transition to college is scarce. Given the limited research on what ASLs experience as they transition from adult education to community college, it is necessary to draw context from studies examining high school and postsecondary learners as they navigate educational opportunities and move to higher education.

Given the limited research on college-bound ASLs' experiences, particularly the experience of those pursuing a high school diploma, it is necessary to draw from studies examining the experience of high school students who share characteristics of ASLs. Martinez et al. (2019) examined through a multisite descriptive case study how college readiness efforts and strong college-going culture at three racially and economically diverse public high schools impacted students' academic experience and well-being. The data analyzed included semistructured individual and group interviews with 59 students, field notes, observations, archived data, and school documents. Data were collected during two academic school years. The study found that although students expressed appreciation for the college-going culture at their schools, conversations also revealed that students often felt stress, frustration, exhaustion, and sometimes anger as a result of the strong college-readiness culture they experienced at their schools. Some students coped with the college-going culture by cheating to meet academic expectations, while others purposefully resisted or avoided advanced courses because of the academic workload and the anxiety caused by the expectations in these classes or because of the need for self-preservation to meet other responsibilities such as working to

contribute to the family income. Other students coped by trying to be outstanding students, others gave up, and some felt they were not college material and blamed themselves. This study offered a critical perspective when examining college readiness efforts and the potential for negative unintended consequences of not considering student voices in college-readiness efforts.

ASLs experience preparing for college in much the same way nontraditional postsecondary students do. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) interviewed 17 adult learners enrolled in an introduction to university course to examine how they experienced their transition to higher education in terms of learning, participation, and identity. Qualitative data revealed that students in this course perceived themselves as peripheral participants in the university community and that university regulations and academic procedures challenged their sense of belonging. The practices of the higher education community sometimes worked as a barrier to participants and reinforced the notion that the participants in this study were peripheral participants in the university. This research underscored that attention should be given to students' identity as they negotiate meaning in a higher education institution and its practices. Moreover, the study suggested careful consideration should be given not only to what is taught, but also to the practices that impact students.

Bowl (2001) explored the experiences of adult learners as they made their way through higher education by drawing from the stories of 32 learners and examined in detail the stories of three students making their way to higher education. The study engaged participants in the research process to gain a deeper understanding of financial and institutional barriers experienced by adult minority students. The components of Bowl's research included informal discussion and individual interviews. Participants in the study voiced their struggles with financial poverty, lack of time, tutor indifference, and institutional marginalization. The research suggested that responsibility to adapt often lands on students' shoulders because of the

institute's unresponsive stance. The research suggested that institutional barriers can be addressed by considering students' perspectives and experiences.

Rendón's (1994a) study examined the educational experiences of 100 first-year community college nontraditional students' perceptions of their educational experiences through focus group interviews. Rendón (1994a) defined nontraditional students more broadly to include first-generation, low socioeconomic status, and minority adult students. Some participants were the first in their families to attend college, many worked to support their families, and others had returned to college after a significant period of time. Findings in this study indicated student persistence increases when institutions helped them negotiate the transition to college. Creating in-class validating communities, providing one-on-one feedback, scaffolding instruction, engaging students through collaborative learning, believing that all students can learn, and using a culturally relevant curriculum facilitates transitions to college. The research also underscored the importance of fostering a positive class environment and building an institutional climate that connects the academic and social aspects of students' college experience. The research indicated that students are more likely to persevere when institutions work to create an in-class and campus environment that personalizes instruction and support by reconfiguring what, how, and for whom they develop educational systems.

Conclusion

Though some studies addressed adult secondary transitions to college, few studies explored how institutional practices, policies, and procedures in adult education programs facilitated student advancement and attainment. Furthermore, most studies exploring adult students' transition to college focused on situational and dispositional barriers. Also, most research on student transitions to college focused on students who had delayed enrollment or had stopped out of college. There is little research or understanding of adult secondary students in K–12 adult education programs and their trajectory to community college. My study aimed to

address these gaps in the existing literature, and to expand our understanding of ASLs transitioning to community college and the impact of institutional practices, policies, and agents in students' movement to higher education.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

A growing number of adult learners are enrolling in higher education. Nontraditional adult students have multiple commitments, adult responsibilities, and barriers associated with networks and information that may lead to students stopping out or pausing their pursuit of further education. Rendón's (1994) validation theory, Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of community cultural wealth, and Stanton-Salazar's (2010) social capital framework guide this research. Combined, these perspectives serve as theoretical frames to examine the experiences of ASLs preparing to transition from an adult education program to a community college. Moreover, these frameworks challenge deficit ideologies that have permeated educational policies, systems, and practices by providing a lens with which to consider the intersectional identities of student learning. These theories also invite institutions and institutional agents to take initiative in responding to learners' needs.

Validation Theory

Validation theory is grounded on the idea that "validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994b, p. 44). In her study, Rendón proposed a student learning and growth model to better understand underserved students, improve instruction and learning, understand students' development in educational institutions, and identify student success strategies (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). This research study centered on the lived experiences of college-bound adult high school diploma students who had stopped out of mainstream high school and had enrolled in adult school to continue their education and transition to college. Validation theory underscores the need for institutional actors to shift and respond to students by engaging in the validation of students and their diverse needs.

Moreover, institutional actors must recognize that students learn and engage in institutional life in diverse ways and have the capacity to be full members of the academic and social community.

Rendón (1994a) stated that nontraditional students have the capacity to be full members of the academic community. However, students who come to the academy with self-doubts often are expected to fail. Participants in Rendón's (1994a) study expressed they had self-doubt and felt unprepared for the college experience. They also expressed they felt invisible or that faculty did not want to engage with them. Still, students who were involved in the academic experiences appeared to be more excited about learning. Validating students' cultural diversity transforms and uplifts students to become involved in the academic community. Rendón (1994a) proposed a student learning and growth model that includes orienting faculty and staff to the needs and strengths of culturally diverse student populations, training faculty to validate students, and fostering a validating classroom. Faculty, administrators, and counselors can transform vulnerable students into powerful learners excited to learn, engage, and attend college.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth also informs this study. Yosso challenges the assumption that students of color come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies. Students come with aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Yosso's research shifts the lens away from a deficit perspective of communities of color and focuses approaches on learning from these communities' cultural assets and wealth, underscoring the need for commitment in developing schools to acknowledge the multiple strengths of communities of color to serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice. To better support nontraditional students in their academic trajectory, educational leaders must reflect and shift policies and practices and restructure

institutions around knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks possessed and utilized by people of color. To address inequities and disparities among underserved students, institutions and institutional actors must understand nontraditional students' experiences. Validating students' experiences and diverse cultural wealth can transform and empower students to learn, engage, and access a positive learning experience.

Yosso (2005) builds from critical race theory and introduces the concept of community cultural wealth and challenges the assumption that students of color come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies. Students come with aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Students bring with them from homes and communities into the classroom. Yosso speaks to the need for commitment in developing schools that acknowledge the multiple strengths of communities of color to serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice. There is a need to restructure social institutions around knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks possessed and utilized by people of color. Yosso's research shifts the lens away from a deficit perspective of communities of color and focuses approaches on learning from these communities' cultural assets and wealth.

Social Capital Framework

Stanton-Salazar's (2010) social capital framework is grounded on the concepts of institutional support, institutional agents, social capital, and empowerment. This theory draws from empowerment theory. Nonfamily adult agents in social development, socialization, formal and informal education, and social mobility of adolescents have social access. These connections allow institutional agents to provide support to students in their educational trajectory. This framework provides insight into how minority youth manage participation in different environments, develop ways to overcome difficulties, and interact with institutional agents. Furthermore, this theory invites institutional agents to reflect on the institutional support provided and its impact on students.

Though the frameworks considered for this study center on either youth or students enrolled in college, the issues these theories address directly align with experiences, issues of equity and social justice, and assumptions adult education students encounter in adult education programs. To better support adult secondary students in their academic trajectory, adult education programs must reflect and shift policies and practices to align with students' experiences, responsibilities, capital, and attributes. Institutional commitment and faculty, counselors, and staff who understand students' experiences and needs are essential to create an environment that supports all students. Validating students' experiences and diverse cultural wealth can transform and empower students to learn, engage, and access a positive learning experience. These theories will provide the framework in which this study will seek to understand how institutional agents validate students' experiences and capital and cultural wealth to empower students to persist and move forward in their educational trajectory. These frames will inform how students experience their trajectory from adult education programs to community college.

CHAPTER 4: METHODS

Research Design

This study aimed to understand how college-bound ASLs experienced the institutional practices and policies implemented by adult education programs as they prepared to transition to college. This study used a qualitative approach consisting of one focus group and individual semistructured interviews to come to a deeper understanding of how ASLs experienced K–12 adult education and how this educational system prepared them to advance in their education trajectory. The two sites selected for this study employed at least one full-time transition navigator (TN) trained to support college-bound secondary learners. Participants represented adult education institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2010) and college-bound ASLs to offer perspectives on how adult education programs interact and develop programs and support services for ASLs. Concepts of institutional agency, cultural capital, empowerment, and validation guided the analysis of the emerging themes of this study. This chapter provides an overview of the research setting, participants, data collection, data analysis, positionality, and limitations.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. In which ways do adult education programs prepare, facilitate access, and provide support to community college-bound ASLs in the Sacramento region?
2. What do community college-bound ASLs experience while preparing to transition to community college?

Research Setting

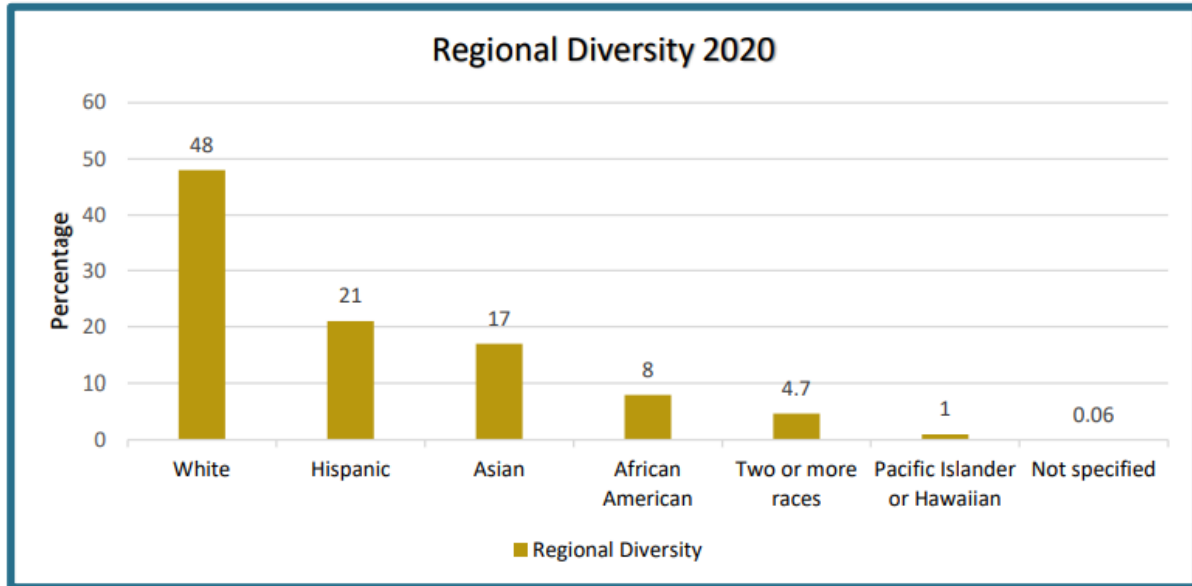
The study focused on two adult education schools in the Sacramento region. Both adult education schools are overseen by the California Department of Education and are members of a California adult education consortium. The two selected programs have worked together to

align their intake process and transition services. Each program employs at least one full-time TN specifically trained to support college-bound secondary learners.

The consortium covers metropolitan cities and rural communities with diverse needs, encompassing four counties: Amador, El Dorado, Sacramento, and Yolo, in Northern California. The consortium works together to provide education and workforce services to adult members of these communities and includes ten school districts, four County Offices of Education, and four community colleges to provide education and workforce services to adult members of these communities. In 2020, 30% of individuals served by the Capital Adult Education Regional Consortium (CAERC) identified as White, 30% as Hispanic or Latino, 22% as Asian, 11% as African American, and 6% as two or more races (CAERC Three-Year Plan 2022–25). Data from the 2020 census identified the region’s racial and ethnic diversity as follows: 48% White, 21% Hispanic or Latino, 17% Asian, 8% African American, 4.7% two or more races. According to the CAEP, for 47.3% of Hispanics or Latinos, 27.9% of White, 13.4 % of Asians, and 7.2% of African Americans within the surrounding community, income was near poverty or less. More than half of the student population are 20 through 39 years old, 18% are 40 through 49, and 15% are 50 years and older. In 2020, six out of 10 adult education students identified as female. Adult education agencies serve adults in the region who want to develop their skills and further their education, yet for 2019–2020 only 11% of adult education students in the Sacramento region transitioned to postsecondary education (California Community Colleges, n.d.).

Figure 1

Capital Adult Education Regional Consortium Regional Diversity, 2020

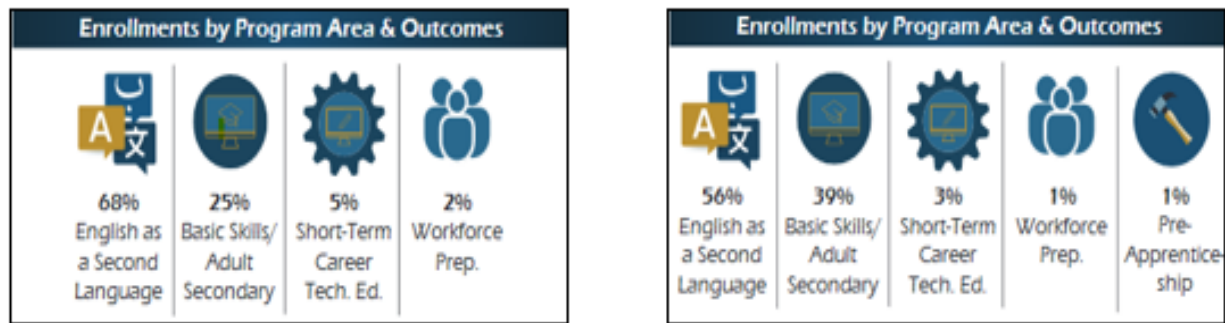


Note. From *Capital Adult Education Regional Consortium Three-Year Plan 2022–25, 2022* (<https://caerc.org/pdf/2022/CAERC%202022-25%20Plan%20Final.pdf>).

The demographics of the two selected programs differ somewhat from the overall consortium, which spans both rural and urban areas across the region. The two programs examined in this study are both located in urban settings and serve student populations with slightly different demographic compositions compared to the full consortium. In 2021–22 the first adult education program served 1,517 students. Sixty-eight percent of those students enrolled in English as a second language, 25% in basic skills/adult secondary, 5% in short-term technical education, and 2% in workforce preparation programs. Women represented three-quarters of all students, and 79% were non-native speakers. The second adult education program served 1,671 students. Fifty-six percent of those students enrolled in English as a second language, 39% in basic skills/adult secondary, 3% in short-term technical education, and 2% in workforce/preapprenticeship preparation programs. Women represented two-thirds of all students, and 68% of enrolled students were non-native speakers.

Figure 2

Enrollment by Program Area and Outcomes, Adult Education Programs 1 and 2



Note. The left panel shows enrollment outcomes for program 1 and the right panel shows enrollment outcomes for program 2. Tech. Ed. = technical education; Prep. = preparation. From *CAERC Fact Sheets 2021–22*.

It is important to note that adult education programs' scope of educational services goes beyond providing educational opportunities to college-bound ASLs. These programs delivered educational services to individuals seeking language, academic, and employment skills. They also provided adults with the knowledge and skills needed to participate in civic life and the workforce (Steenhausen, 2012). Their needs ranged from English language acquisition to earning a high school diploma or equivalency. As noted in Figure 2, adult education programs provided services to address this need and provided adults with opportunities to develop skills and training to move on to higher education or self-sustaining employment regardless of where they were in their educational trajectory (Steenhausen, 2012). By design, this study focused on college-bound ASLs who planned to transition to postsecondary education within a year; for that reason, this research explored only the experiences of adult learners who were earning high school diploma or equivalency and did not include those in other programs with different goals or those who intended to transition directly to the workforce.

Participants

The participants in this study were four TNs serving college-bound ASLs at two adult education programs in the Sacramento region and six college-bound ASLs enrolled in the same

agencies. Purposeful sampling was utilized to identify and select participants who had experienced the phenomena being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were purposefully selected to represent adult education TNs and college-bound ASLs to gain insight from the specific target populations' perspectives of their experience in adult education programs and their role in preparing ASLs to transition to community college. Participating TNs were identified through the consortium TN network. Participating ASLs were identified through the adult secondary education programs within the agencies participating in the study and TNs who knew of college-bound ASLs intending to transition to college within a school year. Through this approach, participants were invited and provided information about the study.

TN Participants

Four TNs participated in this study. In describing their role, TNs stated that they assisted students with enrollment, goal setting, and career planning. They also helped students transition to college, training, and employment opportunities. Four TNs from the focal adult education programs were also selected to participate in a focus group interview to discuss their thoughts, observations, and experiences in relation to their role as TNs assisting college-bound high school diploma students transition to community college. The information about the participants presented in this section came directly from the focus group interview.

The first TN first came in contact with adult education programs as an immigrant with a bachelor's degree looking to expand her English language vocabulary and knowledge. She had served as a medical interpreter and enrolled in a medical terminology course. She then served as a bilingual family educator and later became a TN. She currently works with second language learners and ASLs. She was proud to share her story with other immigrants and students. She was inspired to serve as a TN because she knew firsthand the challenges immigrants like herself encounter when attempting to access educational opportunities and

employment. She felt she could contribute to the adult education program she serves by helping staff and teachers better understand adult education students' perspectives. She believed that being in adult education programs is about continuous learning for both students and institutional agents.

The second TN served ASLs at her agency and dedicated time to community outreach. She felt a strong connection to adult education programs, as her grandmother had graduated from the adult education program she served. She empathized with students because she knew from experience how it felt when it took a long time to graduate. She had worked for the criminal justice system but took a sabbatical to focus on her well-being and family. She returned to the workforce as a paraeducator, as a proctor, and later as a TN. She stated that adult education programs do more than provide education; they restore self-esteem and confidence.

The third TN completed her secondary education at an adult education school and then transitioned to college. Before joining adult education, she served as a data analyst. She had always been of service to others and worked in special education programs. She served English language learners, ASLs, and career technical education students.

The fourth TN served in special education programs prior to their transition to adult education. She felt the challenges she encountered in her educational journey and her personal experiences helped her relate to students. She strongly believed ASLs want to be in school and are ready to learn. She served ASLs and career technical education students.

ASL Participants

ASLs participating in this study included six college-bound students enrolled in adult education programs who were close to attaining or had attained their high school diploma or equivalency within the school year; they were enthusiastic and eager to participate in this study, as they hoped that by sharing their stories, they could help other ASLs complete their secondary

education and advance to postsecondary opportunities. Although their experiences were unique to their circumstances, they all had high educational aspirations and exhibited agency over their education trajectory by balancing life priorities such as family and work responsibilities; they drew from their family, community, and various agents as they navigated their academic journey. This section provides a snapshot of each ASL's background and the motivation behind their educational trajectory.

The first ASL, who identified as a Hispanic female in her 40s, had returned to school after raising her children. She aimed to be part of the solution to challenges in her community. She served as a district English Learners Advisory Committee chair and has assisted her community through work with the Sacramento Area Congregations Together. She found that returning to school did more than help her develop the academic skills she needed to attain her GED. Her participation in the adult education program also helped her *discover* things about herself. While enrolled, she drew inspiration from her teacher and her student peers. She had a sense of humor and encouraged participants in her program by sharing her academic journey.

The second ASL identified as a 19-year-old male from Afghanistan. He had transferred to two different high schools before moving to California. He tried enrolling in a district high school when he arrived in California but was told they had no record of him and to go to an adult education program. He appreciated the adult education program because it allowed him to attain a high school diploma. He wanted to get his high school diploma and enroll in college. His goal was to develop skills to transition out of his current job and get into a field that would help him earn a living wage and allow him to help others.

The third ASL identified as a Hispanic female, mother of three, in her 30s. She cared for her family, attended school, and worked a flexible schedule. She wanted to return to school for her children and become the first person in her family to be a high school graduate. She loved her experience in the adult education program and enjoyed the curriculum and the class format.

She appreciated her teacher, her TN, and the support services offered by the school. She believed that there should be better advertisements for the adult education program, and that students should share their experiences, so others could know that there are educational opportunities for all.

The fourth ASL identified as a Hispanic female in her early 40s with a four-year-old daughter. She had stopped out of high school in the 10th grade because she did not have the support needed for her learning difference. She later enrolled in college to develop her reading and writing skills but stopped when she got her dream job. She decided to return and get her high school diploma when she had her daughter because she wanted to be a good role model for her. She felt her adult education program had a nice setup to help students. She appreciated how the adult education program helped her enroll in a college course while working on her high school diploma. She thought adults wanting to continue their education would benefit from the school sharing their services, perhaps through a community fair. She thought sharing her story could be a form of advocacy and motivate people.

The fifth ASL was in her 30s and identified as a Hispanic female. She was a working mom who had stopped out of high school to take care of her baby. She came to adult education because she had time to return to school after a work injury, and she had always wanted to get her high school diploma or GED. She also saw this as an opportunity to transition to college and get a degree that could allow her to work remotely or in an office setting. She thought adult education programs could help students transition to college by assisting learners by providing information about navigating college and different careers.

The sixth ASL was in his 30s and identified as an African American male. He had enrolled in his adult education program because he knew it was what he needed to do to get his high school diploma. He was not able to graduate when he was first enrolled in high school because he had not realized he was a few credits short of the graduation requirements. He said adult education programs helped those interested in furthering their education to accomplish

goals. He enjoyed helping others and felt motivated by his wife and baby boy. He thought everything his adult education program was doing was valuable to students. He recommended adding more counselors and teachers like the ones they had to the staff. He hoped that by sharing his story, he would help others like him.

The ASL participants in this study were college-bound learners working to move forward in their educational journey. They demonstrated a strong sense of community and advocacy and shared their stories in support of the adult learner community.

Data Collection

The following section outlines the data collection process. Data were collected through a TN focus group and six individual semistructured ASL interviews. First, this section describes the data collection process for the data generated by the focus group. I follow with a description of the data collection process for the data generated by the six individual ASL interviews. Finally, I transition to a section detailing the data analysis.

To address Research Question 1, data were collected via a focus group interview. Focus groups are interviews that explicitly use group interaction to capitalize on communication between study participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), allowing researchers to collect data from several people simultaneously (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The focus group questions covered themes of practice and program approaches evident in the literature and those experienced by students in adult education settings while preparing to transition to community college. The questions for this focus group followed a semistructured format to encourage participants to share experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This protocol was designed to obtain data that would increase understanding of how institutional agents support college-bound students and allowed participants to communicate their perceptions of how adult education programs promote student movement to community college.

The focus group interview protocol contained 10 questions. The first two questions served as warm-up questions. The remaining eight questions provided insight into the participants' perspectives and experiences as they related to the study (see Appendix A). The focus group was conducted once the official institutional review board approval was granted.

Participants received a request for voluntary participation and a consent document describing the study, the interview process, and the interview questions. Before the focus group interview was initiated, participants were reminded that their responses would be recorded, confidential, and used exclusively for this study. Field notes were taken for follow-up questions, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed via a transcription service. The transcripts served as a source for coded data. Within 1 week of each interview, participants received an email thanking them for their participation. The email included the transcript of their interview for them to check for accuracy, and they were invited to share additional thoughts and perspectives. Analytic memos were written after each interview to document the interview process, reflections, details, and observations. This process encourages researchers to think critically about interview experiences and patterns in coding and supports a process that generates codes and categories (Saldaña, 2021). The focus group interview was conducted in person at a time and location that was convenient for the participants in the focus group. Focus group Interviews were transferred to ATLAS.ti software system after each interview session to be analyzed. Data were stored in a password-protected file.

The data collection process for the ASL interviews was guided by Research Question 2: What do community college-bound ASLs experience while preparing to transition to community college?

To address Research Question 2, data were collected via individual interviews with ASLs preparing to transition to community college. The literature reviewed, concepts of validation theory and the community cultural wealth framework and supports participants might

experience in adult education within their trajectory to higher education informed the development of the interview questions. Data were collected via in-depth semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews are a valuable qualitative research tool that allows flexibility to explore the phenomena explored in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This format encouraged participants to share experiences, providing flexibility during the interview process to develop a conversational tone and the opportunity for spontaneous questions that responded to the interviewees' perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews were conducted via Zoom for students' convenience. The interview protocol contained 10 questions. The first two questions served as warm-up questions. The warm-up questions aimed to ease participants into the interview process and to prepare them to comfortably and freely engage with and naturally respond to the remaining questions in the interview protocol. (See Appendix B). The following questions focused on student validation (Rendón, 1994x), institutional agency and support (Stanton-Salazar, 2010), and ASL cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). These questions provided insight into the participants' perspectives and experiences as they related to the study (see Appendix B). The interviews were conducted once the official institutional review board approval was granted by [UC Davis IRB Administration \(IRB #1923602-1\)](#).

Participants received a request for voluntary participation and a consent document with a description of the study, the interview process, and interview questions. Before the one-on-one interviews began, participants were reminded that the interview would be recorded and that their responses were confidential and only for this study. Notes were taken for follow-up questions, and the interviews were recorded via Zoom. Analytic memos were written after each interview to document the interview process, reflections, details, and observations. As described above, analytic memos (Saldaña, 2021) were written after each interview to document the interview process, reflections, details, and observations. The transcripts served as a source for coded data. Interviews were transferred to the ATLAS.ti software system after each interview

session to be analyzed. Data were stored in a password-protected file. Within one week of each interview, participants received a thank-you email that included the transcript of their interview for them to check for accuracy and an invitation to share additional thoughts and perspectives.

Data Analysis

This study used qualitative methodology to analyze focus group and one-on-one student interview transcripts, field notes documenting observations during interviews, and analytic memos capturing reflections and initial thoughts of the data collected and the process. Data analysis consisted of a cycling process of reviewing, organizing, analyzing, and reflecting on data with various rounds of coding to arrive at the four emerging themes presented below.

I engaged in open coding to break down qualitative data into parts to analyze and compare similarities and differences among the experiences and perspectives of ASLs and TNs offered in the individual and focus group interviews, respectively (Saldaña, 2021). Examples of themes that emerged through open coding include motivation, education, academic support, teacher interactions, advocacy, college information, and college knowledge. The following quote illustrates an example of data coded as teacher interactions:

[My teacher] knows when we get to class. She's always [asking] what did you work on this week? What are your goals for this coming week ...? Before class ended, she would always go around and see what we were working on.

For the second coding cycle, I engaged in axial coding to capture and combine the meanings conveyed by participants in the study via their transcribed and open-coded individual and focus group interviews into axial codes. I used the research questions to identify what adult education programs do to support college-bound ASLs and how these actions impact movement to college in this cycle of coding and grouped emerging themes from the open coding process into categories such as institutional support, institutional agents, student experiences and perspectives, and ASLs' strengths and challenges. For example, I collapsed the open codes teacher interaction and academic support into a new axial code, institutional

support. Axial coding helped transition from the initial coding process to the theoretical coding process (Saldaña, 2021).

I also engaged in theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2021) to understand the impact of adult education practices and policies on ASLs' advancement toward community college. Theoretical coding helped capture ASLs' experience as they prepared to transition to community college while enrolled in an adult education program. Theoretical coding helped extract the meaning of participants' discourse and in what conditions these actions occurred (Saldaña, 2021). Theoretical coding also helped integrate and synthesize the categories derived from coding. This coding process was informed by concepts of institutional support, institutional agency, student cultural and social capital, empowerment, validation, and navigational capital. Rendón's (1994b) theory of validation guided the examination of whether and how institutional agents validate ASLs' attributes, cultural capital, and experiences as they move forward in their pursuit of a community college education. Stanton-Salazar's (2010) concepts of institutional support, institutional agents, and empowerment provided insight into how institutional agents impact ASLs' movement to postsecondary education. Examples of the codes that emerged include ASL educational aspiration and agency, institutional agents, family, and community as a source of empowerment, ASL self-advocacy and resistance, and access to college information and navigational capital. These concepts guided the data analysis and provided insight into how adult education programs empower, prepare, and facilitate advancement to community college.

The last coding cycle consisted of process coding to establish the four emergent themes of (1) ASLs' agency over their educational experience, (2) teachers' support and student empowerment, (3) the impact of community and peers, and (4) preparing for community college. Process coding is a valuable technique for unpacking experiences, interactions, and phenomena that might carry different meanings for different participants (e.g., support accessing education) described in qualitative data. (Saldaña, 2021). Process coding allows us

to note observable and conceptual actions in the data, allowing the extraction of interactions and helping explore interactions and responses as they relate to the themes that drove the study (Saldaña, 2021). These themes captured how ASLs navigate their educational trajectory in adult education programs and the impact of interactions, practices, and policies within these agencies on their preparation for movement to college.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

Various measures were taken to ensure the reliability, trustworthiness, and validity of this study. Participant feedback is the most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of perspectives and responses. It is also a way of identifying personal biases and misunderstanding of any observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An audit trail documenting the dates, times, settings, and durations of the focus group and one-on-one interviews provided a detailed account of the methods and the procedures conducted in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Audio recordings and transcriptions were stored and protected by a password in a secure e-file.

Positionality

I have had the privilege of serving adult education programs for over 23 years. During this time, I have served as an administrator, academic advisor/transition specialist, resource teacher, and classroom teacher of English as a second language, adult basic education, high school, and high school equivalency. In my current role as the director of the CAERC, I am committed to the development of programs that promote learning, equity, and achievement for all students and look forward to working with programs to support adult learners in the capital region.

My identity and life experiences as a first-generation daughter of Mexican immigrants, my work with immigrants and underserved groups, and my professional trajectory as an

educator and advocate for adult learners have allowed me to witness structures, policies, and systems designed for adult learners from the perspective of those in positions of power and privilege often perpetuating agendas, priorities, and values of the dominant majority. These observations influence the way I approach research and analyze and interpret data. Through my study, I sought to uplift adult learners and their voices to communicate and influence decision-making and practices in adult education.

While conducting my study, I provided oversight to the adult education programs in the CAERC. Though I work closely with adult education administration and TNs to develop, expand, and support adult learners' access to equitable educational opportunities, I do not supervise or evaluate the participants in my research. The existing relationship with the adult education administration provided access to student participation in my study.

Challenges

This study was not without its challenges. The broad range of responsibilities and influences ASLs encounter, including time commitment to their studies, complicated their ability to participate in this study. Sharing the purpose of the study, outlining participant expectations, and scheduling interviews at a time that was convenient for the participant mitigated complications. There were also challenges with two TNs' family commitments and unforeseen events that made it difficult for them to participate on the original date the focus group interview was scheduled. To respond to this challenge, the focus group interview was rescheduled to a different day and time to accommodate participants in this group. The participants were committed to providing their voices to this area of research, and that ultimately helped overcome the challenges to ensure ASLs and TNs could advocate for the program that was helping them reach their goals.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter summarizes key findings and analyses discussed within the context of the research questions posed in this study and the theoretical framework guiding this research. The study used a focus group and one-on-one semistructured interviews with four TNs and six ASLs to (1) understand how adult education programs impact ASLs and (2) understand how ASLs experience preparing for their trajectory from adult programs to community college through two research questions:

1. In which ways do adult education programs prepare, facilitate access, and provide support services to college-bound ASLs in the Sacramento region?
2. What do community college-bound ASLs experience while preparing to transition to community college?

This chapter presents the findings through four themes based on TN and student responses.

Summary of Key Findings

The findings presented in this chapter discuss how ASLs experience adult education programs while they prepare for further education and how these programs support college-bound adult learners as they prepare to transition to community college. ASLs participating in this study had to interrupt their education to balance family, employment, personal responsibilities, and situational challenges. They valued education and enrolled in an adult education program to complete their secondary education and transition to community college. ASLs were driven to enroll in community college for diverse reasons, including preparing for better employment, developing skills to support their community and families, inspiring and motivating their children and peers, and personal fulfillment. The findings in this study underscore the assets ASLs bring and the importance of validation, relationships, and tailored support in promoting educational access and success. The following four themes emerged through the analysis of data:

ASLs' Agency Over Their Educational Experience

ASLs bring with them considerable resources when moving forward in their education. They have high educational aspirations and exhibit agency over their educational trajectory. They are empowered by their family, communities, and peers and draw from their experiences, knowledge, and interactions to navigate and access educational spaces and respond to life circumstances and the limitations of the institutions they interact with.

Teachers Supporting and Empowering Students in Their Academic Journey

The ASL participants in this study identified various actions teachers took to help them acquire confidence in their abilities to learn, persist, and achieve their academic goals. Students described how teachers were approachable and empathetic. They also articulated how teachers structured learning experiences that suited their unique learning styles and abilities. Moreover, they expressed how instrumental this was for them as they moved forward in their educational journey.

The Power of Community and Peer Support

Community and peer connections had a profound impact on ASLs' experiences in adult education programs. These connections helped them tackle self-doubt, gain strength, and persist in reaching their academic goals. They also served to empower and reassure ASLs that they were deserving of educational opportunities and advancement.

Preparing for Community College

ASLs in this study attended adult education to access educational opportunities and prepare for their transition to college. TNs were the primary sources of college information and support. Community college collaborations with adult education programs also provided assistance to college-bound ASLs. ASLs valued these interactions, and also shared strategies,

ideas, and approaches that could further promote and prepare ASLs for a successful transition to college.

Themes Emerging in the Data

An analysis of the data revealed four emerging themes to describe how community college-bound ASLs experienced adult education as they prepared to transition to college. The first theme, ASLs' agency over their educational experience, describes ASLs' aspirations, the role of family support, and ASLs' resistance and self-advocacy. The second theme outlines teachers supporting and empowering ASLs and describes how instructors interacted with ASLs and validated their unique experiences. The third theme, the power of community and peer support, speaks to how peers supported and empowered each other to move forward with their education goals. Finally, the fourth theme, preparing for college, offers students' perspectives on how they received college information and resources, and provides insight into what ASLs found would enhance how they acquire and develop college knowledge and navigational skills.

Theme 1: ASLs' Agency Over Their Educational Experience

Participating ASLs had high educational aspirations. They exhibited agency over their educational experience and balanced life priorities. They strategized and looked for opportunities to continue their education.

Aspiration

ASLs are inspired and motivated to return to their education for many reasons. When discussing how, when, and why they decided to return to school and continue to community college, ASLs expressed the desire to be present for their families and communities. They aspired to be strong role models, wanted better jobs to provide for their families, and had goals they were determined to accomplish. They often had to balance multiple family, student, and

work responsibilities that complicated their participation in an educational program and strategized on the best way to balance their commitments and aspirations.

ASLs were greatly influenced by their families and how their choice to return to school affected those they cared for. This was evident when an ASL talked about how she had always wanted to get her high school diploma. She described how she put her education on hold and prioritized taking care of her baby daughter. She returned to school when her daughter was older, she said:

When my daughter was older, that's when I started going [to adult education classes], but like I said, I left it halfway. And then I said, you know, I have to accomplish this. I loved it. And I don't start things and do not finish them. So, I wasn't happy that I had left it, you know, just halfway. So, I got motivated to go back and finish it. I've always wanted to get my GED or my high school diploma. I wasn't able to get it when I was younger because I got pregnant young, and in a Hispanic household, if you have a baby, you got to work you know. You have got to provide for your child. So, I wasn't able to do anything for a couple of years because my child was small. So, you know it's just like I had my hands full.

This student's words illustrate the impact and influence ASL's family responsibilities and priorities had on their choice to return to school. This was evident when this ASL talked about how she had always wanted to get her high school diploma, and though she put her education on hold and prioritized taking care of her baby daughter, she returned to school when her daughter was older.

ASL were also empowered by family and aspired to be good role models for their families. An ASL mother of three said she was motivated by her children to be the first person in her family to get a high school diploma. She wanted to model this attainment for her children and expressed how important this was to her:

My kids are my motivation. I want to be a role model for them. I know that they look up to me. So, I want to make sure that I'm getting to where I want them to be because they're in school right now... I would be the first one in my family to become a high school graduate. It has always been a dream. I was once enrolled in GED. I never finished it. I was enrolled in high school and then that didn't happen. So, I keep coming back to it, and then this time I want to be able to get to the finish line.

This ASL thought of her educational success as an opportunity to show her family that an education was something that was attainable, possible, and something they deserved to access. She was driven by the desire to inspire her family.

In addition to balancing family responsibilities, this ASL prioritized employment before returning to school. However, after a work-related injury, she strategized a way to prepare for a new career. She saw the time she got off work to recover from her injury as an opportunity to complete her GED and prepare for a job that would be more suited to her health situation. She explained this by saying:

I kind of left it [school]. I did only two of the GED tests and then I kind of gave up during the middle. So, I just went about my days, I guess, and then, I injured my knee, I am a home delivery person, so ... I couldn't drive anymore. I had to take some time off from work due to my injury in my knee, I wasn't able to walk for a while, so once I started walking, I was getting bored being at home, so I started thinking what I can do to take advantage of the time that I was off. I remembered that I left my GED halfway. So, I went again and finished... I love driving, but because of the injuring on my knee, sometimes it bothers me. So, I would like to get another kind of degree, or you know get a degree in something that I could maybe work remotely.

This exemplifies how ASLs draw agency from situations often considered challenges. This ASL assessed her situation and saw her time off as an opportunity to pivot and focus on developing her skills to find new employment opportunities that would align with what she needed and wanted in life. She embraced this opportunity to plan and work towards a better future.

An ASL described the challenges he encountered when trying to understand education and employment options in a country that was new to him. He talked about how he wanted to attain his high school diploma and go to college to access better job opportunities and be a role model for his community:

Now, I'm just going to work at a restaurant. I don't make good money... I just want to be an example to somebody. I want to go to college... Then you can get a good job. Then you can find good money, you know. Then you become a good person for yourself too. You can start your main job. And you can help when you start your job. You can help somebody else too.

ASL participants also voiced their aspirations and how serving others was important to them. For example, an ASL said, “I realize I have to do something for myself.” She expanded by saying, “I have always had the mentality to serve and educate my community.” She was driven by her desire to contribute and give back to those around her. Being part of a network of individuals who supported and learned from each other moved her. She explained how this led her to embrace leadership opportunities; she wanted to go to college “to get educated to serve better, to be able to help others.” She acknowledged, “I cannot do that without preparing myself,” and explained,

I know I am not going to be able to change the world, but I just want to give whatever I can to improve; maybe we cannot see it, but maybe if we go and educate ourselves a little, maybe the next generation is going to be better.

When talking about personal aspirations, one student shared, “I know I can go to college, and I know I can get a degree, and I don’t need a high school diploma. I understand that but it’s just something I want to take off my list.” She later described adding to her goal after being in class: “I thought I would just do the high school diploma, and that was it. But then I decided, I said, you know what? I have time to take it further.” This illustrates how ASLs came with clear goals in mind when they enrolled in adult education; once in a program and through their ASL community and institutional agents, they expanded their understanding of the opportunities they could access through education and could add to or modify their initial goal.

Family Support

For ASL learners, family is not only a source of inspiration and motivation; family is also a source of support and agency.

ASLs engaged in multigenerational and multidirectional learning. In this journey, everyone is a learner and a teacher. An ASL mother of a high school graduate and college student shared how her son helped her when she struggled with an assignment and how they both valued the interaction of each other’s efforts:

I'll ask my son and he's always there you know to help me you know. And he gets excited too, he likes me going to school and he likes that I succeeded in getting my GED, and that I'm going forward. That makes him happy. So, he's always happy to help me.

Family is also a source of navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). An ASL shared: "My son helps me because you know he does it every semester. He knows how to register. He knows how to do this and helps me with that." This illustrates how families engaged in multigenerational and bidirectional knowledge sharing in support of their education and family goals.

An ASL who had stopped out of high school because she did not get the support she needed for her learning difference said the following when talking about how she overcame challenges: "I've always been surrounded with family who aren't necessarily book smart, but they're savvy and they're quick learners. I've always been surrounded by people like that." Her words describe how ASLs draw from their familial and community capital to disrupt inequities in how they experience and access education.

ASLs' Resistance and Self-Advocacy as a Tool to Gain Navigational Capital

ASLs in this study described how they drew from their community, resources, and strengths to overcome challenges in their education.

Most ASLs experienced some doubts about their abilities to succeed; however, they persisted and took action to overcome their reservations. One student shared:

I enrolled and then they said you have to get an account with the GED website...I started reviewing the materials they have there....and I said, I'm not going to be able to do this. I had been out of school, I don't know for about 25 years, 20 or more 20, 28, I don't know. I just went to high school in Mexico. And I said, oh my gosh, why do I have to complicate my life you know? It's too much, too confusing. And I said, well, you enrolled. So, you have to keep going.

This is powerful because she pushed herself and overcame her self-doubts because she knew the benefits would outweigh the discomfort.

The majority of ASLs talked about how they used technology as a tool when they were challenged by their assignments. For example, an ASL talked about how she accessed technology when she did not understand something:

I feel like I'm the kind of person like, if I don't know something, I'll call on YouTube and see some kind of video. Tutorial or something. So, I don't just say, oh, well, I don't know how to do it. I try to see, you know, Google it, or I'll try to find out. And then like I said, I'll ask my son.

Other ASLs described how they strategize to make the best use of the resources and support to get the most benefits and outcomes for their efforts. For example, one ASL described how she strategized to get the academic support she needed and coenrolled in college to get math credits for her high school diploma at the same time she got general education college credits. She shared:

So, I decided to say, you know what? I can do this. And I am going to do this. And so, one of the classes that I needed, a few of the classes that I needed was math. So, I said, well, why don't I just go over to college?... Why don't I just do it there and knock out a general education [class] and knock out my high school? ... that's where I'm enrolled in now...which is very doable.

She also talked about how she advocated for support with her learning difference and how this has helped her overcome the invalidation she felt earlier in her academic journey:

I had to make peace before I was ashamed of my disability. And now I just tell people straight up I'm dyslexic. So, I'm going to be behind. This is why it takes me longer to process things ... I have had so much trauma from that age from elementary to junior high to the little bit of high school I had. Because I was so far behind because I had teachers that made fun of me because I had students that made fun of me because I knew that I just wasn't getting it... when I signed up for the math class... I just told them straight up this is what happened to my life. This is why it's taken me so much longer and just having that owning that gave me the confidence to be like, hey, it's okay if I don't get it right off the bat. And it's okay for me to ask questions because they understand where I came from.

This ASL pushed forward, went beyond discomfort to access opportunities, and took pride in her authentic self. She embraced who she was and took advantage of opportunities to educate institutional agents on ASLs' strengths and characteristics. This is significant because it shows the importance of embracing ASLs' unique challenges and the value of open-minded

educators who provide validation and accommodation once informed of ASLs' skills and learning differences.

An ASL described how he transformed painful experiences into something valuable. He said: "Sadness can also motivate you. When someone thinks they're better than you and you feel like you have to prove yourself, that can be turned into a motivation." He elaborated, "I try to focus more on positive things or positive thoughts or whatever continues to motivate me, the more positive floods out the negative or the sadness you know. That's what I am mostly driven by."

An ASL described how ASLs tap into their experiences and cultural capital wealth to overcome challenges, engage in self-reflection, reassess their goals, and consider new possibilities and opportunities:

I use my life experience. I use what I am going through right now. What I am learning about myself right now, I am discovering. I am getting to know myself. And I am discovering the things that I really want in my life.

Theme 2: Teachers Supporting and Empowering ASLs

ASLs in this study described how their teachers fostered an environment conducive to learning and how their teachers helped them acquire confidence in their abilities to learn, persist, and achieve their academic goals.

Believing in ASLs

All ASLs talked about validating experiences with their teachers. When talking about first enrolling in adult education, a learner described how she initially felt overwhelmed when she enrolled in the class and how things changed on her first day of class when her teacher helped her understand that she was capable of doing her schoolwork and empowered her to develop a study plan for her:

I said I'm not going to be able to do this... Then I went to my first class... And then after the class I stayed with the teacher and I said, I don't know. This is just very confusing. And then she explained to me that I can do it the way that I feel comfortable with. At my own pace and my own time... She really made me feel like she took into consideration what I said. You know? Not like saying a student that is bugging me. No. It's just like whenever I was struggling with something, she was there. When I couldn't understand something, she looked for some resources for me. So, I did feel very welcome, very appreciated.

This statement speaks to the profound impact educators can have by taking the time to listen, encourage, and accommodate students struggling to find their footing educationally. It also testifies to how gestures of empathy and flexibility affirm a sense of belonging. Another ASL said, "Just knowing that somebody understands where I'm coming from and understands that life throws you curveballs and that you're able to work through those and push on, just having somebody that believes in you is huge." This ASL's words emphasize the power of human connection through validating experiences, demonstrating understanding, and instilling a sense of confidence.

Validating Class Structure, Strategies, and Resources

When talking about how teachers structured learning and support for students, one ASL described how her teacher acknowledged them when they are in class and makes them active participants in the learning process:

She knows when we get to class, she's always [asking] what did you work on this week? What are your goals for this coming week, you know? Before class ended, she would always go around and see what we were working on.

She also talked about how her teacher actively checked for understanding and reinforced what they were studying. After describing her teacher's actions, she paused and said, "I think my teacher, you know, was a really good help." Several ASLs in this study described how teachers supported their individual academic needs. One student said about her teachers:

They would be there in case I had any questions if I had trouble with any of the material. ... if I was not getting it. They would give me YouTube videos where I could go and see other people giving classes on whatever I was having trouble with. So that helped me a lot and they have a lot of books like in the classroom. Not just GED, but other kinds of books that you can go and read or take quizzes, so that helps you.

A student echoed this sentiment and expressed the joy she felt by being able to accomplish a milestone in her educational trajectory:

When I couldn't understand something, she looked for some resources for me. So, I did feel very welcome and very appreciated. And I feel... just let me tell you how good I feel that I finished my GED like three weeks ago and I still go to class.

Another student also talked about how she valued how approachable and accessible her teacher was: "Them just being there, and just having that accessibility like to be able to contact my teacher, email or you know the text, if I need anything, I think that helped me a lot, just to have somebody there."

Supporting ASLs' Aspirations

When talking about how ASLs move forward in their education, an ASL shared how influential her teacher's words and encouragement were for her to stay on track:

She inspired me to keep going, and I think I kept going because of that. It feels good to have somebody encouraging you. I didn't think I needed that as an adult, you know. I thought that was for kids. You don't need to be like, oh, good job. But it feels good. And it makes me keep going and try to do better.

One ASL said the following to illustrate how impactful her teacher's efforts to connect, support, and uplift students were, and how they were conducive to a positive learning experience:

[She always asked] What did you work on this week? What are your goals for this coming week? Before class ended, she would always go around and see what we were working on. If we needed help and then she would kind of reinforce whatever we were studying. So, I think my teacher was a really good help.

This was important to this ASL because it helped students find meaning in their academic work. She described how she did not have the same kind of personal and meaningful experience the first time she enrolled in an adult education program. She said this about her previous experience:

I think that's why when the class first started, there were so many students. And then at the end of the class, it was probably only like 8 of us left you know... So, I feel like a lot of us lost that motivation just because we're adults and we're busy and we have

responsibilities and things. And if we don't feel like, you know, we're getting something, we just kind of give up, you know, and just go about our day and just forget about it.

So, I feel like that is important. That your teachers are there with you, helping you, motivating you.

ASLs also valued teacher feedback and communication. One ASL talked about how she felt supported when her teacher responded to an email she wrote asking questions about a homework assignment. She said, "He responded to me promptly. That means he has my back." The teacher's actions conveyed a genuine interest in assisting this student. Another student said that when her teacher checked on her, "it seems like... they care that you succeed. They care that you graduate." The teacher's sincere concern for the ASL appeared to help her become more confident that she would succeed.

Several ASL talked about the ways in which teachers helped them overcome frustrating academic situations. One ASL said: "She showed me how sometimes when you get frustrated, you just need to take a break and just kind of just you know do something else and then come back to it later and it makes a difference."

Another student described how her teacher created spaces for them to share their experiences and support and motivate each other. She also gave them access to resources that were meaningful to students: This student shared:

I wasn't understanding so I would get frustrated, but the Tuesday Zoom meetings really helped me. Because my teacher would motivate us. She gave us a lot of motivation to talk. Gave us things to read to keep us motivated. And that just helped me a lot because I didn't have that in 2016 when I was studying. So, things have really changed.

Another student shared the transformative effects of being validated by her teacher and peers: "I feel confident. I feel like I'm welcomed. I feel that if I fail that I'm not going to be judged, they just keep me going ... and that refuels me for the week and keeps me going."

Theme 3: The Power of Community and Peer Support

ASLs developed, nurtured, and valued their peers and their community of learning, and together they provided and attained social and emotional support that helped them achieve their

academic goals. Community and peer connections had a profound impact on ASLs and helped them tackle self-doubt, gain strength, and persist in reaching their academic goals.

Various ASLs talked about their class dynamics and peers. An ASL described how these interactions with each other were trusting, comfortable, and safe. She expressed how she appreciated the motivation and emotional support she got from her classmates by saying, “I feel like I’m welcomed. I feel that if I fail that I’m not going to be judged that they just keep me going ... that refuels me for the week and keeps me going.” Another ASL talked about the confidence she had gained in class:

I feel really, really, good around my classmates and my teacher ... I feel like I can talk, and I’m not going to be judged. Because I’ve always been a little shy. So, I feel like if I say something, they’re going to judge me, but not with this class.

Another ASL described the importance of her classmates sharing how they were doing. She said, “We would all say what we were working on or trying to do. I think that all helps.” This sentiment was shared by another ASL who described how her peers would uplift each other and provide comfort when they took tests. She said this about her classmates:

Every time somebody is going to go take a test, we try to motivate each other and if they pass, we celebrate it and if they didn’t pass, well you know we would tell them you know it’s okay, you know, just keep going you know. Don’t give up. I think it’s just being there in a group setting and just being there for each other, you know motivating each other really helped.

A student echoed this statement: “Seeing other students succeed, like when they pass their test, I’m like, I have to get there.”

Theme 4: The Unknowns and How ASLs Prepare for Community College

ASLs in this study attended adult education to access educational opportunities and prepare for their transition to college. ASLs relied on TNs as the primary sources of college information and support to navigate the college registration and enrollment process, financial aid, and other college services. Community college collaborations with adult education

programs were also a key source of support reported by the participants in this study. ASLs valued the interactions and the support provided by adult education programs and expressed great appreciation for the empowering agents they had in their teachers and TNs. When asked what else adult education programs and institutional agents could do to support the ASL movement to community college, they offered ideas, approaches, and strategies they felt could further enhance the support provided. TNs also talked about the challenges encountered in their role and offered suggestions to overcome them and provide more efficient and equitable services to ASLs.

TNs as Institutional Agents

TNs played a significant role in helping ASLs build on their prior knowledge and life experiences. In addition to providing ASLs with college information and support in navigating the community college system, they were a source of emotional support and instrumental in the transmission of navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). TNs reassured ASLs that they were deserving and able to transition to and succeed in college. TNs also recognized institutional challenges that ASLs might encounter and worked to mitigate these by connecting to community college institutional agents, services, and networks to facilitate navigating the community college system.

TNs as a Source of Information and Resources: All ASLs shared how their TN was a source of information and resources and expressed how important this was for them to move forward in their pursuit of higher education opportunities. An ASL expressed how instrumental his TN's help in understanding the different community colleges he could access and the assistance he got with his financial aid application was for him. He emphasized that this meant a lot to him as he was new to the country and did not know where to start. He said,

I am new here. I didn't know nothing about how to apply for college or how to apply for financial aid you know. She was helping me with my financial aid and college. I mean, yeah, I really appreciate her.

He added, “She showed me where to find the resources for each of the colleges, different ones.”

A second ASL also described how her TN encouraged her to explore and engaged her in reflection regarding her options and invited her to come back and discuss her choices. She stated that her TN said, “Once you settle down, you clear your mind a little, you are going to narrow what you want to do or what you want to explore, and then you can always make an appointment and come back.” This was impactful because it empowered her to think of what best aligned with her goals and aspirations. The TN also encouraged her to come back for guidance and direction. This is significant because her TN’s actions empowered her to access her individual agency by providing an opportunity for her to become an active participant in her educational trajectory. It also showed the TN’s commitment after the interaction; the ASL could come back and continue to receive support. It wasn’t a one-time thing.

A third ASL shared how her TN worked with her to figure out her interests, skills, and goals to determine what career options would match her aspirations. She expressed how the process helped her see opportunities she was not aware were available to her:

I had a meeting with her to help me try to figure out what I can do with the things that I like, you know ... Then she did an interest assessment for me, and then I put all the things that I like to do and all that, and then she showed me a bunch of different things, you know, and that’s why I say that this is opening a new world for me.

The TN affirmed and validated that college was a place for her. Her meeting with her TN helped her realize there were opportunities in community college that aligned with her strengths, interests, and goals.

TNs in the study understood that situational challenges could impact an ASL’s academic trajectory; to overcome these challenges, they often assisted ASLs by providing them with information and resources to help them overcome difficulties. TNs participating in this study shared that adult education programs had offered them or a close family member the opportunity to continue their education. They all were proud of their experience and saw their

work as a way to pay it forward and support the adult education community. They had great empathy for students and felt that their life experiences and positionality helped them build relationships with the ASLs they served and understand their perspectives.

An ASL shared the following about TNs: “They’re very helpful with giving you ... information about college or any other resources you need like housing or rent help.” This ASL not only expressed gratitude for the college information she received but also appreciated that her TN understood that by assisting her with situational challenges such as housing, she was supporting her ability to continue her education.

When asking TNs how they identified ASLs’ needs, they all agreed it was about building connections with students. One TN described how she develops relationships with students by saying,

[I] sit down when we first meet and build that authentic relationship with them, asking them. I had an 18-year-old this week right out of foster care, has a baby, our life experience can kind of help... we have resources we can connect them with, and just letting them know that ... I’m a safe person, my partners are safe people, we’re here for you... [I can say] I’ve lived this, I can help you, or let me give you some strategy...saying we’re here to support you, let’s move through this together. I think really letting them know that they’re not alone really helps a lot. And just asking, asking permission to ask too, is it okay if I suggest [something to support you]?

The importance of building trust and community was emphasized by this TN. She spoke of the importance of building authentic, empathetic relationships with students right from the first meeting. She explained how making meaningful connections and establishing trust allowed her to ask questions and understand each student’s unique situation; this practice helped her create the conditions for ASLs to persist, connect ASLs to the appropriate support and resources, and do so in partnership with other institutional agents.

TNs as a Source of Encouragement, Inspiration, and Validation: Many ASLs have not had access to or the opportunity of experiencing or navigating the college system and may have limited sources of information; for many, their TN is the only or first source of navigational capital and emotional support. An ASL talked about the challenges he encountered navigating

the educational system as he was new to the country; he expressed the importance of his TN's support by saying, "My counselor gave me a lot of information about college ... that's the information that is going to encourage me." He expanded, "That's why I found a lot of interest about college about how to do my nursing program you know. I'm very encouraged about that."

Another ASL mentioned how her TN inspired her to keep going; she said the following about their interactions: "She's always inspirational and all that. So, I decided to say, you know what? I can do this. And I am going to do this." This student also shared how her TN used every opportunity she had to talk about college:

She'll say, you know, whenever we talk, ever think about college, and just kind of always brings it up, basically the only one I have more contact with. You can find whatever with her, and she is very kind, and she is very patient.

An ASL holding his baby son echoed this sentiment and said this about his TN:

They're there for you, you know? Like a friend or a caregiver, you know? They support you, like if you're having trouble with problems, whether that be outside of school or not, and it's kind of is affecting your ability to concentrate on certain things...They help you kind of develop, it's like mentoring in a way, and so I think that's pretty good.

The Impact of Community Colleges' Collaborations with K-12 Adult Education

Community college collaborations between adult education programs and local colleges are also a source of college knowledge and navigational capital. College outreach, informational fairs, workshops, and career development courses aimed to prepare ASLs to transition to college helped students access college information and ways to navigate the college system. One ASL credited the informational session provided by the local college in collaboration with the adult education school she attended for influencing her to enroll in postsecondary education. She said, "They brought in someone from the [college], she was the one that told us ... a lot about college, and that is why now I am enrolled in a college class."

Two ASLs voiced how coenrolling in a college course designed to help them learn how to navigate the college system helped them prepare for college and develop an understanding of how to access the services that were available to them. One ASL said, "The college offered a

semester [class], and through that HCD [Human Career Development] class ... they told us all about financial aid and growth mindset.” An ASL who took that same class also said, “College [outreach personnel] taught us about financial aid and strategies, and development and mindset or smart goals and all that stuff to get you ready for college.”

TNs also shared the importance of developing relationships and sustaining partnerships with college institutional agents to enhance their practice and benefit ASLs. One TN said, “[We need to] build relationships with our community colleges [to support] ... transitions to community college.” Another TN talked about fairs and college nights at her site and how these events and the college staff provided valuable information and support to ASLs. She said, “Our college nights, bringing the individuals who are on campus, and allowing students ...to apply for [college] ... having that hands-on assistance and just always reminding our students ...there’s always other options [is valuable].”

ASLs’ Perspectives Preparing for College

ASLs aspired to attend college for a variety of reasons. The ASLs in this study saw postsecondary education as an opportunity to contribute to their well-being and their families. They also believed college could be a place to develop skills and cultural capital to contribute to and empower their community.

ASLs Navigating and Accessing College Information, Guidance, and Support: TNs strived to help students with career planning, exploration, and counseling. They often helped ASLs develop an educational plan and aided them in navigating adult education program and community college systems. They also helped connect ASLs with support services and develop skills to persist in their education. This is important because ASLs have experiential knowledge that can help them through their college experience. Often, they know what they want to do in college, but they have not had access to guidance or information to navigate the college

system. TNs in this study helped mitigate the uncertainties some ASLs had about community college.

One ASL shared that he was grateful to have connected to his TN because he had questions about college. He said, “I just want to know, I just want to start college also, I’m new here. So, I didn’t know some stuff about college. Like what subject do I need...? Should I go physically or is it online?” He further shared how his TN helped him feel welcomed and encouraged him to register for college, and helped him understand his options, fill out college application forms, and apply for financial aid.

Another ASL expressed appreciation for the navigational support her TN provided. She shared that it was important to have access to someone who understood the college system because it alleviated the uncertainties that ASLs face when they don’t have the experience to navigate the college system.

I think ... if you never have gone to college, you don’t know where to go or how to access like, say, financial aid, how to apply, how to look at the classes, how do you know what classes you’re supposed to take, and so, I think if you don’t know, that it becomes a little frustrating because you’re not sure where you’re supposed to go. So, I think [help is] really important.

TNs in this study were either full-time or part-time staff. All TNs in the study were tasked with additional responsibilities besides supporting and preparing ASLs to transition to postsecondary education. These additional responsibilities impacted how many ASLs TNs could serve, and how and when they provided services. One TN shared that if they were not so busy with their other responsibilities, they would have greater capacity to provide equitable services to ASLs:

I wish I had time for follow-up... I try and tell them if they have problems, they can still come to me afterward... And they do sometimes, but I wonder about the others that I don’t have time to reach out to... I wish I did because I want to know, is there anything else I can do you know? How do I do it better for the next person? ... It’s a work in progress you know.

Another TN offered the following idea to build capacity and reach out to more ASLs: “We need more passionate people to come help... Navigators, ambassadors, people, and students

willing to support other students.” This comment speaks to TNs’ desire for and belief in the impact a network composed of institutional agents and social contacts could have on ASLs attaining college knowledge and navigational skills.

When prompted to share what adult education programs could do to prepare students for community college, ASLs expressed that the services they received while enrolled greatly helped them persist and prepare for community college. Their teacher referred them and connected them to TNs when they had college questions and when they were close to attaining their GED or high school diploma. ASLs were able to meet their TN in person, and they received information from them via email when they were ready to discuss college.

When I asked how adult education programs could enhance services for new students, the ASLs in the study shared that receiving early and frequent access to college information, knowledge, and support would benefit them most in preparing for community college. When I asked what else could help students prepare for college, one ASL suggested that a class specific to college information might provide more access to college information. She said, “I think that maybe a little class after we graduate... giving us a little more information about [college] ... I did get some information... but other stuff I had to kind of figure it out on my own.”

Some ASLs in this study had the opportunity to take an aptitude or skills test. One ASL expressed how this helped her understand her options after getting a GED or high school diploma. She suggested that teachers and school staff should be explicit about motivating ASLs to consider college options and conveyed the importance of providing college information as a motivator. She said,

[Adult education programs] should motivate you to know different kinds of careers, things that you can do ... maybe take ... an aptitude test to see what your strengths are and what motivates you... I think [adult education programs] should ... share more information about college so you can get motivated to go.

Another ASL suggested institutional agents could help ASLs understand what college would be like for an immigrant balancing various responsibilities. She commented that the

education system in her country was different, and students like her would benefit from help understanding college expectations. She said, “I’m thinking about the school system in our countries ... I would like to have a better idea of how [college] can be done as an adult with responsibilities. What are my options? How can I do it?”

She expanded by expressing that it would be valuable and meaningful if ASLs had access to “real-life examples, not ... a textbook example.” She also suggested that individuals providing information “explain it in a way that is not intimidating” and in a “user-friendly” way. She expressed vulnerability when she said, “It’s intimidating to start something; you don’t know how long it’s going to take you [to complete].” This last statement underscores how important it is for ASLs that institutional agents help reassure them that college is an option for them.

The Power of Shared Stories and Community in ASLs’ Trajectory to College

Both ASLs and TNs agreed that hearing shared success stories helped prepare students for college and reassured them that they were not alone in their journey to community college. They also felt as though they could inspire individuals and help them understand that they are not alone and are a source of inspiration. One student expressed the importance of shared stories when she shared:

Have currently enrolled students share their experience through, I don’t know, through a video or just by sharing with your friends about your experience, or your friends that don’t have a high school, or don’t go to college and share with them ...so that they find out what [adult education] is or what they teach or what they offer...sharing with your community, if there was like a fair or something like that, I would want to be there and motivate people to join... Be an advocate.

Another student also articulated how shared stories could help individuals understand, access, and navigate educational spaces. She said:

Maybe people can share their experience with the new students... I was telling another person at the district they should get a group of first-generation kids that go to university and colleges and share that and have presentations for the high schoolers so that they can see the stories reflected on those new generations, the first-generation Hispanics, that go to university. To identify yourself with stories that you can see. Maybe we can

use the same people who have already graduated from [adult education] programs, do presentations, or even a video to share their story with the others, the whole journey.

She continued to reflect on the power of sharing and how she could learn and benefit from other individuals' experiences and explored the possibility of her benefiting from these opportunities. She said: "[By] connecting with people that have the same experiences as me...and... learn from that, maybe that will be inspiring and will make me say, okay, if they could do it, I can too." She expanded by saying, "Maybe adult schools could do that too...share [students'] story... the whole journey, you know?"

TNs agreed that having ASLs share their success stories and college experience had significant impact on ASLs. One TN said, I think bringing in those student advocates [former students who are in college] ... is a good strategy to help motivate other students with the process [of transitioning to postsecondary education]. TNs also shared the willingness of ASLs to connect and support each other. One TN talked about a former ASL who wanted to talk to students about her successful experience taking a math class at college. The TN said, "She wants to come back and present to ... our students that you could take this math... It's really easy." This speaks to the importance of community support that exists among ASLs and how they continue to support each other.

Summary of Major Findings

The findings presented in this chapter explored four main emergent themes. First, ASLs brought with them considerable resources, had high educational aspirations, and exhibited agency over their educational journey. They were empowered by their family and their communities and drew from these assets as they navigated and accessed educational spaces. Second, ASLs felt validated by institutional agents. Teachers played an important role in helping students tap into their strengths and acquire confidence in their academic abilities. Third, community and peer connections empowered students and reassured them of their capacity to succeed academically. Peers also served as a source of validation and support. And fourth,

ASLs in this study valued college knowledge and information. ASLs relied on TNs and college outreach as the primary sources of college information and navigation. However, access to this information was limited and was mostly provided when they were close to attaining their high school diploma or GED. They also expressed how the shared experiences of peers provided validation, inspiration, and information on how students like themselves can succeed and move forward in their education.

In the upcoming chapter, I will engage in a discussion of the findings as they relate to the research questions and report implications for policy and practices.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter is organized into six parts: a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, implications for policy and practice, recommendations for policy and practice, recommendations for future research, a conclusion, and a researcher's reflection. In this chapter, I summarize key findings and provide an analysis of the data to understand how college-bound ASLs experience adult education programs' institutional practices and policies that aim to prepare them to transition to college. In the discussion section, I contextualize the themes of the study in relation to the theoretical framework to respond to the research questions that guided this study. In the implications and recommendations sections, I discuss policy and practice considerations from an asset-based lens that centers ASLs' perspectives and experiences as they prepare to transition to community college. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of research focused on understanding, supporting, and preparing ASLs to transition to higher education from an asset-based student perspective. I conclude with a researcher's reflection on how this study has impacted my work as a researcher and scholar-practitioner.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what college-bound ASLs experience in adult secondary programs as they prepare to transition to college. The study used a focus group and one-on-one semistructured interviews with four TNs and six ASLs to (1) understand how adult education programs impact ASLs and (2) understand how ASLs experience their trajectory from adult education programs to community college.

The following questions guided the analysis of the data collected for this study:

1. In which ways do adult education programs prepare, facilitate access, and provide support services to college-bound ASLs in the Sacramento region?

2. What do community college-bound ASLs experience while preparing to transition to community college?

The data were also analyzed with concepts within the context of the theoretical framework. Rendón's (1994x) theory of validation served as a guide in the examination of whether and how institutional agents validate ASLs' attributes, cultural capital, and experiences as they move forward in their pursuit of a community college education. Stanton-Salazar's (2010) concepts of institutional support, institutional agents, and empowerment provided a frame to examine how adult education programs validate and promote different types of capital. Findings were addressed through four themes that emerged through the analysis of the TN focus group and ASL semistructured interviews. Data revealed themes that described how students experience adult education programs while they prepare for further education and how these programs support college-bound adult learners as they prepared to transition to college.

Discussion of Findings

This discussion contextualizes the themes of the study in relation to the theoretical framework. The analysis of the data gathered from the TN focus group and semistructured interviews with ASLs revealed four emerging themes to describe how college-bound ASLs experience adult education as they prepare to transition to college. The first theme, ASLs' agency over their education experience, describes ASLs' aspirations, the role of family support, and ASLs' resistance and self-advocacy. The second theme outlines teachers supporting and empowering ASLs and describes how instructors interact with ASLs and validate their unique experiences. The third theme, the power of community and peer support, speaks to how peers support and empower each other to move forward with their education goals. Finally, the fourth theme, preparing for college, offers students' perspectives on how they received college information and resources, and provides insight into what ASLs find would enhance how they acquire and develop college knowledge and navigational skills.

ASLs' Agency Over Their Educational Experience

ASLs brought with them considerable resources as they moved forward in their education. Participating ASLs had high educational aspirations and exhibited agency over their educational trajectory. This study reaffirms previous literature that states students bring a rich reservoir of experience and are motivated to believe in their capacity to learn (Rendón, 1994x). Other scholars have also recognized that adult learners are motivated, responsible, and self-directed and have life experience they can access to make connections to learning (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles, 1974; Wyatt, 2011). They balance life priorities such as family responsibilities and were empowered by their family, communities, and peers. They draw from their experiences, knowledge, and interactions to navigate and access educational spaces and respond to life circumstances and the limitations of the institutions with which they interact with great sophistication. They exhibit resistance capital and advocacy skills as they strategize and consider opportunities to continue their education. While not specifically regarding ASLs, Yosso (2005) has argued and affirmed through her research that minoritized students such as ASLs access and experience academic opportunities from a strengths-based perspective.

ASLs prioritized competing responsibilities and balanced responsibilities as they worked to prepare for the next stage in their education journey. Though existing research has acknowledged adult learners as individuals who exhibit “the social, psychological, and/or economic roles expected of adults in their cultures and collective societies” (Hansman & Mott, 2010, as cited by Karmelita, 2020, p. 64) and who choose to participate in learning activities that will bring a sense of improvement in their lives (Karmelita, 2020), these characteristics are often viewed from a deficit or damage-centered perspective (Tuck, 2009). This study challenges that perspective and situates ASL as individuals who deal with life circumstances and structural inequities in resourceful, sophisticated, and creative ways. It also underscores how students draw capital and knowledge from their experiences while navigating the educational system.

These findings parallel research stating that minoritized students draw capital from their children, community, and agents who engage in social justice (Yosso, 2005).

As discussed by Yosso (2005), minoritized students have personal human resources in their environment drawn from their extended familial and community networks. ASLs in this study spoke of how they considered how and when they access educational opportunities, how these choices affected their families, and how family motivated, inspired, and empowered them to work towards their academic goals. Furthermore, family was also a source of navigational capital as ASLs and their families in this study engaged in multigenerational and multidirectional learning as they prepared to access college. These findings parallel research (Smith and Gluck, 2016) that ascertained that having children did not affect enrollment and was positively related to academic outcomes.

Minoritized students have high educational aspirations, hopes, and dreams despite challenges and structural inequities (Yosso, 2005). ASLs came to adult education with aspirations and clear goals and engaged in reflection, assessed their options, and modified goals as their ASL community and institutional agents interacted with them to expand their understanding of the opportunities they could access through education. They also strategized to make the best use of resources and support that most benefited their efforts.

ASLs in this study described how they drew from their community, resources, and strengths to overcome challenges encountered when moving forward academically. According to Yosso (2005), the source of this capital comes from family, community members, and a desire for justice. ASLs in the study described how they leveraged resistance capital to push forward and go beyond discomfort to access opportunities despite having experienced academic invalidation and systemic and structural disparities throughout their experience.

Teachers Supporting and Empowering ASLs

The second theme outlines teachers supporting and empowering ASLs and describes how instructors interacted with ASLs and validated their unique experiences. ASLs in this study identified various actions teachers took to help them acquire confidence in their abilities to learn, persist, and achieve their academic goals. These findings parallel research stating that academic validation occurs when in-class activities foster students' capacity to learn and acquire confidence in being a student (Rendón, 1994b). Validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process by which agents foster academic and interpersonal development (Rendón, 1994b). ASLs described instances where teachers structured learning experiences that suited their unique learning styles and abilities. ASLs valued teacher feedback and communication, and felt genuinely cared for and supported as individuals and in their academic development. ASLs described how teachers created spaces for ASLs to share their experiences and support and motivate each other by providing them with access to meaningful resources that supported their academic development. ASLs valued how teachers checked on them and felt cared for and validated. ASLs described how teachers were approachable and empathetic and expressed how these actions helped them develop confidence in their ability to academically succeed and transition to college. ASLs described the transformative effects of being validated by their teachers and peers and felt welcomed. ASLs felt their teachers created a nurturing environment where there was no judgment of where they were on their academic trajectory. They also expressed how instrumental this was for them as they moved forward in their educational journey.

These findings align with research that affirms students become more confident when they receive academic and interpersonal validation (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). They also confirm that when validation is present, students have the confidence to learn and strengthen their sense of worth (Rendón, 2002). The findings also confirm that students remember instances when they experience validation, and when agents actively reach out and affirm, they are

capable. Finally, creating a validating learning environment occurs when students receive meaningful feedback, are given access to meaningful curricula, and have access to a positive learning environment (Rendón, 1994a). The findings that in-class validating communities, building connections, providing one-on-one feedback, personalized instruction, engaging students through collaborative learning, and believing in students foster students' capacity to learn and acquire confidence in being a student are similar to the findings of Rendón (1994a), Karmelita (2020) and Smith and Gluck (2016).

The Power of Community and Peer Support

ASLs discussed the power of community and peer support. They developed, nurtured, and valued their peers and community of learning, and together they provided and attained social and emotional support that helped them achieve their academic goals (Karmelita 2020). Community and peer connections had a profound effect on ASLs and helped them tackle self-doubt, gain strength, and persist in reaching their academic goals, confirming research stating that validation can occur in or out of class with multiple agents such as students (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Yosso (2005) also pointed out that these social networks help students prepare and help reassure them that they are not alone in pursuing an education. Karmelita (2018) also noted that students attributed positive in-class experiences mainly to the connections they made in class.

Preparing for College

ASLs experienced support through institutional agents as they prepared to transition to college, and relied on TNs as the primary sources of college information and support to navigate the college registration and enrollment process, financial aid, and other college services (Alamprese, 2004; Karmelita, 2020; Zafft, 2008). ASLs discussed how this was important to them, as many had had little opportunity to develop navigational capital and college

knowledge. TNs helped ASLs build on prior knowledge and life experiences to identify interests and skills to determine what career options aligned with their goals. TNs were a source of information and resources. TNs also assisted ASLs through academic advising focused on student experiences, perceptions, and challenges (Karmelita, 2020). ASLs expressed how significant this was as they moved forward in their pursuit of higher education opportunities. These interactions were a source of validation, navigational capital, encouragement, and inspiration. Yosso (2005) asserted that students benefit from navigational empowerment fostered by institutional agents. Some ASLs also commented on the value of having one-on-one support to overcome challenges accessing the college system. Adult learners interested in postsecondary education benefit from individualized assistance in understanding the requirements for postsecondary participation (Alamprese, 2004).

Another source of support included community college collaborations with adult education programs. Outreach, informational fairs, workshops, and human career development courses aimed to prepare ASLs to transition to college helped students access college information and resources and develop ways to navigate the college system. Similarly, Wyatt (2011) argued that students benefit from a basic orientation to campus and information about practices and policies.

ASLs in the study acknowledged that they had contact with an institutional agent supporting their efforts to move into college, particularly as they were getting closer to attaining their high school diploma or GED. However, they noted that they would have benefited from earlier and more explicit, intentional, and frequent exposure to support, college information, and institutional agents assisting them with college preparation (Karmelita, 2020). ASLs who accessed and coenrolled in a college course designed to help them navigate the college system reported benefiting from the opportunity to prepare for college while still working on their secondary education. It is pertinent to address that some ASLs in the study were not aware of this opportunity and voiced that a class helping them understand how to navigate this system

would alleviate the need to “figure college out” on their own. ASLs expressed a desire to attend college but reported they often did not know how to access information about programs, what courses to take, or what support services were available to them. ASLs articulated that they would benefit from early exposure to college information and expectations and said that knowledge of how individuals with their same background and responsibilities navigated college would help them have a better understanding of how they too could transition to community college and navigate the college experience. These statements confirm the argument that utilizing peers and other social contacts is a way to gain college access and navigate other social institutions (Yosso, 2005).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The main goal of this study was to understand how college-bound ASLs experience adult education institutional practices and policies as they prepare to transition to college and the impact of institutional support as they prepare for this transition. This work is salient because ASLs are diverse, have different needs and challenges, and experience education in ways that are often overlooked by those tasked to serve them. This study aimed to uplift the voices of ASLs and recognize the wealth of knowledge and experience they bring as they navigate their movement to higher education. The findings in this study provide three implications for policy and practice.

First, ASLs bring considerable resources and assets when moving forward in their education. They possess high educational aspirations and exhibit agency over their educational trajectory. ASLs were empowered by their family, communities, and peers. They drew from their experiences, knowledge, and interactions to navigate and access educational spaces and respond to life circumstances and the limitations of the institutions they interacted with. These findings align with Yosso’s (2005) concepts of community cultural wealth and demonstrate that ASLs access and use their experience and cultural assets to navigate their educational

experience. They also use their cultural wealth to overcome challenges. ASLs in this study also felt empowered when they had validating experiences when interacting with institutional agents such as teachers, college outreach staff, and TNs. The ASLs' empowered stance further demonstrates that adult education programs, institutional agents, and peer consideration and validation of these attributes can contribute to a successful transition to postsecondary educational opportunities (Yosso, 2005).

ASLs brought considerable resources and assets when moving forward in their education. They possessed high educational aspirations and exhibited agency over their educational trajectory. ASLs were empowered by their family, communities, and peers, and drew from their experiences, knowledge, and interactions to navigate and access educational spaces and respond to life circumstances and the limitations of the institutions they interact with. These findings align with Yosso's (2005) concepts of community cultural wealth, demonstrating that ASLs access and use their experience and cultural assets to navigate their educational experience and use their cultural wealth to overcome challenges. ASLs in this study also felt empowered when they had validating experiences when interacting with institutional agents such as teachers, college outreach staff, and TNs, demonstrating that adult education programs, institutional agents, and peer consideration and validation of these attributes can contribute to a successful transition to postsecondary educational opportunities. Findings in this study asserted that empowering college-bound ASLs' identities and validating their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) promote academic success and transition to community colleges. Instead of expecting students to conform to the academic and behavioral norms of education systems, adult education programs should focus their efforts on validating student strengths and building community engagement. This asset-based approach addresses student challenges by modifying programs to meet learner needs, rather than forcing learners to adjust themselves to fit the system. This shifts support for ASLs away from a deficit perspective (Goto and Martin,

2009; Kitchen et al., 2020) and instead focuses on students' cultural assets and wealth (Yosso, 2005).

A second implication was understanding the impact of institutional agents such as teachers and TNs. ASLs described their teachers as agents who fostered academic advancement and access to resources and opportunities. Participants in this study identified various actions taken by teachers to help them acquire confidence in their abilities to learn, persist, and achieve their academic goals; some of these approaches included one-on-one feedback, scaffolding instruction, engaging ASLs in collaborative learning, and communicating that they believe in ASLs' abilities to prepare and transition to higher education.

ASLs described how teachers were approachable and empathetic; they also articulated how teachers structured learning experiences that suited their unique learning styles and abilities and created spaces where they shared their experiences and received support from and provided support to peers; they also shared that these spaces inspired, empowered, and motivated them as they navigated their educational experiences. Previous research confirms that fostering student engagement and social involvement through group work and interactions can increase student success (Tinto, 2012 as cited by Karmelita, 2018). Community and peer connections helped ASLs in this study tackle self-doubt and helped reassure them that they were deserving of educational opportunities and advancement. ASLs described the space created by teachers and peers as a place to be in a community where they felt safe and could find support and inspiration. Analysis of the data verifies the perspective of scholars such as Rendón and Munoz (2011) that creating in-class validating communities and providing relevant instruction facilitates student academic advancement (Rendón, 1994x). This study provides evidence that academic and interpersonal validation empowers students to draw from their assets as they prepare for higher education, underscoring the importance of viewing students as competent and equipped with valuable foundational assets (Rendón, 2002).

Third, ASLs in this study attended adult education to access educational opportunities and to prepare for their transition to college. They relied on TNs as the primary sources of college information and support to navigate the college registration and enrollment process, financial aid, and other college services. TNs assisted students with enrollment, goal setting, and career planning; they also helped students prepare for and transition to college. Institutional agents such as TNs act to directly transmit or negotiate the transmission of highly valued resources, opportunities, and services, providing support that ensures that individuals become active participants with institutional spheres that control resources and network pathways associated with forms of empowerment, including academic achievement and mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Yosso (2005) asserted that students benefit from navigational empowerment fostered by institutional agents. TNs helped ASLs build on prior knowledge and life experiences, identify interests and skills, and determine what career options aligned with their goals. TNs also assisted ASLs through academic advising focused on student experiences, perceptions, and challenges (Karmelita, 2020). These interactions were a source of validation, navigational capital, encouragement, and inspiration.

ASLs greatly appreciated and spoke highly of the support provided by institutional agents. However, they noted they would have benefited from earlier and more explicit, intentional, and frequent exposure to college information, assistance, and support, as the support they received was mainly provided as they got close to attaining their high school credential. Participants had a few suggestions for improving outcomes of ASLs planning to transition to college. ASLs in this study stated that a college readiness class would help prepare ASLs to transition to college. ASLs who accessed and coenrolled in a community college course while enrolled in a secondary education program reported benefiting from this opportunity; ASLs who were not aware of this course offering suggested that a class that helped them understand the community college system and expectations could alleviate the need to learn how to navigate the college system on their own.

ASLs expressed a desire to attend college but reported not knowing about or having much information or experience navigating the community college system. Exposure to individuals with shared experiences who have successfully transitioned to college would help them have a better understanding of how they, too, could navigate and have the college experience. This confirms the notion that utilizing family and other social contacts is a way to gain college access and navigational capital to access and persist in social institutions (Yosso, 2005). Karmelita's (2018) research points out the importance of relationships, institutional agents, and family members and how these relationships help develop social capital and support networks.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings of this study, I offer three recommendations for adult education programs, administrators, and education leaders. First, based upon this study's findings, to best support ASLs, I recommend that educators and researchers must commit to understanding their experiences and required support as they work to transition to college (Rendón, 2018). Adult education programs have the ability to create validating, empowering, supportive environments for ASLs. Validation should be intentional, proactive, and systematic. Creating personal, caring relationships is central for students persisting in their education (Rendón, 2002). Access to resources and institutional support are significantly dependent upon the network characteristics and network-related capacities, motivations, and inclinations of resourceful institutional agents participating in the social universe of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2010); adult education programs must also take a comprehensive approach to building resources that support students. Supports that positively influence college outcomes include case management to connect students to public or other needed assistance to solve life crises, college transition support networks, meaningful academic feedback, and mentoring (Smith and Gluck, 2016). My findings indicate that institutional agents play a valuable role in promoting college access. When

validating agents work together to serve students, they become a circle of support that facilitates access and empowers students to move through their educational pathway (Rendón, 2002); by working together, teachers, TNs, support staff, and partners can improve their capacity to respond to student needs; and by working together, students will have more efficient and greater access to teachers, navigators, mentors, support, and other potential sources of cultural capital.

Second, ASLs participating in this study highlighted the importance of community, peer support, and witnessing how individuals with similar backgrounds and responsibilities navigated their academic trajectories. Given these analytical insights, I find it paramount that adult education programs and agents recognize student potential and foster learning communities that promote relationships among students, teachers, and staff, as these social networks help students develop agency, knowledge, and tools that help them prepare and take the next steps in their academic journey.

Finally, it is not enough to have empowering institutional agents committed to validating and supporting ASLs; the capacity of institutional agents to empower others is greatly dependent upon the structure and resourcefulness of their social networks, as well as their orientation towards effective networking (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Based upon these analytic insights, I lastly recommend that adult education programs must support and allocate resources to promote and support collaboration among teachers, TNs, support staff, and partners to improve systems meant to facilitate and support a successful transition to college for ASLs. My findings indicate that institutional practices designed to prepare ASLs to transition to college should consider students' perspectives. Resources should be allocated for professional development focused on student-centered support and validation, understanding the college system, resources, and support for ASLs for those that work with ASLs.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are significant opportunities to expand research focused on understanding the impact K–12 district adult education programs have on ASLs' movement to community college and how learners experience their trajectory to college in these programs. Scholars have asserted that adult learners are self-directed and have life experience and cultural capital they can access to make connections to learning (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles, 1974; Wyatt, 2011; Yosso, 2005). However, research attempting to identify what influences adult educational attainment has tended to highlight situational or dispositional barriers affecting students (Goto and Martin, 2009; Goodman & Kallenbach, 2019; Kallenbach, 2019; Kallison, 2017); this research typically places the responsibility to adapt to educational systems that are often not designed to validate, empower, or lift ASLs' diverse assets and experiences on students. One area of further study is continuing to explore how adult education programs can facilitate transitions to college from an asset-based student perspective and focus on alleviating institutional barriers rather than centering support around ASLs adapting to systems that often challenge rather than foster student movement to postsecondary opportunities.

A second area of needed study is identifying how institutional agents navigate social networks, structures, and resources to support, validate, and empower ASLs. As ASLs noted, more explicit, intentional, and frequent exposure to college information, assistance, and support would help ASLs better prepare for their movement to college. TNs in the study also underscored the importance of understanding how to navigate the different structures and systems ASLs were preparing to access. They also stated the importance of networking within those systems and structures. However, they were challenged by time constraints, limited resources, and other roles and work responsibilities they had to attend to. Research indicates that adult learners who have academic success in higher education tend to gain economic and personal benefits and are more likely to provide social, political, and economic benefits to

society (Ritt, 2008). This research would provide insight into what adult education programs can do to move this effort forward.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that ASLs bring considerable assets and various forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) from which they draw to navigate their educational advancement. Academic and interpersonal validation empowers ASLs and reassures them that they are capable and worthy of educational opportunities. Institutional agents such as teachers and TNs have an important role in preparing ASLs to transition to college. These agents are the primary source of college information, assistance in navigating the college registration and enrollment process, financial aid, and other support services. To better support adult learners as they prepare to transition to college, adult education programs must allocate resources to support institutional agents' capacity to navigate structures, social networks, and resources and effectively assist, empower, and validate ASLs. Adult education agencies and institutional agents can facilitate ASLs' successful transitions to postsecondary opportunities by providing support and resources that promote collaboration among teachers, transitional navigators, support staff, and partners. This collaboration should focus on developing or improving systems that are student centered, offer validation, demystify the college system, and make students aware of available resources and assistance.

Researcher Reflection

This reflection outlines how my positionality shaped my research process, lessons learned, and my growth as a scholar-practitioner. Conducting this inquiry deepened my perspective on and appreciation for adult learners and those dedicated to uplifting underserved students. I am incredibly grateful for the generosity and wisdom the participants in this study

shared with me. Engaging in this qualitative study was a humbling experience that helped me develop personally and professionally.

Perspectives Guiding the Research Process

My positionality as a first-generation daughter of Mexican immigrants, my work with underserved groups, and my career pathway as an educator and advocate for adult learners have shown me how policies and systems intended to serve adult learners are often designed without adequate input from the learners themselves. Through this study, I sought to elevate and amplify the voices of adult learners, enabling them to share their experiences and perspectives to influence decision-making and practices in adult education.

This research aimed to gain deeper insight into ASLs' experiences within adult education programs and how these programs impact their transitions to community college. Having dedicated my career to serving adult learners, I appreciate the sophisticated ways these learners efficiently apply their knowledge, experiences, and skills toward growth and development. This study intended to uncover how adult education programs and agents could better support and promote students' educational trajectories into postsecondary education, specifically community college.

My Thoughts About This Experience

My background shaped my approach to this research, analysis, and interpretation of data. I aimed to learn from the students I serve and hear their perspectives on improving services to prompt critical reflection on mindsets, educational inequities, and the effects of a deficit perspective in education. A qualitative approach allowed me to capture rich insights into adult secondary students' academic experiences and the cultural assets they leverage to persist and succeed. This study provided an opportunity to acknowledge how diversity initiatives, though well intended, can inadvertently promote systemic inequities if not informed by those

with diverse experiences. Through this research process, I became more aware of the complex challenges adult learners and empowering agents face in promoting educational mobility. Engaging with participants and analyzing data prompted me to reflect not only on how adult programs can better support learners but also on how institutional agents can be better supported as they assist learners in preparing for their next steps. Being truly supportive requires intentional inclusion, affirmation, and validation of the entire adult education community. This research highlights the benefits of grounding educational support in students' attributes and experiences.

Insights I Will Carry Forward

A qualitative approach allowed me to capture rich insights into adult secondary students' academic experiences and the cultural assets they leverage to persist and succeed. The data-gathering process with participants allowed me to gain awareness of the challenges, aspirations, and attributes that shape adult learners' experiences. These interactions prompted self-reflection on how adult education programs and institutional agents might evolve to better empower and equip students for their educational journeys. I witnessed the benefits of grounding support in affirming students' attributes and experiences; I also became more aware of the collective growth mindset of both learners and empowering agents. This project reinforced the importance of learning from and partnering with students to understand their experiences and needs. Through my engagement with the participants in this study, I was reminded of the need for inclusion and support across the adult education community to enact meaningful change; this process underscored the value of asset-based approaches that honor the cultural wealth, motivation, and capabilities adult learners possess.

This study provided an opportunity to uplift and amplify the voices of adult secondary students, enabling them to share their invaluable experiences and perspectives. As a result of this study, I have learned that amplifying learner voices through qualitative methods can spur

critical examination of policies and practices shaping adult education. I am honored to have learned from this community and look forward to applying these lessons to advocate for adult learners.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Interview With Transition Navigators

Research Question 1: In which ways do adult education programs prepare, facilitate access, and provide support to community college-bound adult secondary learners in the Sacramento region?

Focus Group Participants:

Date:

Location:

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this focus group interview. This focus group discussion is meant to get your thoughts, observations, and experiences as they relate to your role as a transition navigator assisting college-bound high school diploma students. I would also like to understand how the practices and support you provide to students facilitate their transition to community college. Finally, I would also like to know what you think based on your experience should adult education programs do to support students transitioning to college.

Consent Form and Ground Rules: As a reminder, participation in this study is voluntary. You should only discuss things you feel comfortable discussing with me. You may end the interview at any time. I will be recording this interview. I will not share your personal information, and your comments will remain anonymous.

May I start recording?

Background Questions

1. Can you please introduce yourself and tell me about your role?

Possible follow-up:

How would you describe your work at adult education?

2. How did you become involved in the work that you do?

Possible follow-up:

How did you know you wanted to work with adult students?

Supporting College-Bound Adult Secondary Learners and Institutional Agency

3. Can you describe how you approach supporting high school diploma students?

Possible follow-up:

How do you build relationships with students?

4. How do you know when a student is ready for community college?

Possible follow-up:

What actions do you take to identify college-ready students?

How do you know what they don't know?

5. How do you assist students in preparing for community college?

Possible follow-up:

How does your school prepare, facilitate access, and provide support services to college-bound high school diploma students?

6. Tell me about a time you helped a student that was ready for college transition. How do you help a student that has been making progress and is interested in college as a next step in their education?

Possible follow-up:

What activities, practices, and support have you found have the most impact when assisting students transition to college? Why are these important?

What challenges did this student encounter in their journey to community college?

What challenges or obstacles do you, teachers, and/or staff encounter when supporting and assisting students' transition to college?

7. Tell me about a time you helped a student that was reluctant or afraid to transition to college.

Possible follow-up:

What activities, practices, and support have you found have the most impact when assisting students transition to college? Why are these important?

What challenges did this student encounter in their journey to community college?

What challenges or obstacles do you, teachers, and/or staff encounter when supporting and assisting students' transition to college?

8. What existing practices or models supporting adult education students transition community college are familiar to you?

Possible follow-up:

What approaches do you think should or could be taken to ensure equitable support for students' transition to community college?

9. What support do you get to assist students going to college?

Possible follow-up:

What supports do you need, or would you like to better assist college-bound adult ed students?

Closing

10. Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you would like to share?

End of session

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Adult Secondary Learners

Research Question 2: What do community college-bound adult secondary learners experience when transitioning from adult education programs to community college?

Participants:

Date:

Location:

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this focus group interview. This focus group discussion is meant to get your thoughts, observations, and experiences as they relate to your role as a Transition Navigator assisting college-bound high school diploma students. I would also like to understand how the practices and support you provide to students facilitate their transition to community college. Finally, I would also like to know what you think based on your experience should adult education programs do to support students transitioning to college.

Consent Form and Ground Rules: As a reminder, participation in this study is voluntary. You should only discuss things you feel comfortable discussing with me. You may end the interview at any time. I will be recording this interview. I will not share your personal information, and your comments will remain anonymous.

May I start recording?

Background Questions

1. Can you please introduce yourself and tell me about your school?

Possible follow-up:

Tell me a little about yourself and what motivates you?

2. Tell me what motivated you to enroll in adult education?

Possible follow-up:

Why did you enroll in adult education?

Student Validation

3. What does the school do to make you feel welcomed?

Possible follow-up:

Do you feel you belong? Why or why not?

Supporting College-Bound Adult Secondary Learners

4. What are some ways teachers, transition navigators, and or school staff help you continue your education and get ready for college?

Possible follow-up:

What does adult ed do to help you persist, complete, and move on to college?

What classes, activities, or support does the school provide to help you reach your academic goals and transition to college?

How does the school keep you engaged and motivated in reaching your academic goals?

5. How does the school help you learn about college enrollment, financial aid, college support services?

Possible follow-up:

What strategies or activities do teachers, Academic Advisors and/or Transition Navigators use to communicate career options in college, how to enroll and access support in community college?

6. What do you think might help with preparing or transitioning to college, and how does the school, teachers, or staff help you?

Possible follow-up:

Who do you go to for help?

How did you communicate this?

Institutional Agency

7. Tell me about a time someone in the school helped you stay on track?

Possible follow-up:

Is there a particular person in school that you feel has been important in helping you get your high school diploma and transitioning to college?

What did that person do?

Why was it important?

College-Bound Adult Secondary Learners' Capital

8. How do you use your personal skills, strengths, community, and life experiences to persist in moving forward in your education and transition to college?

Possible follow-up:

What personal strategies do you use to work on completing your high school diploma and going to college?

9. Based on your experience, what could/should adult education schools do to help students go to college?

Possible follow-up:

What more can the school do?

What would you change?

Closing

10. Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you would like to share?

End of session.