ENGAGING OUT-OF-SCHOOL MALES IN LEARNING

BY

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ABSTRACT

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This ethnographic study examined how one adult education center engaged out-of-school males (16-25 years old) in learning. Drawing from a learner-centered paradigm, the author reflected on her journey to the problem through her own school experience as well as her years with out-of-school youth in community settings. The literature review covers four areas – scope of the high school dropout problem, engagement, emergent adulthood, and programs currently attempting to engage this population. Research was conducted at The Downtown Learning Center in Brooklyn, New York.

The four findings of this study centered on components of the "web", or adult education center that engaged the young men in learning. Affective relationship, interior and exterior space, and learning activities promoting engagement are the "threads" that re-engaged the young men in learning. In addition to these threads, the study reveals continued threats to this re-engagement. These findings have potential implications for teacher professional development and program design for adult education centers and schools attempting to re-engage this population in learning.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation was both a labor of love and an unsettling journey. Many people walked this adventure with me, and to all of them I am very grateful. This section of the dissertation may border on the sentimental; for that, I do not apologize so long as the bulk of this work is read with the gravity and attention this research deserves.

Primary gratitude goes to the many hundreds of students through the years who have been my teachers. I am particularly grateful to the students of The Downtown Learning Center for their insights and friendship; they are my inspiration. Thank you to the stakeholders – tutors, volunteers, staff, adult students – from The Downtown Learning Center, and The Brooklyn Tabernacle for your willing contributions.

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I am grateful to the Older Men's Focus Group that candidly raised issues around race and class, often told through personal experience. Their life experiences gave voice to critical questions about the institutionalized nature of racism and its impact on our young men.

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In the early days of finding my research question, my siblings Glenn Hlavacek, Dennis Hlavack, and Elsie Machtemes were interviewed and gave me valuable insight that contributed to the development of my research question. Their time and careful perspectives are appreciated. Growing up with you, I now understand, was a privilege that we all enjoyed.

To my adult children, Rebecca, Nathan, Matthew and now, Sarah, their affection, humor, and total truthfulness always reminded me that I had the best of both worlds – academia and family – I am a blessed woman when I look at them. They have grown up to be fine men and women who are and will continue to contribute to making our world a better place.

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CHAPTER 1   -   INTRODUCTION

"When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self- recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two – that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other."
                                                  bell hooks (1994, p. 61)

The idea for this study, of out-of-school males who re-engage in education, was

conceived when fellow researchers advised me to choose a topic and research question

that I cared about. And that is what I did. I care deeply about the young men who

participated in the study, the learning center that engaged them, and the process of re-

engagement. This chapter begins this "labor of love" with background on how I came to

care so much, continues with the statement of the problem, the context of the problem,

and the research questions. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature, and Chapter 3

outlines the study design and methodology. Chapter 4 describes the 16-25 year old males

who participated in the study, while Chapter 5 introduces The Downtown Learning

Center, or "the web", which is the focus of the ethnography. Chapters 6 through 9 explain

the four major findings of this study followed by the implications for practice and future

research in Chapter 10.

Arriving at the Research Question

Theorists of teacher or practitioner research raise the question, "Where do research

questions come from?" (Hubbard & Power, 2003) And adult educators ask, "What does

your experience as an adult lend to the research?" (Knowles, 1986) In answering these

questions, my own research question emerged at the convergence of my personal

experiences with disengagement and marginalization growing up, my twenty-five years

of professional adult education work with disengaged young students, and a larger social

problem of the high school "push out" in America. My research interests reflect my

stance as a learner, as an adult educator, as well as a researcher. As bell hooks so aptly

states, "no gap exists between theory and practice" (hooks, 1994).

Personal and Professional Background

Growing up in the suburbs of Middle America, my early years before formal

schooling were driven by intellectual curiosity. Like many children in safe environments,

my time was spent playing, reading books and interacting with friends. I was raised by

parents who were readers and learners but had no higher education. My father dropped

out-of-school in 9th grade to run the family farm. My mother was the first in a family of

eleven siblings to graduate from high school, but did not continue her education. My

mother and father were first generation immigrants who spoke their immigrant parents'

native Czech. No effort was made to teach my siblings or me Czech, as my parents

wanted their children to speak English and assimilate into America. Being a farmer and

subsequently a laborer, my father was a union man. Both my parents were politically

active – voting regularly, following politics conscientiously, and attending union

meetings. Democracy and social activism were important to my parents. It was not

unusual for my parents to discuss issues related to union organizing, workers' rights, and

racism in the presence of their children. During the 1960's, as we ate dinner at the kitchen

table, the television broadcast civil rights demonstrations. My father's interest in, and

passion for the civil rights movement was an education for me in the importance of

tolerance, cultural identity and issues of injustice.

Our family was different from our more middle class northern European neighbors who had settled earlier in our community. My family's working class status prohibited me from participating in the country club, piano and dance lessons, and social activities of other more affluent young people in the neighborhood. My parents' language, traditions, worldview, and social status framed my cultural identity. These differences kept me at the margins of the social, academic, and cultural life of the community while in school. Although I understand that my experiences with marginalization in no way come close to the often extreme and harmful effects of marginalization that the participants of this study experience on a daily basis, I feel they helped sensitize me to what it is like to be on the outside of the mainstream.

Despite the feelings of marginalization, I had hundreds of children's books available to me as I grew up. Given my parents' enthusiasm for reading, I developed an early interest in reading and books, and I was eager to begin school thinking that it would be all about an adventure with literature. But, beyond kindergarten, school would prove to be a disappointment to me. Although I always did well in school, it was disengaging; school failed to engage me in a way that books and learning in other contexts did. I developed an unconscious dichotomy between schooling and learning. I am not alone in this feeling. The Civic Enterprise 2006 Study on high school dropouts, *The Silent Epidemic,* reports this same disengagement with school among 69% of student respondents who were capable of graduating from high school but did not. These former students reported boredom, disengagement, and lack of interest as strong contributing factors to their failure to complete high school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison, 2006). Although I did not drop out, I easily resonate with these responses.

This same experience repeats itself in my son, Matthew. Matthew is full of intellectual curiosity. At twenty-three, he is now learning the construction trade from top to bottom. Although he graduated from high school, he has little interest in attending college. He attests to

finding formal schooling easy, boring, and disengaging. Over the past twenty years as an educator, I have witnessed this same pattern of disengagement from formal schooling among hundreds of young, intelligent men. During the past five years, I have seen increasing numbers of honors students with superior intellectual capabilities drop out (The Downtown Learning Center, 2006).

Reflecting upon my personal experiences of marginalization and disengagement with formal schooling, I see how these experiences drove my mission as an adult educator, and ultimately the formation of my research question. My own son's experiences served to focus the research question further, and my choice of research subjects, predominantly minority male high school dropouts, is driven, in part, by the early influence my father had on my formation of concerns about marginalization and social justice.

My professional experiences focused me on my research site, methods and scope more clearly. As a developer of two community based adult learning centers, as well as the director of a third, all in marginalized urban communities, I have been involved in community organizing as well as collaborative strategic and program planning. I have participated on student advisory councils, writing groups, literary councils, boards, study groups, playwriting groups, book discussions and peer support groups – all examples of learning communities, groups of individuals sharing common beliefs and values engaged in learning together. I have witnessed the power of such groups to engage all kinds of

learners, including the disengaged, in learning. Therefore, my research leans towards an

interest in learning communities and the social context of learning as opposed to a focus

on learners engaged in individualistic endeavors. I have observed often the power of

learning in community.

Learning in community is supported by theorists and social activist educators from

diverse academic disciplines who maintain that knowledge is constructed in social

interaction and social settings and that learning cannot be divorced from a social and

cultural context. Among the people and theories who informed my work as an adult

educational professional are: Myles Horton and Paulo Freire writing about transformative

and emancipatory learning (Adams, 1975); Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger who

articulated the concept of situated cognition, (Lave J. & Wenger E., 1991); Lev Vygotsky

and constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), and Yrjo Engestrom, the developer of cultural

historical activity theory (Engestrom, 1999). These theories also informed the creation of

the learning communities I developed, as well as the theoretical framework supporting

this research study.

Given my personal background and professional commitments, I wanted to do my

research in a community setting where engagement in learning among marginalized

populations could be explored and where instruction is designed to acknowledge and

build on the importance of social context. The site for this study is an

adult education center, The Downtown Learning Center, located in downtown Brooklyn,

New York. This center is a not-for-profit church supported center enrolling 725 students

annually, with an ongoing waiting list of approximately 200 students. The Downtown

Learning Center's population, including both students and tutors, is over 90% non-white

and/or of recent immigrant status. Approximately 45% of students are between the ages of 16 and 25; 97% of those are African American or Hispanic. 50% of the total population is unemployed; the other 50% are mostly working poor.

The site serves a significant population of marginalized, educationally disengaged young men in a setting with a commitment to learning in community; this program profile is consistent with my personal and professional research interests.

Context for the Research

I now move from describing my personal and professional research interests in this topic to four social phenomena in America which provide the broader research context. These phenomena are: an alarmingly high school dropout rate, the social context affecting

postponement of adulthood for increasing numbers of 18-25 year olds, an increasing number of unemployed and incarcerated young males of color, and the increasing numbers of adolescents and emergent adults entering adult education programs.

High School Dropout Rate

Recently the high school dropout rate has been identified as "epidemic" (Bridgeland et al. 2006). "Nationally, only about two-thirds of all students – and only half of all Black, Latinos and Native Americans – who enter ninth grade, graduate with regular diplomas four years later" (Orfield, 2004, pg.1). In some urban high schools dropout rates are as high as 60 to 70 % (Orfield). In Chicago, for every 100 Black male high school freshman only 2.5% obtain a Bachelor's degree by the time they are twenty-five

years old (Jackson, 2006). Far too many young adults, particularly urban minority youth, leave formal schooling before graduating.

Due to inaccurate and poor recording of graduation numbers, varying definitions of what a dropout is, and reluctance by school administrators to make the magnitude of the dropout problem clear, we don't know if we have always had a high rate or, if it is, in fact, increasing. Whether this is a recent development or a long standing issue, the numbers are large, as are their consequences in today's job market in which a high school diploma is needed now more than ever. Most of today's employers require a minimum of a high school diploma, and sometimes a college degree, for entry-level jobs (Mincy, 2006).

Many employers, who in the past hired individuals without a high school diploma have left the inner cities where the high school dropout population is concentrated. The jobs remaining there now pay significantly less than other jobs which high school dropouts previously filled (Mincy, 2006). Besides the cost of high school dropping out to individuals, a 2007 report "An Economic Doomsday Awaits New York State: The High Cost of the inadequate Education of Hispanic Youth" states unequivocally that the loss in taxable income due to unemployment and underemployment of high school dropouts and the resultant cost to New York State for health, welfare and prisons is in the tens of billions of dollars annually (Belfied, Levin 2007). Therefore, the need for a minimum educational attainment of a high school diploma (or its equivalent) is greater than in the past, both from an individual and a societal vantage point.

Delayed Adulthood

This elevated high school dropout rate is concurrent with a second phenomenon a

prolonged transition to adulthood for 18 – 25 year olds. This phenomenon is referred to

by

some researchers as "emergent adulthood" (Arnett, 2000). Indicators such as entry into

the labor market, school completion, living outside of parents' home, and birth of a first

child are often used to measure transition to adulthood (Buchman 1989; Shanahan, 2000).

Initially, "emergent adulthood" was seen as a middle class phenomena caused by

changing economics and the high cost of living independently. Whereas previous

generations generally took on markers of adulthood (financial independence, marriage,

full-time employment) around 20 or 21 years of age, today's youth do not do so until

their late twenties and sometimes thirties, thus delaying attainment of adulthood. With the

current economic recession, economic costs of entering adulthood are exacerbated for

middle class youth but have even worse consequences for young men of color and the

poor (Harrington, 2009).

It should be noted that working class, minority and poor youth do have some

experiences in the transition to adulthood that are distinct from mainstream or more

privileged youth, and tend to move to adult responsibilities faster than middle class

whites (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McCloyd, Rumbaut, Settersten, 2003). Nevertheless,

economic factors causing delayed adulthood have ramifications for all young people,

regardless of whether they come from advantaged or disadvantaged backgrounds. But

again, the evidence indicates that for minority and disadvantaged individuals the

transition is often more difficult, by whichever measures are used to define adulthood (Osgood, Foster, Flannegan, Ruth 2004).

Close to 80% of all Americans believe that evidence of transition to adulthood is leaving home, completing school, having a full-time job with benefits, and attaining financial independence (Furstenberg et al.2003).With the current economic environment, it is harder to have an income that provides for the completion of these traditional markers. It is even harder for those who have not completed high school, much less college. For high school dropouts, the difficulty transitioning to adulthood is exacerbated by the decline of available jobs that do not require a high school diploma (Harrington, 2009). Civil service jobs, such as jobs in the police force and fire department that in decades past were open to high school graduates now require a minimum of two years of college. Similarly the military is requiring a GED or high school diploma for all recruits. Because the earning power of an individual with a high school diploma, or GED, is less than it was fifteen years ago, someone without even this credential has little chance of earning enough to sustain himself, much less a family – traditional markers of entrance into adulthood.

To reiterate, a high school dropout in America is even more affected than other youth by the social and economic causes of delayed transition to adulthood. The combination of these two phenomena of large dropout numbers and the economic and social factors that delay adulthood creates a unique marginalized population. This is a group of young people often trapped in poverty and disengaged from education and, often, society (Benson, Furstenberg, 2003).

Unemployment and Incarceration for Young Males of Color

Within this marginalized group of high school dropouts is a subgroup that is young, black and male with a special set of difficulties. For example, Black males are unemployed and incarcerated at a higher rate than any other group of individuals in this country (Mincy, 2006; Edelman, 2006). Black men earn only 67% of what white men earn even with comparable educational levels. In 2001, the likelihood of going to prison was highest among Black males (32.2%) and Hispanic males (17.2%) and lowest among White males (5.9%) (Jackson, 2006). During the economic boom of the 1990's, while all other groups made advances economically, young black males (ages 16 – 25) and other less educated young males were left behind in the job market, more often unemployed, or when working, employed less hours per year (Mincy, 2006). Although there are many explanations for these troubling statistics, researchers consistently cite lack of education as one of the main reasons why young men are incarcerated, unemployed and have difficulty transitioning to adulthood (Mincy, 2006).

Given the high school dropout rate statistics and socioeconomic obstacles to achieving adult status for young men of color, there are systemic problems that go beyond an individual student's failure to achieve. They are issues of racism, discrimination, economics, history of oppression, educational inequality, and misuse of power (Kozol, 2005; Eckholm, 2006; Noguera, 2003 and Fine, 1991). Institutionalized racism is a variant name for these factors often hidden in our institutions and particularly our schools. For young men of color, one of the results, among many others, can be what psychologists term "learned helplessness" (Seligman, 1975), a belief that you are helpless to make change in the face of overwhelming problems and large obstacles.

Effects of Dropping Out for Young Adults and Adult Education Programs

Where are all of these young people going after they drop out? We have always seen, but now seem to be seeing increases in the numbers of them entering adult education programs to secure GED test preparation in order to pass the GED exam (Imel, 2003; Chulp, 2006). "The proportion of teenagers getting GED's has doubled since 1989, while overall high school graduation rates have declined slightly," said Duncan Chaplin, an economist at the Urban Institute in Washington (Arensen, 2004). According to Jacqueline Cook, a researcher on GED issues in NYC, for those who want to prepare for the GED, "the demand to enroll in adult education programs far exceeds the number of seats available" (Cook, 2008). In Texas, as reported by the College of Mainland, the GED graduating classes of adolescents in their adult education programs was the largest ever in 2009. Rachal and Bingham (2004) call this phenomenon "The Adolescentizing of the GED". Increasingly, adult educators have to respond to this influx of young men and women. As a consequence of their increasing numbers, limited space, adolescent behavior problems, and inadequate funding, there are many challenges integrating these teens and young adults into programs aimed at adults (Flugman, Perin, Spiegel, 2003). Traditionally, they served predominantly adults over 21 in literacy, ESOL or GED programs. But with the influx of larger numbers of youth entering these programs, questions of how to engage them becomes an issue of concern for these programs (Hayes, 1999).

The many issues raised in this introduction will be probed in more depth in the next chapter's literature review. Suffice it to say that the convergence of the societal phenomena of high school dropout rate, the economic issues impacting the delay of adulthood, the disproportionality of minorities who are unemployed and incarcerated,

large numbers of young people opting for GED preparation in adult education programs, along with my own personal and professional experiences, led me to identify the research problem described here.

Statement of Problem

A marginalized group of male emergent adults ages 16-25 are dropping out of American high schools in large numbers and enrolling in adult education programs. By virtue of their age and recent high school attendance, they are a group distinctive from the traditional adult students in these programs (Hayes, 1999). There are few documented models of how adult education programs effectively engage this group. This study begins to address this gap by examining how one adult education program is responding and engaging this marginalized population in learning.

The purpose of the study was to identify and describe the key elements, from the perspective of stakeholders, which are important in effectively engaging young adult, minority males in the culture of learning in The Downtown Learning Center, Brooklyn, New York. The program is in an urban setting and serves a high proportion of out-of-school males; the study's focal participants are currently attending The Downtown Learning Center, or have transitioned to college and employment. This research focus is on neither why young males drop out of high school, nor the system of American education. Rather it focused on describing a learning organization as a way to understand what one adult education program does to engage this population in learning.

Although we know much about why, how many, and who drops out of high school, we know a limited amount about how adult education programs are responding to this population. Certainly there is discussion of this issue among adult education professionals

(Chlup, 2006), but there is little empirical research on these young men in adult education programs to date. This ethnographic study will address this gap in the research.

Research Questions

Given the background presented and the problem as stated, the principal research question was:

From the perspective of multiple stakeholders, what are the critical, organizational and instructional features in the educational culture of The Downtown Learning Center that help 16 – 25 year old, out-of-school males engage in learning, as evidenced by consistent participation in the learning community and transition to post-secondary education or employment?

The sub-questions explored were:

What were the processes of mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998) and cognitive engagement (Beder, Tomkins, Medina, Riccioni, Deng, 2006) at The Downtown Learning Center? How do these contrast with learner's previous school experiences? What aspects of the culture of the program contributed to engagement? What obstacles impeded re-engagement in learning?

Significance of the Study

Findings and conclusions from this study can inform adult education centers and practitioners who are receiving an influx of late adolescent and emergent adult students and struggling with how best to meet their needs. The study also can contribute to policy and practice discussions focused on identifying strategies to re-engage these young people in formal, but non-high school settings and provide important alternatives to re-engagement in learning in traditional settings. To date, there has been little formal research done in this area.

In addition, current attention has been drawn extensively to the dropout "epidemic", particularly among young minority males, through the media and in academic writing. However, few studies have identified solutions to the problem of engagement of these young men in learning in the adult education arena. Also some research is being done on reengagement in formal school settings, but little has been done in non-traditional school settings. This research begins to fill that gap.

From a broader perspective, the general problem of engagement in learning has significance for dropout prevention and recovery programs as well. The purpose of these programs is to engage young people in learning with the aim of preventing dropping out or to get them to re-engage -- certainly this study addresses these challenges. The study has significance, not just for the adult education arena, but also for schools and other kinds of programs currently struggling to keep youth engaged.

Finally, for the young men who participated in the study, there is significance in their participation. Their participation in this research process is a way of potentially improving the learning chances for other young men in the future.

A Final Reflection

I was unprepared for the kind of professional and personal journey upon which this research would take me. But I have come to understand from the findings of this research and my own learning journey, the intellectual and affective strands of our many "webs" are intertwined. bell hooks labels the bond between theory and practice as "reciprocal processes". The personal and professional, theory and practice, research and teaching are difficult to separate, and often reflected in their parallelism and reciprocity in the chapters to follow.

CHAPTER 2   -   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

"He that studies only men will get the body of knowledge without the soul; and he that studies only books, the soul without the body. He that to what he sees, adds observation, and to what he reads, reflection, is on the right road to knowledge, provided that in scrutinizing the hearts of others, he neglects not his own."

Caleb Colton (1837, p. 115)

"I am an actual statistic, a young man who dropped out of high school and who just needed guidance and direction. I even felt as if I was just another "black kid" or "young black male."

Sanjae –Research Participant

Introduction

In this review of the literature, four areas were selected for discussion as a way to position this research in the existing knowledge-base and speak to the research question. They are, an overview of the high school dropout population in America, disengagement in learning, current programs addressing disengagement among this population, and ramifications and challenges for adult education. Although discussed briefly in the previous chapter on background of the study, this discussion looks more deeply at existing research in each area.

The research literature in the overview of the high school dropout population, includes quantitative research citing statistics and educational demographics nationwide. These studies also track trends and causes for the dropout problem. Other high school dropout research studies focus on individual young people, and like the quantitative work, they seek to discover reasons for dropping out, and provide more detailed descriptions of the experiences of these young people. In addition, this review establishes

the magnitude of the high school dropout problem in America and identifies the systemic nature of the problem. Much of this research moves the causes and solutions away from the individual student ("blame the victim") to larger institutional, social causes and contexts (Fine, 1991).

The overview will also include research on the scope of the dropout problem, the phenomenon of "emergent adulthood", the systematic nature of the problem, and the ramifications of leaving school for the high school dropout population, with a particular focus on research on young men of color who drop out of high school.

Secondly, the research discussion will address a major cause of this problem – disengagement from learning. This portion of the review will establish that a primary cause of the dropout problem in American is disengagement and will conclude with a summary of the existing findings on disengagement and relate those findings to similar trends in this study.

The third area is research focusing on program models that are attempting to re-engage young adults in traditional or modified high school contexts as well as program models for vulnerable at risk populations in out-of-school settings. My approach in describing this work will be to move from the large scale to the small, looking at large national programs and then smaller ones in adult education centers in an effort to identify what is known about the range and variation of program models designed to serve the target population.

Finally, literature on ramifications and challenges for adult education programs will be included. In general, this research attempts to identify patterns and strategies for successful engagement. Little empirical research on this population in adult education

programs could be found; however, discussions of this issue are cited. It is clear that this issue is generating interest, concern, and dialogue, if not yet much research, pointing to the significance of this study in breaking new ground.

Definitions

To clarify research terms used throughout this review and study, this section defines key terms related to the research, specifically identifying terms that are sometimes used in different ways depending upon the source and context. In addition, some terms have the same denotative meaning but differ connotatively. For the purposes of this study *out-of-school youth* will refer to individuals aged 16 – 25 who are currently not attending high school on a regular basis (not necessarily formally discharged), and who have not graduated from high school, and individuals (16 – 25) who were formally discharged from high school without graduating. The terms *high school dropout* and *high school non-completer* are synonymous with *out-of-school youth* except that they do not have the age distinction. All terms refer to individuals who have attended high school in the United States. All three terms will be used where appropriate in this study. The reason for the distinction between out-of-school youth and high school dropout is three fold. First, for statistical purposes a distinction is made. Secondly, some individuals dislike the term high school dropout and find it inconsistent with the experience of some students who have been "pushed out" by the system. Finally, high school dropout can be anyone who left high school no matter how long ago or how recently, in other words, someone who is not a youth. The use of the term *pushout* will be used interchangeably with *dropout,* reflecting changing terminology, and in the case of *pushout,* emphasizing that

explanations for disconnection from school often reside in the system rather than the individual student (Tuck, 2008).

Three additional terms used are: *disengagement from school, disengagement from learning and re-engagement.* Disengagement from school means leaving school. Disengagement from learning does not necessarily mean a student has left school, but, if he is attending, he has no engagement in learning. Re-engagement in school means enrolling and participating in some sort of educational setting after dropping out. *Dropout prevention* will refer to programs and interventions designed for in - school youth with the purpose of preventing them from leaving. *Dropout recovery* refers to programs attempting to re-engage dropouts in formal school-based learning.

The term *engagement* is complex, multi-faceted. For purposes of this study, it is defined in the context of a continuum. It includes the two components of engagement sited in a NCSALL research study on adult literacy education and engagement, "cognitive and contextual" (Beder, et al. 2006). Cognitive engagement, as defined in this NCSALL study, is "mental effort focused on instruction" (Beder et al. 2006, p. 119). This is individual and includes metacognition, motivation and individual learning strategies (Beder et al, 2006)). Beder's second component of engagement, contextual, includes the educational context that either supports or detracts from learning. According to Beder, the cognitive and contextual are interdependent.

In addition to Beder's two complex components of engagement, this study's definition also encompasses Wenger's mutual engagement, which is "people engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another… It requires the ability to take part in meaningful activities and interactions, the production of shareable artifacts,

community-building conversations, and the negotiation of new situations" (Wenger, 1998

p. 73 and 184). Mutual engagement is a social component of student engagement.

Two additional dimensions of engagement, as they relate specifically to school, come

from Russell W. Rumberger's work highlighting engagement or disengagement from

school among high school dropouts -- *academic engagement* and *social engagement.*

Academic engagement means mental involvement leading to learning, and *social*

engagement means involvement with others in community leading to learning

(Rumberger, 2001). These terms are very similar to Beder, et al's *cognitive engagement*

and Wenger's *mutual engagement.* For purposes of this study, the term *cognitive*

engagement will most often be used. When referring to peer and adult social relationships

linked to school and learning for an individual student, the term *social engagement* will

be utilized (Rumberger, 2001). *Mutual engagement* will refer to broader community

building and systems engagement linked to learning (Wenger, 1998). But the primary

term to be used will be *engagement or engagement in learning* as an encompassing term

that includes all of these types of engagements.

Combined with these various types of engagement, this study presupposes that

engagement can be represented along a continuum reflecting degrees of engagement,

from intense engagement at one end of the continuum to minimal engagement at the other

end. The highest degree, or most intense, is engagement when the learner is in a state of

flow or "optimal experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991); this is the holistic experience

people feel when they act with total involvement so that nothing else seems to matter.

The experience is so deeply absorbing that the activity is intrinsically enjoyable and the

individual functions at his or her fullest capacity. At the opposite end of the continuum,

the degree of engagement is limited to simply being physically present, in this case, for learning activities.

Beyond type and degree of engagement, there appears to be another dimension of engagement called learning identity. According to Stanton Wortham, social identification and academic learning are co-dependent in the classroom. This social identification may include whether a student takes on an identity of a "troublemaker", "resister", "clown" or "engaged learner." For Wortham, the curriculum plays a central role in engagement in learning with the potential to influence students' behavior and what social identity they manifest in the classroom. Engagement in learning then can include the development of a *learning identity,* labeling and claiming oneself as a learner (Wortham, 2006). Related to cognitive, social and mutual engagement is the resulting evolution of an individual's identity as a learner.

Drawing on these many definitions and extensive studies on engagement for the purposes of this study, I am defining *engagement* as an investment of time, energy, and interest to participate in learning activities in or out-of-school, which include cognitive, social, and contextual components often including the development of a learning identity. This engagement includes "flow" experiences on one end of the continuum but more often is fluent in its movement along the continuum depending on circumstances and contexts.

Finally the term *learning community* presupposes a social theory of learning and assumes learning as a kind of social participation. A learning community is a group of people with shared values who work together for the purpose of learning with and from each other. This term refers not to just local events of engagement in certain activities

with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities (Wenger, 1998, pg.4).

Overview of High School Dropout Problem and its Consequences in America

The Scope of the Problem

The high school dropout problem in America is large and systemic in nature. Explanations for the problem are complex and broad in scope and may be found in issues of economics, race, poverty and societal change. According to research sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,   "There is a high school dropout epidemic in America (Bridgeland et al. 2006)." According to the research report, "Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001", graduation rates are between 68 and 71 percent - this does not include those who return to attain a GED diploma (Swanson, 2004). This means that more than one-quarter of all high school students fail to achieve a high school diploma (Bridgeland et al. 2006). These national graduation rates reflect a high dropout rate that is not limited to urban areas but reaches beyond, to the suburbs and rural areas (Swanson, 2004). The gap in rates between regions is significant, however. According to the U.S. Department of Education data on graduation rates (2004), in the suburbs and rural areas of Baltimore 81.5% of students graduate, while 34.6% graduate annually in urban Baltimore. This same gap is evident in other major cities and their surrounding communities, such as Cleveland, Detroit, New York, Minneapolis and Chicago (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). There are also significant disparities in graduation rates among different racial and ethnic groups, nationally. For Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans the rate of graduation is

approximately 50 %, for Whites and Asians it is about 75%-77%; the remaining

percentages indicate our dropout rates.

As substantial as the problem appears, researchers state that, if anything, the number

of dropouts is under-reported (Barton, 2005; Greene & Winters, 2005). Gary Orfield, in

his book, *Dropouts in America* (2004), stresses that schools are notorious for under-

reporting or inaccurately reporting students who do not graduate. Orfield states, "It's not

unusual for a

school to report a 10 % dropout rate when the number of graduates is 70 %

lower than the number of ninth graders enrolled four years earlier" (Orfield, 2004, p. 4).

According to Orfield, school officials are not held accountable for accurate recording.

While they hold students accountable for their performance, they demonstrate little

accountability themselves, if half of their students simply "disappear" from school

without their reporting it (Orfield, 2006).

Despite apparent under-reporting and lack of consistent accountability, the research

over the past ten to fifteen years suggests an "epidemic" of students leaving our public

high schools without graduating (Barton, 2005). This, of course, is even more troubling

when we consider that the job market sustains fewer employees without a high school

diploma (Mincy 2006). Increasingly, jobs require a college degree even for entry-level

positions. The era of plentiful low-skilled, labor and union jobs whereby an individual

can make a decent living without a high school diploma or its equivalent is over (Mincy

2006).

Emergent Adulthood and The High School Dropout

For these many high school dropouts, the economic and sociological factors that contribute to a delay in adulthood for all youth, are often more prevalent and have a potentially greater impact upon their lives. As discussed earlier, researchers noting this trend have coined a term for this delayed status – emergent adulthood (Arnett, 2000). If we define adulthood as attainment of financial independence, leaving home, completing school, and working full-time, then only 46% of women and 31% of men age 30 in 2000 had reached adulthood according to this definition (Furstenberg, Kennedy, Mccloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersen, 2003). These statistics were 77% and 65%, respectively for women and men of the same age in 1960.

The passage to adulthood is being prolonged. This is not unique to Americans, but this prolongation is quite a dramatic trend in America and exacerbated by the recent recession (Harrington, 2009). Although many societal factors contribute to this trend, including changing views on marriage, women's roles affecting work and career, and increased access to and need for higher education, the primary force shaping this trend is economic (Furstenburg, 2003; Flannigan, Osgood, Briddell, Wray & Syvertsen, 2006).

Several large scale longitudinal studies focusing on this trend have come out of The Network on Transitions to Adulthood supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. These studies show young adults struggling to be economically independent. Even for young people who have completed college, increasing numbers return to live with parents due to their having incurred large debts related to college loans and the high cost of rent and home ownership. Therefore, these young people frequently prolong the transition to adulthood often until their early 30's.

According to Benson and Furstenberg (2003), the causes of this trend have special ramifications for the population represented in this study, 18 – 25 year old Black and Hispanic males. Delayed adulthood, in and of itself, is not the problem. However, the factors and challenges delaying entry into adulthood for all young people are exacerbated for minority males, and this is a problem. They find that African Americans are already disadvantaged as they seek to enter adulthood due to poverty, lower quality schooling, racial segregation, and limited social networks that provide social capital in mainstream, middle class culture. Kozol (2005) adds substandard healthcare and living conditions involving overcrowding and violence to these disadvantages.

It should be noted that marginalized families and cultures do not always measure attainment of adulthood in the same ways that middle class families do. In fact, research supports that "those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience major life transitions at earlier ages than those from more advantaged backgrounds," (Furstenberg, 2006 p. 8), but with less resources to make these transitions effectively. The experience of transition to adulthood for working class and poor minority youth is different than for middle class whites. Those less advantaged move to adult responsibilities faster (raising children, supporting parents) but with less financial, familial and emotional resources (Shanahan, 2000). In spite of these differences, the literature suggests that all young people are affected by the challenges that cause delayed adulthood, however differently, but with more severe challenges for the poor and out-of-school youth.

Kmec and Furstenberg's 2002 study suggests that not only race, but gender plays a role in shaping this trend. They found that Black men are more likely then Black women

and Whites of either gender to be adversely affected by the economic and social factors delaying adulthood. "Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than Whites to experience a transition to adulthood that casts a long shadow over their adult lives, including diminished prospects for socioeconomic achievement" (Shanahan, 2000). Therefore the trend that indicates all young people in their twenties may experience delays into adulthood shows particular challenges for the target population.

Systemic Nature of the High Dropout Problem

 In addition to the societal phenomenon of "emergent adulthood", there are additional outcomes that move the high school dropout phenomenon from an individual problem or personal pathology, character flaw or individual choice, to a systemic one.

 Beginning with Michelle Fine's seminal work, *Framing Dropouts* (1991), researchers began to view this issue from a systemic perspective, rather than an individual problem or personal pathology, character flaw or individual choice by students. Fine makes the case that high schools, particularly in urban environments, are seriously flawed in their delivery of services to young people and that students do not drop out as much as they are pushed out of the system by institutional failures of schools. In *"Gateways and Get-aways: Urban Youth, School Pushouts and the GED* (Tuck, 2008)*"* a student of Fine's updates research indicating the educational policies at the federal, state and city levels that prevent students from completing high school. Tuck is adamant in her argument that students are not dropouts but are pushed out of a failed school system in which students experience humiliation and danger (Tuck, 2008). An excerpt from Tuck's 2008 participatory action research study argues for the study's use of the word pushout, as

opposed to dropout, and describes high schools as spaces of dysfunction determined to fail students.

> "First, opponents of the make and stance of our research might view it [pushout] as a loaded term that absolves the individual student of her personal responsibility in her schooling, yielding to a conspiracy theorist's phantasies. Likewise, some might find it too generous a term that protects the closeted inner-workings of a system determined to fail city students. Now having listened to hundreds of stories of push out, this second view resonates with me, for many former students, schools were sites of anxiety, depression and humiliation- their stories of not mere stories of push out, but squeezed, kicked, punched, sliced out. Cast out. Stamped out. My coinciding readings of Indigenous and decolonizing literatures affirm another word that comes to my mouth: erasure." (p.128)

The description of New York City high schools as spaces of dysfunction that affect students physically and emotionally, are collaborated by the stories of key informants and stakeholders in this study as well as the extensive, long term work of Jonathan Kozol, whose research examines race and poverty in terms of sociological and historical context.

In his book, *The Shame of the Nation,* Kozol examines urban schools from a very personal perspective, (he knows kids, talks to children and teachers, walks the halls) but analyzes the failure of urban schools to graduate a majority of its students from a systemic perspective. A part of the dysfunction he observes is what he calls the "new segregation" in our schools, which he passionately brings to light with example after example. Blacks and Whites are increasingly segregated, with Black schools more poorly staffed, equipped, funded, maintained. White schools and Black schools are horrifyingly

unequal in all areas that affect students' education and predict their chances to move on

academically (Kozol, 2005). This is a large systemic problem in our society stemming

from a history of slavery and racism. The most severe consequences of this are

experienced by the Black male and reflected in the low graduation rates for this

population.

Similar to Kozol's work, and the new research on Black males, is Mehan's 1997

report for the Hispanic Dropout Project "Contextual Factors Surrounding Hispanic

Dropouts". This report again strongly argues for viewing high school dropouts as a

systemic problem, as opposed to an individual one. Mehan maintains that there is

widespread rationalization that blames dropping out on a lack of commitment among

low-income students from ethnic minority backgrounds, single-parent families, or recent

immigrant families who have not mastered English (Mehan, 1997). The overemphasis on

the relationships between individual characteristics and dropping out places blame for

having left school, early on students who may be victims of educational systems that do

not meet their needs (Natriello, 1995; Rumberger, 1987**).** The case has been made for

examining dropouts using a systemic approach as opposed to the individual. Using this

systemic approach, this study was designed as ethnography in order to observe the re-

engagement of these dropouts by focusing on the educational context rather than focusing

on individual students and their failure to succeed.

Black Males and the Impact of Dropping Out

    Researchers have identified three main areas in which not having a high school diploma matters greatly. From these studies, the impact of dropping out of high school seems to have correlation to incarceration, unemployment and economics for young men of color.

    Two new studies have drawn attention to young Black male high school dropouts. In both studies, the issue of disengagement from school and college is explored. Among the findings in "Black Males Left Behind" (Mincy, 2006) and "Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men" (Edelman, Holzner, Offner, 2006) are the following: more than half of inner city Black men do not finish high school, incarceration rates for these young men climbed significantly in the 1990's, and these incarceration rates are now at an all time high for Black males. According to these studies, 16 % of Black men in their 20's who did not attend college were either in prison or jail in 1995. By 2004, 21 % were incarcerated. By the time they were in their 30's six out of ten Black men who had dropped out-of-school had spent time in prison. There appears to be a correlation between disengagement in school and/or dropping out of high school to incarceration (Edelman et al. 2006).

    Beyond the huge human costs of dropping out and incarceration, there are huge financial costs to society as well. *Figure 2:1* shows the costs to New York State in terms of lifetime cash, in-kind transfers and institutional costs to taxpayers for individuals at varying levels of educational achievement. According to Harrington's data, high school dropouts cost society substantially more than individuals with higher educational attainment. Harrington makes the case that the reason for the high cost to New York State

for high school dropouts is incarceration (Harrington, 2009). From the data, for New

York State there is a correlation between dropping out and total institutional costs for

incarceration over a lifetime paid by the state. Although there are other costs that

contribute, such as health care and public assistance, the largest institutional costs are for

incarceration, according to Harrington.

Figure 2:1 -Expected Lifetime Cash and In-Kind Transfers and Institutional Costs of
New York City Residents Aged 18-64, Paul E, Harrington, Center for Labor
Market Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, March 6, 2009
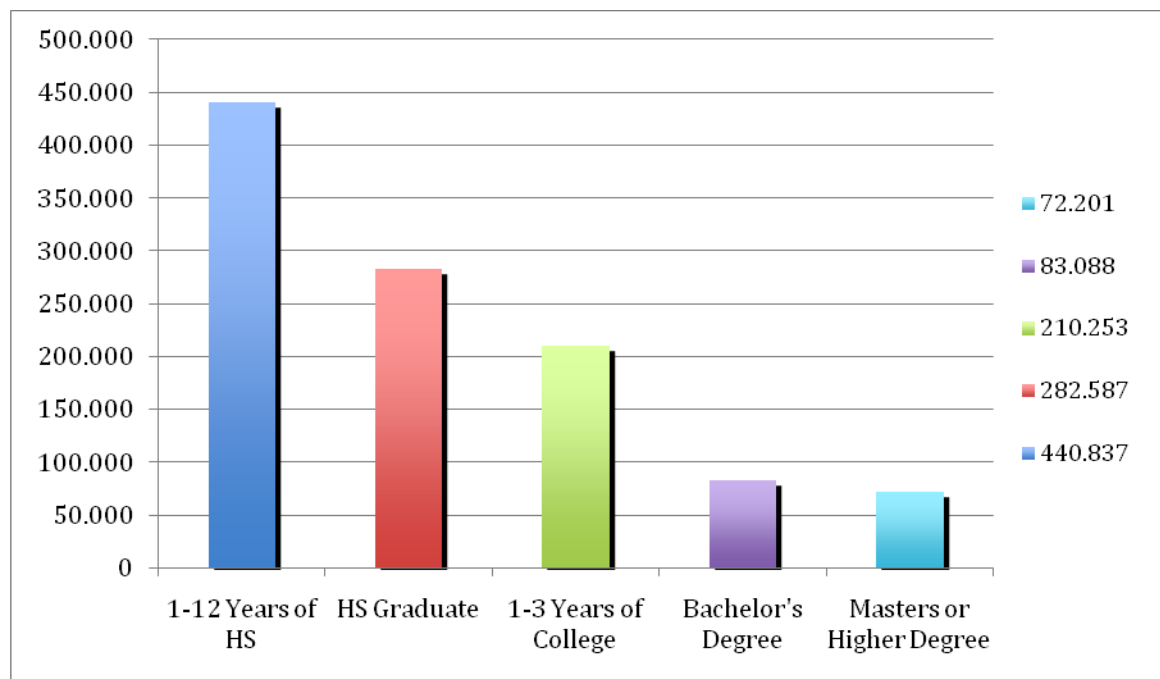
In addition to a correlation between dropping out and incarceration, there is a

correlation between dropping out and unemployment. Black males in their 20's who did

not finish high school had a 65 % jobless rate. Research has shown that when Black male

students are compared to other students by gender and race they consistently rank lowest

in both achievement and unemployment (Ogbu, 2003). Black males have the worst

attendance records, are suspended or expelled the most often and are most likely to drop

out and be unemployed. (Voelkle, 1999; Raffaele, 2003; Staples, 1982; Pinkney, 2000;

Roderick, 2003).

   Harrington's 2009 research also tracks average number of weeks worked per year for

young men of varying educational levels in New York City (Figure 2:2). These numbers

clearly indicate that not only do young men who are high school dropouts make less

money; they do not work as consistently during the course of a year. Figure 2:2 illustrates

the mean annual weeks of work for a high school dropout in comparison with adults who

have more education. Although *figure 2:2* does not indicate weeks of work annually by

race, due to the high dropout rate among Black males we can infer that men of color work

less per year than other men (Ogbu, 2003).

Figure 2:2 - Mean Annual Weeks of Work of the 18-64 Year Old Population of New
            York City, Paul E. Harrington, Center for Labor Market Studies,
            Northeastern University, Boston, March 6, 2009
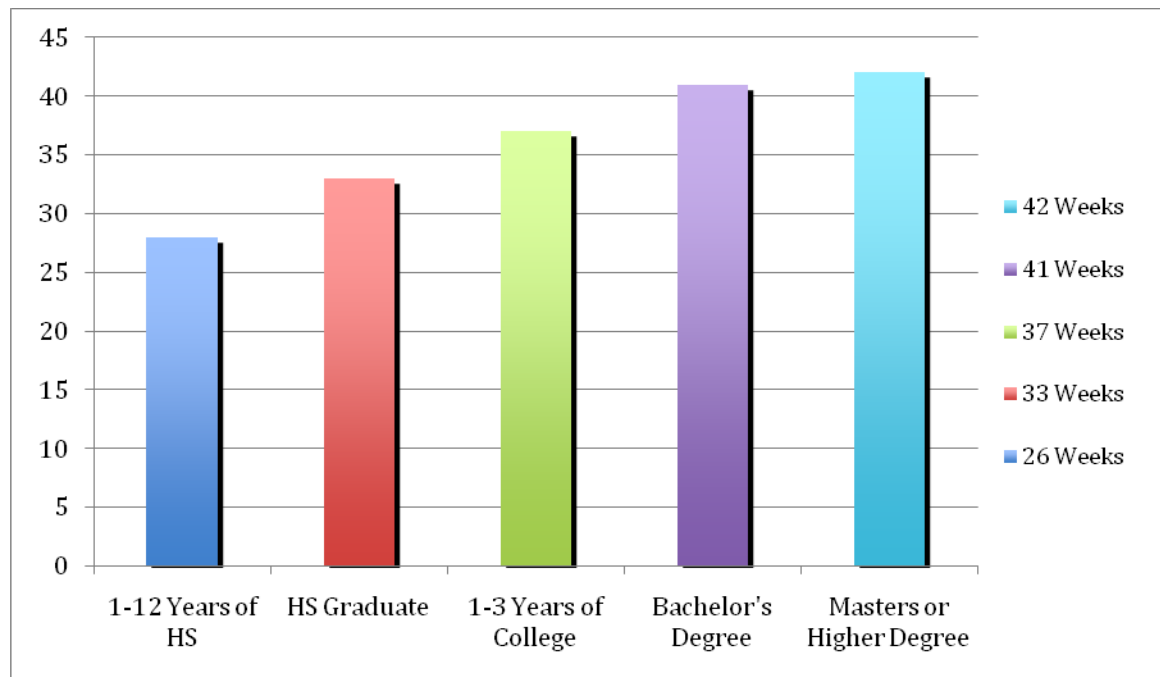
Linked to both incarceration and unemployment are startling new statistics highlighting expected annual lifetime earnings of the target population. Figure 2:3 illustrates that level of education directly affects expected lifetime earnings. Harrington (2009) discusses the impact of the current recession on individuals with different levels of education. He asserts that the recession has the largest impact on young men of color who have dropped out of high school.

Figure 2:3 Expected Lifetime Earnings of the 18-64 Year Old Male Population of New York City Paul E. Harrington, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northwestern University, Boston, March 2009
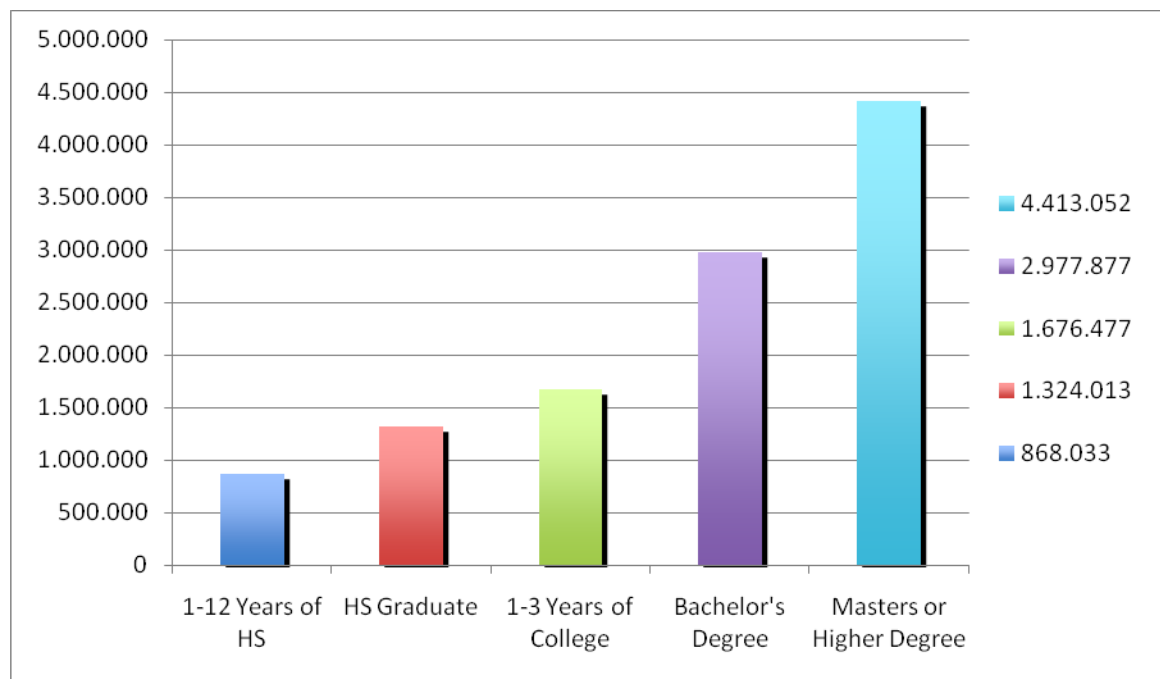
These annual income numbers (*figure 2:3*) indicate that high school drop outs, who are disproportionately young men of color, are likely limited to a life of poverty with very little hope for economic stability or advancement.

In addition to impact on employment and income of dropping out-of-school for the young men, there are economic costs to society as a whole. As indicated in Chapter 1, *Figure* 2:4 displays the loss of tax revenue as a result of not completing high school. Not only does dropping out have great costs for the individual, there are collective costs denying our society tremendous potential tax revenue. And again, because drop outs are disproportionately young men of color, this data is especially significant for this target population. These kinds of problems have been known for decades, but these new studies refocus our attention on them and highlight just how severe they are.

Figure 2:4 - Expected Lifetime Tax Payments of New York City Residents Aged 18-64
Paul E, Harrington, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern
University, Boston, March 6, 2009
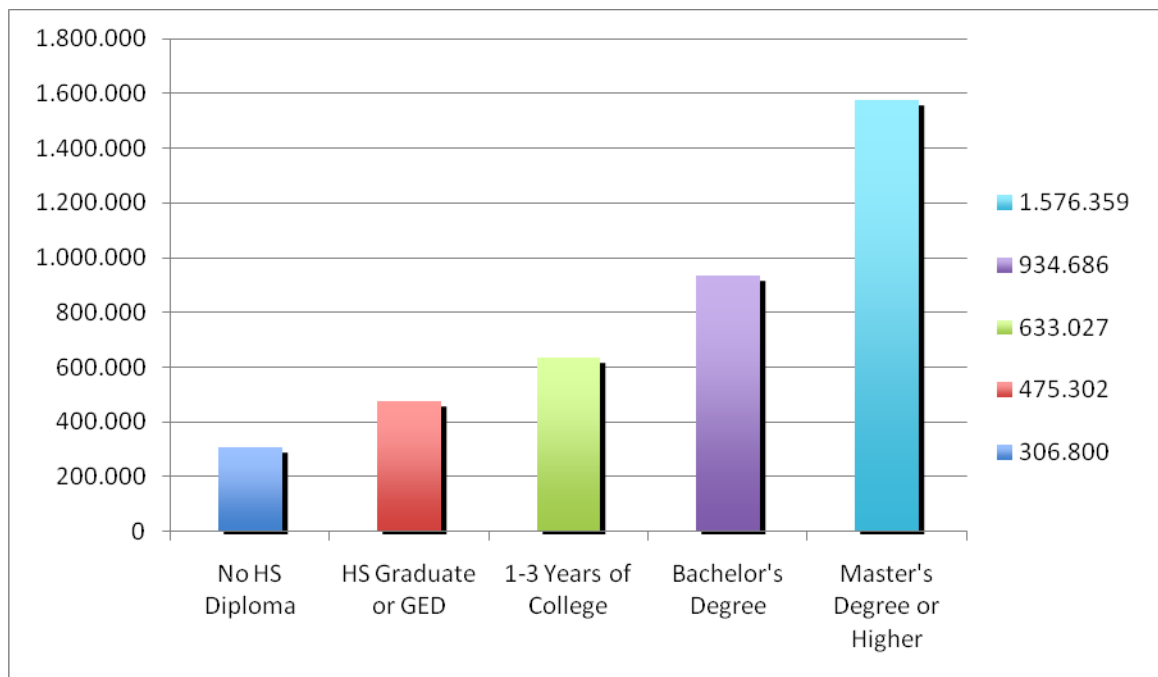
Examination of Harrington's statistics strongly supports the idea that engagement in learning for out-of-school youth, particularly males, is an economic issue with profound ramifications for our economic stability as a country. Phrased another way, attention to the engagement of out-of-school males is "economic stimulus", and there is a high price to be paid for disengagement in learning to both the individual and to our society as a whole.

<div align="center">Disengagement – Pushed Out and Dropped Out</div>

With the costs of dropping out so high for both society and the individual, in particular young men of color, the causes of dropping out need examination. The research on high school dropouts makes it clear that the main cause of students leaving school is disengagement with the school environment and learning, but researchers differ on how they make this argument in both their focus and perspective. Some researchers examine high schools and the process of disengagement; others focus on youth after they have dropped out, and other studies are longitudinal and quantitative with a broad focus. The research of Fine, Tuck and others maintain the perspective that schools are responsible for "pushing" students out, for a variety of complex reasons, while others, like Bridgeland (et al); focus more on the student and individual causes for disengagement.

As noted previously, perhaps the most seminal research about disengagement and the dropout is Fine's *Framing Dropouts* (1991). In this study of a New York City high school, she documented that the problem lies within a dysfunctional and unequal school system, and not within individual students. Fine interviewed many out-of-school youth, observed individual students during the process of being discharged from high school, and analyzed the school's discharge process. Fine establishes that most students are not

dropping out; they are pushed out by a system that does not have the capacity to deal with large numbers and complex needs. In Fine's study "push out" means, students don't want to leave, and they do not want to drop out-of-school, but they are encouraged and even instructed to by school personnel who are overwhelmed, and often themselves disengaged, [by overcrowding, violence and understaffing]. She reports that at least a quarter of the students counseled by school personnel were told that their only option was to withdraw from school; Fine places the locus of disengagement with the school. From Fine's study, the point is that schools "pushed" students out by explicitly encouraging them to drop out, or making it difficult for even potentially competent students to meet graduation requirements.

Tuck's (2008) more recent GED study updates Fine's research outlining the educational policies at the federal, state and city levels that prevent students from completing high school. In addition, she interviewed hundreds of GED students and concluded urban high schools are often spaces of humiliation, physical and emotional danger, and boredom which give rise to disengagement. These hostile environments, by their very nature of emotional and physical violence, are places that push out and erase students from the system, to use Tuck's terminology. Tuck's understanding of "push out" is more implicit than Fine's. For Tuck, the school conditions are often so unappealing, and sometimes dangerous, that many students simply choose to leave. Tuck's study maintains that students are inadvertently "pushed out" by schools that fail to engage. The description of New York City high schools as spaces of dysfunction, physically and emotionally, are corroborated in findings from this present study as well as the extensive, long term work of Jonathan Kozol.

Beyond New York, a study on the Florida school system presented in a 2004 PBS broadcast, reported that dropout rates are actually decreasing. The school systems are pushing students out-of-school and into taking the GED. According to the report, these "push outs" are disengaged from school, but not counted as drop outs on official school records. This type of "pushing out" by the system seems to be happening all over the country (Merrow, 2004).

Indications from this study corroborate the work of Tuck, Fine and Merrow, seeming to indicate that high level students, or students with the potential to excel, are pushed out. This does not mean that these bright students are counseled to leave and get a GED, as in Fine's study; that would make no sense in a climate where accountability is key. However, it does mean that our schools may have failed to engage some of our brightest. In the case of both Tuck's study and this present one, student research participants seemed unwilling to cope with much of the emotional and physical violence and boredom that they reported experiencing in the system. A work out of the University of Iowa (Colangelo & Davis, 2002) speaks not to the physical and emotional violence of schools but to the boredom and lack of challenge experienced by the exceptionally smart students. Their work with gifted students indicates that if there is not intellectual challenge for the high ability kids then they become invisible and that the schools lose them (Colangelo et al. 2004). Indications from these studies are that perhaps our schools are not graduating some of our brightest.

According to Rumberger in a chapter from Orfield's important *Dropouts in America* (2004), in contrast with studies that examine the issue from a systemic perspective discussed here, most studies examine student disengagement in terms of attributes of the

students – their opinions, feelings and reasons for leaving school. From these studies we

can understand disengagement with its result of dropping out to be not a onetime event

but the "final stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement" (Orfield,

2004. P.133). For example, two extensive reports by Civic Enterprise and Bridgeland

document factors that contribute to this disengagement process. Both are large studies

conducted in 2006 that rely heavily on student self-report gathered through surveys and

interviews with large participant pools. The 2006 Civic Enterprise Report states that

among students who drop out, one of the top reasons for leaving school was "classes not

being interesting." Among students who dropped out with high GPA's and those who

were motivated to work hard, all stated boredom as a major contributing factor in their

decision (Bridgeland et al. 2006). In Bridgeland's study, 69 % of respondents said they

were not inspired or motivated to work, 80 % did one hour or less of homework each day,

and

70 % were confident they could have graduated had they tried. Failing school, being left

back a grade, and not being academically prepared for high school were additional

reasons for dropping out, but they ranked lower than disengagement from learning (35 %,

32%, and 45% respectively) (Bridgeland et al. 2006). There are indications from this

present study that, in fact, the lack of academic preparedness may be linked to earlier

disengagement in learning and not adequately achieving. These students are different

from students discussed previously; these students may need remedial work due to early

disengagement in school or poor quality instruction. When these students drop out, they

need remediation in the basic skills in order to pass the GED.

In addition to disengagement from learning, two contrasting studies provide data on the complicated family and personal issues that contribute to dropping out as well. A relatively early study by the National Education Longitudinal Study of students who were in eighth grade in 1988 and later dropped out, 77 % cited school related reasons for leaving (e.g. didn't like school, didn't like teachers/students, didn't feel they belonged and consequently did not attend and were failing), as opposed to 34 % who stated family or work related reasons. A later and smaller study, Stewart's 1999 case study of four teen dropouts identify the following reasons for their leaving school: teen pregnancy, gangs, learning disabilities, alcoholism and drugs (Stewart, 1999). Replete with photographs and personal narratives, Stewart's study is a very intimate look into the lives of these individuals. Unlike the larger quantitative studies, this study makes the problem concrete and personal. This was the only study that did not point directly to disengagement from learning as a primary cause of dropping out, due largely to the particular cases selected.

Another smaller, qualitative study which combines both the systemic view of students who leave high school as pushouts, with an individual perspective documenting individual students' experiences is similar to this study. *Reconstructing Dropout (*1997*)* is a Canadian ethnography of Black student disengagement from school focusing on ways the structure of the school system contributes to the disproportionately high rates of Black students dropping out, as well as recounting individual stories of student disengagement. Unlike some of the other studies, this ethnography examines the affective elements of disengagement – isolation, fear, anxiety, powerlessness, the feeling of physical and emotional insecurity, and learned helplessness. Parallels can be drawn with

America from this study in regard to race, class and gender as it relates to high school

dropouts (Dei, Maxxuca, McIsacc, Zine, 1997).

Much of the research on Latino youth dropping out centers around issues of

language, immigration, culture and the failure of American educational systems to

engage Latino students in learning. According to Mehan (1997), Latino and African

American males do not see a connection between school and learning and the world of

work or their futures. In addition, Mehan describes this group as being culturally

disengaged from the American school system. Mehan's report does suggest some

preliminary strategies for addressing the needs of Latinos and other minorities through

effective educational intervention, but again the bulk of the research, and there is a

tremendous amount, is on the cause of the problem – disengagement - not solutions to it.

The previously cited studies are all consistent with the findings of my study.

However, with the exception of the Tuck (2008) and Dei et al. (1997) studies, the

research does not identify the intense negative and isolating elements of student

disengagement. Although much of the research highlights the dysfunctionality of school

systems and the boredom and lack of challenge leading to disengagement over time, the

harmful effects of disengagement on students who participated in this study is not

previously captured. However, all studies do point to cognitive or social disengagement

as one of the main explanations as to why students dropped out.

<div align="center">Programs Addressing Re-Engagement for this Population</div>

This portion of the review examines research on two approaches to addressing the

problem of disengagement from learning, Dropout Prevention and Drop out Recovery.

All of the programs reviewed here aim to reengage youth in learning, but some are

offered before and others offered after they drop out. Some are in school-based settings,

while others are alternative school programs.

Dropout Prevention

Dropout prevention programs seek to serve in-school, but at-risk youth, before
they drop

 out. Since the scope of this study is youth who have already dropped out, this review will

provide only a brief overview of prevention programs. Although research on dropout

prevention is not immediately relevant to this study, to the extent to which it focuses on

engagement, it does contribute. Many of the educational strategies actually designed to

prevent dropping out, hands on learning activities, and relationship and community

building are consistent with the findings of this study. Most prevention programs have a

proven track record of retaining youth in school, (Martinez, 2005) and most of these

programs are large, well-funded initiatives which function within public school systems.

Advanced Placement, College Now and *America's Choice* are among the most familiar.

Advanced Placement and College Now provide high school students with a chance to

earn college credits and learn about college and college expectations while in high

school. These programs generally target low-income and minority youth. The goal is to

keep students in school and provide support for college access. Both the College Now

and Advanced Placement initiatives appear successful in reducing college costs for at risk

students. According to a recent College Now report, 99.2% of College Now participants

go on to college. (collegenow.cuny.edu)

America's Choice is a US Department of Education initiative designed to provide

support for struggling students. It funds large, multi-school initiatives aimed at vulnerable

populations with the long-term goals of drop-out prevention (America's Choice, 2009). It is a comprehensive K -12 effort targeting at-risk students with supportive reading, writing, math and ESOL programs, as well as professional development for educators working with at-risk populations. To date there are promising results as measured by standardized test results in Rochester, New York, and Chicago, Illinois. Students who participated in the America's Choice programs showed a 25% (www.americaschoice.org) gain in basic subjects as compared to non-participants in those same basic subjects. The belief is that early intervention in the basic skills will prevent future dropping out-of-school.

   The relatively large federal, state and private funding for these programs seems to indicate a recognition by policy makers that we are losing too many of our best students and need to retain them, and that disengagement from learning is often a cumulative process happening early in a student's career. Policy makers may also be seeing this as, perhaps, the easiest group (high performing students) to serve giving the best return on investment.

   In reviewing research on these programs (Martinez, 2005), four common strategies emerged as effective for keeping youth in school and supporting college success. They are personalizing of services, utilizing the latest technology, differentiating instruction, and establishing academic rigor and a balance between building academic and social networks. They offer strong mentoring components and create consistency between elementary and secondary curriculums. These seem to be components designed to engage learners through caring and responsive relationships, relevance and stimulating intellectual work.

Drop-Out Recovery

In addition to drop-out prevention, drop-out recovery programs designed for out-of-school youth aim to re-engage them into formal school-based settings. One of the most comprehensive reports on successful drop-out recovery programs (Martin & Halperin, 2006) describes in detail twelve programs, including four that are national. In the introduction, Martin and Halperin explain that the settings and strategies for dropout recovery are varied. They include utilizing federal, state, county and faith based funding. They are located in public schools, alternative learning centers, community based organizations, for-profit schools, adult education programs, and other social service organizations. Probably the most well-known of the twelve programs described is the Job Corp.

The twelve programs represented in this study are located throughout the country in both urban and rural areas. According to this report, the programs utilize the following strategies for effective dropout recovery efforts: open-entry/open-exit, flexible scheduling, year-round learning, teachers as coaches, facilitators and crew leaders, real-world activities, career oriented curricula, concurrent opportunities for employment, clear codes of conduct with consistent enforcement, extensive support services and differentiated learning settings, schedules and styles for a varied group (Martin & Halperin, 2006).

The twelve drop out recovery programs cited in Martin and Halperin's research are embedded in communities of practice where there is strong integration of social and

academic engagement as well as job skills components. These employment or service driven components include carpentry, construction, plumbing, and nursing classes along with academic courses. Job Corp offers much of what all recovery programs offer: automotive, health care, business and technology classes with strong supportive counseling, social skills instruction and GED preparation. These programs give direction to how we might begin re-engaging our dropouts and prevent further dropping out in the future.

Two components appeared consistent in all drop-out recovery programs and seemed to be most associated with actual recovery and re-engagement of students, and these two components were also identified in this present study: differentiated learning strategies and strong social and affective relationships with staff and peers**.** However, this study explores both components in greater depth than previous studies and examines them in context of one educational setting as opposed to the sweeping overviews of twelve programs in the Martin and Halperin study. This present study also identifies additional components contributing to re-engagement not cited in these previous studies.

Ramifications of and Challenges for Adult Education

The ramifications of the apparently increasing numbers of high school dropouts and the increased numbers of GED test takers would seem to indicate that adult education programs are enrolling more youth, ages 16 – 25, as was noted in Chapter 1. Like other issues surrounding high school dropouts, the reality of this claim is somewhat unclear, but what we do know is that there are now large numbers of youth in adult education. Whether this number is growing is where the uncertainty lies. A review of the literature

in this area looks at current trends in the demographics of GED recipients and how that

may or may not affect participation in adult education, identifies the challenges to adult

education programs of serving this population, raises policy questions, especially

regarding funding, and documents some program responses to the problem.

Youth, the GED and Adult Education

According to the US Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult

Education (OVAE) and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) there has

been a steady increase in the number of youth 17-24 taking the GED exam. This increase

is about 6% as calculated from 1991. But according to the Youth Right Network,

"Nationally teens account for 49% of those who earned a GED in 2002, which was up

from 33% a decade earlier" (Arensen, 2004, p.1). "The total number of GED recipients

nationwide grew from 514,297 in 1996 to 655,514 in 2001, a 27% increase. But the

increase among 16-year-olds was 42% (13,371 to 19,009), and the increase among 17-

year-olds was 32% (56,572 to 74, 72)" (Rachal and Bingham, 2004, p. 36**).** Of course,

these statistics alone do not necessarily mean a significant increase in youth attending

adult education classes. The discrepancy between the lower NCES statistics and the

higher numbers reported by other sources is unclear and may be attributable to varying

reporting methods, but whatever the cause, numbers, as reported by all sources, are

increasing.

A 2008 study from the Department of Youth and Community Development

of New York City (DYCD), *Our Chance for Change: A Four-Year Reform Initiative for*

GED Testing in NYC. Figure 2:5 shows that the proportion of youth (16-24) compared to

adults in NYC who took the test in 2006: 60%; and 72% of GED certificates were

awarded to youth 16-24 years old for that same time period. A closer examination of

the data also shows that the younger the youth, 16, 17 or 18 years old, the higher the pass

rate. The rates of youth, who took the GED in NYC in 2006, are two to three times higher

than for adults over 25. Examination of the numbers for 2007, record a similar trend

(Cook, 2008).

Figure 2:5 –**Number of GED Candidates and Pass Rate by Age; 2006 for New York City**
Department of Youth and Community Development, NYC

Age	# of GED Candidates	% of Total GED Candidates	# of Diplomas	Pass Rate
16	134	.48%	92	68.66%
17	2,197	7.95%	1,562	71.10%
18	3,013	10.91%	1,817	60.31%
19	3,280	11.87%	1,613	49.18%
20	2,417	8.75%	1,039	42.99%
21	1,795	6.50%	692	38.55%
22	1,480	5.36%	542	36.62%
23	1,253	3.54%	475	37.91%
24	1,006	3.61%	370	36.78%
25+	11.053	40.01%	3,181	28.78%
Total	27,628		11,383	41.20%

This large proportion of young GED recipients and test-takers, both in NYC and

nationally, has been coined as "The adolescentizing of the GED" by Rachal and Bingham

(2004). Passing this equivalency exam opens doors to college, the military, and entry

level jobs. We can infer from these statistics, coupled with the high dropout rates, that

some portion of these adolescents secure a General Educational Development – (GED)

certificate through participation in adult education programs. According to the DYCD

study, GED candidates under 21 consistently score higher than other candidates, and the

demand for adult education GED classes for enrollment far exceeds the seats available in

adult education programs in NYC (Cook, 2008). This study does not directly state that

there are more youth in adult education than in the past, but, rather, that perhaps there

would be if there was room for them.

In 2003, An Exploratory Case Study of 16-20 year old students in Adult Education

Programs were conducted through the CUNY Graduate School of Education. The study

examined five adult education programs in a large, urban community. Through both

quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, including interviews with directors

of the programs and analysis of existing enrollment figures, the following conclusions

were drawn: enrollment of youth had dramatically risen in the four years prior to the

study; these students have behavioral as well as academic challenges; attendance is low

and sporadic among this population. This study indicates that this is a difficult population

to engage. This study states unequivocally, "whether analyzed in terms of simple

numbers of youth enrollments or in terms of youth enrollments as a proportion of

enrollments of all age groups, the program data showed large increases in youth

participation. The analysis indicates that 16 – 20 year olds were becoming the

predominant age group in the programs studied" (Perin, Flugman & Spiegel, 2006 p.

175). Perin, Flugman and Spiegel cite increases in youth enrollment (16-20 years old)

from 91% to 230%, for ages 21 – 24 year olds from 18% - 123% for the four urban

programs they studied in 2002.

Several reports in 2002 and 2003 substantiated the CUNY study stating basically that

although the trend of increasing numbers of adolescents in adult education programs is

generally substantiated in the field, to date much of the information that affirms this trend

is anecdotal (Imel, 2003). It does appear that youth are entering adult education centers in

larger numbers than ever before; in particular 16 – 20 year old youth enrollment in adult

education centers has risen (Imel, 2003). Both Hayes (2000) and Beckwith (2002)

confirm this trend, but also describe the difficulty in documenting the exact numbers of

youth in adult education programs. Beckwith asserts increased and stiffer high school

graduation requirements, a perception by high school students that the GED is a "quick

fix", and insufficient alternative high school programs for high school dropouts are

factors in this influx (Beckwith, 2002).

The 2004 National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy (NCSALL) study reports

that youth are, in fact, taking the GED test at a younger age. Whether that translates into

increasing numbers in GED programs is unclear. The study goes on to say that it is clear

that there already is a high proportion of youth in Adult Basic Education programs (ABE)

nationwide; 41% of all participants are youth, so whether that is an increase or not seems

irrelevant (Roloff & DiTommasco, 2004). Given the large numbers, there is a need for

information on how to engage these youth in our adult education programs and this study

addresses that need.

Policy and Programmatic Responses

Cook (2008) makes the case in her NYC DYCD study that more programs and space in programs for youth preparing for the GED need to be made citywide and that taking the GED practice exam, given in adult education programs, should be a requirement in order to take the official exam. If both of these recommendations were implemented it would certainly substantially increase the number of youth in programs, and, likely, better prepare them for the test.

In her review of programs and policies regarding youth in adult education programs, Hayes (2000) focuses on 16 – 17 year olds in adult education programs and the policies surrounding their participation. She raises questions about how to socially and cognitively engage youth within adult education settings. She cites the challenge of engaging youth and adults in the same classrooms, and notes that some programs are teaching youth and adults in separate classes. Because youth come with different needs, interests and focus for learning than adults, Hayes argues, engaging them may be different than it is for adults. For example, she points out that instructional materials and methods which may be appropriate for adults may not be a good fit for adolescents.

Susan Imel (2003) calls for programmatic responses to engage and effectively serve youth. She concludes her paper on the topic with a summary of policy level questions raised by adult educators. These include whether adult education programs should be serving this population when, in most cases they are not funded to do so, and should adult education programs continue to serve students when a far better funded system with many more resources has failed to serve (Imel, 2003). Rachal and Bingham (2004) argue that adult education programs should be reserved for adults and that it should be state policy that high school dropouts must wait until their high school class graduates before

they can enter adult education GED programs and take the GED exam. To date, these

questions and ideas linger, not yet fully resolved. But for purposes of this study, the

question is not, should we serve this population, since they are already attending, but how

can we learn to re-engage them with the limited resources.

Youth in Adult Education – Program Designs

Pending answers, and regardless of the appropriateness of serving this population

in adult education programs, youth are participating. This has pushed the field to begin to

grapple with this reality simply by documenting existing programmatic and instructional

strategies. Yet, there are few published descriptions of what adult education programs are

doing. (Imel, 2002) There are two programs with research components aimed at serving

out-of- school youth in adult settings that have done so, FutureWorks (Cochran, 2000)

and Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning (2000, 2001). Elizabeth Cochran

conducted an action and practitioner research project at her FutureWorks program in

Virginia. She found that small classrooms, individualized instruction, shorter week and

school day, informal classroom climate, teacher advocacy and alternative routes to

accomplishing goals were the key components to the program's success in meeting the

needs of youth (Cochran, 2000). According to Cochran, these components are effective in

engagement and dropout recovery as demonstrated by retention in the program and

success on the GED exam.

Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning (MAAL) in Kansas City, Missouri adopted

a "youth cultural competency program" incorporating youth culture, teen icons and teen

music as teaching tools as a way of reaching young people who do not respond to

traditional adult basic education classes (MAAL, 2001). Traditional adult education

teaches to adult learners' goals and interests such as parenting, current events, immigration, Bible reading, and functional literacy skills. Metropolitan alters themes and goals to those of interest to adolescents, acknowledging that their goals and interests may be different from older students.

MAAL's program design has a strong professional development component and creates learning communities within its program for increased relationship building between staff and youth. As reported by MAAL, GED graduation rates and retention rates were up 55% in 2000 and 2001 (MAAL 2001). Both the FutureWorks and MAAL designs, especially as they highlighted learning communities, small group work, and goal setting, as well as relationship development were consistent with the findings of this study.

A few articles written by adult education practitioners have appeared in newsletters and practitioner-oriented journals on the topic of program models for youth in adult education. These practitioners, who have served youth in adult education classes, document the increasing youth trend and suggest strategies for responding to it (Smith, 2002; Chlup, 2006). Most of the discussion focuses on classroom management issues, and program format questions such as whether to teach adults and teens in the same classrooms (Chlup, 2006; Appeit, 2006) or segregate by age. On this issue of mixed age groupings in classes, a best practice awaits more empirical evidence but this study does begin to engage this subject in its findings.

The CUNY study states that 16 – 20 year old youth entering adult education programs are less mature, motivated, and responsible than adult students over twenty, and more likely to be involved in drugs, gangs, and fighting. Also, they are more likely to be

mandated by courts or drug rehabilitation programs to attend classes. According to this study, they exhibit Attention Deficit Deficiency and hyperactivity more often than adult students. CUNY's study concludes with a strong recommendation for a research agenda "investigating more fully the educational, social, health, and career needs of out-of-school 16-20 year old adult education youth" (CUNY, 2003).   This present study begins to address this recommendation, and is a step towards fulfilling this research agenda.

Given this review of the literature, it is clear that this study addresses a clear gap in the research literature. We know a great deal about who drops out, why, and what societal trends contribute to this problem, as well as the rates at which youth drop out. We have ample evidence of the personal and social costs of dropping out, particularly for young men of color. We also know a few programmatic interventions that are successful in drop-out prevention and recovery. We understand that many young people are either now entering or potentially will enter adult education programs after they drop out, and that this number appears to be increasing. We also know that the current proportion of youth in adult education programs is large. Several researchers and practitioners have argued that they present instructional challenges and opportunities that are likely to be distinctive from their older classmates. But we have little empirical research on what specific characteristics of programs and instruction can effectively engage them in adult education. The two studies of adult education programs previously cited, MAAL and FutureWorks, appear to be practitioner research projects of small scale and design. Although clearly making a contribution to the field, these studies do not provide the kind of empirical inquiry required of such a complex, large and significant topic.

This study begins to provide that empirical evidence. Through an ethnographic lens, it

 looks at a specific under-studied group within adult education programs, males 16-25

years old, with regard to their cognitive and social engagement in one specific program.

An examination of the research on high school dropouts, programs serving these

populations and youth in adult education programs, indicates the value and importance of

investigating an adult education program which serves this population to determine the

features that contribute to the young men's engagement in learning and what the students

see as its most important features contributing to their engagement. This study begins to

meet that need.

CHAPTER 3   - STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

"Clearly it is no longer possible to think about learning without context. Although context cannot be ignored anymore; educators often struggle to explain how people learn in and with various contexts."

Niewolny & Wilson (2009, p.1)

"I agree with the steps taken in the research, to do it well. I feel the concepts and principles are similar to mine so I like we're partners in this."

Javier – Key Informant

This is an ethnographic study examining how one adult education center engages out of school males age 16 -25 years in learning. Ethnography was chosen because it provides the appropriate scope and context for capturing the complexity of the program and is able to address broad cultural components needed to answer the research question. According to John Creswell (1998) in the classic, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* ethnography with its origins in anthropology and sociology is an appropriate choice "when one wants to study the behaviors of a culture-sharing group… and human behavior is recorded in cultural terms" (pg. 39). The focus of this study is a culture-sharing group, The Downtown Learning Center, and how that culture impacts engagement. Ethnography was also selected because of the nature of ethnographic fieldwork and the ethnographer's role. Again according to Creswell, ethnography presents the "native's viewpoint" in a systematic way with intense engagement over extended time by the researcher recording observations and interviews through note-taking, video and audio means (Creswell, 1998). As this chapter describes, this study

meets all of these criteria for what Creswell calls "good ethnography" (Creswell, pg. 212).

<div align="center">Site Description</div>

The research site was selected for its work over the past three years with an estimated 300 (100 per year) young men from the target population. Approximately 50 students from the target group, as well as older adults, graduate with a GED annually. Study participants were drawn from the graduates, of which 90% expressed an intention to go on to college or full-time employment, as well as from the 200 young males (16-25 from Pre-GED, Literacy, ESOL and GED programs) currently registered in the program. The Center encouraged this on site research, providing easy access for me to conduct this study.

The Downtown Learning Center is located at 180 Livingston Street in Downtown Brooklyn, New York. At any one time, it serves an average of 500 youth and adults and more than 750 annually in its ESOL, Literacy and GED programs. It houses a large GED program attracting approximately 100 young males of color per school year. The site has five full-time and two part-time staff, and 125 volunteers. Among the program's former students, over its seven year history, an estimated 350 have passed the GED exam, and gone on to college and/or employment. It has an ongoing waiting list of several hundred.

The Downtown Learning Center's mission, developed by students, staff, tutors and administrators, is: "*to empower and* transform *lives one at a time …through education in the context of community*" (The Downtown Learning Center, 2006). This aspiration seems to be consistently reflected in many aspects of the program. Facilitated by one volunteer tutor per group, instruction is conducted in small groups of seven to ten

students and is participatory. Peer tutoring is encouraged and supported within each

group. Groups meet for a minimum of six hours per week; in most cases they meet for

nine hours a week over a period of ten months per year. At the time this study was

conducted, morning, afternoon and evening instruction was available. Before they begin

working with students, all staff and volunteers receive an initial nine week, 54 hour,

intensive training in adult education, literacy and second language acquisition theory and

practice. Ongoing staff development is provided but is not extensive.

The Downtown Learning Center (DLC) is recognized by the State Education

Department of New York, New York City (NYC) Departments of Parole and Probation,

and the Human Resources Administration as a viable GED preparation site and referral

site for GED classes. The DLC has affiliations with the Literacy Assistance Center in

NYC, the Coalition for Adult Education, and New York University Writing Program for

purposes of professional development and program support. The DLC collaborates with

Penn State Adult Education Program for purposes of research and graduate school

recruitment of potential adult education doctoral students. Nyack College Graduate

School of Counseling and Long Island University utilize the DLC as a masters level

internship site for their counseling students. CUNY's Black Male Initiative Program

provides college tutors to the DLC as well as college entrance support for DLC

graduates.

The DLC is supported financially, primarily, by a faith community, The Brooklyn

Tabernacle. Funding is also provided through private donors, church giving, and

foundations, but only minimally through the city of New York. In addition to financial

support, The Brooklyn Tabernacle Church and The Downtown Learning Center share the

same board of directors, but are incorporated separately. The Downtown Learning Center
is a 501c3 not-for-profit community based organization. The Learning Center is a social
service "arm" of the church.

The Brooklyn Tabernacle has an international reputation and outreach on all seven
continents through its seven-time Grammy Award winning choir and its missions
programs. It is a non-denominational Christian church; its membership is both racially
and culturally diverse with approximately 8000 members from all over the world.

The following classes are offered: GED, Pre-GED, Reading and Writing for Adults,
English for Speakers of Other Languages, Parenting, SAT, Spanish and French. In
addition, all registered students of the DLC can participate in any one or more of the
the following workshops or projects: Student Publishing, Decorative Arts, Student
Advisory Council, Playwriting, Fieldtrips, Strategic Planning, Supportive
Counseling, College and Career Counseling, Clothing and Food Distribution. A
Computer Lab and Library is on site for students' use before, during and after
classes. Participation in all classes, workshops, and projects is free of charge**.**

Recruitment of staff, tutors and students is done through the church, as well as the
wider New York City community. Participants in The Downtown Learning Center's
programs are also eligible to participate in all church activities and functions including
Sunday services, prayer meetings, youth activities, the basketball league, men's chorus,
and women's meetings, but are not required to be members of the church. An estimated
fifty percent of DLC participants are members of, or regular visitors of the church.

Summer outreach programs, run by DLC staff, assist churches that are interested in
developing adult education programs. In the summer of 2006, the staff went to the Czech

Republic to help develop an ESOL camp; in the summer of 2007 and fall of 2008, the

staff went to Accra, Ghana to assist in development of an adult literacy program and

library.

Data Sources

The data collection plan was designed to give both depth and breadth from a variety of

perspectives to a description of the ways in which the DLC engages young male learners.

Although a variety of data collection methods were utilized to do so, the primary data

sources were interviews, focus groups and observations with five key informants of the

focal population.

Data which was collected from these five key informants helped identify and drive

additional data collection from other sources. These secondary sources were used as

checks and elaborations on data from them. In addition, the secondary sources provided

data from diverse learning center sources and perspectives of stakeholders, providing the

opportunity to gather a more comprehensive picture of the DLC. Methods used to gather

data from multiple sources and stakeholders included semi-structured individual

interviews, focus group interviews, mapping of the physical space as used by key

informants, dialogue journals, observations of instruction, behavior in groups, and use of

instructional tools by the target population.

Sample Selection

Criteria used to select participants was that they were males 16-25 years old,

minority (as defined by race, ethnicity or economic status), currently or previously

enrolled in The Downtown Learning Center GED program for a minimum of one year

with consistent attendance, reading at the 9th grade level or above, and willingness to participate in the study. Individuals who met the above criteria were self-nominated or nominated by staff, volunteer tutors, and other stakeholders. Other means of recruitment were word of mouth, weekly memos sent to all students, which included a request for study participants, e-mail recruitment announcements, verbal announcements, and researcher invitation. Fifteen students were nominated for participation and were contacted and invited to participate.

Once this pool of individuals was nominated, these nominated individual's files were reviewed to ascertain age, attendance record, grade level, length of time in the program, and educational history to assess that the study criteria for the target population were met. Individuals who met the selection criteria were called in for a screening interview to determine availability and willingness to participate in all aspects of the research (interviews, focus groups, observations and dialogue journals.) Beyond agreeing to participate, individuals who expressed special interest in the research and/or had multiple levels of engagement in the center (participating in more than one class and volunteering in the program in special events, were members of the student council, and/or peer tutoring) were asked to participate as key informants. Participation was voluntary.

Five key informants were selected from this pool of 15 individuals who met the above criteria and who had been nominated by the staff, tutors, and other stakeholders. Preference was given to GED students who would likely be ready to take the exam within the next academic year, had good attendance, participated in a small instructional group regularly, volunteered on student committees and were peer tutors in the program, as well as those students with the longest period of participation.

Beyond the five key informants, the selection process continued to identify additional young male learners and other stakeholders (graduates and current 16-25 year old male students, board members, student advisory council members, adult students, parents, staff and volunteer tutors) from the DLC to participate in this study. Young men who met the general selection criteria and were nominated to be key informants, but not selected because of limited time of enrollment, limited participation in center activities outside their instructional group or scheduling conflicts, were invited to participate in the Young Males Focus Groups.

Center stakeholders were recruited for four focus groups by invitation. Staff members and volunteer tutors, who worked with GED program participants and young men, were invited to participate. Board members, staff, and volunteers familiar with the GED program, and those who expressed interest in the research, were also invited to participate. I, as the principal investigator, recruited them through public announcements at organizational meetings and e-mail invitations, as well as during one-on-one conversations. Adult learners, 26 years old and above, and student advisory council members were recruited through the Weekly Memo (bulletin published for all program participants on a weekly basis) and verbal announcements made during regular program hours.

These adult students, over 26 years old, were selected based on the following criteria: minimum of one year participation in Center, commitment to the Center as demonstrated by good attendance and involvement in one or more activities, such as student advisory council, volunteer internships, weekly tutoring, book committee, student publishing, and special events sponsored by the center.

Staff and volunteer tutors were selected based on criteria which included a minimum of one year employment or volunteering at the DLC, direct work with target population, demonstrated effectiveness with target population as shown by class retention and test score increase, and time availability.

Characteristics, including minimum one year participation on board, having visited The Downtown Learning Center's GED program, and time availability were important in the selection of board members. This part of the recruitment process proved the most difficult as both The Downtown Learning Center and The Brooklyn Tabernacle have the same small board, limiting the choice for board participants in the study. In addition, board membership was hard to ascertain, and information difficult to glean; therefore, only one board member participated. Five influential church staff members participated and two focus groups of older men were conducted. Composition of the groups included: volunteers, tutors, maintenance, security, and administrative staff. Participants came both voluntarily, and because they were recruited.

Data Collection

The primary data collection tools focused on the five key informants of the DLC. Individual interviews, observations, focus groups, spatial mapping and dialogue journals were done to develop a complex, layered, intertwined picture of the DLC. More focus groups, observations and interviews were conducted than originally planned, as the initial data collected inspired additional questions and the participants' enthusiasm for the study made it worthwhile and relatively easy to organize forums to collect additional data. Table 3.1 summarizes the different data collection methods utilized from a range of sources.

Individual Interviews

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with the five young men identified as key informants: Javier, Dustin, Shawn, David and Jamal. A total of eleven interviews, two with each of four informants and three with Javier (see table 3.1), each of an hour to an hour and a half in length, were conducted. (Javier, Shawn, David and Jamal participated in focus groups as well.) The first informant interview was centered on what engagement in learning meant to them, under what circumstances disengagement happened and why, and what re-engagement in learning "looked like" since coming to the DLC. This first interview also probed previous school experiences as they related to engagement in learning and to the young man's identity as a learner. The second interview focused on gathering descriptions of the DLC and how it fostered, or failed to foster, engagement in learning and the key informants' identify development identity as learners.

Table 3.1

Data collection followed the timeline below:

MONTH/YEAR	DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY	PARTICIPANTS
JANUARY 2008	File Review	Key Informants
	Interviews Begin Interview #1	Key Informant-Javier
FEBRUARY 2008	Interviews 2 & 3	Key informant-Shawn & David
MARCH 2008	Focus Group #1	Young Men
	Interview #4	Key Informant-Dustin
	Observation A	Javier
	Critical Friends #1	Critical Friends

APRIL 2008	Observation B	David
	Observation C	Dustin
	Interview #5	Javier
	Observation D	Dustin
	Focus Group #2	Young Men
	Interview #6	Dustin
	Observation E	Javier
	Interview #7	Jamal
MAY 2008	Observation F	David
	Observation G	Jamal
	Observation H	Jamal
	Focus Group #3	Older Men Stakeholder
	Focus Group #4	DLC Staff/Stud/Vol
	Interview #8	David
	Interview #9	Javier
JUNE 2008	Focus Group #5	Older Men
	Interview #10	Shawn
	Focus Group #6	Stakeholder- church
JULY 2008	Interview #11	Dustin
AUGUST 2008	Interview #12	DLC Director
SEPTEMBER 2008	Data Analysis Spatial Mapping	
OCTOBER 2008	Critical Friends #2	Critical Friends
DECEMBER 2008	Member Checking Group	Young Men/Stakeholders
JANUARY 2008 *Participant Journaling – ongoing	Critical Friends #3	Critical Friends
JANUARY- MARCH 2009	Data Analysis	
MARCH 2009	Member Checking	5 Key Informants

Whereas the first interview focused on the individual's past and present learning

experiences, the second interview focused on the organization and the instructional

context with regard to how they influenced the individual. There were also some

questions about cultural tools (cultural in this context meaning "the culture of the

organization") used at the DLC. Some examples of these tools are curriculum material,

mission statement, maps, marketing material, and DLC published books.

Between the first and second interview, observations were conducted and dialogue

journals were initiated. Observations of key informants were planned to occur between

the two interviews so that questions related to observations could be addressed during the

second interview. The second interview also included questions, which emerged from a

first Young Men's Focus Group and provided an opportunity to clarify and elaborate on

Focus Group data.

All individual interviews were audio recorded, and interview notes were

 taken on the responses of the key informants during each interview. I transcribed the

audiotapes within several days of the actual interview.   I became well acquainted with

the data quickly and was able to do initial coding very early in the data collection

process.

Observations

Eight observations of four of the key informants were conducted. The fifth key

informant (Shawn) had already graduated and left the DLC at the time of this study.

These observations followed Javier, Dustin, David and Jamal during the instructional

interactions between tutor and student, with other students, in small groups, as well as

during work-study and college admission interactions. The key informants were observed

as they utilized tools within the instructional setting, participated in additional learning

activities other than those in the classroom, and negotiated the physical learning space. It

is important to recognize that all observations focused on how the four young men

engaged with other learners, instructors and program staff, learning tools, and the

physical space. In other words, I focused on engagement of the young men within the

learning community through place, instructional format, tools and activities, and

relationships. The only exception to this was the observations which followed Javier from

his work-study job at the DLC to the local community college and his engagement

process there.

Interviews, focus groups, and dialogue journal entries were interspersed

with these observations. This back and forth data collection process proved to be a rich

way to elicit information about actual engagement in the classroom and to do ongoing

member checking with the informants about whether my observations were accurate as I

recorded them. Observation field notes were given to key informants before the second

and third interviews, and they were asked to respond to the content of the field notes after

reading them. Key informants were uniform in their responses saying, almost without

exception, that the observational transcripts captured them and their engagement with the

instructional groups accurately, often expressing surprise at the accuracy with which their

interactions and behaviors had been captured. As a whole, the observations provided an

in depth picture of what it is like to be a learner at the DLC. The total number of hours of

observation was approximately 24.

Observation of instructional engagement

I participated as an observer in three of the key informants' (David, Dustin and

Jamal) instructional groups; a total of six observations, two observations per informant,

of approximately three hours each. David and Dustin were observed within their

instructional groups studying for their GED test. The remaining two observations were with Jamal, who I observed tutoring a group of GED learners. Jamal, a GED graduate, was now tutoring other students in his own instructional group. Notes were jotted down during participation in the groups and written up more fully immediately following the observation. The focus of these six observations was how David, Dustin and Jamal were cognitively and socially engaged in learning within GED instructional groups. Observations centered on collection of data which included non-verbal communication (body language, eye contact, attention to task), instructional interactions (questioning, discussing, initiating conversation, reflecting), and social interactions with tutors and students (laughing, listening stance, conversing), use of time, use of instructional tools, and indication of attention to goals.

As a part of these six observations, data on the three young men's use of instructional tools were collected. Instructional tools are defined in two categories: social groupings and physical tools. These social grouping tools included small group instruction, one on one instruction, peer tutoring, computer instructed learning, lectures, sustained silent reading, writing share groups, math manipulatives' group, and informal study groups. The physical tools observed were commercially and DLC created books, math manipulatives, writing tools (journals, notebooks, software, and maps), authentic texts (menus, subway maps, invoices, newspapers) and documentation tools including reading & writing logs, and goal sheets. These observations occurred as a special focus during observations in the GED instructional groups and were documented as a part of the instructional group observations.

Observations of work-study and off-site engagement

In addition to these six observations, an additional two were conducted with Javier. The first was during his work-study job at the Center, taking and documenting student attendance. These observations tracked social interactions, work performance, use of authority and non-verbal behavior. During the second observation, Javier left the Center to register for college at the local community college (he had passed his GED). I followed Javier to the college, through the registration process, and then interviewed him after this observation.

Observation of engagement in physical space mapping

A physical map of The Downtown Learning Center was created to examine the proximics (how space affects, drives, and influences engagement) of the key informants at DLC. The purpose of the map was to observe engagement patterns of the young men and how they utilized the space. Initial journal entry questions and interviews probed how and what spaces the young men used and where social and cognitive engagement took place. Initially I obtained a map of the DLC, a type of architect's blueprint. During observations of the young men, I kept track of what space they used, for what purposes space was used, and where the young men spent most of their time. This included where the young men congregated with peers or alone, and where they studied. I added descriptions to the map of how furniture was arranged, the size of rooms, and door and window placement in the spaces where the young men had their groups. Once physical spaces were identified, interview and focus group questions probed the young men about their preference for and utilization of certain spaces and room configurations to find out what it was about the spaces which enhanced social and cognitive engagement.

Journal Entries

Written dialogue journals were given to three of the five key informants (Javier, Shawn and David), as well as a few of the other young men participating in the research following the first interview. The informants were asked to reflect on the interview process and write down additional thoughts they may have had that they did not say during the interview. They were also asked to give feedback on the interview questions, and give their overall impressions of the process. In some instances, a question may have been asked that seemed to warrant additional response by the key informant so they were asked to take the journal home and write additional responses to the interview question.

Once the informant brought the journal back, I read his entry and wrote a response, as well as asking additional questions for clarification. The strategy was designed to obtain more data than could be attained from the interview. The idea was to have a written conversation related to the research questions to add depth and clarity by probing and examining the classroom observations, as well as issues raised in the interviews, and ultimately to explore, monitor, and evaluate the nature of engagement. To these ends, the dialogue journals were only moderately successful.

It was hoped that the dialogue journals would encourage responses to DLC policies, systems and space. In actuality specific questions including: What DLC rules do you remember and are they effective? What do you like or dislike about the physical space at the DLC? Did you use the goals sheets? Are they effective? These questions were better addressed and answered in individual interviews and focus groups. It seems that the young men's reflections were more fluently and freely given in the interviews and focus groups than they were in the journals.

This method proved to be the least fruitful in terms of collecting data. It was most successful with David, although he struggled with the mechanics of writing, because he did complete several journal entries. Javier and Shawn each wrote one journal entry to which I responded, but they frequently forgot or lost their journals. David provided me with two entries, which I was able to use in the analysis. Nevertheless, I ended up abandoning this method of data collection in favor of concentrating on other more fruitful methods. I did attempt to create reflective writing opportunities after focus groups and interviews to give the young men time to think about and give additional feedback. In one instance, I asked focus group participants to draw a picture of where they saw themselves "within" the DLC.

These reflective responses, both in words and images, although less frequent than I would have liked, gave additional data that participants did not share during the interviews or focus group, or had not had an opportunity to contribute. These efforts seemed like a reasonable replacement for the dialogue journals.

Although to a lesser degree than anticipated, the journals, reflective writing, and drawing did provide a qualitatively different kind of data than the interviews, observations and focus groups. In the planning stages of the research I assumed that the journaling would provide a forum for individual critical reflection, as well as in depth self examination and extended reflection on the learner's identity that individual and group interviews could not. In actuality, the key informants preferred to do their critical reflection using oral communication (interviews and focus groups), with the other students and me. This willingness to engage in intense self-examination, critical reflection, and identity exploration is discussed further in the analysis section.

Secondary Data Collection

Focus Groups

Focus groups, which included four of the key informants - Dustin's schedule did not allow for his participation in the focus groups - as well as other program stakeholders, were conducted using group elicitation techniques (LeCompte, Schensel, 1999). Focus groups were purposely not defined by participant's roles or functions in the program. Instead they were mixed groupings of two older men's groups, which were comprised of men playing different roles and performing different functions in the organization (tutors, older students, staff, volunteers, church members). One church staff group included one pastor, administrators, and supervisory church staff. The one DLC stakeholder's group included students, tutors, and staff.

Focus groups were implemented because of their social nature. The focus groups were consistent and parallel with common instructional practices at the DLC; focus groups on specific instructional topics and for the purpose of sharing writing are often held. Therefore, participants were accustomed to interacting in small groups, which facilitated the free flow of discussion.

Focus groups were audio and video recorded, with subsequent transcription of sessions for data analysis purposes. A total of seven focus groups were conducted: two with young males, one member checking group including young males, and four with other stakeholders. (See table 3:1)

Young males

Two focus groups composed of four of the five key informants, as well as seven additional males, 16-25 years old who met the study criteria, were conducted. The sessions were between an hour and two hours in length. The purpose of these focus groups was to identify and describe practices at The Downtown Learning Center that effected participants' engagement in learning. In line with this, participants' cultural knowledge surrounding the DLC was probed. An initial focus group was conducted to elicit data that would give direction to individual interviews, observations, and journaling. Based on initial focus group data, follow-up questions for interviews were developed, topics for journaling uncovered, and observation activities determined. For example, during the first young men's focus group, the young men spoke intensely and at length about the emotionally negative experiences they had experienced in school. Therefore, follow-up on this topic was continued in other data collection sessions as it related to current re-engagement. The focus group, as a data collection method, was selected for use because of its social nature. The second young men's group occurred after other data collection (interviews, observations, and journaling with key informants) was underway. This group was composed of six young men, 16 - 25 years old. Emerging themes from the research were presented to them for feedback and elaboration on the data.

A third young men's group, which included four young men (one key informant) and three additional stakeholders, was held at the end of data collection. This third group session served as a means of further member checking of initial findings; feedback and reactions were requested from this group.

Other stakeholders in The Downtown Learning Center

Four focus groups composed of DLC Stakeholders (staff, student advisory council members, adult student 26+ in age, volunteer tutors and members of the board of directors) who met the study criteria were conducted. The initial goal was to interview two groups of 7-8 stakeholders (minimum 5 per group) from all areas and roles in the DLC. The sessions were to be one hour in length each. There would be a total of 14-16 Stakeholders' Focus Group participants.

Actual data collection deviated from the original plan in terms of the number of stakeholders participating, the number of actual groups, the length of sessions and the composition of groups. A total of four Stakeholder's Focus Groups were conducted including, two older men's groups, one mixed staff/tutor/student group and one board/pastor/church staff group. In all, 30 stakeholders participated. The first Older Men's Group had 9 participants, the second Older Men's Group had 7 participants, the DLC Stakeholders group had 10 participants, and the Board/Church/Staff Stakeholders group had 7 participants (The first and second older men's group had an overlap of 3 participants). The composition of the groups was less heterogeneous in terms of roles in the organization and gender than planned. Part of the departure from the original data collection plan was due to scheduling challenges. More importantly, once the research began, themes emerged that warranted composing additional groups, separated by gender and role in the organization. There were many volunteers who asked to participate, and they had much to say. In one case, so much discussion and intense emotion came out that it warranted a second group meeting of more than the one hour allotted.

The purpose of the Stakeholders Focus Groups was to identify and discuss practices at the DLC that participants believed were important to 16-25 year old young men's engagement in learning.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with initial data collection and memoing. Throughout the months of data collection (and even during a concentrated analysis stage) I carried a journal with me and practiced the reflexive process of memoing (Miles, Huberman, 1984). Multiple volumes of this research journal were kept throughout the process of data collection to jot down observations, conversations, notes from related reading, and thoughts, reflections and questions that emerged during the months at the research site. This was the first line of analysis, the identifying of recurrent patterns of verbal responses and repeated patterns of behavior, before beginning systematic and full analysis in September of 2008. From the beginning of data collection in January of 2008, I was on the "look out" for emerging issues that might eventually lead to analytic themes. Early on, I was alert to patterns in the data and searched for the "stories" the data was revealing. This initial analysis supported the data collection and informed the selection of location and timing for observations of instructional engagement, tools, center activities, and physical space. The initial data collection and preliminary analysis from the focus group, interviews and journaling, and the analysis of audio tape recordings and written interview notes, drove the choices for observations and generated further questions for later focus groups and interviews.

Table 3.2
Data analysis timeline:

METHODS OF ANALYSIS	MONTH/YEAR
Memoing	January 2008
Memoing	February 2008
Initial Coding	
Memoing	March 2008
Co-occurring coding with data collection	
Critical Friends Analysis	
Memoing	April – August 2008
Co-occurring coding Interim analysis	
Inductive Coding of Transcripts	September 2008
Reading on Qualitative Analysis	
Memoing	
Critical Friends Analysis	October 2008
Reading in Qualitative Analysis	
Inductive Coding of Text	November 2008
Enumerative Inquiry	
Matrix design	
Data Reduction	
Re-Coding	
Metaphor Formation	December 2008
Visual Display for Analysis	
Graph Designs for Enumerative Data	
Final Text Coding	
Member Checking	March 2009

Several kinds of analysis targeted at different data were occurring simultaneously --

coding for emerging themes and patterns from initial focus groups and interviews and

clarification of those patterns with the observations, final focus groups and interviews.

Coding

Concentrated analysis began in September 2008 with coding of written transcripts for

emerging patterns of common participant verbal responses, behavioral patterns, and word

frequency patterns around re-engagement. The transcriptions coded for common

categories of responses were taken from all interviews, focus groups, observations,

dialogue journals, maps, and research memoing. This clustering, or sorting, started by

putting responses and observations in "bins" or "categories" that were similar and related

to re-engagement in learning (LeCompte, Goetz 1983). Opting for a manual approach,

rather than a qualitative software option, all documentation was colored coded for

emerging themes. Each bin or category was given a different color. This was the first

stage of data reduction (Miles and Huberman 1984).

From this first stage, the following broad categories or themes emerged which I

labeled: 1) affective engagement 2) activities and tools 3) obstacles/limitations 4) space

5) race/identity and 6) other. At this time, I was still open for further or revised

categories but the initial coding had begun. All initial categories addressed the research

question. All categories were reported, or were observed, to have engaged (or in the

instance of obstacles – disengaged) the young men, and all categories appeared

frequently in the data.

Matrix Display

I utilized hard copies, color coding and physically displaying these transcripts

and coded categories on my walls to better visualize the data, but I needed a method for

further data reduction and visualization. Consequently, I took the broad categories

derived from initial coding and designed a matrix display (Miles & Huberman, 1984)

using the five emergent themes as main matrix headers with a row for each participant

group. In other words, a matrix was designed for key informants' responses, older men,

and each stakeholder's group. All observation, interview and focus group data were

combined in each participant group matrix. The rationale for creating a matrix for each

group was that there appeared to be significant contrast between the responses of the

young men and the responses of other participant groups in the study, and I wanted to

explore this as well as examine the emergent themes and patterns.

Once all coded data from the transcripts was entered into the data matrixes, I color

coded the data once more for the now emerging categories, which I initially labeled

affective relationship, the significance of space, curriculum, and forces of destruction.

These four categories emerged through identification of discussion themes, themes in

word choice and repetition of themes from multiple data sources.

For example, throughout the data there were examples of participants' speaking

about the affective or emotional relationships necessary for engagement; there were

multiple discussions around this topic from all data sources. This theme of relationships

and the emotional or affective nature of those relationships was repeated over and over

again, becoming apparent through color-coding the data. In addition, emotive and

relational word choices by participants (love, affection, nurturance, care, friendship) were

prevalent throughout the data as the participants spoke of engagement in learning. The

additional three categories of space (which would be further coded for specific types of

space), learning activities, and threats to re-engagement emerged in much the same way

through analysis of discussions themes, word choice, and frequency and in the

appearance of these themes across all collection methods and sources.

Enumerative Inquiry

At this point in the analysis process, I wanted another vantage point on the data

to make sure that what I believed I was seeing was really present. Therefore, I decided to do an enumerative inquiry (Miles and Huberman 1984). This quasi-statistical approach uses word frequency and the numeric listing and classifying of items and words by percentage and frequency. After exploring several qualitative software programs suggested by Miles and Huberman, I chose to use the word frequency application provided on my MacIntosh Computer. This simple computer program provided the counting device I needed. I was able to establish the total number of words for each transcript and identify those words or derivatives appearing most frequently in each text and then sort these frequently used words into my emergent categories of the matrixes. Those words that had either a strong denotative or connotative relation to the emergent categories were tabulated for frequency in the texts. I was able to establish and support my initial coding through this enumerative approach (see findings chapters for specifics).

Search for a Metaphor

As I began to uncover emerging themes through the data display in the matrix, coding and enumerative analysis, I began to see a more complex picture from the data with many contradictions among participant responses. Upon further examination of the quotes and narratives from the key informants and stakeholders, a picture of a complex, spiraling, interwoven picture of the DLC began to emerge. My next question was, "How can I best analyze the complex relationships among themes and adequately capture the inherent issues and contradictions? Is there a metaphor that will help interpret and make the findings clear?

As Miles and Huberman (1984) explain, the use of metaphors is, among other qualitative devices, a way to find patterns and connect findings to theory. I needed a

metaphor that could capture the complexity of the social cultural system of engagement that was emerging in a simple, visual way. Outside on my patio, where I would retreat from my research, were numerous spider webs – fragile, complex, patterned. The idea for the metaphor emerged. The idea of the web described well the complex, woven nature of the DLC, standing alone yet connected to other organizations. Thus, I decided to use the metaphor in the analysis process as a way of visualizing and making sense of the findings and their relationship to each other.

Validity and Reliability

   Four techniques were employed to ensure validity and reliability of the research: triangulation, member checking, critical friends group and my own reflective process (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

Triangulation

   In addition to the four overall techniques ensuring validity and reliability, four types of triangulation were utilized. *Data collection triangulation* was enacted by using multiple approaches to collecting data and involving multiple participants filling a range of roles in the study. This triangulation of data provided different voices, perspectives, angles of visions and points of view (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The second type of triangulation, *methods triangulation*, involves multiple analytic strategies. In this regard, I utilized initial coding, interim analysis, text coding, visual displays, enumerative analysis, member checking, charting and graphing.

   Similar to the "web" metaphor that emerged from data analysis, the triangulation process was rich and allowed for plenty of opportunity to compare and contrast

participant responses as well as compare and contrast responses from different collection

methods. The further triangulation of varying analytic processes, and the enumerative and

emergent coding from text, contributed to the credibility of the findings.

Member Checking

Member checking in which research participants review artifacts of data collection

to see if they "ring true", reflect their views, and seem consistent with what they said

during the data collection process, was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In all

instances where key informants reviewed transcripts from observations, they affirmed the

observations.

A focus group designed to be a member check was held in December 2008 at which I

presented the initial findings of the study, the analysis methods, and the web metaphor.

Key informants and research participants had an opportunity to look at the findings, ask

questions, make comments and respond. Without exception, participants thought the

findings were consistent with what they had said, what they heard others say, and found

the metaphor appropriate. With this assurance from research participants, I could go

back to work confident that the findings were not only valid, but I could take the

metaphor of the web further.

A final focus group was conducted in March 2009, following completion of a first

draft as another member check. A presentation highlighting the process of the study and

findings was made to key informants to gather their reactions, feedback, questions,

concerns and suggestions. Again, the informants resonated with the findings and believed

they were consistent with what they had said, felt, and expressed during the course of the

study. With one exception, all key informants continued to feel that the web was

appropriate. One key informant was concerned that the web should only represent The

DLC and not other schools that failed to engage young men. He felt that it needed to be

made clear that the web was the DLC, not a broader educational context.

Critical Friends

During the analysis process, "critical friends" (volunteers, older students, other

researchers, graduate students) met with me to identify preliminary models or categories

for engagement that were emerging from the data. These analytic group meetings met

three times during the course of the research. Critical Friends Group members were

recruited from other NYC Adult Education Programs, friends who work in Adult

Education, Penn State Adult Education Graduate Program, NYC Department of

Education/Special Education, The Brooklyn Tabernacle, The Literacy Assistance Center

and The Downtown Learning Center. The Literacy Assistance Center of New York City

agreed to provide space for The Critical Friends Group meetings.

At the first meeting, the group reviewed an interview transcript and gave me

feedback on my interview questions, the sequence of my questions, and boundary issues I

was struggling with in my role as participant observer. Their analysis was a helpful way

for me to check my own reading of the transcript and for me to probe it for further

analysis.

The second group, composed of many of the same members as the first, helped me

"take a step back", from my position as director, to see the data from the vantage point of

individuals not directly involved with the DLC and to test my ideas against what others

saw emerging from the data. The group prompted me to develop the web metaphor and

encouraged me to pursue the categories initially identified.

The majority of the critical friends was non-white and was of racially and ethnically similar backgrounds as the target population. Consistent with Critical Race Theory the composition of the group was also an attempt to help me "make privilege visible" and to recognize that as a white researcher I carry certain power and privilege that needs to be acknowledged and addressed (Delgado, 1995). I also needed my friends of color to check my assumptions and findings against their experiences as individuals of color for validity and reliability.

Initially, I had planned that at least two critical friends would not be directly engaged in the setting on a daily basis. However, as it turned out, none of the six participants in the critical friends group were directly connected to the research site on a daily basis; two were Ph.D. students working on somewhat similar adult education topics, three were educators involved in professional development, and one was a church member and former tutor at the Center. One additional critical friend, a black male, who has experience in adult education, assisted with videotaping focus groups, recruitment of participants, and member checking. His role was a bit different than the other critical friends as he was present during videotaping of some sessions. His feedback following videotaping sessions became part of the data and often validated my own observations, thereby increasing reliability.

Researcher Role

During the year I conducted research at The Downtown Learning Center my role changed. As noted previously, I was the founding director of The Downtown Learning Center for almost eight years; I have had a long, intense and vested interest in the development of the Center, which made me a participant observer and "insider" in the

research study. When I began the research at the Center in January of 2008, I requested a

Sabbatical to complete the research. I had every intention of returning in September of

2008 as director. But several months into the research, I began to change. I thoroughly

enjoyed the research process, and I enjoyed the flexibility that working part-time,

studying, and research provided. Through the reflexivity I engaged in for the research, I

began to see that I wanted to do other things. But I was also seeing the Center, the church

(the parent organization) and the work there through more critical eyes – perhaps the eyes

of a researcher; perhaps just from a new angle as a result of not being so enmeshed in the

day to day work. In April of 2008, four months after starting the research, I resigned my

position at the DLC to spend more time working on my research, teaching college

courses, and working with the CUNY Black Male Initiative.

Yet because of the years of investment at the DLC, I was not an outsider even after I

resigned. From an ethnographic perspective, going "native" was not even an option. I was

and remain an integral part of the culture of the program; therefore, a participant observer

was the role I played, and my task was to "make the familiar strange", an insider

researcher role. This insider role seemed to be an advantage when facilitating focus

groups and conducting interviews, especially when sensitive subjects were discussed.

During one intense, emotional and long focus group discussion, one participant stated in

regard to my role, "Oh, Joni understands, she's alright," as he seemed to sense that

several young men felt inhibited by my presence to speak candidly about race and

education. For the most part my participation, as the only white and only female, did not

seem to hinder the flow of discussion around race. Perhaps this was because I was a long-

term member of the church (25 years) and well known as having been vocal about my

belief that racism exists, even in the church, and should be openly discussed in educational settings. In addition, as the facilitator of the focus groups I initiated questions pertaining to engagement in learning, race and faith which encouraged participants to talk freely about issues of race.

I brought to this research study a 32 year career in education with 25 years in adult education as a teacher, a program developer, advocate, and administrator. In addition, this doctoral research study is the culmination of ten years as a student at Rutgers University Graduate School of Education. I worked full-time in the field while working on this degree. From a postmodern perspective, this journey was marked by self-reflexivity and reflexive subjectivity (Bourdieu, 1984); from an adult education perspective, it was marked by transformative learning (Mesirow, 1999). Both perspectives informed my understanding of my researcher's role.

As indicated in the introduction, my research topic came from my personal and professional experiences, and intense interest in the research population and question. Because of this I found myself emotionally attached to the participants, their stories, and their concerns. On a few occasions, especially early on in the study, it was not unusual for tears to run down my face as I transcribed the interview and focus group audiotapes. Then again, later in the analysis process, re-reading the data, the tears fell again.

In order to stay emotionally healthy and create appropriate boundaries in my research role I read, prayed, and wrote. I used these reflective strategies to think through, find spiritual support, and document my journey. As a result, I believe I was able to maintain emotional balance and make important career decisions. It was through these processes that I decided to resign from my job and began to see myself as a researcher as

well as a practitioner. This identity transformation was important to my research; as a

result I now seek to link research and practice, talk to other researchers, and think more

about the possibilities of combining both educational practice and research in the future.

At the same time, opportunities in academia opened up to me. First I was offered a

position with CUNY's Black Male Initiative as their part-time research coordinator, then

as an adjunct professor at New York City College of Technology. Both were a direct

result of doing this research study. These opportunities broadened my view of myself as

both an educator and researcher. Specifically, the work with The Black Male Initiative

(BMI) allowed me to pursue additional research opportunities and to parallel BMI work

with this study.

Furthermore, my close connection with the young men in this study, my empathy

for them, my identity transformation, and new career opportunities propelled me to look

at my research role differently than when I began. After hearing from the young

men, I now see the possibilities for participatory action research in the future. Although

not within the scope of this study, I now have a "parking lot" for future research. I have

also made contact with Dr. Eve Tuck and Dr. Michelle Fine, who work at the Institute for

Participatory Research (PAR) at the City University of New York Graduate Center

(CUNY), in regard to a future participatory action research study with the Black Male

Initiative (BMI) of New York City College of Technology (NYCCT) at which I now

serve as coordinator. My hope is to include some of the young men from this study, who

are very interested in doing something about the pushout issue and who want their voices

to be heard, in possible future PAR projects. These future research ideas have kept me

grounded in this study and have helped me to stay within the current research design and scope.

In summary, despite changes in my role, my close knowledge and vested interest in the program brought unique advantages to this study. My role enabled intimate and in depth access to the research site and provided a lens to the learning community that only a "native" could bring to the research. The research design reflected my broad understanding of the program and utilized data collection methods consistent with the actual instructional strategies of the program – dialogue journals, focus groups, critical friends groups, and reflection. Because of my former role at the program, the research design seemed to me almost an extension of the design of the learning program community. This prevented the research from interrupting the authentic activities of the research site and provided what I believe is a richly descriptive reflection of the program.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is the participant observer status of the researcher previously acknowledged. Because I am the former director and developer of the program site, I knew some of the research participants personally; there were high stakes investments, emotionally and intellectually, in this research as described. While subjectivity is always at issue in qualitative research, my role in the program site made this a special concern. Also, the site selection – a faith-based, community based, non-profit organization - is unique in its delivery of adult education services. The transferability of findings to state and federally funded secular adult education settings may be limited.

Despite these limitations, I believe there is value in this study for the field of adult education as it focuses on a population, trend, and research gap heretofore undocumented. Already new programs in Milwaukee and Harlem and as far away as Accra, Ghana are using the initial findings to shape decisions for new adult education centers in their faith based communities. The transferability of findings of this study were also explored when they were be presented in February 2009 to the New York City Teachers as Leaders Project sponsored by Deutsche Bank, which prepares new teachers for work in New York City Public Schools.

More importantly, the hope is that despite its limitations, this research will help adult educators and the young people they serve to understand engagement in learning better, as seen through one adult learning center, and thereby expand our understanding of key components of programs that effectively may meet the needs for this population.

CHAPTER 4   -   THE YOUNG MEN

"By several recent counts, the United States is home to 2 to 3 million youth age 16 through 24 who are without postsecondary education and disconnected from the worlds of school and work."
                                                                          Wald & Martinez, 2003, p. 15

"I am a high school drop-out. I'm from downtown Brooklyn. The reason for me dropping out-of-school is because my mom needed help paying the rent. I'm not a drug dealer. I don't rob people. I like to help people when they are in need, and that's basically my life."
                                                                          Khalid – Research Participant

Key Informants – Collective Theme and Individual Stories

Javier, Shawn, Dustin, David and Jamal were the five key participants in this study. Individually they are distinct and their stories of disengagement varied; however, through cross-case analysis collective themes emerged. This chapter examines how past educational experiences inform who these young men are now as re-emergent learners. It reveals their pain, sensitivity, capacity for industry, and creativity as well as vulnerability to threats both inside and outside of themselves.

The five key informants' participation in the study, in terms of time and investment varied. Of the five, Javier and David asked to assist with videotaping and brought me information on the research topic from the Internet, contributing most. In some ways, though not officially so, they were co-researchers with me. All key informants initiated questions and gave helpful feedback throughout the duration of the research. I continue to have communication with all five.

The key informants ranged in age from 19 – 24 years old, three were African-American, one was Latino and one was Latino/Italian. Of the five, three passed the GED exam and the other two are still working toward taking the exam**.** Figure 4:1 outlines individual characteristics of the five key informants, which is followed by an in depth description of each young man and how each of their stories contributes to the collective theme.

Table 4:1
Key Informants

KEY INFORMANT	AGE	RACE/ETHNICITY (as identified by participants)	TIME ENROLLED AT DLC	EDUCATIONAL STATUS	PAST/CURRENT OBSTACLES TO ENGAGMENT (as identified by participants)	
Javier	23	Hispanic/Puerto Rican	1 yr. & 6 months	Passed GED/Started College	Prison Drug Use	
Shawn	19	African-American	1 yr. and 10 months	Passed GED/Started College	Inappropriate Special Educ. Placement/Drug Use	
Dustin	23	Black/African-American	5 years	GED Student	Peer Pressure/Mother ill	
David	22	Italian-Sicilian/Puerto Rican-Spanish	3 years	GED Student	Discrimination/Bad Schools/Poverty	
Jamal	24	African-American	9 years	Passed GED/Graduate AA Degree College	Girlfriend Pregnant/ Peer Pressure	

Javier

Javier, of medium height and build, identifies himself as a "light-skinned" Puerto Rican. He never takes off his baseball cap worn sideways during our interviews or classes. His pants, t-shirt and jacket are the baggy style worn by most of the young males at the DLC. He smiles with a shy grin when addressed; only infrequently making eye

contact with me. He often appears aloof when he walks down the halls at the learning

center; he doesn't say hello first but is always polite when spoken to. He seems to try to

camouflage himself and make himself invisible by dressing like all the other young men,

never initiating communication or eye contact. It is almost as if he does not want to be

noticed but, rather, to blend into the background. This kind of "invisibility" seems to

occur especially if he feels threatened, which in public settings is often.

Educational Turning Point

   In his late teen years and early twenties, Javier was suspended from schools for

weapons possession and then incarcerated for selling drugs. He states that he was trying

to develop "some type of image for myself with the people I was hanging around, and I

was engaging in those activities [selling drugs, weapons possession] to be accepted." Due

to this incarceration, he did not complete high school and only received his GED after

attending the DLC. He explained that a passion for learning had been ignited through a

special mentoring relationship he developed in prison.

> Well, while I was in prison I am not the kind of person to interact with a lot of
> people, but this guy was like an older guy. And he sat down and talked to me [He]
> let me know how I was new to the prison system and let me know how everything
> was and how everything was run, and pretty much let me know the alternatives to
> stay out of trouble and alternatives to change my life and my direction. Basically
> he started giving me literature to read and different types of books on history and
> stuff I never knew before. And it just caught me. It just caught because it was so
> much stuff I never knew. And it winded up being my eyes were opened. So after
> that I started to read more, and I started to learn more and I developed a passion for
> learning.

   Javier reports that much of his self-effacing demeanor and "camouflaging" behavior

developed in prison where his mentor taught him how to stay safe. The young men

report that prisons are frightening, tense, sometimes violent and always insecure

environments both physically and emotionally; they report that the experiences in prison

are frequently traumatic. Javier appears cautious, sometimes fearful, and to "watch his

back" with other people, particularly in groups. There is a fragility about his behavior that

is at first tentative and alert to potential danger, which appears to be a result of this prison

experience. Javier's mentor taught him how to behave so that he would go undetected in

prison, and thereby, stay safer from violence. Perhaps, just as importantly, this mentor

provided him with books that got him started with studying and reading. Javier stated that

he had a great deal of undisturbed time in prison to study, which he enjoyed.

Effects of Past Experience on Current Engagement in Learning

During both the interviews and classroom observations, Javier was friendly,

reflective and open. This current behavior is in contrast to his feelings and behavior when

first arriving at the DLC. Javier says that even though he developed a love for learning in

prison, when he first engaged at the DLC his overarching feelings were of despair and

isolation. He speaks of this experience when coming to the DLC after a just few months

after getting out of prison:

> When I first came [to the learning center] I didn't interact with anybody or
> communicate with anybody or get close to anybody. . . When I left prison my
> outlook was negative . . . because of a lot of experiences I'd been through. I
> didn't look at anything like education or I didn't worry about that. My outlook was
> really dark. I had obstacles weighing down on me.

Javier was distant from people at the DLC when he first came a year and a half ago,

and some of this distancing behavior is still evident from time to time. From his outward

appearance, he could be misjudged as unapproachable, unengaged, and even hostile.

However, Javier is no longer distant from people and is both affectionate with students

and tutors and is able to converse on a range of topics. Javier's past trauma and prison

experience has had visible affects on the way he dresses, carries himself and isolates

socially when among strangers, but in familiar settings, I observed that he demonstrates

warmth, humor and connection to people:

> They (Javier and a tutor) are sitting at a table to the entrance of the Learning Center taking attendance as students walk in. The conversation is serious yet punctuated with laughter and light-hearted banter. They talk about chemistry, the formulas, table of elements and the fact that chemistry is a "brain buster." Javier gives a high five to a female student as she walks in, then he gets up from the attendance

> table asking the tutor, who he has been conversing with, to "watch his bag". Javier walks over to another student (now graduated and turned tutor) and jokes around with her. They give each other a big kiss and hug and the student-turned-tutor tells Javier that he is special because he has completed his GED and is planning for college.

Javier has attended the DLC for a year and a half, worked in the office, taken the GED

exam and passed, and enrolled in college. Over the two years, Javier reports that he felt

safe at the DLC, regained his "passion for learning" and re-engaged. It seems a process of

emotional healing began for Javier since he came to the DLC. Javier describes this

process in this way.

> Since I have been here [DLC], it's helped me to open up and release some of my stress and pressure. My whole dealing with education was dark. I am able to release some of that stress and pressure, absorbing the love and support from people. It makes me feel a little more better inside…

Academic Potential and Hope

In addition to a self-confessed passion for learning, Javier observably has a "thirst

for learning." For example, more than any other key informant, Javier showed a curiosity

for the research topic, a keen interest in the research process, and a desire to participate in

the data collection.

He brought me articles containing statistics on high school dropouts, which he had

researched on the Internet, periodically, approached me about the process of the study,

and gave me his perceptions. One afternoon at the DLC, Javier unexpectedly stopped me

and started talking about the research. I asked him if he would be willing to speak his

thoughts, which were coming out rapidly, into a tape-recorder. Javier said he would, so

we went into a backroom, and he spoke directly into the tape recorder.

> I pretty much feel like partners with you. Hum. We have the same concepts, the
> same ideas and pretty much the same concerns when it comes to education.
> Humph. I see that you take the initiative to, you know, try to find out what's
> going on with the school system and try to find out you know the dropout rate. I
> agree with a lot of steps that you're taking in the research . . . I feel like being
> your concepts and your principles might be similar to mine so I definitely [feel]
> like we're partners in this. Pretty much I feel like we have to find solutions for
> these problems ….

Javier was invested, thoughtful and perceptive about the research. He actively engaged

in his own "literature review" on high dropout rates and throughout the member checking

phases demonstrated the ability to raise key questions and give keen insights about my

process. In doing so, Javier steps back from the research study for which he is an

informant, and defines himself as a researcher and partner, and demonstrates the kind of

reflexivity so important to engaged adult learners and researchers (Nightingale &

Cromby, 1999).

Javier's greatest interest is in science, specifically chemistry. He scored high on the

science section of the GED, and often read science books at home while he was waiting

to begin college. Javier developed a friendship with a volunteer tutor who is a medical

doctor, and they discussed the periodic table of elements and other chemistry topics that

he may need to study before entering college. Upon receiving his acceptance to college,

these were his words, **"I can't believe it. Life is so amazing. I am going to be a scientist!"**

Upon entering college after completing his GED at the DLC, he admitted to feeling

hopeful and excited, but very afraid of failing. He explained that any small obstacle

almost made him want to give up. He continues to be fragile and insecure, this time from

forces inside him. Javier started college during the course of the study. Early on in his

first semester at college, he alluded to struggling with his college math class. During his

first semester I asked around his college to see if anyone had seen him and tried to

contact and leave messages for him, but he had disappeared from view. Upon

reconnecting with him at the end of the study, I found out that Javier had dropped out of

college due to frustration and fear especially related to his math class. He was

disappointed in himself but determined to re-register and go back for a second attempt at

college.

                                              Shawn

    Shawn is a tall, handsome Black young man who dresses in the same style baggy

jeans and baseball hat but with a bit more color, flair and style than Javier. He is always a

half hour to forty-five minutes late for his classes, but when he does arrive he engages

immediately and is cooperative, friendly, warm and well liked by the group. His

attendance is sporadic but again when he is present he works hard, is focused and

demonstrates high motivation. Shawn seems to pick up concepts quickly and often states

that he "remembers this" but just needs a review. Shawn is an able reader and writer but

needed remedial math before taking the GED exam. Most of his work at the DLC was

focused on math instruction in preparation for the GED exam, which he passed easily the

first time he took it.

Educational Turning Point

    Unlike Javier, Shawn has not spent time in prison. Nonetheless he brought a traumatic

past into his present learning environment. Shawn's experience is one I call "educational

abuse" because he reports that he suffered emotional damage in school that had

significant future educational ramifications.

Shawn self-identifies as an African American born in Brooklyn. Raised primarily by

his grandmother, he went to public schools in Brooklyn. During his elementary years, he

enjoyed school and did well. However, in junior high he was placed in special education

classes. When I asked him why he was placed in special education he explained that it

was:

> Because I was bad, I guess. That's when everybody was going to special education. It was like; let's put this kid in special education because that is more money for the school, of course. 'Cause special education programs get more money for the school. I was just thinking, I was smarter than everyone in the class, and I was getting A's and B's but I was told it was because of my behavior, Ok?

He described his placement experience and its consequences for his learning in an

angry tone and connected his dropping out of high school and drug use with placement in

special education. He did not actually drop out until he started high school and drug use,

but his disengagement in learning began in junior high school.

> Since I was in special education, I dropped out. I started special education in the middle of 7th grade. Ever since I was in special education, I didn't like school. When I got into special education I stopped learning. And then I got discouraged when I would see the other students in regular education. They were talking about homework or something and their homework is harder than mine, or they have much more homework than mine and I just got discouraged.

Shawn thought school would be better when he started high school because he

believed he could return to regular classes. He explained that his grandmother tried to

intervene on his behalf, but she believed the school officials when they said special

education would continue to be best for him. In his words, "She did what she thought was

best for me without knowing [that it wasn't]." He said that he never faulted his

grandmother for allowing his special education placement, but instead faulted the school

system for failing to provide appropriate learning opportunities.

> This is also the time I thought I would be mainstreamed, but I wasn't
> mainstreamed. My family would not allow me to stop going to school, but I
> wasn't learning anything. So it was like, I don't know, I got discouraged again.
> Then I am just sitting there not learning, and bothering students and being bad.
> The work was so slow in special education I don't know; it's crazy – I think it is
> the New York City public schools.

Shawn reported that many of his male friends also were placed in special education

along with him. During this time in high school, his drug use began, and he dropped out.

During the course of interviews and focus groups with Shawn, he spoke frequently about

the negative impact of being placed in special education.

Effects of Past Experience on Current Engagement in Learning

At the DLC, Shawn had high scores on the GED Practice test in reading and writing,

but needed to brush up on math. At the time of the study, Shawn was nineteen but had

been a learner with the DLC for three years. All testing and assessments at the DLC

indicated that this young man's placement in special education was inappropriate. This

was consistent with Shawn's self-assessment of his abilities.

Shawn's over-all attendance was erratic at the DLC; he was in and out of classes

over the three years. He was often hard to locate and would seem to disappear for many

months at a time. Then he would suddenly appear at the Center ready for class,

sometimes after several months of absence. Shawn explained that this spotty attendance

pattern was due, in part, to his drug use:

> I know what it is; it's me. … I know if I actually go I'm going to learn something.
> But it's like there is something stopping me. .. It's not about learning, 'cause I like to
> learn. . . It could be drugs because I do drugs. I mean not drugs; I do smoke
> marijuana.

During the course of Shawn's first interview, he reflected and processed for himself the connection between his past disappointments in school, drug use, and now the erratic pattern of attendance at the DLC. He admitted to daily drug use and talked about his attempts to "slow down".

> It started when I went to special education I started smoking marijuana. All these bad things happened to me as a child. You try to do good and life is very hard as it is because I'm a minority, so then I come upon drugs. All I want to do is sleep. I was always an energetic child. I'd go places, travel, and always walk somewhere, go by myself, doing things and discovering things. But I just turned to this marijuana, it is just so, so easy to go to as a comfort zone. Is this really affecting my life? I'm like thinking of trying to slow down the process. When I wasn't in school [DLC] I wasn't slowing down. I wasn't coming, and I was smoking. But now I'm in school I'm slowing down, but I don't know if I'm slowing down enough. I still do smoke every day.

This discussion about his drug use and its connection to his current learning continued through the course of the study. Shawn talked often about his depression and inability to get up for class and his extreme sleepiness. During interviews he talked extensively about the emotional trauma, fear of failure, and insecurities that he felt were the result of his special education placement. He believes the marijuana both masks his pain and contributes to his sporadic attendance at the Center – the disappearing and reappearing.

Despite this behavior, Shawn showed intense engagement with The Downtown Learning Center and the staff when he was present. During both focus groups and observations, Shawn was a vigorous participant in discussions, articulate in voicing his ideas and able to communicate well with his peers. Shawn takes responsibility for dropping out-of-school but also places the issues of inappropriate placement in special education and his subsequent use of marijuana within a larger context of injustice and racism. Like the threats to engagement, always present around the spider's web, Shawn

explained that there are forces present that always have the potential to tear young Black

men down.

> It is a whole system set up for failure, because in the streets police target all the Black people. Well, most of the time. And say you was in Manhattan like on 5th Avenue or if you were in downtown Brooklyn, and there's these cops around and you're just walking. They'll most likely bother you down there. So I feel like it's not even the teachers; it's the people higher than that, like the Chancellor's level, setting it up or the government setting it up for Black people to fail.

While speaking about this larger system set up for failure, Shawn spoke with

suppressed anger and rage about his perception that the system tears down his sense of

efficacy which was typical of the way other young men spoke of their past school

experiences. Shawn articulates his views of present day schools in light of history, stating

that while slavery is no longer physical, the school system creates a "slavery of the

psyche."

> Because they have this school system that causes you not to want to go to school. ...It's sort of like slavery [in the past] was more physical . . . back then, I feel like it's more of a mental thing [now]… if your mindset is not strong enough, you feed into what society is feeding us and that's like no good.

Shawn brought to the DLC this "mental slavery". He brought self-doubt, fear of

failure, and his drug use to his current learning efforts. This "slavery" would continue to

haunt him during his time at the DLC affecting his pattern of attendance and

disappearance as well as his self-confidence in his ability to learn.

Academic Potential and Hope

Despite these obstacles, Shawn passed the GED exam on the first try with a more

than adequate passing score. This was a source of great joy for Shawn. Immediately upon

receiving his diploma in the mail, he contacted the DLC exclaiming his appreciation for

the role his tutor had played, and his gratitude for the DLC as a whole. He reported that

his entire family was ecstatic and would attend the upcoming GED graduation, which they did. The DLC GED graduation was a great day of accomplishment for Shawn, as well as his grandmother, mother, and sister.

Shortly after graduation and during the course of this study, Shawn enrolled and was accepted to the local city college. Shawn would like to be an architect. He would like to be the first in his family to complete college.

Shawn now identifies himself as a high school "pushout" as contrasted to a high school "dropout". Shawn is contemplating the possibility of legal recourse and compensation through the National Urban League's Legal Department for his inappropriate special education placement and the subsequent harm done to him both emotionally and educationally.

Dustin

Dustin self identifies as Black and African American, and was twenty-three years old at the time of the study. He dresses with the same baseball cap, baggy pants, baggy shirt and sneakers as many of the other young men at the DLC. Color coordinated hat, shirt and sneakers are in fashion during the study period, and Dustin is seen wearing a yellow hat, yellow in his shirt, jeans and yellow streaked sneakers. Dustin alludes to using his clothes to attract attention and make a statement of identity that he belonged to the streets. He used his hooded sweatshirt to hide his eyes and face; this same hiding behind their clothes was evident with Javier and Shawn. Dustin, like the others, seldom takes off his hat or jacket, and appears to use them as a means of protection. Dustin is especially tall, over six feet, with a large build. His physical presence is commanding and strong.

Educational Turning Point

 Unlike Javier and Shawn, Dustin does not identify any past trauma or issues that

contributed to his dropping out-of-school. Dustin says the schools he went to were ok; it

was just that some of the kids were always fooling around, not paying attention, and

disruptive. He places the responsibility for dropping out squarely upon himself. He does

report that seven of his ten friends, with whom he attended high school, have dropped out

and are into gangs and drugs.

It is somewhat unclear why he dropped out other than there seemed to be no strong

engagement in learning, and he was behind in accruing credits due to cutting out-of-

school and just not attending classes. He experienced strong peer pressure to hang out

with the wrong crowd, get high and just not go to high school He felt he would be too old

when he graduated. He dropped out-of-school in the 10th grade but reported that he had

no difficulty with the schoolwork and that he had been an average student.

Effects of Past Experience on Current Engagement in Learning

Dustin demonstrates the same pattern of disappearing that Shawn did; he has been in

and out of the DLC for four years and is sometimes difficult to reach by either phone or

email.   Upon entering the program, he had high scores on the GED practice test, passing

four of the five portions and only failing the math by one point. Despite these high scores,

as of this writing, he has not taken his GED test. Considering his high GED Practice Test

scores, Dustin should have taken and passed the test already. He explains what the holdup

was:

> Ok, I sort of remember the dilemma the first time. 'Cause when I came in here
> [Learning Center] it was an age thing. Cause I didn't have no ID [which I need to
> take the test], and told you my moms had to go with me to the DMV to get a state
> ID. But she's disabled right now. She has bad arthritis. She walks with two

canes now. But before it was a struggle for her to get there, so I had to wait for her. As a matter of fact, she had to get her ID before I could get mine. By that time, the deadline was passed.

Dustin is unsure and unclear about why, after getting his state ID, he never took the test, although he agrees that his practice test scores were high enough to pass. He now works full-time as a machine operator and comes to class only sporadically at night. Dustin explained that he "loves" the DLC and values getting the GED.

> Yeh, I came back first of all, if having a high school diploma is like, you have to have that. That's a priority. That's like bare minimum, you have to have it. If you don't have it … it's like nothing. So that is the first thing. I had to get that. The second reason was 'cause it's like a really good program.' There's a lot of love here.

During the course of the study, Dustin did sit for the GED exam for the first time. It was   held at a local high school over two separate days. Dustin went the first day and completed the tests, but the second day he did not attend. Then he disappeared from the DLC again. When I tracked him down, he came for an interview, and Dustin explained why he did not go to the second day of testing.

> I missed it [because] I got totally discouraged. And I didn't even go back to class after that. I mean I am like walking, and I am like at the corner and my chest started getting tight, and I had to turn around, and then when I got upstairs [at the test site] you know when you have asthma you can hardly breathe when you have an attack? This doesn't happen often. Doesn't that seem ironic? …. I didn't go to work the next day or nothing. I had to call up. I think I missed two days of work on that. That is what happened. And I can't tell you, or remember the last time I had an asthma attack. It just so happens the day I go to take the second part of the GED exam, here I go.

When he returned to the DLC, he stated that he was so discouraged that he had failed to go again to complete the test. However, he was determined to try again and wanted to return to the DLC. There is nothing explicit in the data that explains Dustin's extreme discouragement after failing the examine other than that, along with many of the other

young men of this study, there is a sense that if you are a high school non-completer, for whatever reason, you are a failure as a student. Additional failures seem to feed into this deep sense of inadequacy and inability to be a success.

Academic Potential and Hope

As of this writing, Dustin is still engaged at the Learning Center, working, and taking evening classes. He has signed up to take the test again, a full year later. Dustin is now waiting for his testing date.

Dustin hopes to attend college. His great creative interests are computers and electronics, and he is thinking about majoring in one of those areas. During our interviews when discussing engagement in learning, he spoke of his experiences learning about electronics outside of the DLC, in his brothers' music studio. Two of his older brothers have music studios in their homes where Dustin is able to experiment with technical equipment for music production. Dustin reported that he enjoys the hands on learning and the "first hand" observation in the studio and explains that this is how he engages best, when he can manipulate parts of a computer and experiment with putting one together. He receives great satisfaction from this kind of engagement:

> It was like my mother used to tell me when I was younger. I used to always break open a radio and put it back together and see where does this go and just put it back. I know how to take a computer apart and put it together from scratch. If you just put the pieces on the table. I taught myself how to do that. I never had a computer class. I had an old one [computer] one day, and I just opened it one day. And I don't know how, and I just knew where everything went. First I knew all the component parts of the computer. Then I was, if I take this out, this will happen, cause and effect. And if I plug this in, you have memory here to make this go faster from there. And it just escalated as I got older, and it is still there to this day.

Dustin speaks about these "flow" experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) when working on computers, experiences when he is so engaged in learning that he loses all track of time.

> I realize that I started [working on computers] at about 8 p.m., and I turn around it's 12:30 already, like I didn't even know, like no phone, no TV. The TV might be on but I'm not paying no attention, not even if it is Michael Jordan. I'm right here, seeing the inner workings of what's going on in the computer and learning.

These experiences never happen in school for him. During observations of Dustin in class at the Learning Center, he is focused and engaged with the materials, students and tutors, but does not demonstrate the intense kind of flow engagement that he described when he is working with electronics.

Dustin speaks of his capacity for industry and creativity as it relates to electronics, and to a lesser degree demonstrates at the DLC a capacity for focus, industry and collaboration with his small group. Despite Dustin's slow progression toward the GED and college, he remains hopeful, doggedly optimistic, and committed to his study at the DLC.

David

David is a twenty-two year old, medium built, light-skinned Puerto Rican/Italian who dresses in Goth garb. His hair is straight and long, often in his face, hiding his eyes. He often wears hoods or hats, which further cover his face. This "camouflaging" attire – baggy pants, hat, and big jackets – is seldom taken off in the classroom, even in warm weather. Most of his clothing is black with long chains and belts draped around his body. He has multiple piercings, with rings on his lips and nose. His appearance is a bit intimidating and out of the ordinary from the other students, but he smiles easily and is most often warm and cheerful. David would engage openly in conversations of all sorts

when he felt comfortable, and showed affection and sentiment to those he knew. When

he knew someone and felt comfortable, he would greet them with a hug and kiss,

otherwise he would remain aloof.

David lived at home with his mother and his sister who was terminally ill during the

study. (David's sister died during the last months of this study.) His father is not present

in his life.

Educational Turning Point

This fourth key informant, David, attended a technical high school in downtown

Brooklyn, where he says he experienced favoritism by his white teachers. Being of Italian

and Puerto Rican background, he states that he was given preferential treatment by many

of the Italian teachers in his predominantly African-American high school. During the

course of the interviews, observations and focus groups, David describes a school with a

majority student body of color taught by a predominantly white faculty. He referred

frequently to being the recipient of preferential treatment by Italian teachers in the form

of passing grades when not deserved, extra attention and the bending of rules to his

benefit. This clearly bothered and angered him.

> Like at the end of one school year when I quit school and was a manager [at a
> store]. I had got a call from one of my teachers. And he called me [and said] "just
> come back." This is in like around May. He calls and says, "Come and I'll pass
> you. I'll just pass you." And I refused. I didn't want to do that because I thought
> about cheating myself, plus I was making good money. I just hated his calling and
> saying he would pass me. It was just crazy. And that's the God's honest truth, I
> swear.

David struggled with what he called the injustice of his high school experience even

though it appeared to favor him. He demonstrated a high degree of reflexivity about this.

During interviews he explored issues of race, discrimination, inequality and poverty,

especially as it related to his own experience. David was clearly able to understand the

larger social context of injustice evidenced in the school system. For example, he said:

> First of all that school doesn't have that many Italians, student wise, [but] teacher
> wise a lot. But I kind of can say they liked me because of that. Because I was half
> Sicilian. I could get away with a lot of things. That's the truth. I didn't like that
> much. You have teachers that are paid, right? If they are paid, they have to
> care about people and stuff. And they still go about it this way. What does that
> tell you about the system? It's self-explanatory right there. And I was on the
> good side of it, and I was still feeling. . . I was on the privileged side. And I still
> felt a little weird about it. You know what I mean?

David felt that his teachers ignored his Puerto Rican heritage, and he resented this.

Following my first interview with him, David brought his high school yearbook to show

me. Next to his photograph, the editors of the yearbook placed an Italian flag. This

clearly upset David because he felt that his Puerto Rican heritage had been disregarded

by the school and teachers. To him, his mother and her heritage had been disrespected.

David refused to accept a high school diploma from his school because he believed he

had not done the work or met the graduation requirements, even though he thinks the

school may have granted him one, or it could have been arranged. Instead, he went to

work in the stock room of a department store and dropped out-of-school. David reports

that he missed a great deal of school due to his sister's illness, his own laziness and

disengagement with learning in the high school. He felt that the teachers did not really

teach and that they were just "there for the paycheck" in his high school and that their

lack of interest affected his attending high school on a regular basis. The combination of

his intense discouragement with the teachers and the unjust favoritism in many ways

pushed David out-of-school.

Effects of Past Experience on Current Engagement in Learning

David has an array of family and person problems that he admits affected his past learning, but some of these problems continue into the present. His family is poor which affects his ability to attend classes regularly. Sometimes David did not have money or a metro card to come the Learning Center. In addition, the pressure of his older sister's terminal illness and death during the time of the study was both financially and emotionally costly to David and his mother. In David's personal life he had many obstacles to learning, yet he formed warm relationships at the Center and engaged heartily in learning when present.

Of all the key informants, David struggled the most with his literacy skills as measured by the reading part of the standardized Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) reading test and DLC Writing Assessment but nevertheless seems very engaged by reading. For example, I observed David to be thoroughly engaged in sustained silent reading at the DLC for thirty minutes at a time. David was reading *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* by Calvin S. Hall. David mentioned to me in a previous interview that he is very interested in psychology and often reads Carl Jung. He has a great love for poetry. It is not unusual for David to engage in political conversations during and after class. The 2008 presidential race was in progress during my data collection, and David often participated in debates and had strong opinions about the candidates and the issues. David had a wide range of interests and enjoyed his classes, speaking highly of both the tutors and the DLC. At the time of the study, David had been attending for several years.

However, David's past experiences with school left him skeptical of new learning environments and new tutors. It seems to have taken him time to feel comfortable at the

DLC due to his past negative experiences with what he called "the system." In addition, David's home life seemed to follow him once again into the classroom. The stress of never having enough money to get to school, the difficulty finding a job, the pressures of a terminally ill sister seemed to interfere with his learning.

Academic Potential and Hope

During the course of the study, David took the GED exam but failed the math section. Shortly after this, his sister died. He was increasingly difficult to contact after these two events, but he came to a member checking session where I presented the initial study findings. At that time, he reported his intense discouragement with the testing process and that he had almost given up on ever taking the test again.

Most of David's friends are college students who do not know that he has not completed high school. He says he is able to engage in their intellectual conversations, going home to investigate a topic if he does not understand it. David clearly enjoys thinking and debating, but says he feels ashamed and embarrassed about not completing the GED, especially with his girlfriend and her friends who are completing college.

David is slowly, after almost a year, beginning to study for the GED again by going to a local college for math tutoring. It seems very positive that he will "bounce back" another time, and eventually attempt the GED again.

Jamal

Jamal is a tall, lanky African-American young man of twenty-four, a college basketball player who has just completed his associate's degree in business at the local college. He is a graduate of the DLC and now a tutor. Not unlike most of the other key

informants, he wears baggy jeans, large t-shirts and a baseball cap even when he tutors. Jamal is always smiling and pleasant but prone to disappearing without saying a word. At the time of this study, Jamal lived with his grandmother, and he reported that many of his high school friends were in jail or dead. He reports he is one of the only ones among his friends who went to college.

Educational Turning Point

Jamal came to the Learning Center about nine years ago and always wore a "hoody" over his head so you could barely see his eyes. When he first came, he was with a friend who is now in prison. He dropped out of high school because his girlfriend was pregnant, and he felt a responsibility for the anticipated baby. However, the girlfriend miscarried the child, but Jamal did not return to high school.

While working at his uncle's real estate office, Jamal's grandmother told him about the DLC, and he registered. Jamal stayed in the program several years and passed the GED exam. During those years he established a close bond with a white female tutor twice his age; he attributes much of his success to her and their tutoring relationship. After passing the GED, Jamal received a basketball scholarship to a local college and went on to complete his associate's degree. He continued to work with his uncle's real estate company and became a GED tutor at the DLC.

Effects of Past Experience on Current Engagement in Learning

While in college, Jamal tutored many students and assisted them in passing the GED exam. During this time, Jamal grew to see himself as a learner as well as a basketball player attending college and tutoring at the DLC. Jamal's past educational experiences never engaged him in a way that helped him form an identity as a learner**.** He reports that

now he realizes that people often look at him, and other young Black men, only as

potential basketball players, and he now sees that he should study and have an identity as

a learner as well as an athlete.

> I realize how some people look at a Black person and realize he is just here for his jump shot or just here 'cause he… 'cause I said I got this scholarship and I am going to run with it. But that really made me realize, alright, that's what they mean about every Black guy is here 'cause they got a jump shot, and they can play ball and they can run fast. Still get down in the books 'cause everybody do think you just here 'cause you can play basketball. That's what it was.

Jamal has undergone an identity transformation and now sees himself as a student

valued for his brains, as well as his basketball ability. In our first interview, Jamal spoke

about how he feels people at his college view young Black men who have a basketball

scholarship and how this has had an impact on his view of himself as a student.

> Like when the professors [first] knew me... and they are like it's you and you play on the basketball team. It is Jamal, alright. [But now, it is] Jamal the student. I see, I've seen that transformation myself. [Before] it was like, yeh, you play on the basketball team, but you still get this work done. But now it is, Jamal, alright, I like that question you answered. [Now] it's more about the schoolwork and just not … see when you are on the team you get leniency….. I see they are actually using [appreciating] me for my brain. Like I do use it [my brain] now instead of like I can play ball. I see that now.

Of all the key informants Jamal has been at the Learning Center the longest and has

"advanced" from student to tutor. After nearly nine years, he continues to tutor because:

> [When someone asks,] "Jamal, can you help me with this?" And I do that, [it] makes me feel a whole lot better. I love it, I ain't got no feeling like that in my world outside the DLC. But when somebody actually comes to me and says can you help me with this, and I help them, and they walk off with it. That makes me feel good. That's how I engage in more learning. That makes me feel excellent. Like if I help somebody with something, you know I'll know it but it's like I'm helping them, so they're learning something, and I'm learning more at it.

Similar to the other four key informants, I observed Jamal being distant and aloof at

the DLC even while tutoring. He physically distanced himself from his students by

walking out of the room without a word or leaving class with no explanation while the

students were working sometimes leaving the class in the hands of other volunteers who did not know where Jamal was. He left the room often to go to the bathroom or make copies. He would not sit with the students, like most tutors, but at an adjacent table with his back to the wall, closely observing all that went on in the room and sitting very still. He would stare and almost scope the room to watch what was going on from a distance.

However, during interviews he candidly spoke about his affections for the Learning Center, and it was not unusual for him to use the word "love" when speaking about his students, tutors and the DLC. His attire remained the same even after he became a tutor, although the "hoody" does not cover his eyes as much. He still wears the hat, baggy jeans, and jacket but his language and action now reveal his affections. There is nothing tough or aloof in the way he talks about the Center or his place in it.

> I love it at the Learning Center. I love all the people, but why I'm here this long I don't know. I don't know. I like it. I love the Learning Center. This place is good. I love tutoring. I love doing this in a place like this. It is comfortable. It is relaxed. And it is something I like doing. I feel I see myself doing good at helping people get the GED.

Academic Potential and Hope

Jamal receives great satisfaction in seeing his students pass the GED exam and says he will continue to tutor at the DLC. Several staff members have suggested to Jamal that he finish his BA degree in teaching; in fact, he was encouraged to apply for a Teachers – as - Leaders scholarship through The Black Male Initiative of CUNY. Jamal declined. Although the staff at the DLC has high expectation for his further college success, he seems content with his associate degree and the prospect of managing his uncle's realty company in the future.

Other Young Men

Once data collection began, young men approached me to be a part of this study; there was no problem recruiting research participants. In addition to the five key informants, eleven young men participated in two focus groups providing additional data around their educational and personal histories, re-engagement in learning, and obstacles to learning. As with the key informants I looked at their educational turning points, their past effect on current engagement in learning, and academic potential and hopes.

The young men bring with them a lifetime of heartache. To my knowledge, none of the young men had a father who was present in their lives. Most were raised by mothers, grandmothers, or other family members. Several had lost mothers at a very early age and were being raised by someone other than their immediate family. One of the young men's parents had both been murdered. He came home from school one day to find them both shot and bleeding in his home. For these young men, they often brought untreated post-traumatic stress and unresolved grief to the learning environment, which likely had an impact on their current engagement.

Others were raised by their families and have mothers, grandmothers, aunts and uncles who care very deeply for them and care very deeply about their education. In some instances, they would be the first in their families to enter college once they completed the GED and enrolled in post-secondary education but would have little support to, or knowledge about, how to negotiate the new and foreign cultural context of academia.

Almost all of these young men live below the poverty level or come from families of the working poor. Most live in neighborhoods where violence is common, most often

precipitated by turf battles over drug sales. These obstacles add to already difficult educational environments.

Focus group participants ranged in age from 17 – 24, all were young men of color, two had passed the GED and the remainder of the eleven youth was currently in the GED classes at the DLC. It should be noted that key informants participated in the focus groups too, but are not included in the eleven. Table 4:2 provides an overview of each of the eleven young men: their ages, race and ethnicity, current educational status and obstacles to engagement in learning past and present.

Before addressing the educational turning point, the impact of past experiences on current learning, and academic hope and potential, it is important to interject a description of the focus groups as they were the primary source of data from the eleven young men. More than other data collection methods, focus groups provided a forum where the young men described past school disengagement, societal disengagement, and what I am calling threats to re-engagement, destructive both to their educational and emotional lives. These threats include, but are not limited to, poverty, poor and unequal educational experiences, drug use, loss, gangs, and racism. In the groups, the men were very open and intense, sometimes angry and emotional. The young men spoke a good deal about what does engage them at the DLC. But in speaking of their engagement now, they often contrasted their current experience with their past educational experiences. It seems as if the adverse forces of the past have real ramifications for how they do and will respond when re-engaging in learning in new and current educational settings. The focus groups further highlighted what can only be called the emotional and educational abuse

that many of these young men have experienced and, in some cases, continue to experience.

As already demonstrated by the key informants, but further substantiated in the focus groups with the other eleven men, the young men exhibit a sometimes intimidating appearance belying an underlying harmlessness; their aloofness may mask a potential for creativity and a need to attach to a someone or some community for sustenance and support. Data also indicates that the young men are very vulnerable to potential threats of to re-engagement in learning.

Table 4:2

Young Men Focus Group/Other – Self-Identifiers

YOUNG MEN FOCUS GROUP/Other	AGE	RACE/ETHNICITY	EDUCATIONAL STATUS	PAST/PRESENT OBSTACLES
Youth #1	21	Black	GED Student	Bad Teachers/Schools/ Neighborhood
Youth #2	23	African-American/Native American	Passed GED/Started College	Loss of Mother/Girlfriend Drugs
Youth #3	19	Barbadian/Black	GED Student	
Youth #4	17	Black	GED Student	Stress/Anxiety
Youth #5	19		GED Student	Teenage Father/Gangs
Youth #6	18	African American	GED Student	Bullies/Violence/Bad Teachers/Schools
Youth #7	20	African-American	GED Student	
Youth #8	20	African-American	Passed GED/in College	Doesn't live with Family
Youth #9	24	African-American	GED Student	Death of Mother/Depression
Youth #10	21	African-American	GED Student	Father Incarcerated/Mother absent
Youth #11	17	African-American	GED Student	Murder of Parents

Educational Turning Point

Consistent with the responses of the key informants, the eleven young men spoke

about peer pressure, drug use, special education and discrimination as being factors that

disengaged them from learning in the high school years. And through the data collected

from the focus groups two more factors, or perhaps composite groups of factors,

emerged: emotional and physical abuse and inadequate educational opportunity.

The abuse they experienced in school settings varies from mild teasing and bullying to physical violation, and from neglect to psychological mistreatment. With the exception of one young man who went to school in the West Indies, the young men attended different schools in different neighborhoods in New York City, but the stories sounded painfully similar. At the mildest, some young men experienced verbal abuse from other students.

> I got it all the time I used to be ashamed of myself when I used to wear glasses. They would say you are a nerd, this and that, so you know I really had to take it for myself. I'm going to learn something. I want to do something. It's about yourself just sit in a corner so I can learn something. **(Youth #4)**

> I agree with him because I used to wear glasses too. I used to be called a nerd but now as I look at it it's like it hurt. I guess it hurt for a while because you want to be accepted like oh, it's cool, or whatever. **(Youth #1)**

By themselves, these experiences could be nothing more than mild bullying. But other young men reported daily and consistent bullying that often led to physical violence in the classroom or after school, which went unchecked by school personnel. This neglect was reported repeatedly by the young men and confirmed by others. It created an atmosphere of anxiety and stress that would seem likely to discourage engagement in learning.

> You know growing up it wasn't like I wasn't getting good grades and all, I was getting my work done. I was doing what I had to do, then they say sticks and stones may break my bones and words will never hurt you – that's a lie. Words do hurt you. It's just something that it hurts to deal with. You know what I see school as a place of learning where you learn new things everyday plus different subjects. The fact that you walk into school knowing you are going to be bullied doesn't give you an edge. **(Youth #6)**

This youth talked about verbal abuse from peers as something to be expected on a daily basis. It was something you just had to deal with, especially if you were a quiet kid. Most adults in the schools were said to be unaware, unwilling, or unable to stop it.

Feedback from the focus groups indicated that bullying and verbal abuse was normal and to be accepted and dealt with. The ability to deal with the verbal abuse varied from young man to young man, but no one denied its prevalence.

Perhaps most disturbing is incidents of violence in school, previously alluded to, which left some of the young men feeling physically unsafe. The young men experienced physical abuse on the way to and from school and in school, sometimes on a daily basis.

> You try to learn a lot but then kids are over there fighting [in the classroom] and they [school officials] want to suspend you for a day or two. I can say the system don't care. **(Youth #1)**

One young man talked about having to transfer from school to school for his physical safety. His account was not atypical of reports by others.

> I could defend myself. But at the same time I don't want to get in trouble. So after all that, kids could come in class and hit me so I had to make a safety transfer to go to the next school. Then when I went to the next school, you know, it seems like everything is starting all over again. So I said I don't want to stay here no more [I thought]. So if I am going to get picked on everywhere I go, it's better if I drop out. And I am going to drop out and do something with my life. **(Youth #1)**

 "Safety transfers" were not uncommon. Many of the young men had transferred to several different schools for this reason, which led to disruptions in their learning. More often, the young men just dropped out-of-school as the best way to stay physically safe.

Adding to this reportedly physically "hostile" environment, were teachers who lacked interest and care for the young men. There were reports of chaos in the classrooms with teachers frustrated and resigned to not teaching, which may have been interpreted as a lack of caring by the men. Repeatedly I heard that teachers did not seem to care, and that this attitude was communicated to the young men.

> You know something is wrong when a teacher says, "I'm doing it for the money." You know what I mean? I've heard teachers say that. They don't care. They're just doing their job; that's all they care about. **(Youth #6)**

Some of the young men understood that the teachers worked within a system that made teaching difficult, and that there were teachers who cared. They agreed that the teachers had a hard time, too.

However the effect on the young men of neglect, bullying and physical violence at school cannot be underestimated because of the way they discussed its impact on their future educational decisions. They reported being afraid to attend school and switching to different schools to flee the abuse. Most finally gave up and dropped out-of-school rather than remain in what they maintained was an "unsafe" environment. One youth reported leaving school because the verbal abuse was physically threatening and made him unable to engage in learning.

> There was gangs and everyday there was a lot of fighting so you didn't get your school and you didn't get to pay attention to your schoolwork. .. It wasn't a safe environment for me. **(Youth #7)**

In addition to verbal and physical abuse, the young men paint a picture of schools where there was a lack of challenge and opportunity to learn. This was because of the teaching methods, out-of-date textbooks, and physical facilities. Run-down facilities with defects ranging from broken toilets, chipping paint, blackboards with no chalk were reported. In many instances, they did not blame teachers as much as what they called "the system." Reports of being bored and the work being too easy were frequently reported.

> I think it is the whole system in general as far as dealing with everything around us. Plus the way a lot of teachers teach in class it doesn't bring any type of interest to the class. If you speak and call it's "be quiet; you can't be talking." **(Youth #1)**

> I agree with everybody cause like I know my old school. They were more into sports than education. Way more into sports, like they would put a lot of money into

basketball teams but you will have books from the 80's. ….. There is lack of challenge, too. **(Youth #7)**

Like the schools in NYC don't offer much. They might have a basketball team. That's about it…… Schools down south too, they have like colors on the wall or just the atmosphere looks more inviting then schools [here. They] be all dull. **(Shawn)**

The young men believed that schools in other areas, "down South" and the suburbs and even "some schools in Manhattan", were better than the schools they had attended. The majority of the schools attended by the young men were predominantly comprised of an ethnic and racial minority population with Whites making up only a small percentage of the student body. David said that "maybe it was a conspiracy" or "intentional" that they were given, in their minds, such sub-standard facilities and educational opportunities compared to schools with more Whites in Long Island or Manhattan.

The focus group participants spoke extensively about their experiences with special education. We know from research that young black and Hispanic males are placed in special education at a proportionally higher rate than the overall school population (Eisenman, 1992). At least four of the young men, including one of the key informants, had been placed in special education. It could be argued from their current performance at the DLC that these were inappropriate placements as current research on special education placement for young men of color indicates. My speculation is that they were placed in special education because of their behavior. Focus group participants engaged in a dialogue on special education and the lack of challenging work, and perceived inappropriate and unethical placement of students. This conversation included Shawn, one of the key informants, but resonated with other young men in the group.

I remember like in fourth grade when I was in elementary school. I was in regular education, then I went to special education. They gave me like the whole weeks worth of work. I did it in one day. Like every week they gave me the whole work and I'd be like … you know what's crazy? They only put you in special education for your behavior. It's not much academically… **(Youth #7)**

I can say something about special education and race. For New York City, I don't know what years, and just seems like New York City or the school system wanted to put people in special education. I was in regular education, and I was a smart student doing my work and everything ... but you don't learn in special education. You don't learn. **(Shawn)**

They'll tell you like you have a choice, [to go to special education or not] and they'll look at your papers and see what happened during high school and like "yo, man you are eligible for Special Education." **(Youth #5)**

I think they were trying to force people into special education because of the money. Special education students get more money than regular students for the school. So I feel they were just forcing people into special education. They say it is behavior [but it is not; its money for the school]. **(Youth #1)**

I have been in special education. I feel it is hard to learn there because they pick all the bad students, especially in junior high. It seems like they pick all the bad kids and put them in special education. And especially if your parents don't know any better. Because if your parents just think the teachers always right, if you have one of those parents they are going to listen to what's going on for the school, and they'll place you right in special education. It seems like all the bad kids in special education. **(Youth #7)**

I agree with him. **(Youth #5)**

You might say I know about this already [in special when a topic is taught]. They say "nah"[they teach it anyway]. They try to make you think that you are lower. It's like going backwards [in your learning]."**(Shawn)**

One young man disagreed with the others and said he thought the special education teachers seemed more helpful and that, from his perspective, you received more attention. However, he had not himself been a special education student.

But overall, the young men felt that placements in special education had contributed to their dropping out, and to feelings of shame and self-doubt. In some instances, they felt a

great injustice had been done to them when they were placed in special education. Because of these severe emotional consequences, and their potential to affect the young men's future academic progress, I would argue that these placements were a form of educational abuse.

Effects of Past Experience on Current Engagement in Learning

Almost without exception, the young men in this study alluded to or spoke frankly about past emotional and educational trauma. No two young men are the same or have the same experiences, their stories vary; but the trauma is present for almost all. Like engagement in learning, their traumatic experiences are on a continuum ranging from bullying, to verbal abuse, to physical violence in their school experience. While it may seem extreme, the word "trauma" is used here because the long-term effects of traumatic stress are evident in the young men's behavior and words, and during member checking the young men agreed unanimously that the word "trauma" was not too strong a word for some of what they had experienced. Past tragic and traumatic experiences affect present day behavior; this present stressful behavior often goes unrecognized as being caused by past traumatic experiences (Schwartz, 2006). In the case of learning re-engagement, it would not be at all unlikely that if the young men experienced trauma in school previously, when they attempted to re-engage in learning in a new setting this would generate rekindled anxiety and fear.

The focus group conversations around these topics of verbal and physical abuse, lack of challenge and boredom, feelings that the system did not care about them succeeding, and misplacement of students in special education were long and heated. A summary of their discussion cannot convey adequately the high level of participation, deep emotion,

and rage expressed by the young men. For over an hour and a half the young men were

deeply engaged in discussing these issues and requested time for further discussions. It

was apparent that they had not forgotten the past and that it was still very present with

them. They appeared to bring these feelings with them into their present learning.

They described this long-term impact as mental slavery. Again Shawn often led in

these focus groups, elaborating on what he brought up in individual interviews.

> Yeh, I think we still have modern day slavery. **(Shawn)**

> Yeh, yeh **(Youth #1)**

> I think it has just changed and developed more from a physical to a mental, you know, a social type of slavery where our minds are actually stuck on one particular, you know what I'm saying, thing. That's not helping us, that's not benefitting us. [educationally]. **(Shawn)**

> It sort of like slavery was more physical, more hands on back then, I feel like it's more of a mental thing like a certain mindset [about our ability to learn]. And if your mindset is not strong enough you feed into what society is feeding us and that's like no good to fail…..Like everybody is saying black people drop out of high school or black people smoke weed or black people do this or black people do that. **(Youth #1)**

> Like typical stereotypes? **(David)**

> Yeh, like it's always being said, so that people [we cannot learn] are just going to believe that. **(Youth #7)**

The combination of dropping out of high school, which they experienced as their

own personal failure, plus the additional challenges of loss, abandonment, and gang or

drug violence bred grave self-doubts. The young men stated they believed themselves to

be failures and that they often are afraid to attempt new endeavors or form relationships

initially for fear of rejection. Even though they understand that there were systemic

failures and some negative experiences in school, which were beyond their control, they

attested that their school experiences left them with low self-confidence and fear about

their ability to achieve academically.

> A lot of our black males have been scarred from young [in schools], and I think that they have been stripped away from their voice, and those scars have never been expressed so therefore there was never any healing that was brought to it. And now the victim is perceived as a predator. **(Youth #6)**

> Mmmmmm. Sometimes I be down on myself, and I say, am I smart enough to do this? **(Youth #4)**

> Yeh. Sometimes I lose it. Like I feel despair. Like I don't know if I can make it anymore. Like I don't know if I can keep going at this… I want to give up. **(David)**

They seem to hide and defend themselves by what they wear, how they speak and

where they go. They try to make themselves invisible. The case can be made that the

style of clothing the young men wear is merely fashion; however, the young men

reminded me that the baggy pants without a belt comes from prison attire and that it was

important on the street not to stick out and become a target. Although not explicitly stated

in the data, the impression that I received was that the attire was fashionable, but

defensive armor as well. To me it appears that they often carry with them great

unresolved grief; they are often fragile emotionally because of past experiences in and

out-of-school. They are skeptical of new learning environments for fear they will be a

replication of the past. A focus group member explained when he first arrived he was

fearful to get close to others.

> Yeh, when I first came [to the DLC] I didn't interact with anybody or communicate with anybody or get close to anybody.

Academic Potential and Hope

Despite the fears and self-doubt they have about school, the young men exhibited a strong desire to learn and a hopeful resiliency about the future. This determination was described by one young man.

> When I started [at the DLC]… you know sometimes I didn't believe in myself. I didn't believe in myself, it is too hard, but then I really sat down [and said] I can do this [GED]. I know I can do it. I know I can do more.

They also wanted action. They wanted to take their thoughts, ideas and discussions "on the road" to help others in the future by working to prevent this kind of emotional and educational abuse for others. At the completion of the first focus group, they immediately asked when we would meet again. They expressed that the focus groups were supportive and that it felt good to discuss these issues with others. The group suggested that once the research was completed that they make a documentary on high school pushouts to help other young people growing up.

Almost without exception the young men wanted to go to college and desired professional careers. They want to be architects, engineers, police officers and veterinarians once they complete their GED and college. All saw the importance of education, and all said they were determined to achieve their GED and move on with their lives.

Cross-Case Analysis

In examining the data from both key informants and the other young study participants, a theme or pattern emerges. First, there is a pattern of discouragement, disappearance, non-completion as demonstrated by starts and stops in attendance, and a

pervading sense of being a failure associated with the "dropout" experience. Fear of failure due to past educational turning points and experiences follow the young men into new learning environments and can continue to hinder progress forward.

I believe these patterned fears are demonstrated by how the young men hide and defend themselves by what they wear, how they speak, and where they go. They try to make themselves invisible. To me it appears that they often carry with them great unresolved grief; they are often fragile emotionally because of past experiences in and out-of-school. They seem skeptical upon entering new learning environments for fear there will be a replication of the past.

We must be careful, however, not to misunderstand these patterns from a deficit perspective. These patterns are not signs of deficits in the young men, but rather the result of their prior educational experience that may manifest itself as learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) and self-doubt about their ability to learn and their safety in learning environments (Schwartz, 2006). The effects of past educational experiences are brought into new learning settings and can hinder re-engagement in learning unless recognized, and addressed in a new learning environment designed to support the necessary healing that needs to take place. These patterns need not to be ignored and should be addressed in the adult education setting. The next chapters will examine the DLC as one such "web" that attempts to do just that.

CHAPTER 5   -   THE LEARNING CENTER

"Learners are engaged both in the contexts of their learning and in the broader social world within which these contexts are produced. Without this engagement there is no learning, and where the proper engagement is sustained, learning will occur."

Hanks (from Lave & Wenger, p. 24)

"I have a passionate love for The Downtown Learning Center.
 Passionate love. The Downtown Learning Center changes lives."

Tyrone - Stakeholder

The Center – An Overview

The data indicates that The Downtown Learning Center is like a "web" comprised of important "threads" that re-engage the young men in learning and support systems without and within the Center that provide the needed frameworks for it making it able to engage the young men. Originally conceived and designed with a learner centered philosophy (Freire,1970), the DLC was intentional in development and mission, revolving around the students' needs, and, in the case of the young men, making their academic survival possible (DLC, 2001).

Through ongoing, structured, annual strategic planning, the DLC has built a program both fragile and strong. Like most adult education programs, funding has always been an issue. There has never been enough money for adequate staffing, supplies, books, technology and professional development. There was always the looming possibility that the program could be shut down and disappear, depending on the state of the economy, and level of donations. In addition to the vicissitudes of public funding, the DLC is reliant upon the church, The Brooklyn Tabernacle (BT), to decide its fate.

Yet even with this fragility, the DLC is a strong community designed to provide a space that is nurturing and engaging, and there are systems that frame the web so that the "threads" or patterns of engagement can be present, as evidenced from data collected through observations as well as focus groups of stakeholders. The data indicate that the young men are indeed engaged in learning at the DLC, and it is ultimately the strength of certain threads present in the DLC that re-engage them.

With the metaphor follows the idea that the web does not stand alone but is also connected to frames outside of it. In the case of nature, those supports include buildings, roofs, grass and trees; for the DLC its outside supports are its centralized location, its funding, marketing and human resources through its relationship to the church.

By including a description of the DLC in light of this larger context, complexity and contradiction pervade this chapter. Anyone who has spent much time in community based organizations and churches knows that, to follow the metaphor, they are often "intertwined" and "entangled" communities attempting to survive financially, relationally, and spiritually while accomplishing their missions to their communities.

A study of organizations in all their complexity is far beyond the scope of this study, yet the broader context in which the center functions is important to understanding the findings. The DLC does not function in isolation; therefore, a description of its physical, social, racial and cultural contexts as they support or detract from engagement and shape the DLC and the engagement of the young men is appropriate. Figure 5:1 shows two support areas outside, the DLC's centralized location, and the church, plus the inside support of the DLC organizational structure and mission. Like the doorframe or the

corner of a house for the spider web, these supports prop up the Learning Center and

ultimately the engagement of the young men.

Figure 5:1 – **"Web" of the DLC – Support Systems**
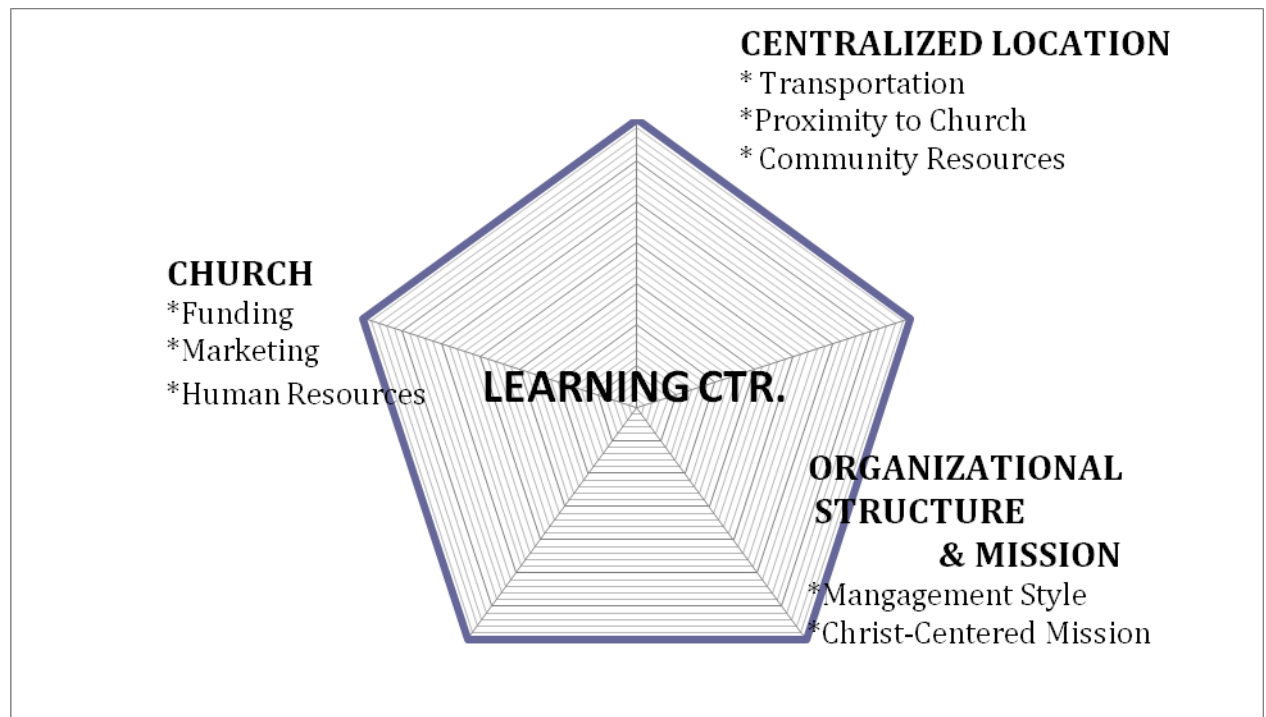
I do not claim to be exhaustive in my description of these constructions, or to claim

that they are the only framing supports. Communities of practice, such as the DLC, are

intricate, connected and mobile organisms that are ever evolving, and it would be

impossible to be totally comprehensive. Nevertheless, the following sections provide

enough contexts to understand the complexity of the research question and the major

findings or "threads" of the study.

The remainder of this chapter will describe these three major areas of web support:

centralized location, the church and the DLC's organizational structure and mission.

Within each of these supports, this chapter will describe components (figure 5:1) that undergird the work of the DLC's engagement of the young men in learning.

Centralized Location

The Downtown Learning Center, and The Brooklyn Tabernacle, its funder and parent religious organization, is centrally located in one of the most densely populated areas of Brooklyn. In addition to the DLC's close proximity to the church, it is conveniently located providing access to major transportation and social service systems.

With its location at the intersection of most major New York City subway lines and bus routes, as well its proximity to both the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges, it is central, convenient, and accessible. Major bus routes stop right in front of the DLC. Subway lines to Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens and the many neighborhoods of Brooklyn are within blocks of the Center. By car, the DLC can be reached easily from Manhattan and even Staten Island. On several occasions students and tutors have even come by railroad from as far as Connecticut and New Jersey, via Metro North and New Jersey Transit. The DLC is situated in a centrally located urban hub. The DLC is interconnected by both transportation and social services to the surrounding tri-state area. The five major modes of transportation available and utilized by students are railroad, bus, subway, car and foot. Availability and proximity to mass transit is basic to engagement particularly for the young men who do not have access to a car and rely on public transportation. Nevertheless, even the availability of mass transit is not enough if students cannot afford a metro card due to unemployment or poverty.

In addition to being centralized for transportation, since September 11, 2001, the DLC's location in Downtown Brooklyn has become even more central because many businesses relocated to this area from lower Manhattan. Downtown Brooklyn has become much more of a hub for the five boroughs of New York City, evidenced, in part, by prolific high rise building construction on the same block as the DLC. In addition to housing many of the relocated Manhattan companies, making it an increasingly used shopping and business area, Downtown Brooklyn also has an arts center and two major colleges. All of Brooklyn's major courts, which serve the entire borough, are located close by. Most major Brooklyn government agencies are located in Downtown Brooklyn near the DLC. This includes employment centers, Department of Motor Vehicles, Immigration Services, the Department of Education, and the Department of Corrections. Similarly, major social service organizations such as the Salvation Army and Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, all are within a few blocks. This gives the DLC staff the ability to refer students to these city and social service agencies for a variety of services. During the course of the study, this central location emerged as a clear asset for the engagement of the young men, facilitating regular attendance and making retention more feasible.

Other stakeholders, such as volunteer tutors, also benefited from this central location. Because many of the daytime tutors are retired professionals and senior citizens, a central, easily accessible location was key to their participation. In addition, evening volunteers often traveled from their jobs in Manhattan via the mass transit system in order to serve as tutors.

The Brooklyn Tabernacle Church (BT) is located within half a block of the DLC. The majority of the stakeholders are members of its large congregation making the close proximity ideal. The young men reported that they have relatives, friends, and acquaintances that are members of the church. Javier is actually a member of the church, works at the church, and is living with a family from the church. Dustin's mother was a member of the church. Jamal attended the church sporadically, counseled with the head pastor of the church, and has sought him out in times of personal and family crises. Other key informants were, at the very least, aware of the relationship of the church to the DLC, if not involved themselves. Out of the young men's focus group participants, three were attending the church; among the older men's focus group, all were either current or former members of the church, or staff at the church. This membership pattern was true for the other two stakeholder groups as well.

For students and tutors who are members of the church, the location of the church directly across from the DLC made attendance and participation at the center more convenient for attending classes, tutoring and participating in church activities. Participation in youth groups, recovery groups, spiritual counseling, Bible study groups and worship services at the church were made more attractive because of its close proximity. DLC stakeholders also took advantage of food distributions and clothing drives conducted by the church.

This situated or "nested" location in relation to the larger community and social service resources places the DLC in a strategic position for student and tutor recruitment, and potential engagement of the young men. The physical and relational placement of The Downtown Learning Center from its broadest reach is the tri-state area of New York,

New Jersey and Connecticut. The physical location of the DLC is critical to existence as

the spider webs' existence is dependent upon a suitable location and attachment to stable

structures.

Relationship with The Church

To understand The Downtown Learning Center's capacity to engage the target

population, it is important to look at its relationship to The Brooklyn Tabernacle, from

which it originated. Their intersections, interconnectedness, and contradictions are

significant; they appeared in the data frequently. The Brooklyn Tabernacle Church is

incorporated as a religious organization and is the parent organization to The Downtown

Learning Center (DLC), a non-religious, not-for-profit, community-based organization.

This kind of legal relationship between a church or religious organization and a non-

religious 501C3 organization established to do community work is fairly common.

Despite this relatively neutral legal arrangement, the way the two organizations function,

and the impact that their relationship has on the engagement of the young men, is

pertinent to this study.

The two organizations intersect in three important areas: funding, marketing, and

human resources. For the purposes of this study, the intersections are only important in

regard to the ramifications for the young men and, the support of, or obstacles to, their

engagement. As the findings will clarify, these intersections posed both benefits and

obstacles to engagement for this population and an understanding of the relationship

between the organizations around these intersections is important for this reason.

Funding

Funding for the DLC is provided from and through The Brooklyn Tabernacle:

member giving, private contributions and donations, a few foundation grants, member

matching corporate grants, and small government contributions. Fundraising is primarily

done by the pastor and administrative pastor, and infrequently by members who take an

interest in the DLC. All DLC funds are funneled through the church; the church controls

the budget and makes budget allocations to the DLC. The DLC director presents

recommendations as budgetary needs arise, but the majority of the financial decisions for

the DLC are made by the leadership of The Brooklyn Tabernacle. Because there is little

financial transparency, how much money is raised, and how it is allocated is unknown to

DLC stakeholders.

During the older men's stakeholder's focus group the issue of financial transparency

and financial accountability was raised as a concern, in relation to the way in which the

funds for the DLC were dispersed. This stakeholder's group was specifically concerned

that the DLC is underfunded.

> I think The Brooklyn Tabernacle can impart a little bit more to the DLC. I say that
> having been an instructor here for approximately four years. Of course [there is]
> the emotional and spiritual support, but I don't think enough financial support is
> here. I have definitely seen a need for much here at the Learning Center regarding
> supplies maybe other services for the students, things physical they need at times.
> I think The Brooklyn Tabernacle can do more.

Russell, another stakeholder, points to the potential impact of under-funding.

> When certain things are lacking people come to us and you literally become an
> apologist, we are going to try to get to that need but I think there needs to be more
> emphasis placed here because these are fertile minds and you are talking about
> our future.

The DLC's financial dependence upon The Brooklyn Tabernacle, and perceived lack

of transparency, was only a point of concern by the DLC stakeholders because they felt

the DLC was not receiving enough financial support to adequately carry out its mission.

For the stakeholders, the critical issue was that the lack of funds may adversely affect the

program's ability to engage the young men. Examples of these effects included lack of

up-to-date technology, adequate textbooks, sufficient staffing, and professional training

for tutors.

Marketing

A second point of intersection of the two organizations is marketing. The DLC is

marketed as a ministry of the church and resources for the church and learning center are

garnered through this marketing effort. The church advertised the DLC as a community

outreach effort and through the advertising, collected donations that were for the

continued support of the DLC.

One prominent marketing device was a DVD produced by the church choir. In this

DVD, the DLC and its students were highlighted. This DVD was shown around the

country, and in select locations internationally for a period of about a year and a half,

whenever the choir presented a concert. Through this marketing device, money was

donated by other churches and individual donors to the church for the DLC.

The DLC was also marketed at church music and pastors' conferences which attract

musicians, pastors and ministers from around the country, and world. From these

conferences, churches have contacted the DLC asking for tours, consulting and training

to start their own learning centers. The DLC is also presented on The Brooklyn

Tabernacle website as a community outreach of the church. It also has its own website

with additional marketing and solicitation for funds which are then funneled through the

church.

Students were occasionally invited to speak at the church on behalf of the DLC to elicit both financial and human services support from the congregation. This marketing at the church often resulted in additional volunteers, financial and in-kind contributions, and new student recruitment for the DLC. This marketing was both a potential benefit and exploitation to the youth of the Center, as voiced by stakeholders.

Human Resources

Besides funding and marketing, the third intersection between the church and the DLC is human resources. Human resources is defined here as the utilization of people from the church in the service of the DLC. Almost without exception, all stakeholders (excluding students) in the study are members or regular attendees of the church. Some are on staff at the church, others on staff at the DLC, and still others are volunteer tutors or students at the DLC. In addition, the church and the DLC share staff for security, maintenance/building management, and finance. The two organizations share the same board and church leadership supervises the staff for both. Stakeholders stated that the pastors and majority of the staff at the church, other than those who do security, do not come into contact with the students and that there was minimal interaction between DLC and church staff. One stakeholder stated that the lack of involvement and visible support by the leadership, who, with the exception of the head pastor, are men of color, does not support and encourage the young men's engagement at the DLC. Another stakeholder, Marlon, a graduate- turned- tutor agreed and said,

> I think that the Learning Center is overlooked by the church. In the same sense, that here we have an opportunity to minister to literally hundreds of people. Yet still with few exceptions the presence of the leadership from over the street [the church] is scarcely seen. I think it is detrimental.

There is a feeling among the stakeholders that the church does not really care a great

deal about the learning center because the pastors and leadership from the church do not

know the students or interact with them. The feeling was that if the leadership of the

church was more involved, engagement would be enhanced; whether or not the lack of

involvement detracts from engagement is not clear. There is also a feeling that the lack of

leadership visibility and involvement with the learning center is a missed opportunity for

the church to fulfill its mission. Charles, a church staff member who volunteers at the

DLC explains.

> I think there is definitely opportunity to grow and improve on the services,
> the relationship, the visibility and letting the students really know that the
> church is truly behind it [the DLC]. I don't think the students really believe it.
> **(Charles- church staff)**

More generally, the older men's group felt that the Christian church, locally and

in other areas of the country does not care about the kind of young men who are the focus

of this study. Marlon thinks this is an issue not only for the church and the DLC, but
other

churches, and that it is both the churches' responsibility and opportunity to respond.

> There is a responsibility that the church has to bear in terms of reaching out to that
> bucket of young men that fit into this category. I think more can be done because
> these are the leaders of the future. And if you don't begin pouring into these young
>
> men now and you try and if you are not proactive about it now… The challenge will
> be greater. I don't think the church has really taken that step. I don't think ownership,
> the resources, have been thrown or applied or focused on that particular group of
> young men by the church. **(Travis – DLC graduate)**

The general consensus, especially in the older men's focus group, was that there was a

separation between the DLC and BT that has an impact on the degree to which the DLC

could meet the needs of the young men. The men felt that with more funding and staff

support the DLC could expand its services, increase its hours, provide more educational

resources, increase moral support, and DLC Staffing. They felt that at the current levels

of investment in the areas of intersection, there are limited benefits to the DLC.

David, a key informant, and another young man, Terrell, videotaped the BT staff

focus group. Perhaps as evidence that the BT staff is less than 100% behind the young

men, the young men perceived a subtle tone of condescension that I also felt. Excerpts

from the BT focus group as the member's spoke of the young men exemplify this tone.

> They [the students] should be grateful. They are getting free classes and the
> staff [DLC] work really hard and many of the tutors are doing it [teaching]
> for nothing. They volunteer. You can't get that anywhere. **(Administrator #1)**

> Immigrants come from all over the world and they graduate. They work
> hard. I think they [young men] just have the wrong attitude. You have to
> work hard. Other people work hard, learn English, come to this country and
> make it. **(Administrator #2)**

> To engage the young men? I don't think you should have separate classes just
> for them [the young men]. That would be discrimination and unfair… They
> [the young men] just don't appreciate. They have learn how to act for a
> job interview, write a resume, dress right, pull up their pants…
> **(Administrator #3)**

Following the group, David and Terrell spoke about the relationship of the BT to the

DLC.

> To me there is a great divide [BT and DLC], two different paradigms and ways of
> thinking. There is a wall dividing the thinking. Welcome to my world. Did he
> [BT staff] say that his brother has AIDS and he came from the streets, and he
> thinks the school system is fine and that the school system is not a problem? He
> says he has been there and the problem is not the schools? **(David)**

> You're talking about [focus group] becoming the Uncle Tom, the colonized and
> the colonizer [speaking of minority focus group members]. **(Terrell)**

The young men felt that rather than supporting them at the DLC, the BT staff focus

group was blaming them for their failure, thinking that they were just not trying hard

enough, and that the young men should simply show their gratitude to the DLC for all

that the staff there had done. The young men interpreted the responses from the focus as

indication that the church was uninvolved and uninformed about the work with young

men at the DLC.

> Why are you [BT staff] so harsh against us? Now I know when we were at the DLC what is going on over here [the church]. They don't know what is going on over there [at the DLC]. This was consistent with what other [focus] groups said about them. **(Terrell)**

> It was so hard for me to keep my mouth shut. I was so angry. I really want to confront them. This was the hardest group. I really would like to get them all in a room and have it out. This is the mentality that is in the school system. That is why it is so messed up. **(David)**

Although the BT does support the DLC financially, it was generally felt by the DLC

stakeholders that the church uses the DLC when the DLC interests converge with the

church's own interests, but otherwise ignores the DLC. This interest convergence is felt

most acutely in the areas where the organizations intersect: marketing, funding and

human resources. There is the sense that with more intersection and deeper investment of

funding and DLC input in marketing and human resources, the DLC could increase

service hours, improve services and engage the young men more substantially. There was

also a feeling that if there were a closer relationship between BT and the DLC, and more

time spent with the students by the BT leadership, perhaps the young men would be

better understood and more encouraged.

The DLC could not survive independently without the support of these three

intersections with the church; most especially, funding. But with this dependency, serious

questions are raised in the data about these intersections and their effect on the

engagement of the young men. Stakeholders discussed all three intersections with the

church with heated emotions and felt that the contradictions in the church's relationship

with the DLC, if not distracting from engagement, did not encourage engagement with

the young men on a day to day basis. The church is an important support of the DLC but

an apparently problematic one. As it stands, the two organizations' intersections are

laden with contradictions affecting the quantity, quality and nature of the services

provided at the DLC, as well as potentially affecting the young men's view of themselves

within the organization, all with potential impact upon engagement.

<div align="center">Organizational Structure and Mission</div>

In addition to the supports of a centralized location and the relationship to the church,

the web of the DLC is also supported internally by its learner-centered management style

and Christ-centered mission. (Figure 5:2) These two constructions are organizational and

philosophical and are supportive elements of the DLC on which the "threads" of

engagement are anchored. I argue here that they make the threads stronger because of the

type and nature of these frameworks.

Learner-Centered Management

The Downtown Learning Center is designed around a learner-centered model for both

pedagogy and management where learners are active participants in the design of their

own learning and central to the development of the programs. It is intentionally designed

to encourage and promote shared leadership. Figure 5:2 outlines the functions and

structures where student engagement in leadership and management is sought. This

model attempts to include students in all areas of decision-making and program

development. The model includes seven structures which encourage all stakeholders to participate, express their opinions, and be a part of a shared leadership process.

Figure 5:2   Management Model
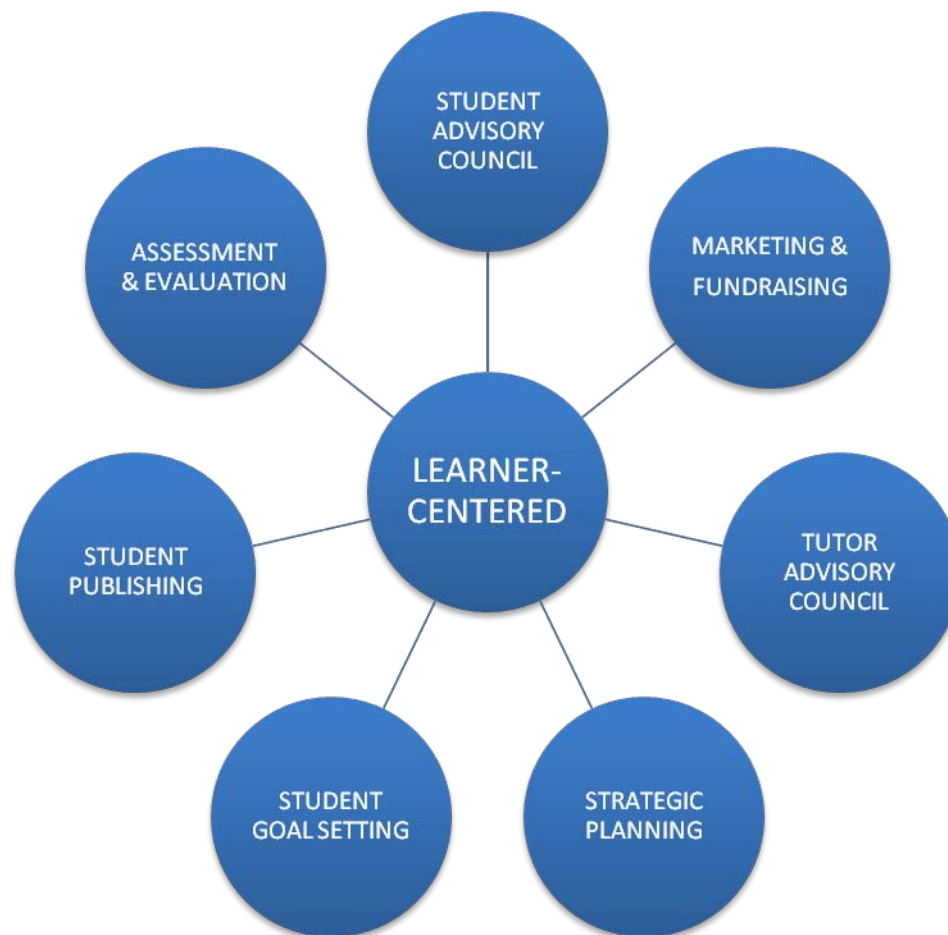
The findings of this study demonstrate that, in fact, the model of management does have an impact on engagement at the DLC, and the style of management is felt through how and to what degree, the young men experience inclusivity and voice, positionality, and power distance (Gladwell, 2008).

The DLC, by virtue of its management style, has mechanisms for including student ideas, suggestions, and decisions in how it does its work. Students are included in decision-making processes because the DLC students' position in the organization is one of collaborator and equal stakeholder along with staff, volunteers, and board. This philosophy of equality and learner-centeredness appears in the language of the DLC Student Handbook.

> Both tutors and students are learners… the learner is a vital participant in all aspects [of the DLC]… students and tutors will be given voice… On the Student Advisory Council, student representatives serve as advisors to staff and ministry workers and represent students' interests. (Student Handbook, 1st Edition, 2001)

The Student Handbook (2001) goes on to state that "Learning stems from students needs and interests – learner-centered." Both explicitly, through the stated philosophy of the program, and implicitly in the structure of relationships and activities, the students are positioned and encouraged to share power, if they so choose. One stakeholder compared the learner-centered model to business models:

> I think that what works [engages] is what Franco said, the informal curriculum that centers around the individual instead of the lesson. And that is something I came to realize later on, if you look at the most successful companies in America right now, they have a very informal structure in how they do things, yet still they are turning huge profits, and the informality that we have here, even though there were rules and regulations, it was not traditional and there is room to speak. It was not hard and fast rule. There is flexibility, and I think that was especially engaging when dealing with people from troubled backgrounds. **(Patrick – tutor)**

Jamal, a student, hints at the impact inclusivity has on learners, when he explains the DLC atmosphere and contrasts it to "school organized ways."

> When you bring the average person who dropped out-of-school and who is on the streets right now into the DLC, they are not used to taking directions. They are on their own. They will say this is what I do. I am a grown man... And their ways wasn't this school organized ways, but there was people [at DLC] who listened to them, and said I understand your problem, but let's talk about it, and they talked and they changed because of the way the DLC is organized. 'Cause I seen it. Listening to people.

Jamal indicates that there is space at the DLC for give and take, talking things through, being heard and having voice. The learner-centered model assumes the importance of forums for students to speak out with the potential for student engagement.

One stakeholder, a DLC staff person, felt that the young men had not participated enough in the management of the DLC and in leadership opportunities at the DLC. She felt that the model was a good one but would have liked to have seen the young men engaged more in the management of the DLC.

> I think that any way we can encourage them … in leadership, in setting the policies…. To be more a part of those conversations [policy making] so if we say you now are not allowed to wear a doo rag or your pants have to be pulled up to a certain point, I think they should be part of that conversation… be more involved in leadership [at the DLC]. **(Amanda – DLC staff)**

Amanda believed that increased leadership and increased participation in the "conversation" by the young men, increased the chances for their engagement.

In the focus groups and during observations, the young men spoke about and had participated in four out of the seven management structures, (the student publishing, goal setting, marketing/funding-raising, and assessment/evaluation). There was a general feeling among stakeholders that the more the young men participated in aspects of the management the more engaged they became. The young men did not actually confirm this belief. Instead, they stated that their priority was to be treated with respect, and that

they felt that the DLC's including them in the decision-making process increased their sense of being respected, gave them an opportunity to express their feelings, and put them closer to sources of power in the program.

Christ-Centered Mission

The DLC is a faith-based organization with a mission and purpose grounded in belief in Christ and doing His work in the world, especially among the poor and those in need. Stated another way the mission of the DLC is founded on the idea that "faith without works is dead." (Bible-James 2:26b, NIV) Therefore, the philosophical core of the DLC is driven by commitment to Christ. An outgrowth of that is a response to the needs of the students in regard to social justice in areas of race, power and education (Figure 5:3). During the course of data collection these three issues emerged as they had an impact upon engagement for the young men and were related to the spiritual philosophy of the DLC. Historically and culturally, these issues have been closely related to Christianity in its emphasis on the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised. Several early adult educators, through their work and writing, have expressed their faith by grappling with issues of social justice, for example during the civil rights movement, voter registration drives for people of color, and union organizing (Horton, Kohl, J. & Kohl, H. 1998). The DLC's spiritual philosophy is not new to the field of adult education (Horton, Bell, Gaventa, Peters, 1990). All the study participants recognized that the DLC's core mission was spiritual, and they characterized it in this way.

Figure 5:3 – The DLC – Spiritual Mission and Three Key Issues of Discourse
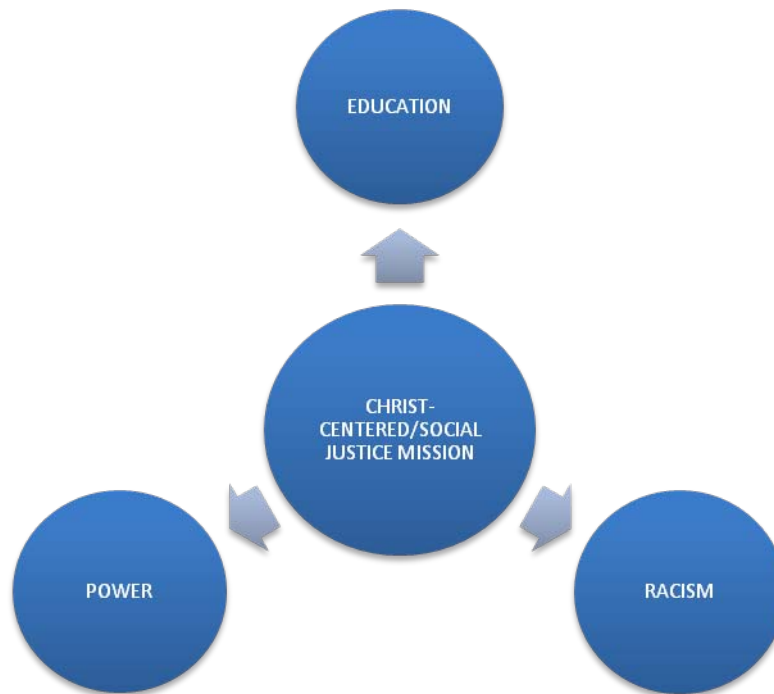
A commitment to Christ finds expression at the DLC by providing educational services to the poor that attempt to equalize opportunity, balance power, and examine institutionalized racism.

The stakeholders from the DLC framed their faith in light of its potential to have an impact on injustices of society. They also saw Christ's example as an imperative to take responsibility to work toward social justice. During a stakeholders' group, one of the stakeholders described social justice as:

> [Social justice] is the church's responsibility. I think that is why Christ did not come to be a Rabbi. I think that is why he didn't come to sit in the temple to just get people blessings and pray for their sins… I think he realized the system was corrupt and he realized … you have to go straight to the community.

For purposes of this study, social justice was sub-divided into categories of equalizing power,   educational opportunity and addressing racism through systemic change and community involvement. The DLC saw their work as a means of addressing these three social justice issues.

DLC stakeholders talked extensively about the larger social responsibility of the church in regard to inequality of education and how addressing those inequalities was the responsibility of faith. DLC stakeholders, for the most part, meshed personal salvation in Christ with the responsibility of one's faith to address issues of social injustice. This was evident in both the DLC mission and the focus group data. The DLC stakeholders looked at their faith in both an individualistic and social context and felt that their faith had implications in both arenas.

The issue of power was already mentioned in the section on DLC's management and learner-centered, shared leadership model but resonates with the Christ-centered mission in that Jesus modeled servant leadership in the New Testament. According to the text, Jesus taught his twelve disciples and then empowered them to carry on His mission throughout the world. The way He taught them was by becoming a servant to them and modeling that servanthood, by washing their feet, feeding them, and exposing corruption in the temple (NIV, Gospel of John). This is similar with adult education philosophy and DLC's model, as the teacher (although not a servant) is a co-learner and the learner often a teacher. There is a balance of power in the teacher and student relationship.

In addition to the equality of power within the teacher and student relationship, the DLC adult learners have decision-making power over their own learning through individualized goal setting, a student advisory council, and strategic planning. These

activities are discussed further in the chapter on space, and learning activities. However, it suffices to say that the DLC's mission of Christ-centered social justice drove its participants to attempt the equalization of power between student and teacher whenever possible, and this balance of power was described as a support to the work of the web in engaging youth.

As further evidenced by the DLC's mission statement, education involves transformation of lives spiritually, emotionally, academically as well as relationally. The DLC's mission statement declares that it is committed to this happening in community and is interested in education in community. Not unlike Christ's mission that affected individuals and addressed their own personal salvation but also affected society in areas of how women were treated, the care of the poor and the widow and the collection of taxes; the DLC tries to affect individual progress and address larger issues of educational inequality. Therefore, the DLC looks at education, and particularly the "push out" issue among the young as a civil rights issue as evidenced by the current "legal" segregation of schools (Kozol, 1991) which still creates inequality of educational opportunity to the urban poor (Mincy, 2006).

This perspective, born of its mission, supports the DLC's engagement with the young men, communicating to them that they are not the problem. The problem lies in a larger social justice issue of educational inequality of which you have often been the unlucky recipient of a substandard education. I argue that this does not make the young men victims nor make them less responsible for their current engagement in learning, but it does support the Center and the young men in clarifying the other factors that have

contributed to their failure in school previously. I maintain that this mere understanding
has the potential to support the web in its work of engagement.

Besides power and inequality of education, the third discourse is race. As stated in
the previous section, the DLC Christ-centered mission, grounded in the framework of
New Testament theology, emphasizes community and the transformation of people and
society, particularly as it addresses oppression. Therefore, as an adult education program
comprised, for the most part, of people of color experiencing oppression in the form of
racism, the DLC's mission obliges it to talk about, grapple with and look for solutions to
racism. I maintain that this obligation, prompted by its mission, supports the web as it
creates spaces to address racism differently from other institutions that the young men
have attended or come in contact with. Chapter 7 will present these spaces created at the
DLC designed to speak to the issue of race, and will utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT),
its terminology and concepts attempt to explain how these important issues are
institutionalized at the DLC affecting the young men of color and their   learning. CRT
assumes that the issue of race is institutionalized, that it is ever present, and that its
presence affects power structures, social justice, and education (Delgado, 1995). Suffice
it to say here, that a Christ-Centered mission supports the DLC in identifying racism as a
social justice issue that needs to be addressed within the learning environment.

<center>Designed for Engagement</center>

As a community of practice, the DLC or the web is connected to a variety of
supportive frames, some intentionally designed and others not. Its centralized location,
relationship with the church, and organizational structure and mission all support the
web, although not without contradiction. As previously explained, but important to

reiterate, the church supports the DLC in significant and vital ways, but not without

aspects of that support that raised concerns by research participants as how this very

support also may be disengaging to the target population. Building on the information

presented in both this chapter and Chapter 4, the upcoming chapters will present the

major findings of this study making the case that both the young men's background,

context of their lives and support systems make certain threads necessary and possible to

engage the young men in learning.

CHAPTER 6   -   FIRST THREAD OF ENGAGEMENT – RELATIONSHIP

"Schools as institutions cannot care directly. A school cannot be engrossed in anyone or anything. But a school can be deliberately designed to support caring and caring individuals and this is what an ethic of caring suggests should be done."
Nel Noddings (1984, p. 182)

"Engagement is more relation. People should have teachers in school who can relate to students especially in schools that have high dropout rates."
Javier

In nature, the spider spins a web made up of threads intertwined to provide nurturance, safety and habitation. For this study, metaphorically there are threads within the DLC that engage the young men in the process of learning. These threads describe the major findings of this study emerging from the data and addressing the research question. The data indicates that there are three threads which emerged as key characteristics of the DLC that helped engage, but the data also indicates a fourth finding, a phenomenon that threatens re-engagement. This chapter will first present these four findings in overview, and then in detail, while focusing specifically on the first thread -- affective relationship.

Threads of Engagement

David, Javier, Dustin, Jamal and Shawn, as well as the other young men, talked again and again about the *relationships* with one or two significant people that influenced their re-engagement in learning. The nature of these relationships is the first thread of engagement. Over and over again, the young men talked about the "love" they felt, the "relationships" that mattered, and the "caring" of the tutors and staff. These are qualities that fit well with my definition of an *affective relationship* as a healthy emotional and cognitive relationship with one or more mentors that help to re-engage young men in

learning. This definition was informed by the research of Keiko Takahashi, *Toward a Life Span Theory of Close Relationships: The Affective Relationships Model* (2005), and Alexander Astin, *Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education* (1984). Takahashi's work develops models of affective relationships and how socio-affective relationships govern behavior in students over time. The term is derived from Alexander Astin's research in holistic educational practices which he has called "affective talent" (Astin, 1991) described later in this chapter. David talked about a relationship of this type with his tutor.

> You get a relationship with this person, and you know it's not favoritism. If you have tutors like Marlon, I'll use him as an example, he'll tell you to your face the reality of things. You know what I mean? But (he will tell you) in a caring manner. You know? That's one good thing; that's why I like The Downtown Learning Center because you got a lot of tutors in here who care.

The second thread is the *space* that the DLC provides- physical, emotional, political and healing. The term space includes two components, exterior and interior. *Exterior space* refers to physical space outside of human beings; this includes how space, or the proximics, (Hall, 1969) affect human behavior, culture and political actions. In the context of this study, how s affects engagement in learning is paramount. *Interior space* means less tangible space inside of human beings. This includes room to feel, to think, to express, to be silent, and includes the "care of the soul" (Moore, 1992). Here is what one volunteer tutor stated about the space at the DLC when asked what engages the young men in learning from their perspective.

> The DLC is like an oasis for [the students] to come to be free from all that oppression out there and violence and whatever. It seems like this is just a little cocoon an atmosphere where they can learn. **(Cynthia – tutor)**

All people need physical space that is comfortable, free of distraction, and safe. But perhaps because the young men's previous school experiences were often uncomfortable, full of distraction and unsafe, the young men reported and emphasized repeatedly in the data that their physical space was important. The data indicates that engaging space also includes space to heal from past trauma, space to voice opinions openly, and space to move and talk freely. Chapter 7 will extend this discussion.

The final thread of engagement is *learning activities.* For purposes of this study *differentiated learning activities* draw from the work of Freire (1970), Hall, T. (2002), and Tomlinson (2001). The instruction is learner-centered and self-directed (Freire, 1970) involving three elements in the learning environment – content, process and products – that are aligned to the needs, wants and abilities of the learner (Tomlinson, 2001). In addition the instruction can be whole group, small group, or individualized instruction (Hall, 2002). Eclectic, learner-centered and self-directed in approach, differentiated instruction is described by Cynthia, a volunteer tutor.

> I never saw this sort of learning before. I've learned a lot here. I find the learning very initiative driven where the students take their own initiative and it enforces more creativity where the student is basically doing their own lesson and their time and their goals rather than the teacher enforcing different methods on the students to do. With this curriculum, the students can find their own type of study methods.

Learning activities, seemingly not as crucial to stakeholders for engagement as relationship and space, nonetheless, emerged from the data as significant. The learning activities begin with the learner to provide choice and flexibility in delivery and content.

By its prevalence in the data, the primary thread of engagement is affective relationship, space is second, and the learning activities are third. These three threads appear to be intertwined at the DLC as threads are intertwined in a web. The fourth

finding is *threats to engagement,* which in contrast to the three previous threads of

engagement, are forces that are continually challenging engagement in learning and

potentially disrupting or disturbing engagement, threatening the integrity of the web.

The close proximity of these threats to engagement, which will be described in detail

in Chapter 8, make it paramount that the threads of engagement within the learning center

be strong and pliable to withstand the potential destructive forces. As an initial example

of this, one young man from a focus group described dangerous distractions outside the

learning center.

> I was part of a gang as well with wearing beads and flags. I stayed with them
> for a little while but then left because it wasn't my style. But there are problems
> with my cousin, of Dominican descent, and he gets into fights which involve me
> because we are related. The basketball court close to the school is where many
> things happen between him, with fights between Black people like every week.
> Like it is hectic and chaotic.   **(Youth #5)**

Gangs are one threat to engagement in that they discouraged the young men from

attending the DLC and distracting them when they did. Although inside the DLC it was

safe, the young men reported that the potential for physical violence, or the fear of forces

of destruction and violence, was ever present. These fears repeatedly appeared in the data

in not only how they generally affected the young men but in their relation to potentially

undermining the work of the learning center.

Among the three threads of engagement that support the young men's learning -

affective relationship, space and learning activities, they are ranked in order suggesting

significance for engagement based on the frequency with which they were talked about

utilizing a word frequency analysis. Responses by the stakeholders in both interviews and

focus groups were analyzed and the findings ranked in order of frequency of response. Of

the four findings, the word frequency analysis cited affective relationship 278 times, and

forces of destruction ranked second being sited 186 times. (*Figure 6:1)* This high word

frequency, in the category of threats to engagement, indicates high potential for

disruption of engagement. Of course, as with all frequency analyses, the suggestion that

frequency equals significance can only be suggested not confirmed.

Figure 6:1   Word Frequency Analysis
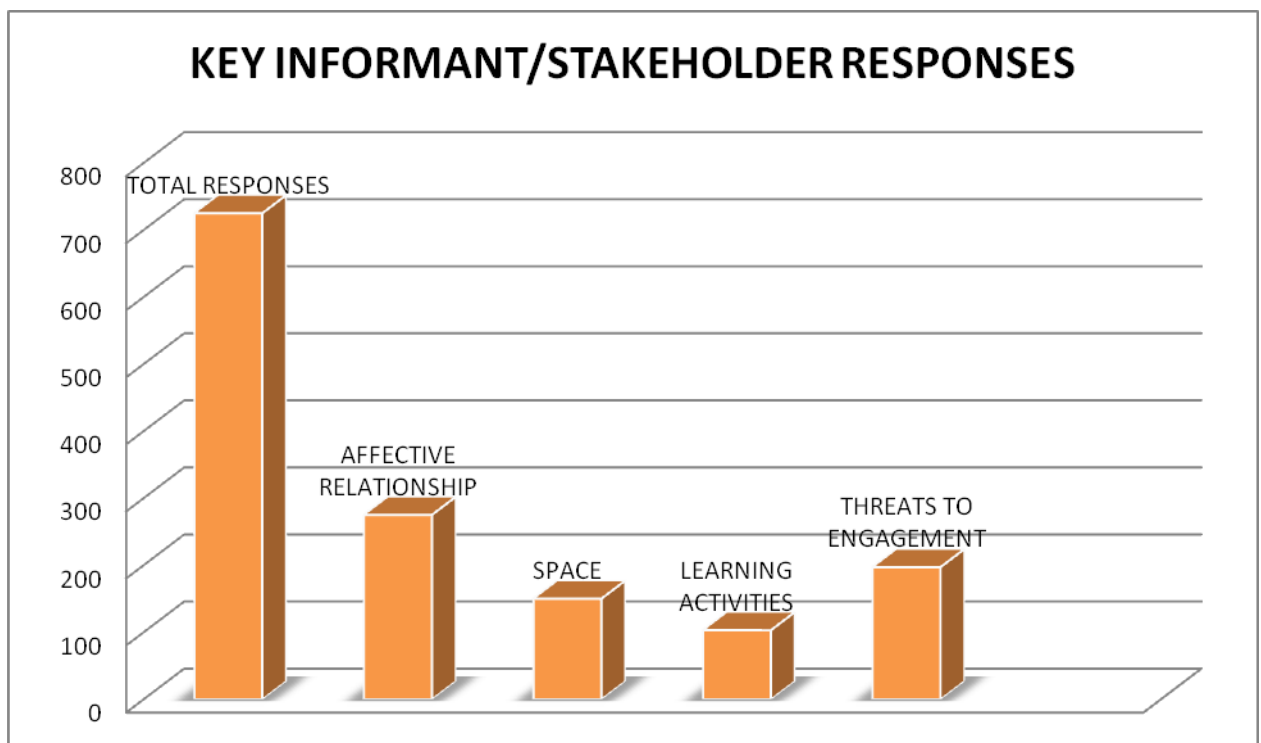
These findings suggest that the academic cannot be separated from the affective

realm for this population of young men as so much of what they said about their past

academic experiences and current DLC experiences were affective in nature. The

findings also suggest that perhaps to ignore the affective realm of education is to fail to

re-engage these populations as these affective relationships were so important to the

participants. Again the findings are not separate threads in the web, they intertwine and each is dependent on the other.

The fourth finding, forces of destruction or threats to engagement, shapes in many ways the nature of the other three findings; some of the other threads might not be as necessary if threats to engagement were not present. The remainder of this chapter, and the next two chapters explore these findings in detail and then provide recommendations for use in adult education settings as well as other settings attempting to engage young men.

Affective Relationship

All five of the key informants reported developing and maintaining a supportive relationship at the DLC with one or two tutors, staff members, or peers that they felt was responsible for their re-engagement in learning. The young men reported these relationships as emotionally intense in nature, beginning at the learning center, but sometimes extending outside the center into their personal lives. Although the relationships are usually between a tutor or staff member and a young man, they can also be peer to peer. As described by the key informants, these relationships often began with communication around GED preparation but evolved into empathetic relationships of emotional support where the young men could speak about problems and obstacles blocking their progress, as well as past hurts that were affecting current engagement. The young men reported having strong, positive feelings for their mentor and believed the relationship to be instrumental in their development of self-esteem and mental health.

Because the young men are emotionally and academically wounded as they come to the

Learning Center, these relationships appear to be a first line of engagement.

For purposes of this study, the term affective relationship is being utilized to define

an emotional relationship within an educational setting with one or more mentors that re-

engages young men in learning. This definition is adapted from the term "affective

talent" from the research of Alexander Astin and the work of the Center for Cognitive

Affective Learning (CAL) at Oxford College of Emory University. In brief, Astin and

CAL's focus on the combination of the affective and cognitive aspects in learning and the

term affective talent means competence for both students and teachers in interpersonal

communication, leadership and empathy development. According to Astin, a clinical

psychologist and educational researcher, affective talent includes self-knowledge and

understanding, self-esteem, and mental health (Astin, 1984). The current work of Astin

and CAL focuses on connection between cognitive-affective learning in undergraduate

education and the importance of creating environments that foster holistic learning. In

addition to Astin, Parker Palmer's research was instrumental in naming the first finding

as their work supported the idea of inseparability of the cognitive and affective domains

as well as the spiritual domain in education (Palmer, 1998). The key informants' affective

relationships at the DLC all reported this inseparability of the cognitive and affective

realms and the influence of the spiritual domain in many of these relationships as well.

There are three main characteristics of these affective relationships. They are holistic,

reciprocal, and unbounded (Figure 6:2). The characteristics are not totally distinct from

one another as the figure indicates. It is their sum total, rather than any of the parts, that

define affective relationships.

Figure 6: 2   The Nature of the Affective Relationship
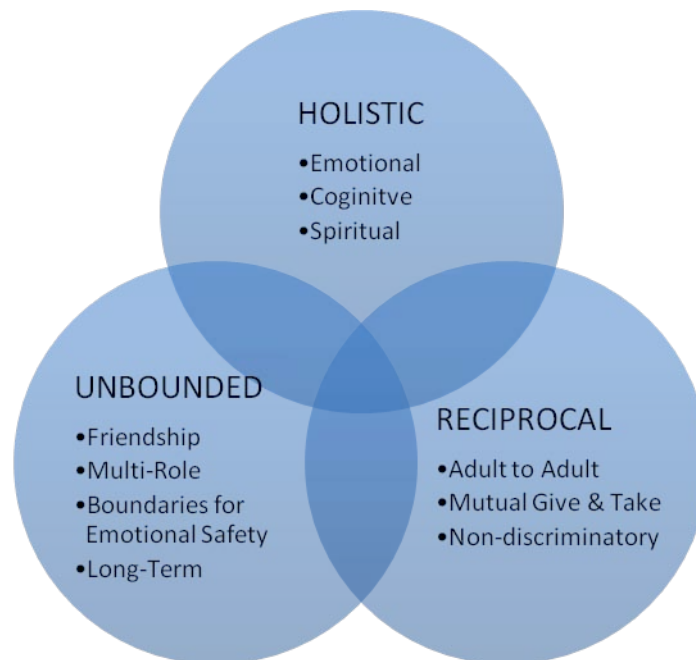
Holistic

The affective relationships of the young men at the DLC are holistic in that they

include emotional, cognitive, and often, spiritual elements. These relationships are

characterized by the interdependence of these elements in one relationship addressing the

totality, or whole of the person. For instance, Shawn's affective relationship with his tutor

was holistic in that not only did they study for the GED math and science (cognitive), the

pain of being placed in special education and fears of failure again was often discussed

(emotional), and they also prayed together about both the GED and Shawn's fears

(spiritual). Affective relationships emphasize the importance of the whole person in the re-engagement process.

At the core of the young men's relationship with their mentor is emotional attachment, having to do with feelings, sentiment, and an attachment often moving or touching. According to neurological research, the brain does not separate emotions from cognition (Caine & Caine, 1998). Therefore, it is not particularly surprising that during the course of this study a whole range of emotions were discussed in the context of learning, and in the context of the affective relationships, the young men spoke of feelings and emotions of love toward their mentor(s).

These affective relationships were also cognitive in nature; the two aspects could not be separated. After all, the reason that the young men came to the DLC was for an academic credential and their relationships with their mentors began with the pursuit of the GED. The young men talked about the cognitive aspect of the relationship, engaging in discussions around current events, math skill acquisition, and shared readings, in the same context as they spoke of the affective aspects of their relationships. For them, the emotional and the intellectual were not separated, nor could they be. It is the overlap between affective and cognitive that is crucial here.

Javier described two significant affective relationships at the DLC which combined the affective and the cognitive. The first was with a tutor, and the second was with a staff person who supervised him during an office internship at the DLC.

> My teacher, my tutor, he worked with me and even when I didn't want
> to answer questions… I guess he must have seen something in me the he wanted
> to pull out and he wound up doing it... And K [this tutor] had a topic for us to
> write, basically the topic was Women's Rights. He split us into two groups…
> the males had to disagree with them getting all these rights and the females had to
> agree...The topic just caught me… I was really engaged in the essay I was

writing. I kept writing. Class was over, and I kept writing like nothing else but that topic mattered to me at that time. My tutor gave me a chance to express my feelings cause I see a lot of injustice. **(Javier)**

Javier is cognitively engaged in thinking through a Women's Rights question and utilizing writing as a means of thinking through this issue presented by the tutor. The tutor responds providing Javier a chance to express his feelings and "seeing" something in Javier that is capable of this kind of engagement. Javier reports that the tutor challenged him and gave him time to think through the issue while encouraging emotional engagement with the issue as well.

Javier describes a second affective relationship with a staff intern supervisor, Ms. Y.

Ms. Y. she's been excellent to me. She's helped me in a lot of ways; she's helped me step up; she's helped me see things differently. I've learned about filing and different information on computers… it's preparing me and providing tools that I can use on the job… This develops my communication and socialization skills… My whole dealing with education, my outlook, was dark. I am able to release some of that stress and pressure and absorb the love from people… I see there are good people [Ms. Y] out here who can and will help.

Throughout the data, descriptions of learning new skills, writing, analyzing issues, as well as engaging in reading, research or GED test practice are permeated with affective language. There seems to be little separation between the emotional relationships and academic work being done, but what makes these relationships unique is the overtly expressed "love" that the young men communicate. The young men feel deeply, especially around issues that affect their lives (race, poverty, unemployment, etc.), and talk about those feelings as they engage in learning within these relationships. Perhaps surprisingly, the men are not afraid to speak about feelings frequently and to mix

intellectual activities of reading, writing, discussion, reflection, research with the

expression of emotion when they are part of trusting affective relationships.

They spoke about the unconditional way that the mentors cared for and loved them,

and then, because they felt accepted unconditionally, they felt they could trust their

mentors. The young men from the focus group repeatedly spoke about these

relationships with their mentors in affective terminology, as exemplified by the

following:

> I got mad love for [my tutor] because… I never knew how to write and
> coming to [tutor's] group, he pushed me. Even though he's on my back, I got
> to write. That's what I call love. **(Youth #1)**
> She gave me attention. The relationship I built with her just made me feel so
> comfortable. Yes, I think it [the relationship] was important for me, for me it
> was… Like I felt she liked me the way I was, and she helped me. That made me
> feel comfortable so whatever she wanted was good for me. **(Youth #6)**

It seems that the formation of the affective relationships was in part a result of the

mentors' affective talent as presented by Astin (1984). The mentors seem to have a strong

ability to empathize with the young men demonstrated by strong interpersonal

communication skills and comfort with expressed emotion.

> It's very important [to engagement]. My tutor is an inspiration … like she
> just has energy like love just flowing to me. **(Youth #5)**

The relationships that the young men had with their mentors produced an effect on

their lives, as far as moving forward toward a GED; at its essence, they were

relationships of tender attachment. The tutors expressed love, attention, understanding

and warmth, and this made the young men feel comfortable, motivated and inspired.

> [The tutors] they got love in them… they make you feel like their goal is to be
> here [DLC] and for you to come back and say I got my GED. **(Youth #1)**

In addition, affective relationships seem to have a balance between a mentor's high

expectations that the young men take personal responsibility for their learning and

understanding of the social context that has played a critical role in inhibiting the young

men's progress. In other words they expect students to take individual responsibility for

their work, but also acknowledge their feelings and experiences. This balance is a good

fit with what the young men say they want in a tutor:

> We need teachers to say I know what you are going through cause I was
> there before. You want teachers who are on your level who can say I've been
> there. I know how you feel. But you know if you get through this, I can tell
> you it's going to be better for you. You want people who can touch you in that
> sense. You want someone not to say just copy this down. You want
> someone who is hands-on. You want someone who understands like just do
>
> this, and you will go places… **(Youth #2)**
>
> [My tutor] he always makes me do stuff I don't like, but that is a good thing
> because it pushes me higher. **(Youth #3)**

The young men report that they respond with affection toward their mentors and this

helps them put forth as a result of their mentor's empathy for them. Jamal makes clear

that this connection to his feelings was important to his continued participation at the

DLC:

> I don't know why I felt like [I] learned so much more at the Learning Center.
> I just felt like I learned so much… like my [relationship] with my tutors
> was real good. The way they carry themselves is very warm and cozy and
> make you want to act that way. There was energy, and energy they produce,
> and it's like you gravitate toward [it] and you produce. **(Jamal)**

Throughout the data collection, in interviews, focus groups, observations, the young

men expressed their affection for their mentors while engaging in instructional groups

and activities. This affection was expressed verbally and through non-verbal

demonstrations, such as kissing on the cheek, and hugs. For them, the emotional and the

intellectual were not separated, nor could they be. It is the overlap between affective and cognitive that is crucial here.

In addition to the emotional and cognitive nature of the relationships, the connection between the church and the DLC makes spiritual relationships not only commonplace but acceptable. Spiritual relationships are defined as relationships that focus on the development of a religious faith, a spiritual inner life, and a relationship with God. Because prayer, Bible study, and worship through the church are available to the learning center participants and the mentors are often members of the church, they frequently become spiritual guides and supports for the young men. This aspect of the affective relationship was culturally familiar to the young men and brought an additional option of support for their engagement.

All of the young men, with the exception of David, were raised as children in the church and are open to and very accepting of spiritual support. All, including David, welcomed spiritual discussion and prayer. It was not uncommon for a young man to pray with his mentor before and after class. Sometimes the young men attended the church and met with pastors for spiritual counseling. Spiritual intervention is always by choice at the DLC, but most affective relationships included this spiritual component to some degree, and at a certain point in the relationship. David spoke about the spiritual component of relationships at the DLC.

> There is like this loving type [spiritual] thing because of the church [my tutor
> is part of the church]. Because most of them, they have this loving type aura...
> and people feel more comfortable here. My tutor, I told you I am pending
> about religion, so what my tutor would do is give me a Bible and ask me to
> read certain chapters, and we'll talk whenever I come back. That's big to
> me… I am still looking into Christianity. And my tutor is a good person to
> talk with about spirituality. **(David)**

As described in the previous chapter, there are contradictions in the relationship

between the church and the DLC organizationally. However, on a personal relationship

level the spiritual dimension added by the DLC's connection to the church seems to be an

asset to the young men because church was frequently a part of their family background

and upbringing. Further evidence of this comes from a volunteer support counselor who

views the spiritual aspect of the relationships at the DLC as positive for the students.

> I see a student [that I have a relationship with], and they seem to come knowing
> that we are part of a church. They know we are Christians, and so they are able
> to relate to not only the educational and emotional and mental but the spiritual
> aspect. You are able to ask if they have any spiritual beliefs, and sometimes the
> pressure and the condition are so heavy. But those [I have a relationship with]
> are willing to have prayer and this seems good for them.
> **(Counselor- Stakeholder)**

This dimension of the affective relationship may not be possible in other adult

education centers, but due to the fact that the DLC is within a church setting, these

relationships can include this dimension. It appears that the spiritual support provided in

these relationships compliment the emotional and cognitive components making the

relationships truly holistic and powerfully supportive. Dustin sees the spiritual

relationship as providing this kind of support.

> At the DLC I learned, [from my tutor] and I use this today in this everyday
> life, I learned there is a higher power like there really is a higher power –
> somebody, somewhere that's really like helping us, helping me. **(Dustin)**

Spiritual support seems additionally crucial in these relationships as the young men

often carry trauma so that spiritual encouragement is most often not only accepted but

greatly appreciated and welcomed. Dustin explained that the support of a spiritual

relationship, which he experienced with his tutor, helped him through hard times, and

how it supported his academic progress.

> The high power in Jesus is saying 'Ok, you have been through so much. I [Jesus] got you from here.' Even if you're doing bad yourself, even if you are harming yourself, or preventing yourself, or doing [bad] to yourself, the higher power is not letting me go… I met this tutor and he just changed me [spiritually], and I got my GED which nobody ever expected. I didn't expect to get my GED. And I got it, and now I am talking about college. **(Dustin)**

Reciprocal

Data analysis indicates that the affective relationships were reciprocal in nature, demonstrated by sharing and mutuality. When a relationship is reciprocal, both the mentor and the young man are recipients of knowledge, support, affirmation and seem to benefit from the relationship. The key components of reciprocity in the relationships are that it is adult to adult in nature, involves give and take from both participants in the relationship, and is non-discriminatory.

First, the affective relationships were adult to adult in contrast to a child/parent relationship or child/adult relationship. In most instances, the young men are over eighteen so the relationship is not between a minor and adult, and the young men can be independent in their choices and do not legally have to attain parental permission to do anything.

The ways in which the mentors relate to the young men are characterized by dialogue, choice, autonomy, learner-centeredness, mutual respect, and equality. This is not to say that child/adult relationships don't exhibit these characteristics, but adult relationships are defined by them (Knowles, 1970).

Indeed, the relationships I observed seemed equalitarian. The dialogue and interactions were friendly, warm and serious. Both participants in the relationship appeared to "share power" in the relationship, both having a voice and listening to each

other. It was often difficult to know who the students were and who the tutors were. The

following field note reflects a moment

between David and his tutor that is both light yet focused where it could be difficult to

know who the tutor and who the student is.

> David and his tutor banter back and forth, and David says to his tutor, "you are a character." This is said in a light hearted way and with affection; they laugh together then return quickly to the learning tasks at hand.

Another observation, this time of Dustin engaged with his instructional group and his

tutor, highlights his autonomy and the adult shared power characteristic of affective

relationships at the DLC.

> Dustin appears to be trying to cope with the disorganization of the group. The tutor sits down next to Dustin and works with him one-on-one. The tutor takes her cues from Dustin, what they will do, what book to use and what page they will work on… they are working on math figuring averages. Dustin corrects the tutor's calculations after she figures the answer on the calculator. Dustin is correct, and the tutor acknowledges the mistake and moves on asking Dustin if he will teach the group how to do a bar graph. Dustin turns to a bar graph in his math packet.

There is an ease to the relationship that seems based on equality of power. Another

example is from an observation of Dustin as he relates to his tutor. Again, the

conversation is adult in its negotiation style and equal in its nature:

> The tutor says, "Let's turn to page 540 in the GED book." Dustin doesn't have a book. He is questioned gently by the tutor, and Dustin says it is too heavy to carry [as he just came from work]. Dustin goes on to make the case that they should do another activity with a [lightweight] Numeracy Packet.
> The tutor listens. Dustin opens the packet and suggests an activity.
> The tutor follows the lead and the group begins with Dustin's suggestion.

These types of interactions were characteristic of the adult relationships between the

young men and their mentors, exhibiting a civility and maturity in communication and

negotiation. In addition, during all observations there was a sense that both the student

and tutor were learner's together, sharing books they were reading, conversing and

debating on current events, negotiating the goals for the session, and choosing activities

to be pursued together.

Giving back of their time, resources, and emotional support to their mentor, and to the

DLC as a result of their affective relationships, is another aspect of reciprocity in

relationship demonstrated by the key informants. Sometimes the giving back was

personally to the mentor in the form of gifts on special occasions, or emotional support

during the loss of a mentor's family member. Sometimes it was phone calls and text

messages when their mentor was sick. Other instances included asking a tutor if they

wanted prayer, and then the student praying for his mentor. Or in the case of David, he

helped his tutor move to a new apartment. In other instances, key informants established

affective relationships then gave back to both the mentor and the DLC by volunteering

time and skills.

An example of the latter is Javier and his affective relationship with a staff worker in

the office. Javier worked and contributed endless hours working with this mentor in the

office and taking attendance as well as peer tutoring in the classroom. This "giving back"

occurred even after he graduated. His mentor had so much to do, and Javier volunteered

to support her with dozens of volunteer hours. Javier did this as much for her as for the

DLC. According to Javier, she was the impetus for his giving back. His mentor suggested

ways for him to contribute and also created volunteer opportunities that eventually

included a small stipend for transportation making the giving back possible.

David gave back by peer tutoring in his tutor's group. He explained that his tutor had

so many students, and he wanted to help out his tutor. Dustin supported his tutor

emotionally during a time of crises and loss, and Jamal graduated and became a tutor so

that he would make his tutor proud of him. The important issue for engagement is that the

young men were not merely passive receivers from their mentors but active contributors

in the relationship as well. These are not one-sided, patronizing relationships.

 Beyond the reciprocity within the young men's affective relationships with tutors or

staff members, the young men "gave back" to the Center as a whole. The key informants

indicated that the reason that they gave back to the center was in large part due to the

affective relationship(s) they had established as students. Jamal is a prime example of this

type of reciprocity. As a GED graduate of the program, Jamal talked about the thrill of

tutoring others now that he has graduated.

> Can you Jamal, help me with this? And I do that and that makes me feel a whole
> lot better than my – I mean when my group happens – I love it! I ain't got no
> feeling like that in my world. But when somebody actually comes to me and says
> help me with this and I and they help them walk off with it. That makes me
> feel good; that's how I engage in more learning that makes me feel excellent. Like
> if I help somebody I'll know it, but it's like I'm helping them so they're learning
> something, and I'm learning more of it by teaching them. **(Jamal)**

Jamal's main tutor, who he had developed an affective relationship with as a student,

left the DLC. But Jamal remained as a tutor, stating he wanted to help others like his tutor

helped him.

The importance of the reciprocal nature of affective relationships should not be under

estimated. Giving back is not only empowering for the young men, it seems to contribute

to a feeling of belonging to and contributing to a community of learners as demonstrated

by the longevity of participation even by the GED graduates and their personal testimony

to their sense of belonging. If these kinds of reciprocal relationships can be encouraged,

engagement of these young men seems likely to be enhanced. Whether it was giving back

to the individual mentor, or giving back to the DLC, or both, the affective relationship

appears to be the catalyst that encourages and models this quality for students.

   The reciprocal nature of these relationships was also non-discriminatory. Although

the research participants were male and minority, the data was clear that the gender and

race of the mentor in an affective relationship were not a salient concern to the young

men. Some studies have cited the importance of same race, same gender role models for

young males. Therefore for purposes of this study, the participants were asked about the

importance of the gender and race of the mentors and whether that affected their

engagement in learning. The young men were consistent in their answers. Gender and

race was much less important to them than their mentor's expressions of care for them.

The following focus group dialogue demonstrates that young men put a caring

personality above race and gender as tutor characteristics that mattered to them.

> Shawn: "I think it is not a set type of teacher. I don't think that really matters."
> David: "It doesn't matter if it is a male or female. . ."
> Andrew: "I think it's the teacher's heart because if a teacher wants to teach something"
> Andrew: "Son, not to be racist or anything but... I remember in the second grade, this one white teacher, I loved her."

Similarly, Dustin explained that the race and gender of the tutor are not factors in his

learning.

> I've had all different ethnicity of tutors – Spanish, Black and White. I gained from all. There wasn't no flaws that I could say… Yeh, because I've had different ethnicity teachers and it never was a problem. You can learn from both sexes and races… That's how I've seen if from years being here. It's never been we are going to try to cater towards this racial group. **(Dustin)**

   Most respondents concurred with Dustin's point of view. The key informants formed

affective relationships with DLC tutors and staff members of genders, all ages, and a

variety of races; although they did acknowledge that it was good to have male role models. Caring relationships seem to trump differences in race and gender in importance to the young men and their engagement in learning.

Unbounded

In addition to being holistic and reciprocal, affective relationships appear to be what I am calling unbounded; relationships which extend beyond the walls of the DLC, including multiple mentor roles, existing long-term and often becoming what may prove to be life-long relationships. This section will describe these three facets of unbounded affective relationships: friendship beyond the DLC, being multi-role, and creating boundaries for emotional safety.

All the relationships started in The Downtown Learning Center in small GED groups facilitated by tutors who subsequently developed affective relationships with the young men. Most of the relationships were maintained primarily within the walls of the DLC. However, with varying degrees of frequency, the relationships did sometimes move outside the walls of the Center and these "outside" friendships seemed to be characteristic of many of the affective relationships.

In some instances, the outside relationship consisted simply of phone calls by tutors or students to follow-up regarding attendance or homework. In several instances they were virtual through email and Face book. On other occasions, the relationship may involve going out for coffee or lunch, or inviting a student to church. Dustin's relationship with his mentor-tutor was supportive of the tutor when he experienced a crisis. He explained how he anticipated helping his tutor during a time of family crisis.

> Oh, I got his [my tutor] number on my phone. Actually I need to text
> message him. I need to let him know that we [his GED group] are all behind

> him. Like we support him. We will be praying for him and all that. Cause I told
>
> you he's going through – well, you probably know. I'm sure. His fiancée's
> mother is diagnosed with cancer, and he's supposed to be married. **(Dustin)**

Dustin not only retained his tutor's phone number, but he intended to provide

emotional support of his tutor during a crisis. Although this example is also an instance of

reciprocity, giving back, it is that and more. This example led to a friendship outside of

the DLC which continues today.

I went on to question Dustin about his relationship with his tutor outside of class time

and whether he would have had this kind of relationship during high school with the

public school staff, and if not, what made the difference.

> No way in public school. [At the DLC] – It's the love atmosphere. The thing
> that gets me is that you all are not getting paid for this. The teachers in the
> school are getting paid to do this. But there is more love in this school than in
> regular school. So that's the significant factor. It really is.

The affective relationships are characterized by the possibility of contact outside the

DLC, and in the case that Dustin described, actual friendships established over time

outside the DLC.

David reports having an outside relationship with one of his tutors which started

when he helped him move. He reports while "hanging out" with his tutor he was also

learning.

> I went to [my tutor's] house. We help him move. You know and where he came
> from, it's so different from where I came from in Brooklyn. You know what I
> mean? It was just a fun experience hanging out with him because he is brilliant.
> And I made a connection with him… it's just fun… I don't want to say just
> because he is brilliant that makes it sound like I am only hanging out with him
> because I want to be smart. No, I enjoy his company. That's what I like. I like his
> company. I like to be part of him because he can teach me. His is older than me.
> Maybe he is one year older than me, but he's been through schooling and all this.
> He knows more about how it is out there. Just hanging out enlightens me on

things. **(David)**

David viewed this outside experience as educative as well as fun, social, and

recreational. Lending or giving money or other tangible support is another type of outside

component of the relationship. For example, tutors helped with college tuition, rent,

carfare, food and clothes. Some of the young men were living in poverty so mentors

provided financial help for college, metro-cards for transportation, and money for lunch.

Under most funding and social service guidelines, normally these types of boundary

crossings are supposed to be avoided. However, due to the nature of the needs and the

establishment of generally good boundaries, these boundaries could be crossed without

what can be called boundary violation (Schwartz, 2002).

As stated previously, at its core an affective relationship is an adult to adult

relationship; nevertheless, this does not preclude the mentor from taking on various roles,

depending on the need. Multiple roles that the young men described their mentors

playing were parent, older sibling, teacher, guidance counselor, career or college

consultant, therapist, friend, co-learner, spiritual advisor, fellow learner, and co-worker.

For example, Shawn's mentor took on a parenting or older sibling type role when

addressing Shawn's drug use and entrance to college. The tutor contacted drug programs,

made continual follow-up phone calls to re-engage Shawn, had long talks with Shawn

about drug use and effects on his future, and paid his college entrance fee. The young

men do at times exhibit potentially harmful adolescent behavior, including but not limited

to: poor judgment, immature thinking and underdeveloped communication skills.

Therefore, a more parental or familial type of support is needed. In addition, the young

men are still emergent adults living at home, unmarried, and unemployed or

underemployed. They are dependent upon family or other adults in most areas of their lives, so it is not uncommon for the mentor relationship with the young men to take on a type of surrogate parent role.

In some instances, when parents were absent, and even though these relationships were usually adult in nature, the mentors fulfilled jobs that parents would ordinarily provide: talking with the young men about getting to bed on time so they weren't tired for school; the importance of completing their homework; avoiding potentially harmful sexual activity; how to respond when approached by the police; and, choosing the right friends. These parenting functions, though rare, were described by the young men.

Sometimes the mentor takes on a guidance or career counselor role, giving advice about colleges, the college admission process, college fairs, financial aid and scholarships. This may transform the relationship from instructional to a type of counseling role. As stated previously, if there are intense mental health issues they also may be broached by the tutor. During the course of the study the young men mention issues of loss, drug use, gangs, bullying and re-entry from prison as topics discussed in affective relationships. In instances where the young men become tutors themselves, or are part of the church, the relationships are easily maintained within community and take on an additional dimension of colleague in tutoring. The tutor and young men are now professional colleagues.

Sometimes the young men played multiple roles with their tutors. An example of this was when Dustin was the counselor and comforter of his tutor while the tutor was in crisis as described previously. It was rare, in affective relationships, for the student or the mentor to function in only one role. The needs of the young men demanded that the

mentor play more than one role if the relationship was to be effective in engaging them in learning, and often the young men responded by assuming other roles, too.

When Shawn and Javier became tutors following graduation, the role of the young men changed and the tutor and student were then peers in tutoring. As the young men grew and changed, it often forged a change in roles in the learning and changed the nature of the affective relationships that were established. Simultaneously, the mentor also grew altering his/her role in order to address the changing needs.

As stated previously the affective relationship, though unbounded, has appropriate boundaries which maintain the ability of the young men and mentor to learn and achieve their goals without emotional entanglements, distractions, or enablement.

The relationships the young men reported were relationships that promoted engagement in learning, in part, because the boundaries around these relationships were in place. Boundaries are defined as "anything that helps to differentiate you from someone else or shows where you begin and end" (Cloud & Townsend, 2004). Responsible or appropriate relationship boundaries are defined as behavior both physical and emotional that promotes independence, self-responsibility, empowerment, respect, pro-activity, and self-confidence (Cloud et al. 2004). We best understand boundaries when they are absent as in co-dependent relationships where individuals in the relationship seem unable to mature emotionally, change negative behaviors, and move on with their goals. They appear stuck in unproductive habits of behavior affecting learning and maturation (Cloud et al. 2004).

Defining boundaries is extremely complicated and for purposes of this study, only physical and emotional boundaries in relation to affective relationships are described.

Many of the young men in this study came to the DLC having experienced past trauma.

When hurt people come into relationships responsible boundaries are crucial to avoiding

co-dependency (Cloud et al. 2004). The maintenance of responsible boundaries is all the

more important. From the data it appears the affective relationships at the DLC

maintained both physical and emotional boundaries that were not co-dependent and did

not cross physical and emotional boundaries inappropriately.

In all of the affective relationships among key informants, the relationships

observed were not friendships first. The young men may have developed friendships with

their tutors, but they did not start that way. Javier, Dustin, Shawn, Jamal, and David all

had significant relationships with their tutors and, in one instance a staff, which were

initially a student/teacher formal relationship that I saw move toward friendship. The

formal relationship would begin during the instruction, and interaction would be solely

around GED material. As the relationship developed and changed, there were

conversations before and after class, exchange of cell phone numbers, and email. As time

progressed, key informants and tutors would go out for lunch, arrange meetings on

weekends, and participate together in church or cultural events outside the DLC. They

could be observed walking out of the DLC together carrying on what appeared to be

intense conversations.

For the most part these unbounded relationships were reported to be healthy and

positive by the young men and the stakeholders in this study, and these kinds of

unbounded relationships seemed to easily develop as the wounded nature of the young

men elicits compassion, empathy, and a deep desire to help (Cloud et al. 2004).

However, stakeholders did report grappling with how emotionally close to get to students

and when to help and when not to. This is not unlike in counseling relationships, although

not usually classified as friendships, where enabling behavior and crossing emotional

boundaries in an attempt to help can easily happen (Cloud et al.2004). The following

quote from a tutor explains some of the issues tutors reported grappling with in their

affective relationships with students at the DLC.

> [My student] he is on the street, but he attends school here, and he is in my group. He told me he didn't have anything to eat last night. He said, "I am hungry." My mother don't have money to give me to come to school. I would encourage him, give him love. I showed him that if you come, I have something I can give you, but I would like you to come. And then he would cry. **(Cynthia – tutor)**

It is not certain from the tutor's further responses whether or not the tutor gave the

student money, food or other things, and it is not clear in this instance if any boundaries

were crossed. But the tutor did report that learning was interrupted, and the choices she

was grappling with in the relationship made it difficult to teach. Boundary crossing would

be behavior that would not allow the tutor to teach and the student to learn, behavior

causing emotional stress that distracts from the engagement in learning (Cloud et al.

2004).

As mentioned previously, the issues surrounding the young men are so often intense.

They face gangs, violence, failure, prison, unemployment, poverty, racism, and many

other difficulties. The possibility of enablement is likely to be present. *Enablement* is

ongoing behavior that does for others what they can and should be doing for themselves.

This kind of relating can keep a person from growing and learning. Enabling occurs when

the mentor becomes so emotionally involved with the student and their needs that she/he

is not able to perform his/her tutoring or professional responsibilities with enough

emotional distance to be effective. The relationship ultimately does not help the student

(Schwartz, 2002). This kind of enabling behavior can occur in addiction treatment

settings or when working with patients who have intense mental health issues. Because

the young men came to the DLC emotionally wounded and sometimes with addictions,

the awareness and ability to recognize responsible boundaries seems to be important for

developing affective relationships. The tutors in this study appeared to be able to be

emotionally connected to the key informants without exhibiting emotional enablement.

The affective relationships at the DLC that were observed between the young men

and their mentors included physical contact of a culturally and professionally appropriate

nature. Under no circumstances were the relationships sexual in nature, and all physical

contact was appropriate to public settings. Nevertheless, there was physical contact of a

supportive, gentle, and affectionate nature.

These displays of physical affection were seen throughout the focus groups and

observations between tutor, staff and students particularly in the significant affective

relationships between the key informants and their tutors. Kisses on the cheek, hugs,

handshakes, and playful fighting were observed often during the data collection. These

shows of affection appeared to be important to the maintenance of the relationship and

the engagement of the students even though no one explicitly stated this. Physical contact

seemed to be normal and unforced, and seemed to indicate a kind of closeness and

affection not typical in most formal educational settings.

Affective relationships are long lasting unbounded relationships, in some instances

spanning years. They tend to be relatively long-term. Tutors at the DLC tend to make

long-term commitments because often they belong to the church and can be committed

for a lifetime. Also, it is not uncommon for the young men to work on their GED for one,

two and even three years. This is not necessarily because they are so behind

academically; instead, it is often due to other forces that slow down their progress.

Whatever the cause, the young men tend to attend the DLC for an extended period of

time. These logistics at the DLC set the stage for the creation of these long-term

relationships, but it is the strength of the relationship that maintains it over time often

well after the student graduates.

   For example, twice after failing to pass the GED test, one young man finally did so.

Subsequently, his tutor detected a serious drug problem, and the tutor continued to help

him address the problem. This tutor supported him by negotiating the assessment and

referral process into residential drug treatment, corresponded by mail and visits while he

was in the program, and set up a job, and college admission as relapse prevention, after

his seventeen months in the program. At the time of this writing, the relationship has

lasted for about three and a half years.

   DLC staff and the mentors still have contact with all five key informants even though

only one continues to attend the program; three have graduated and started college, and

one is no longer attending the DLC. All of the relationships have continued for over a

year and in several over three years. It may be anticipated that with some of the young

men, the relationships will continue, to some degree, for years to come. The emotional

intensity of them plus the reciprocity makes these relationships seem prone to long term

investment and commitment for both the mentor and the young men.

Thread One of Engagement – Affective Relationship

The multi-faceted relationships described in this chapter were characteristic of what the young men described as key to their participation at the DLC. These are intense, emotional, and complex teaching and learning relationships. This complexity raises serious questions about teacher selection, preparation, and professional development for instructors working with this population. This finding seems to suggest that teaching this population is not for everyone nor is it possible for all teachers to engage with students in the relationships described.

It also raises issues about the skills required to establish and maintain these types of affective relationships and the need for these skills to be taught. It also begs the question of whether or not these relational skills can be taught. These skills may include, but are not limited to: adult learning, interpersonal communication, basic counseling, boundary-setting, small-group management, as well as conventional teaching skills.

In regard to these issues, the DLC utilizes a large pool of volunteers. It has some choice in who works with students and particularly who is selected to work with the young men. Tutors and stakeholders in direct contact with the young men receive nine weeks of intensive training which includes communication skills building, boundary maintaining, small-group management and adult education theory instruction. Ongoing professional development in these areas is minimal at the DLC, although existent. It does appear that for the young men of this study, affective relationships were central to their engagement in learning, but how these tutors were selected and the effect of the training they received on the establishment of these relationships is unclear.

The issues raised in this chapter will be further addressed and recommendations made in the final chapter. The next chapter examines the second thread of engagement, space, in all its many tangible and less tangible dimensions.

CHAPTER 7   -   SECOND THREAD OF ENGAGEMENT – SPACE

**"Space, far from being neutral, is both socially and psychologically
 constructed, and reproductive of inequality… I recall acutely spaces where happy
learning took place… memories of emotional and affective dimensions of learning as
contributing to a positive educational experience… space which magically enabled
learning. However, the opposite is also possible, as testaments to failed,
 thwarted, difficult learning."**

Olivia Sagan (p. 173 & 174)

**"The space where my group is – I love that corner. I just love that spot… Yeh, that's
my corner. It feels like I be right there. You see everything. Everything is right
there."**

Jamal

According to the anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, we are territorial creatures, so space

matters in all public and private places, and directly and indirectly affects our behavior.

In the case of schools, one of the most public of all places, space can affect the behavior

of students (Hall, 1969). Consistent with Hall's assertions, space at the DLC mattered to

the young men, and the spaces created at the DLC contributed to the culture of

engagement for them.

The opening of this chapter will define what is meant by the concept of space within

this study and then review previous educational spaces that the participants experienced.

Included will be how the DLC spaces address the vulnerabilities the young men brought

with them from past emotional and physical neglect or abuse in and out-of-school as

discussed in chapter four. It is the educational turning points and negative past

educational experiences of the young men discussed in chapter 4 and the contradictions

and tensions surrounding the web discussed in chapter 5 that seem to make suitable

spaces necessary for the engagement of this specific population. The bulk of this chapter

will examine the actual DLC spaces both physical and non-physical, how participants

reported responding to these spaces, and then make the case that these spaces

significantly contribute to re-engagement in learning.

Space Communicates

For purposes of this study, space is defined as concrete and physical, (classrooms,

arrangement of tables and chairs, etc.) as well as emotional and internal which enables

reflection, silence, listening, healing, and expressing. According to Hall in his now

classic, *The Silent Language,* we have very strong emotional and sometimes physical

reactions to our spaces, which we are often not aware of. Sometimes these reactions are

almost instinctual and can be very persistent.

> …in the ways in which space is handled, startling variations are discovered and
> we react vigorously. Since none of us is taught to look at space as isolated from
> other associations, feelings cued by the handling of space are often attributed to
> something else. In growing up people learn literally thousands of spatial cues, all of
> which have their own meaning their own context. These cues "release" responses
> already established in much the same way as Pavlov's bells started his dogs
> salivating. Just how accurate a spatial memory is has never been completely tested.
> There are indications, however, that it is exceedingly persistent. Literally thousands
> of experiences teach us unconsciously that space communicates (Hall, 1968, p. 165).

In the various ways in which space is handled at the DLC, space communicates safety,

comfort, healing, and growth through self-knowledge, and the data indicates that these

spaces are intentionally created by the DLC and re-engage young men.

In addition to Hall's seminal work on how space speaks, there is current research in

the UK on educational environments and the creation of spaces that heal and engage

students with behavioral issues and disabilities. Like Hall's research indicating that space

influences and has the potential to engage or disengage all students, these researchers

make the case that physical space is not neutral; it engenders emotions and influences

learning (Sagan, 2008, Spalding 2001, Visser 2001).

Hall, as well as Spalding, Visser and Sagan make the case that physical (concrete or

exterior) spaces create interior spaces for people. These interior spaces can be places of

reflection, self-examination, feeling, healing, comfort, safety and growth. Conversely,

they can be spaces of disorder, chaos, tension, discomfort and insecurity. The spaces at

the DLC, in contrast to the public schools attended by the young men, were examples of

the former, more positive interior spaces.

Sometimes physical or instructional spaces were created, which in turn created

community.

It appears from the data that the DLC social structures seem to create new perceptions,

thoughts, and experiences about learning leading to healing, expression of thought, and

voice ultimately engaging them in learning. Sometimes these interior spaces at the DLC

were spaces within larger physical spaces.

 In chapter 4, it was stated that "the webs must be constructed in a way that can

contrast with past educational experiences in new, supportive ways and be strong enough

to withstand forces of destruction outside the web." The remainder of this section looks

at what the past school spaces communicated to the young men and how the "new web"

spaces of the DLC communicated something different.

 For most of the young men, the school environments from which they came were

chaotic, crowded, abusive, prison-like, and sometimes violent. Marked by the potential

presence of violence, excessive rules and drab surroundings, even at their best they were

non-descript and unpleasant spaces where neither teachers nor students wanted to be. The

young men reported that these learning environments felt unsafe, places not conducive to

intellectual challenge. Keton described the fighting in school in which he did not want to

participate, but felt he had to for self-preservation.

> I can't say school wasn't for me. I just had too many fights. I ain't really
> dropout. I was kicked out. **(Keton)**

 And Shawn described the lack of security.

> NYC or certain schools, they don't put enough into security to make kids feel
> safe in school, and I know that's how I feel. **(Shawn)**

 And Jason reiterated what Keton and Shawn said, when he explained. "It [public

school] wasn't a safe environment for me. Nothing safe about it."

Bullying, guns, gang fights and general chaos and tension permeated many of the

high schools that the young men attended, making them unsafe and unwelcome learning

environments. Their physical danger was paralleled by emotional risk as well. The

young men felt unsafe emotionally and intellectually in their previous settings. In some

instances, the young men's experiences can be categorized only as emotional or

intellectual neglect, if not abuse (Tuck, 2008). In addition, the young men reported that

their old schools were most often spaces where challenge was absent, and they were

frequently bored. According to the data, they felt silenced and experienced the spaces as

places where you could not voice your feelings and opinions openly.

The young men reported that the DLC created learning spaces very different from

past school experiences. These new spaces acknowledged past educational trauma,

provided room to address that trauma, were safe and stimulating. The DLC's physical

design impacted engagement playing a role in creating both a sense of physical safety

and emotional safety as reported by the young men. Beyond the physical space at the

DLC, interior spaces were created through activities designed for reflection, silence, community building, and dialogue.

Physical Spaces of Safety and Comfort

The large, open classroom was frequently mentioned by the young men as important physical spaces at the DLC. Another space was wherever each young man's individual small group met within the large classroom. These spaces were reported as being safe from physical violence or the threat of physical violence, and these physical spaces also made the young men feel comfortable and free for movement during learning.

Large, open classroom

> It is 6:15 p.m. in the large, spacious, gym like room with no windows and high ceilings. Students and tutors walk freely among the tables clustered around the room in separate groupings. Dustin enters the large room, scopes the space with his eyes, then walks to his group in the back of the room, sitting in a seat with his back to the wall and takes one more look around the expansive room.

This excerpt from field note observations describes the large open classrooms favored by the young men, and Dustin's initial "scoping" response to the room was repeated in the behavior of other key informants during observations. The young men reported that these classrooms offered open, free, and safe spaces that gave them comfort. Javier said that within these large open spaces he could see what others were doing, allowing him to "scope" the area to see what was going on, and this brought a feeling of safety because he could observe all activity. Other key informants reported this same feeling. In the large room, there were three exits with wide doors. These exits also gave a feeling of safety, providing easy access. Even though they did not report feeling threatened at the DLC, experiences they reported outside the DLC and in past educational environments could account for this reported caution. Also if students needed to move, they didn't feel

confined or cramped. David described the contrast between traditional classrooms and the

DLC open room.

> I just like the classroom. Yeh. I feel comfortable there. It's not like this is all you
> have and that's it. Like you're isolated in this room, like a basic classroom -- you
> don't feel like this is it. Like when you are in this big room you see everything.
> You feel open... You don't feel boxed in like this [referring to small interview
> room].

Javier described the feeling of safety in the open room.

> The way the room is made and the way you're not divided with one class, you
> know what I mean? It is just open, and that's pretty cool. I really like that… the
>
> class environment, your surroundings, just how like I can't explain it like
> everybody is just there [spread out]. Like you feel safe. You know what I mean?

Within the large room the young men could see others, "watch their backs" and move

around easily without being noticed. This appeared to provide the young men with a

sense of comfort and safety. Confirming this, one of the tutors described this sense of

safety at the DLC as compared to other programs he had volunteered in.

> I think you know that when people [young men] come here they have a sense of
> safety… hmmm. I have volunteered on a number of occasions, and that's just the
> overall consensus that there is just a different feel when they walk in here [DLC
> large classroom] than other facilities or programs that they have walked into.

Although not explicitly in the data, it may be that the large classroom feels like a

safe space because it is such a contrast to most traditional school settings which have

separate isolated classrooms in which most of the young men said they had bad

experiences. It may represent to the young men a new space with the possibility for a

better school experience than the past. What was explicit in the data was that all

stakeholders liked the large room because it was both comfortable and sate, despite

occasional complaints of noise.

Small space within large room

Within the large open classroom, eight to ten small learning groups met. Smaller

groups are situated within the larger open room. They function as small "rooms" without

walls within a larger space. Each group meets around one rectangular or round table.

There was no physical separation between tables, yet the small groups were self-

contained. There could be as many twelve groups in one room with twelve different

activities going on. Dustin described the self-containment of his group.

> Cause when we are there (at DLC), my group is self-contained. Well, I know people
> from other groups, and say "what's up" to them when I come in, but… I don't think
> it has anything to do with the other groups or other people. There really wasn't too
> much branching out.

These small groups are situated in a physical space in which Dustin reported he could

engage in learning. Other key informants spoke about "my group", "my corner", or "my

space". There was a sense of ownership or territoriality where his small group, to which

each young man belonged, was located. There was a strong sense of belonging to that

small group and to the tutor, and this was associated with a particular space and a table

within the larger room; these small groups were configured physically in the room but

were also social structures inhabiting the space. Jamal explained why this self-contained

group is so important to engagement.

> The group is like your family. You feel comfortable with that group so if they are
> learning more and progressing you are going to want to learn 'cause that's your
> group. That's who I am with. This is my group. We do it as a group. Group work
> helps a lot, and I think the sectioning off of groups is very important [to the group
> work].

Additionally, the small group meeting space within the large space made the young

men feel they had a place to belong, a territory that was theirs that was intimate,

manageable, and predictable. It was small enough so that everyone knew everyone else on a personal level, making the space knowable, familiar, and safe.

Although other spaces, such as the library and computer lab, were mentioned as comfortable, there was overall consensus that the most important space where participants could learn in a safe environment was the one occupied by the small group within the larger open room.

<center>Non-Physical Spaces for Healing and Growth</center>

The DLC creates social structures, in contrast to physical spaces, that give the young men opportunities to address the issues of pain and trauma they bring to their learning. One of the tutors when speaking of spaces in the DLC labeled the DLC as a "learning hospital." Safe means free from physical and emotional mistreatment or potential violence. Healing is actually a place where residue from past painful experiences can be addressed and soothed. A distinction is made between safe and healing spaces because safe spaces are not always healing spaces, but they seem to make way for the possibility of healing as some young men testified. Beyond space, the term hospital connotes the possibility for healing and healthy growth as the tutor articulates.

> This space changes everyone. I have spoken to people who have come here, and they have gone on to do great things, but they always say the learning center helped them open up and grow as a person. You can trust when you are here because the group's small enough. This is a learning hospital where there is healing.   **(Cynthia – tutor)**

The pain that the young men bring to the Center is often so acute that it seems it cannot be ignored, if engagement is to occur. Often it is school trauma, experienced by so many of the young men (Tuck, 2008), that necessitates the need for healing spaces within the academic setting. Wounded individuals full of fear of failure and carrying unresolved

pain inflicted in school environments cannot concentrate on a GED until the healing

process is addressed and acknowledged (Schwartz, P. 2006). Anthony and Mason's

comments on this pain are representative of many young men in this study.

> You know students over here they want to learn, but they got so much
> problems in their heart. They want to learn, but they can't because they are
> focusing on that one particular thing [hurt]. **(Anthony)**

> These guys they put on like this front. I think that sometimes they don't want to
> seem soft. They don't want to seem like I can [can't] do this on my own,
> whatever, but deep down inside they are really, really hurting. **(Mason)**

Spaces within the classes, small groups, writing groups, and counseling that are

intentionally designed for the expression of pain would seem likely to aid the healing and

then the re-engagement process. These are places where there is freedom to share because

they are emotionally safe – free from judgment, ridicule, and embarrassment according to

student reports. These are spaces where a student's pain is taken seriously and listened to

intently. These spaces are explicitly not therapy. However, they do seem palliative and

serve a therapeutic purpose. Jamal explains how these healing spaces at the DLC prompt

students to open up their feelings.

> I think the DLC makes you comfortable so that you know there is something deep
> down inside. I'm not saying necessarily bring it [the pain] all out, but at the DLC
> you feel you know I could tell this person. This is what is really going
> on in my life. You [tutor] could help me a little. It [DLC] do give you that push I
> could tell them something that happened in my life. Like the DLC helps you
> build that confidence that you could… tell what you are feeling. Build yourself
> to heal and tell them. **(Jamal)**

The DLC created these spaces through writing and writing shares, silence, spiritual

help, and professional support counseling. These spaces are opportunities to express pain

and be responded to in thoughtful and supportive ways. They encourage self-expression

and reflection by the young men and provide social structures where compassion and

support is possible paving the way for re-engagement.

Writing as Healing

The DLC instructional program included a minimum of twenty minutes of writing

a day in the small groups, intentional space for improving writing skills, and writing for

healing when necessary. During these times, writing creates space to say what might not

be said verbally. Some students wrote their pain rather than spoke their pain. Writing

appeared to be a less risky approach to sharing pain, but it also often led to the sharing of

that pain verbally. The DLC provided extended periods of time for writing in all genres

but began with encouraging journaling and personal narrative. Topics were primarily

chosen by the students; the students were encouraged to write "what they knew and cared

a great deal about." Maria, a GED graduate of the DLC turned tutor, spoke about writing

as healing with her students.

> [We do] knees knocking (sharing writing) and the book we write every year.
> You know everybody gets to have it [their writing] read. Sometimes it brings
> tears and they are able to talk about their pain. Some have so much
> responsibility before they reach the age of puberty, and to be able to share that
> and have somebody understand, and to have so much talent, and say I
> understand we are going to go through this [the pain] together. **(Maria – tutor)**

Young men often wrote about themselves and their own personal experiences

sometimes through poetry. These experiences often were ones of pain and trauma. The

young men seemed to gravitate to poetry. The following journal entry by Keton, and then

poem by Brian, illustrates the expressions of hardship and invisibility that the young men

often communicate through writing.

> I grew up in an unstable household. My pops was always locked up, and my
> moms was just never around. So I grew up learning to take care of myself and go

to school. I had to try to make money and get good grades, but people don't seem to see how hard that is to do. **(Keton)**

HEART OF A MAN

Gone through some pain
Trials and tribulations
To find God's plan
Do you know how it feels in the
Heart of a man?

Nothing easy in life
That I understand
Climbed the highest mountains
To seek God's plans
Do you know how it feels in the
Heart of a man?

Walked hard, hard as one can
Count your blessings, cry out
Let Him understand
How it feels in the
Heart of a man.

(Youth #6)

These two pieces were written during time in the classroom set aside for writing, which is explicitly meant to be a space set aside for healing. The act of writing is an opportunity to get the pain on paper as a way to objectify it, so it can be examined, discussed and sometimes eased. Andrew expressed how he used writing to express painful feelings that he needed to get out.

> I think that whenever you write, like you get most of your feelings out, most of your emotions, and rather than speaking them out loud [writing] is another way of "speaking" your pain.

"Writing shares" or "knees knocking", terms developed at the DLC, are spaces for tutors and students to read their writing, receive peer feedback (more on this in chapter 8) and to frequently share their experiences of pain. Sometimes called "knees knocking" it

usually included four or five students, who volunteered for the group, and a tutor sitting

on chairs in a circle – as close together physically as possible. The space is guarded,

meaning that once the group starts reading their writing, in order to avoid distraction, no

one new could enter the group or leave the group. Total respect for the reader who read

his writing to the others was expected. The group responded to the content of the writing

first and primarily. The goal was to understand what the writer was saying, to

acknowledge and affirm that, and to assist the writer in moving forward personally

through his/her pain and as well as to grow as a writer. One tutor described the "knees

knocking" experience.

> Here they can be vulnerable. They can write poetry. They can write about their past
> experiences. They can cry. They can laugh and hug. **(Angela – tutor)**

The very act of sharing pain with a caring group of individuals who will listen intently

and compassionately is an act of healing. Two of the young men spoke about their

perceptions of the group.

> [Knees knocking] – is very productive. We got a lot of things out in the open,
> and I feel like we accomplished something … finding out things we never
> knew. Because we are seeing things through other peoples' eyes like as
> individuals we're seeing things through other peoples' eyes. You know what I
> mean? And that has an impact to it. **(David)**

> Like I said, you have to listen... if you have somebody from the streets, you
> need someone who is going to listen to, this is what I do. You feel some type of
> way [pain] because this is where I came from, and are you going to judge him?
> Or accept me? If you listen [in the group] they are going to feel comfortable
> and then everything will be alright. You have to give so you let somebody
> know that you are trying to help them get better, to build something with them.
> **(Jamal)**

David talked about how "knees knocking" made you take down barriers with other

people because you are physically close (actually knocking knees) and this helps you

become emotionally close. He described the way this process helped make the "walls

come down" between people and learn about themselves.

> Certain people have space [around them]. That whole space thing just fails. That whole space that [a person] has [decreases], you just come in and be close to the person despite, how they feel. They feel insecure about this. You have to tough it [out] just to deal with it because this is knees knocking and when there is knees knocking you come in close and talk. You just feel better as a person when you do. Those walls are no longer there. I like that. I like knees knocking… It teaches you a lot about yourself.   **(David)**

David spoke of the knees knocking spaces in two ways: the literal, - the physical

space made up of people, and inner, - the emotional space created by sharing feelings

through writing. The close proximity of participants aids in communication, making it

more intimate and freer. David reported that this feels risky at first, but you have to

"tough it out." The other barriers to communication were the emotional ones which

diminished intimacy. The sharing of the writing opened up communication and provided

time and space for safely sharing feelings; if done well, healing and personal growth can

occur supporting engagement in learning.

   A tutor speaks about the value to her of knees knocking groups and the enthusiasm

in them and potential for engagement as well as healing.

> [Knees knocking] it's like being present and participating. Some of my students do a lot of writing share groups, and they just love it and sometimes I have to tell them one at a time because they want to jump on top of each other… Their eyes are bright and in your heart you can see the passion. They are healing and learning and participating. They are in community, and they are engaged, and they feel that their thoughts and their writing are of value.
> **(Rachel – tutor)**

 At a minimum, the student's pain is acknowledged and shared by the tutor and the group.

There was healing in this very act of sharing pain. Sometimes others had similar pain and

the pain was normalized.

On occasion when students wrote intense stories of trauma, they were asked if they would like to talk further about it with a professional counselor. If the student agreed, another healing space was provided through counseling.

Counseling as Healing

The DLC provided professional counseling interns supervised by certified social workers trained to deal with trauma. Counseling was one-on-one, short or long term outside of the classroom, but on-site at the Center. One of the young men, who participated in counseling, used an apt metaphor to describe how important it is for the young men to address their pain and gain relief through the help of a counselor.

> If you don't let it out eventually it is going to hurt even more, 'cause it is like a toothache. I have to get my wisdom tooth out, and I know if I don't get it out it is going to hurt even more. It is something that is deep, deep inside of you and you have to let it out. It is something – that is why I think a lot of people commit suicide. **(Youth #3)**

The professional counselors at the DLC reported dealing with issues of depression, suicide, gangs, domestic violence, mental illness, sexual abuse and trauma, as well as educational trauma. According to the stakeholders, when the tutors open up spaces in their groups for writing, pain and emotional wounds are opened. The counselors provided the additional support for the healing process that should follow such exposures, in some cases on a long-term basis. Jamal and Javier spoke of the counselors as providing some emotional help so that the young men could engage in learning.

> The support team [counselors] is good. I heard students say they felt comfortable talking to them, and they give advice. I think that helps somewhat. **(Jamal)**

> The DLC is a GED program but you have a support team [counselors] here. This place is blessed to have people who have concern for you… and you will be able to talk and discuss your problems and can get help.

Spiritual Space

The final kind of space for healing was spiritual. There was space in the learning

center which could be used to pray, meditate, speak about the spiritual, and read the

Bible, if a student chose. These spaces were primarily behaviors and conversations that

created and encouraged an inner space for the spiritual. I observed key informants

participating in voluntary prayer, reading the Bible as one of his reading goals, and

talking about God with a tutor in small groups. Because of the connection with the

church, the students seemed to accept the spiritual aspect of the DLC. One of the support

team counselors described meeting with a student who was a gang member who seemed

to appreciate the spiritual nature of the center.

> When I see them come they know we are part of a church, and they come knowing
> that this is an atmosphere with Christians. It's easy for them to speak, to say this is
> my past, I am involved in a gang. I find they are the sweetest students and want to
> engage [in spiritual things] and they would love to change. The DLC is an oasis for
> them to come to be free from all that oppression out there and violence and whatever
> and seems like this is just a little cocoon – an atmosphere where they can learn. So I
> think they relate to the teachers, the tutors, the counselors in terms of being
> connected to the church. **(Counselor)**

The refuge of the learning center was created at least in part by the

spiritual element and the connection to the church. The young men were respectful of the

church and the DLC's connection to it. David described the religious aspect of the DLC

and what he observed:

> The atmosphere is so peaceful. That has to do with religion, probably. I mean, think
> about it. Because, you know the real world and how it works, those people don't
> really care… but we try to incorporate this [spirituality] within here [DLC], within
> religion. This religion is very peaceful like I can see. So far I have learned from it
> how I know people and how they act with it. So incorporating that, it makes it more
> relaxed. I can't explain it. That's just how I feel – just relaxed. And that's
> probably what I like about it.

David alludes to the relaxing and peaceful space providing both safety and comfort, but another young man explains that in addition to the safety and comfort provided the spiritual intervention actually helps to heal, or quiet some of the pain, as this young man articulates.

> I really believe that one of the things you guys [tutors] really do is after the class you pray. It does help 'cause there are people in our class, or any class who are hurting. Maybe that prayer does something; it does ease it up just a little bit to know someone is praying for you. I think it does help. **(Youth #9)**

In addition to the internal healing space, the DLC's connection to the church provided also physical spaces for spiritual activity such as a chapel on site where students could go for quiet or prayer. Pastors in the church across the street were available for spiritual counseling, and tutors and staff were willing to pray with students upon request. These kinds of encounters happened occasionally and were opportunities for potential healing through prayer, spiritual guidance, and counseling.

Space for Voice

Arguably, spaces where there is freedom to give voice and to express ideas, opinions, doubts, fears, beliefs, make decisions, and take ownership is both safe and comforting; but these kinds of spaces are also a type of healing particularly when in the past you have had little opportunity to express yourself and your ideas. Voice at the DLC and its relation to engagement to learning was articulated by Monica, a DLC graduate turned tutor.

> If there is no interaction, no give and take, no sharing; I think what brought them to that [dropping out] is that the students didn't have a voice and because of that there is no engagement. There can never be engagement if you do not have a voice.   **(Monica – tutor)**

bell hooks (1994) affirms this observation when she wrote that there needs to be a "recognition of the uniqueness of each voice and a willingness to create spaces in the classroom where all voices can be heard because all students are free to speak, knowing their presence will be recognized and valued" (p. 186). For too long schools have silenced the voices of the young men, particularly our young men of color. There needs to be room for this "coming to voice" (hooks, 1994, p. 148). Out of the belief that the young men of color have often been marginalized in classrooms, and have few opportunities in society where they could constructively and appropriately voice their opinions, viewpoints, concerns and feelings leading to a sense of ownership, the DLC created forums for expression of voice and opportunities for ownership to occur. Spaces for voice begin in each small group, and then through center-wide spaces for voice: strategic planning, student advisory council, essay contests, panels on poverty and racism, internship, and volunteer opportunities.

During fieldwork observations, I saw many open and lively discussions on a variety of topics, and witnessed one about race and then candidate Barack Obama. These discussions in small groups allowed students opportunities to express their opinions and feelings openly. However, the success of these spaces for voice appeared dependent upon the comfort of the tutors and the relationship tutors had with the young men because often the young men would express rage and anger. Sometimes they would make comments that could be offensive to Whites or discriminatory to immigrant groups. It appeared that if tutors were comfortable with controversy and open to the expression of strong feelings, then a space was opened up to free the young men to speak candidly, and

this had the potential to help the young men to grow and develop the capacity to express

themselves appropriately in groups.

The young men spoke of discussion space with their groups which allowed them to

articulate their ideas while listening to and sharing with others. These were spaces where

the young men grew confident in their own voices and their freedom to express

themselves. David explained about how he learned to communicate, state his opinions,

and talk to others.

> The way that it is set up here (DLC) is communication. It's based on
> communication. You have to learn how to talk to people and give your insights.

Javier contrasted his lack of freedom to speak when he was in public school to this

ability to express his opinions at the DLC.

> Teachers here, at least they get you involved or they get the whole group involved
> with working together and speaking. Whereas if you speak in regular schools or
> classrooms, it's "be quiet you can't be talking."

During observations, groups read and wrote a great deal in preparation for the GED

exam, but what seemed most engaging were the frequent discussions. Jamal, a key

informant student-turned- tutor, told a story about discussing the Civil War with the GED

group he was tutoring. He learned about the Civil War from the personal experiences of

an older man in his group and how this experience helped Jamal understand and connect

issues of racism in his own life with American history that he was studying in college.

> I learn something new every day with my group. Like I'm talking about school wise
> like I take college. I show them my books, and they will read one of my books. There
> was an older person I had in my group, and he told me a story. Like this man Mr. N.
> He's done a lot in his life so I had an American history book from college, and he was
> looking at it and he was like, Jamal, you are doing the Civil War? And I said, yeh, I
> had to write a report on it. So he read it. He said it was good, but he gave me a story
> he heard from his great-grandfather who was actually alive then and fought, and I
> never knew that and that made things come together.

Jamal was giving voice to his student in several ways. First, as a tutor, he was hearing about his student's great grandfather who actually made the history he was studying in the textbook come alive and make sense through the telling of a generational narrative of a black man who had fought in the war. This storytelling is one of the strategies utilized in Critical Race Theory (Solorzano 1997,1998) called counter-storytelling. This is a means of giving voice where voices have not been heard, and challenging stories held by the majority. These stories are often those of racism.

In Jamal's group, the older man was most probably counter-storytelling by telling stories from a black man's experience about the Civil War. The intergenerational nature of this dialogue was significant; the older men have stories to tell the younger men and the intergenerational space of the DLC made this possible. Jamal reported that this opened up "spaces" in his group to discuss race today and the impact of past history on him and young men like him.

The older men stakeholder's group spoke the most about issues of race, discrimination and inequality that they experienced daily on the job, in public places, and the church. Because this group was all men of color and older than the 16-25 year old group, they had and do experience racism differently from the younger men. These experiences came out in the focus group, which provided a space to openly discuss racism, but they also discussed how these kinds of discussions and spaces to grapple with the "hard issues" was crucial to the young men. The older men spoke openly about the racism that they confront every day. The men, both young and old, in the focus groups concurred that educational settings needed to be spaces where race was openly discussed, where there were forums for that purpose and there was an openness to do so. Charles,

from the older men's focus groups, stated that there should be space to voice opinions

about racism at the DLC because in past school experiences there had been no space.

     I think wherever you go in an educational center race should be addressed. I just think
it is a reality everyone tries to avoid. It is an unpleasant or uncomfortable subject for
some people to talk about race relations, how race plays out and how things are done.
It definitely plays out 'cause it sends a negative message to these young men. It sends
a message that this is another place of racism [if it is not discussed openly].
(Charles – Stakeholder)

The focus group participants felt that the small group structure at the DLC is an ideal

space for students to voice opinions and express ideas. However, these spaces were not

made frequently and were not pervasive throughout the Center. Much depended on

whether the tutors in the small groups were comfortable with and willing to open up

spaces for political and racial dialogue. From observations of the groups, some tutors

often opened up spaces for political dialogue, other tutors seldom did, but the young men

seemed to welcome and actively participate in these spaces when provided, especially

when they occurred in their small groups.

But in addition to the small group, the DLC program provided space for voice to

debate political topics center-wide. These activities were designed to open up spaces for

dialogue and voice across small groups to include everyone. An example is the annual

essay contests which included topics around race, immigration, political campaigns, and

gender. In turn, these raised challenging and provocative prompts such as**:** "What role, if

any, do you think race plays on poverty in America?" and "You may want to defend a

particular presidential candidate's position on the issue (Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama,

John McCain)." Questions and topics like these were designed to encourage writing,

reading, and research as a way to open spaces for dialogue on controversial issues. An

excerpt from an essay by David gives an idea of how a student used this space to find his

voice.

> I think that our system is set up to keep people down. I think that they [the government system] want a dumb race of people so that they can keep control. There needs to be bad people so that money can be made from our prisons. We need janitors. We need people to work at McDonald's; we need this. So I think that is how the people do things in school, how the school system is set up. They [system] wants it to happen. They want it like that. That is why there is a 50% drop out rate; they want it. **(David)**

Shawn's group took the center-wide essay contest further and wrote a letter to then candidate Barack Obama. Field notes reflect this process.

> There are four students in the group including Shawn sitting around a round table, and they have been writing in silence for about fifteen minutes. The tutor, a white woman in her forties tells me they are writing for the essay contest. This tutor then sits with Shawn and the others and asks if they will read their drafts. One by one they read, what appears to be a first draft… After everyone has read, she says, "what if we were to also write a letter, using these essays, to Barack Obama? Shawn and the students respond and talk about the possibility. They then take a vote and three enthusiastically want to do it. A young girl, about seventeen, seems more reluctant, but says she will. The tutor says you don't have to, you have a choice, but encourages all of them to express their opinions and concerns in this letter.

In addition, the Center created forums for political discussion and welcomed outside

opportunities to do so, such as participating in Yale University's Poverty Project. This

was a program that sent a group of college students to New York City during spring

break to research urban poverty. This half day interactive think-tank involved DLC GED

students, many of them young men, and Yale college students who were mostly White, in

one-on-one dialogue and in small groups to discuss issues of urban poverty and race.

These were reciprocal discussions where both groups of students taught each other and

then reflected on their learning.

During the course of the study, I read DLC announcements about civil rights and

immigration lawyers speaking at the DLC on the legal rights of immigrants and young

men of color when in interactions with the police. These were spaces designed to create

dialogue for students with experts in the area of social justice. Participation in these

speaking spaces was voluntary but well attended by the young men. They provided plenty

of time for questions and dialogue with the speaker and space for voicing anger,

frustration, confusion, and dissent.

Space to Grow

At the DLC, the young men not only could voice their ideas but had power to create

within specific roles or functions of the Center; this opportunity helped them to grow as

students and as people. They expressed their voices strongly in those areas and seemed

to grow in self-confidence, self-expression and responsibility. This growth increased the

opportunities for further engagement in learning. Two of the five key informants, Javier

and Jamal, are the best examples. Javier was instrumental in creating and taking

ownership for the evening attendance taking process; Jamal for his own instructional

group.

While completing his GED classes and after he graduated, Javier had almost sole

responsibility and ownership for the evening attendance taking process involving the

record keeping for hundreds of students. Javier had little supervision from staff and had

full decision-making ability to decide how attendance would be taken, recorded, and

approached. Javier was also able to make decisions in regard to how students who were

late were included, and what penalty if any they would incur. Javier set the tone and

mood as the evening students entered the building. Javier also made decisions for how his

new interns would be trained to take over his job when he went to college.

At the conclusion of an observation of Javier during one of these evening sessions, he smiled profusely as he talked about the attendance process that he had developed. He articulated the process he was instrumental in creating.

> This is pretty much how it goes every Monday and Thursday evening. This is how I check on late students and everything pretty much goes smoothly. We end about this time. Any questions? Well, welcome to my world.

Javier was highly engaged in learning as evidenced by his avid reading, interest in science particularly chemistry, passing the GED while at the DLC, enrolling in college and extreme interest in this research. Javier's engagement, in part, may be attributable to his growth through space provided for him to create and take responsibility for an area of the DLC.

As noted previously, Jamal is a student-turned-tutor and has grown tremendously during this transition of roles. He has grown in self-confidence and communication skills, most specifically. During interviews with Jamal and then again during the word frequency analysis, I observed that Jamal frequently referred to his tutoring and his students with terms of possession and ownership. He always referred to his students as, my students, my group, my corner, my space, and my new students. Jamal speaks to his students in his group with this same sense of ownership.

> You [to the students] owe me my homework. I need to get my homework from you before we leave today.

His role is extremely important to his engagement at the DLC. During an interview when speaking about why he stays at the DLC tutoring, he stated that it was seeing his students succeed that kept him. He described it in terms of ownership almost bordering on possessiveness.

> When my student got his GED that was the best feeling in the world. I guess that

is why I stay, my students, my work helps them, that is the best feeling that my group is good, that my group is doing good. **(Jamal)**

Jamal had full responsibility for his group. He had full decision-making power in terms of goals, texts, how he organized the group, how time was spent. Jamal took full ownership and had full voice in how the group functioned; this was a creative process encouraging Jamal to take on a new role and by his own admission grow in self-confidence and self-expression.

Jamal also was instrumental in creating another process at the DLC, which he reported in the interviews, the initial stage of new student registration. Three times a year Jamal was one of the very first persons the new students met as they came in. Jamal reported that he was responsible for talking to new students, quieting their fears, and orienting them to the DLC registration process. Jamal would then physically escort them to the first stages of the registration process, fielding their questions, addressing their fears and making sure that everyone was in the right place. Jamal developed a system, took ownership of this portion of the registration process as reported by the director.

> Jamal knows what he is doing and can handle it [initial stage registration]. He has taken charge of this part of the registration, so we don't worry. He is able to handle even difficult students and make judgments on what to do and what not to do. It [the process] is his baby.

The data suggests that engagement with the Center and subsequent ongoing engagement in learning (Jamal is completing two years of college) may be linked to Jamal's space at the DLC that allows the young men room to create operations (attendance taking, registration functions, etc.) and, as a result, grow in self-expression and confidence and where his own voice can be expressed through decision-making and task-focused responsibility.

Implications of Space for Re-Engagement

Abraham Maslow's now familiar hierarchy of human needs, states that there are basic

physical, safety and psychological needs that individuals have to have met before they

can engage in the fulfillment of higher level needs such as self-actualization and creative

expression (Maslow, 1943). The data in this study demonstrates that the young men have

basic needs that were unmet in their previous educational experience, contributing to

their leaving school. These needs are those of safety and security, as well as

psychological needs of love and belonging. The data suggests strongly that for many of

the young men of this study, these needs were not met in their previous school

experiences and are sometimes unmet outside the DLC. Therefore, in order to

successfully re-engage them in learning (a higher level need) space needs to be created in

new educational settings to meet these basic needs. The DLC creates these spaces.

The case could be made that all learning environments need these kinds of spaces,

and even successful businesses need safe spaces and spaces to create and grow, which in

turn engages employees in their work. However because of the past educational

experiences of the young men, these kinds of spaces seem to be prerequisite to

engagement in academic learning, or at least must co-exist with instruction in their

current educational experiences.

Furthermore, one of the tenets of adult education theory is that it is learner-centered

(Freire, 1970), connecting to and beginning with the learner's needs. In the case of the

young men of this study, these primary needs are for safety, comfort, and healing. By

meeting these basic needs first, we increase the likelihood that the young men will be

able to re-engage in higher level needs like school learning, later.   Once these spaces are

present, as at the DLC, it seems that changes in the perception of schools and learning

environments occur which then have the potential to affect feelings toward being in those

spaces, further enhancing the possibility that the young men will engage in the learning

centers and learning itself.

 The potential influence of space upon re-engagement cannot be overemphasized.

Second only to affective relationship, it seems the types of spaces described in this

chapter cannot be ignored, if engagement in learning is the goal. These findings suggest

that adult education centers need to be intentional about the design of physical spaces and

what they communicate, as well as intentional in the creation of both physical spaces of

safety and comfort and non-physical spaces for healing and growth.

The spaces just discussed, along with affective relationship, lay the groundwork for the

success of the learning activities discussed in the next chapter. Chapter 8 addresses

differentiated learning activities, the third thread of engagement. The combination and

interwoven nature of these three threads, affective relationship, spaces for safety, healing

and voice, and learning activities make a strong, pliable, intricate web suitable to

engagement.

CHAPTER 8   -   THIRD THREAD – LEARNING ACTIVITIES PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT

The student's role changes from that of being a passive recipient or empty receptacle into which the instructor "deposits" knowledge — the "banking theory" of education — to that of an engaged learner and active agent in the learning process.

                                                     Freire, 1970, Chap. 2

"One of the things that stood out to me as a student and tutor is the fact that it [the DLC] is learner-centered. I really know everyone learns differently. We have different ways."

                                             Angelina – Former Student Now Tutor

In addition to space and affective relationships, significant in the complex processes of re-engagement are the tools of instruction at The Downtown Learning Center. This is the third thread of engagement, the specific learning or instructional activities or tools that are central to instruction and engagement for the young men. Along with the previous two threads, this thread combines to create a strong yet flexible web of learning able to support the learning process even when there are obstacles that threaten learning.

The first part of this chapter will describe the learning activities that promoted engagement and highlight select research literature relevant to the activities. The second part of the chapter will examine the commonalities among the six key learning activities. The final portion of the chapter will make the case that the commonalities promote engagement in learning because they are consistent with and examples of good adult education practice.

Key Learning Activities at the DLC

Key informants identified experiential and other non-traditional learning activities as

well as more traditional workbook and test taking activities as engaging. These activities

were conducted through whole group, small group, and individualized instruction using

books of student choice, or commercially designed textbooks. Within this eclectic array

of learning formats, six learning activities were identified as contributing to engagement:

Goal Setting, Silent Reading, Discussion Groups, Reflection, Celebrations, and GED Test

Book Work. Although these aspects of the instruction were not exhaustive of ways in

which material was presented, they represent the methods that most engaged the young

men. It should be noted that the DLC employed few standard pre-produced curriculum

but had developed a learner-centered eclectic approach from which these activities were

identified. The only exception is the GED workbooks, which are pre-produced

curriculum.

Goal Setting

    In order to structure the instruction so that it is individualized, goal setting makes

learning relevant to the specific day-to-day needs and long-term plans of the learners.

Each student works with his tutor to create a set of reading, writing, and math goals. Goal

setting at the DLC typically follows initial reading, writing, and math assessment and

discussions with students about their interests and goals; this conversation was usually

done one-on-one with the tutor and young men in partnership.

    These goals, although reflecting individualized interests and needs of each student,

also reflect projects and activities that the student and tutor believe will support the

student in passing the GED exam. As stated previously, the goals give structure and order

to the learning process, and represent the student's interests and address the student's

learning needs. The goals assume there will be variation in focus and pace of instruction

and student choice in what is read, written, and studied. If followed to completion, the

goals are a "map" of the route for each student to follow in reaching their larger goal of

attaining the GED.

Goals are documented in written form. These goal sheet documents are simple in

format and straightforward in design as exemplified in *Figure* 8:1. Goals are written in

complete sentences, are measurable and include a deadline. Students and tutors are

instructed in how to write clear, specific, observable, and measurable goals that reflect a

behavior or practice in reading, writing, or math that will be performed.

The goals are action oriented and behavioral in design. For example, "I will read S.E.

Hinton's *The Outsiders* by May 10, 2008 was one of Javier's goals.

Figure 8:1   DLC Student Reading Goal Sheet

READING GOAL SHEET		The Downtown Learning Center	
STUDENT NAME			
TUTOR NAME			
GOAL #1 Deadline:	Date Started	Progress	Date Completed
GOAL #2 Deadline:			
GOAL #3 Deadline:			

David used the goal sheets consistently, and he spoke about how the goal sheets facilitated his engagement by holding him accountable to his reading.

> The goal sheets – I found them tedious at first because you had to keep logging, keep doing this. But once you started getting used to it again, these things you have to get used to. You realize that it is actually a good thing that you have these things here. You can set a goal for yourself and accomplish this goal and be proud of yourself that you have accomplished this... It kinda pushes me to do it because of the deadline. Let's say you have this book and you have a deadline by when you're going to finish this book. The goal sheets put the initiative in you doing it. I have to finish because I have this deadline.

The goal sheets were a way to engage David in reading. Another graduate turned tutor, and now college student, talked about the goal sheets and their simplicity.

Emmanuel described them as a tool adaptive to different learner styles, to real life

situations, and to engagement.

> One of the things that engaged me as a student and as a tutor is the fact that
> the curriculum is learner-centered based. I really know everyone learns
> differently. We have a visual learner - different ways, and for one tutor to
> have several students and to be able to work individually with students
> based on the goal sheets really affected me, also the way of teaching to real
> life situations. **(Angelina – tutor)**

Other stakeholders, such as counselors and tutors, spoke about the additional benefits

of using the goal sheets beyond the ability to address individual learning needs and styles.

They spoke of the possibility it provides for creativity, and the value it places on learning

how to set goals for the future.

> The students take the initiative setting the goals; it is very important.
> They are going to have to set goals for the rest of their lives… I think it
> is more individual oriented which helps them not only here to engage in
> school but for their entire life because this is what life is all about.
> **(Counselor)**

Goal setting is a tool which provides data and accountability for this type of varied

approach to instruction. During the classroom observations, each tutor and group utilized

the goal sheets differently, and the emphasis placed on the goal sheets varied from group

to group. Some groups used the goal sheets as an overall guide for the activities of the

group, referring to them from time to time. Other groups consistently used the goal sheets

every class period, referring to them frequently, and documenting progress toward goals

on a daily basis. One student-turned-tutor, Karl, described goal setting as an informal

curriculum.

> There is an informal curriculum that centers around the individual [goal
> sheets instead of the [whole group] lesson. And this is something I came to
> realize later on, if you look at one of the most successful American companies,
> Google; they have an informal structure … yet they turn out huge profits.
> We have that structure here [DLC], even though there are rules and regulations

[goal sheets], it is not a hard and fast rule. There is flexibility, and I think that is
especially important when we deal with people who come from such troubled
backgrounds. **(Karl – tutor)**

Karl believed that the goal setting provided individual structure and yet flexibility that
was particularly well suited to young men with "troubled backgrounds." The DLC's goal
setting appears to be one of the only consistent structures of the instruction throughout
the DLC. The goal setting allowed for a great deal of flexibility, differentiated, and
individualized instruction.

Sustained Silent Reading

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is a reading strategy or tool used all over the country
in schools to promote reading. According to a controversial 2002 report by the National
Reading Panel and the International Reading Association, the value of SSR as a reading
tool is unclear (Klump, 2007). However, responses to that study have been extensive
arguing that the experimental design standard, which determined what research would be
included, may have excluded much valued work that would have informed the research.
In contrast to the NRP report, many other studies site the correlation of SSR to
improvement in reading for students (Garan and DeVoogd, 2008). Garan and DeVoogd
summarize their findings on current SSR research in an article in the *Reading Teacher,*
December 2008.

> "The body of evidence on SSR reveals an alignment of research
> with what the professional judgment of many teachers has determined—
> Sustained Silent Reading benefits students, and so we see that scientifically
> based reading research and common sense converge." (pg. 343)

The findings of this study concur; the key informants at the DLC sited SSR as one of
the primary activities that engaged them in reading and learning. It should be noted that
the bulk of the research on SSR appears to be with elementary school students and in

school youth. In contrast, this study examines the possible benefits to be attained for out-of-school youth as reported by informants.

Reading research also reports that there are different models for implementing SSR. Mostoften the models include about 30 minutes of actual silent reading, student choice in reading material, teachers read along with students, discussion or a skilled based assessment following reading (Nichols, 2009). The DLC followed this model except for the skilled based assessment.

The Downtown Learning Center has instituted a half hour of Sustained Silent Reading program-wide during each three hour class period. All students, tutors, and staff read a book, newspaper or journal of their choice for this half hour every day. Reading material is selected by the student before SSR starts so that once SSR begins everyone is prepared. Following SSR, post-reading activities including discussion and reflective writing are conducted. During each classroom observation, this tool was utilized, and all key informants participated in this time of reading. The time was respected by the entire Center and was a time of quiet and serenity. Generally everyone at the center participated in reading during every class session for the months at the research site. Nichols (2009) states the importance of doing SSR right by being consistent with the process over time, having everyone participate and having a quiet atmosphere. The DLC's SSR seemed to have all these components.

There seems to be a relationship between the participation in Silent Reading over time and engagement in reading for the young men and may be related to the consistency and predictability of this activity. The degree to which this engagement continues outside the Center is not clear. There is nothing particularly unusual about SSR in K-12, but it is

more unique for adult education programs. A typical fieldwork observation of Silent

Reading from one class period, exemplifies the usual routine.

> The time for Sustained Silent Reading is announced. The entire center reads for
> thirty minutes. David promptly takes out a book without a book cover. It is a
> small paperback worn looking book. Before beginning reading, another
> announcement is made from a microphone at the front of the room. This time the
> director talks about scheduling for GED testing and portfolio assessment. The
> director now says, "Take out your favorite book, sit back, relax and begin
> reading." David, along with most of the rest of the students and tutors, begins
> reading. He is about a quarter of the way through the book. He settles down
> quickly to his reading, his tutor sits and reads beside him. Everyone in the room
> reads for 30 minutes.

Following the thirty minutes of reading, students, and tutors often discuss what they

have read and document the thirty minutes of reading on a DLC Reading Log. This

Reading Log is one kind of attempt to engage the students in reading over time, keep

them accountable for reading each day, and structure the curriculum. A sample Reading

Log is shown in *Figure* 8:2.

Figure 8:2   **DLC READING LOG**

Student Name _____

Date	Title of Book, Article, etc.	Time Spent Reading

Most of the young men mentioned Silent Reading as one of their favorite aspects of

the DLC. Javier described this half hour as a space for silence and its effects on his

feelings and his ability to focus on learning.

I'm the type of person who likes peace and quiet environments. It [silent reading]

gives me a sense of relaxation while I'm in the learning center. I am relaxed in a
environment where I can focus my mind to access information… It feels
different. It feels peaceful. It gives me a level of focus. **(Javier)**

From the data I cannot be certain that healing took place during those times, but it

seems that the young men who live in a very chaotic and noisy city appreciated the space

for silence they experienced in the learning center. During observations, I sat through

many silent reading periods during which the mood seemed just as Javier described it,

peaceful and relaxing. It should be noted that not unlike the interior spaces discussed in

the previous chapter, this space seemed to hold out the possibility of soothing from their

noisy exterior and interior "world", which for them was reported to be engaging.

Small-Group Discussion

There is a rich body of research from a variety of disciplines on the benefits to

students of small-group discussion. One study of adults in the medical field and their

continuing professional development (Kelly, Cunningham, McCalister, Cassidy,

MacVicar, 2007) finds that the small group discussion format increased knowledge in the

field and in small group techniques for the participants.

An evaluation of a pilot of the 'practice-based small group learning' (PBSG)

approach in   Scotland demonstrated enhanced participant knowledge and skills in

evidence-based practice and small-group working… The small group format is an

important factor in the success of the approach, along with the crucial role of the

facilitator. (page 93)

Along with the benefits for learning, this Canadian study emphasizes the crucial role

of the facilitator to the success of the small group. This seems consistent with the findings

of this study as the tutor and the tutor's relationship to the young men was crucial to the

young men as they participated in small groups.

   A summary of research on small-group discussions in general education in the UK

finds thesame potential benefits for student learning, provided there is group diversity

and divergence of opinions brought to the group (EPPI, 2005). Consistent with the

studies just addressed, the DLC used small group discussions widely throughout the

Center as a main instructional tool, beyond the small groups discussions mentioned in

chapter 7, Healing spaces and Knees Knocking. The DLC uses small group discussion for

GED preparation. Students meet in small groups in an "open chair forum" with no

physical barriers (desks, tables) between them, or around tables in close proximity. These

spaces, in context of the larger Center are similar to "my place", as discussed by Raji

Swaminathan (2004) in his study of one urban school and its effectiveness.

> "In order to be effective with at-risk students, urban schools therefore need to pay
> attention not only to creating a caring climate or an engaging curriculum, they
> need to facilitate free spaces that students call "my place" (page 33).

These free spaces are places where there is diversity of people with varied opinions

discussing topics, reading and writing in preparation for the GED. Usually a tutor

facilitates these groups of five to eight students, but sometimes they are student led. As

stated previously from the research (Kelly et al. 2007), the effectiveness of the facilitator

appeared to be important to the success of the small group discussion.

   Students meet to discuss an article or book they have read, to reflect on what they

have learned, and to share their writing and receive feedback. Groups often meet around

tables, almost like a corporate business meeting, and focus on reading completed during

SSR, math assignments, current events, or topics raised from students' goals. This is

space to listen and learn from others. The communal nature of this activity is significant.

Javier described a post silent reading discussion.

> Education wise, I started to communicate with others and it just opened a whole new door for me… if I am speaking to a person and they know what they are talking about, or they have facts on their topic or their subject [from their book] and they can actually show me where they got this information from. People teaching people, you can tell, people learning from other students… then you are engaged in learning and want to share it [your reading] with other people as well. I think I am not totally engaged in learning but I'm heading on that path. I think I'm pretty much there. **(Javier)**

Fieldwork observations of key informants documented frequent instances of these

discussion groups. One example occurred in David's group, where the tutor divided them

(about ten students) into dyads and triads working on math problems. The following field

notes describe this learning activity.

> There were four conversations going on at once at the table -- each dyad or triad studying a different aspect of math: algebra, measurements with a ruler, data analysis, etc. The communal spaces were peer driven and there was intense intellectual activity visible through the focused nature of the conversations around math, the use of math manipulatives (rulers, grids, protractors) and the body language of the students.

This type of focused intellectual space was common in the observations and most

often included informal peer tutoring. These discussion groups like most of the learning

activities combined affective relationship and created spaces of voice and safety within

the structure of the relationship and learning activity. The small size, physical

configuration of the tables and chairs, open conversation, consistent composition of

students and tutors over time provided the forum for all three threads of engagement.

Reflection

> "Reflective thinking is a part of the critical-thinking process that refers specifically to the processes of analyzing and making judgments about what has happened. Learners are aware of and control their learning by actively participating in reflective thinking—assessing what they know, what they need to know, and how

they bridge that gap—during learning situations."
(McDonald and Dominguez, page 46)

According to McDonald and Dominguez and their work in science, learning, and reflective writing, learners are in control of their learning, asking key questions about their own process when reflection is present (2009). Goldsmith's 2009 research on this type of meta-cognitive questioning states that it increases retention of information in learning and promotes engagement. This type of reflective thinking and questioning was frequently observed in small group discussions at the DLC. During or after discussion groups, tutors were observed making connections between the subject and the students' experiences and lives as well, as having students reflect on their own current process of learning the subject (Goldsmith, 2009).

For example, following over an hour of work in the dyads and triads on math, and before silent reading, David's tutor asked the group, "What did you learn? How did you learn it? Is this relevant to you? What didn't work for you?" The tutor specifically asked the students to reflect on the learning process and to make connections between the math they have been doing, how they were learning the math, and their own lives.

This type of meta-cognitive reflection, thinking about the thinking process, is encouraged at the DLC by some of the tutors who were observed. Shawn's tutor used the process when teaching a small math discussion group.

> What is Algebra? Why do we study it? Where would you use algebra in your life or future career? Or would you? How has your work in the group with algebra gone so far? What is working, and what's not? Write about this, and then we will discuss as a group. **(DLC – tutor)**

This reflective questioning gives space for students to think about what they are learning, how they are learning, and what their next steps might be. These meta-cognitive

discussion tools sought to make connections between the subject matter for the GED,

whether it is math or science, current events, books being read, writing, and the students'

lives. During DLC tutor training, the tutors were encouraged to have students reflect on

the processes in the small groups and engage in meta-cognitive reflection to probe the

value of the processes in the individual's learning and engagement in learning.

In this regard, tutors were observed using writing as a reflective tool. Rather than

have students discuss what and how they learned, they were asked to write about learning

experiences, and often shared those writings with their group. These writing reflections

included questions about the learning and its connection to the students' lives and

previous learning. It also included asking students to reflect on what about the instruction

was unhelpful, frustrating, and ineffective. Reflection questions often asked what the

tutor and student could do to improve instruction in the future.

Celebrations

Celebrating is generally not thought of as an instructional tool, but at the DLC,

celebration events appear to be instructional. Jamal talks about celebratory events at the

DLC that impacted him.

> I love all that – Barnes & Noble I told you was my favorite experience. I will
> never forget. Writing for the books. I love that. And the Essay Contest, all that is
> excellent. Even if you don't win a certificate, just to show your appreciation of
> writing so that makes me feel good anyway. So I love all that and the math
> projects and when I read my speech at graduation! I learned how to write a
> speech, do public speaking.

The DLC curriculum includes activities designed to celebrate and instruct at the same

time. Jamal mentions a number of them, student book publication and Reading Evening

at Barnes & Noble, Essay Contest with awards ceremony, and reading a graduation

speech at the church for an audience of about 2000. As stated in Chapter 4, Jamal has

been at the DLC the longest of the key informants, completing an associate's degree and now tutoring at the Center. He has been very involved in celebratory events, and of his own admission, these celebrations have contributed to his engagement in learning,

As stated previously celebrations are intended as more than events acknowledging accomplishments, they are designed to be tools for instruction. One example is the DLC graduation and speech. Several students are chosen each year to speak at the graduation ceremony. During the period of data collection, I observed students writing graduation speeches and practicing delivering them months prior to graduation; the writing becomes one of their learning goals and is added to their Writing Goal Sheet. Students are expected to revise and edit their speeches many times before they have a final draft. In addition, they practice the oral presentation of their speech many times as well. Therefore, delivering the graduation speech is not only a one day celebration of accomplishment but months of writing and public speaking instruction. This appears to be true of all celebration activities; they become a part of the learning process and thus the learning goals.

Another example of this kind of celebration that is also a learning activity is the Reading Evening. While a student at the DLC, Jamal wrote a short story for one of the DLC publications; then, as part of an annual celebration, he read his work at the local Barnes & Noble. Jamal's story was a great success, and the audience responded to his reading enthusiastically. This is the event that he said he would "never forget." When he went to college, Jamal shared the DLC book and his writing with one of his professors.

> I wrote this story for my professor because I told him I like to write. I'm not even in his class. He told me to write a story 'cause I showed him the book. He said it was good and told me "you got some skills" so I wrote this story, it is called "Still in the Ghetto." **(Jamal)**

Following the interview, he told me that he wanted to share this story with me and would bring it for me to see. Jamal's experience at The Barnes & Noble celebration seems to have played a role in his engagement in writing beyond the GED classroom and into college.

GED Testing Practice

In addition to goal setting, SSR, discussion groups, reflection and celebrations, the young men stated that working in the GED test preparation book and practicing GED test taking were instrumental in their engagement in learning. They liked the structured nature of the books and their direct applicability to the actual exam. They also found the books easy to work through at home without tutors or peers from the DLC.

During four out of the eight classroom observations, I saw the key informants working in, and engaged with, the GED Preparation book for about half of the class sessions. Jamal uses the GED book extensively in his tutoring, and Javier mentioned its effectiveness. Dustin prefers the GED book to other materials prepared by the program or tutor.

> I actually prefer the Steck-Vaughn GED book because I'm going to say that because answers are in the back, not because I go there first, but because I challenge myself to see how I'm progressing or whatever. I'll do a practice test, and I will look and see… I prefer the GED book. That way they break it down before step by step so you have a general idea, OK. I'll tackle the next problem, and I'll just apply what they told to this problem. **(Dustin)**

All of the key informants purchased a GED book and liked to use it when working with their peers. The GED practice test, in the GED book, was a good indicator of whether or not they were ready for the test. Similar to SAT and other test preparation books prepared by educational publishers, the GED book can be purchased at any major

bookstore. This was one purchase that the DLC required of its GED students. The book is

generally divided into five sections corresponding to the five sections of the GED test:

Social Studies, Science, Math, Writing and Language Arts. It includes lessons in each

subject area, workbook practice, and practice test taking. DLC students and tutors use it

for in class as well as homework practice.

Jamal crammed for the test using the GED test preparation book the night before he

took the official GED exam, which he would pass.

> The day before I took the GED, my tutor told me to study. So the whole day, after
> I left the learning center, I had the blue GED book. I studied that book for five
> hours straight by myself. I woke up the next day, and I did more for five hours
> straight. I was just focused on that. I didn't think about nothing, eating or sleeping.
> I just wanted the GED that time. That was focus [the GED book]. I didn't want to
> eat or nothing when I had to go to that test. **(Jamal)**

The GED book is a good tool of engagement particularly right before the young men

are ready to take the test. They like the step by step format of the book, the ability to

check their answers, and work independently. The layout of the book gives practice after

each lesson is presented. The progression of the problems and topics in the book go from

the simple to more complex in a linear sequence.

Commonalities Among Key Learning Activities

Although the six learning activities reported by stakeholders, and observed within the

Center to engage young men, are distinct, three commonalities among the activities are

apparent. All six activities have the potential to **connect** learning to students' lives,

provide **choice** and flexibility in subject matter and approach, include the students in

small **communities** of learning and create opportunities for self-reflection and self-

assessment. Multiple examples could be provided from the data supporting these

commonalities, but a few representative excerpts from the data are included below.

Connection, Choice, Community

Community was a key element in all activities. In the first example from the data,

Javier speaks about the small groups and their impact on the learning, the social context,

and the community within the group that is created from the activity.

> This is a unique way of teaching [discussion group] that can capture a student's
> attention, and they work with you and they have you work with other people together
> so that everybody can learn together. When I was in school before it was like you
> really couldn't work together. You had to sit there and basically listen to what the
> teacher had to say. You know certain times, certain teachers would get mad if you got
> help from another friend; they rather you ask them. Here it is different; you will work
> with everybody else. **(Javier)**

The young men contrasted former learning environments to the DLC. In the former,

students were penalized for socializing or discussing their work and told to be quiet; in

the latter, students are rewarded for talking, contributing to discussion and working in

community while learning social skills in the context of a specific academic task. It is

guided socialization with a specific academic purpose in mind. Javier explains learning

social skills through small groups.

> I learned how to socialize with people a little better [through small group discussion];
> communication skills, I definitely learned that. Because there are a diverse amount of
> people, diverse cultures here so I've learned how to speak to each individual and deal
> with individuals.   **(Javier)**

It seems that although the main purpose for the small groups is to provide a forum

for academic content discussion, students learned interpersonal communication skills as

well. Small communities of learning were formed through the activities.

In addition to community, choice was another significant element in almost all learning activities. Data from the interviews with key informants included an appreciation of the balance between the more hands-on and informal curriculum, knees knocking, silent reading, goal setting, reflection, and celebration and the more traditional, sequential work with the GED book and the opportunities to choose what and how they learned. From the observations of the groups, this eclectic approach appeared to give them freedom of choice in both what they studied and how they studied it.

Having choice was important and gave students opportunities to make connections between the subject matter and their own lives. Jamal reported that he felt engaged and felt that learning occurred when connections were made in discussion groups that he and his students could connect to. He gave one example of this connection.

> I get a lot of older people in my group, and they are older and wiser so the stuff I give them they know it, they just have to brush up. And the stories they know from back then, can really help them with their work. So that's why I say that as a tutor I learn so much more from them. And the things they tell me I can give them homework with what they are telling me. It all relates. It all comes back to something. **(Jamal)**

Jamal is African-American, but most of his students are from West Indian islands. Discussion groups provide intellectual space to make connections between who people are, and what they are learning within a community. Jamal reports that he and the rest of his group has learned a great deal about each other's cultures, and this has expanded the group's understanding of history, geography, social studies, and multi-cultural communication. Jamal spoke about this intellectual learning from the people in this community at the DLC and the connections made between his previous ignorance of other cultures and histories challenging his own biases and prejudices.

> Yeh, cause I'm from America, American, and like everybody here is from the Caribbean so I just learn so many things [geography, history, culture] and tasted so

many foods I thought I would never taste, and I heard so many things that happened outside of America [social studies]… I didn't like Jamaicans. That was just my person. But they are cool. They are nice people, Trinidadian, Guyanese, all these islands… they are regular people it's nice... That can change your whole outlook on a lot of things. That is excellent.   **(Jamal)**

The DLC discussion groups were where connections between people's lives were made possible, providing new knowledge; these were spaces rich in conversation and culture often stretching the young men to examine previous ignorance or misinformation. Beyond the connections made to their own lives, community was formed, and the subjects of discussion were driven by the choice and interests of the learners.

Goal Setting, GED Book study, and SSR all provided flexibility to include choice, make connections while building community. Goal Setting depends upon the learners' choice of goals which allows for flexibility of content, individuality among students and groups, and the possibility for creativity. Goals may be linked to real world subjects, and a tool for that can be used throughout a student's personal and professional life. This tool encourages differentiation in activities that engaged the young men in instruction in a way that the one-size fits all traditional curriculums may not have the flexibility to do. Choice and connection to their lives drove the creation of the goals.

The young men stated they liked the structure provided by the goal sheets and logs, which required both documentation and accountability. They like the choice of being able to opt to work within the structure of the GED book also and reported that the GED book was a good connection to the actual test showing them exactly what to expect from the test, giving them choice on what areas to concentrate their study, and providing practice for the official exam.

Sustained Silent Reading provided choice of reading material and an opportunity to read together as a community. Four of the five key informants mentioned Sustained Silent Reading as one of the most effective learning activities at the center. Javier, David, and Jamal describe SSR and how it affected their engagement in reading.

> I'm reading more now. Because the half hour, the half hour of silent reading really helps me to read more and get into the book and really see the book and get into the story. I find it pretty interesting ... because it's like a quiet environment at the time. It just more of a focused level. If everyone is doing the same thing it's like they are giving off that particular energy, you know that positive energy, that positive aura around everything. I just feel good when I do silent reading. **(Javier)**

> My reading has evolved by reading more. I didn't like to read at all before. I like to read good books. Silent reading did it haaaaaaaaaaa [happy laugh] Silent Reading and finally looking for books I would be interested in as well and recommended books by my tutors. **(David)**

> She [My tutor] brought me a book for silent reading, and I use to read. The important thing is that I read with her at that time. **(Jamal)**

Jamal's experience with his tutor was similar to Javier's experience in prison where he was ushered into the world of reading by an older inmate.

> I was new to the prison system and he [another older inmate] started giving me literature to read and different types of books on history and stuff I never knew before. And it just caught me it just caught me and winded up opening my eyes so after that I started to read more, and I started to learn more. Then I developed a passion for learning. **(Javier)**

For the young men what seems to be significant about SSR is the quiet space it creates, reading with others in community, having a choice of reading material, and consistency in the use of SSR.

As in Javier's prison experience, the young men reported that at the DLC they had someone who ushered them into reading, and who gave them ideas about what to read.

This simple act of suggesting literature seemed to make a connection between what he was reading with what he was experiencing in his life as a young Black man. David talked about the books he reads at the DLC and the person who ushered him into the appreciation of literature.

> I like to read certain books you know [during silent reading at DLC]. My girlfriend also recommends certain books for me, too. She's in college already; she's graduating so she has books that she reads and tells me to read. And that helps me out because she's at a higher level than me, obviously.   **(David)**

As David's girlfriend suggested books for him, Jamal's tutor brought him books and suggested and encouraged his reading. Jamal said he wouldn't read books in high school but would do so at the DLC because his tutor personally suggested books; Jamal's tutor would actually read the book along with him. The DLC tutors opened up intellectual spaces by allowing students to choose what they read, yet they provided this gentle "ushering in" to a community of other readers. Additional spaces opened through SSR time, during which students and tutors read independently yet together. It is this time together, yet alone, that many of the young men said was one of their favorite activities at the center, challenging them to read on a daily basis, encouraging them to read challenging material, and inviting them to articulate their knowledge from the reading, all in community and all with a degree of flexibility and choice in what they read.

The final question is raised then. If choice, connection and community are the common elements in the six most prevalent learning activities, what is it about the young men of this study that causes choice, connections and community in the learning environment to engage them?

Adult Education Theory, Practice and Engagement

We know from research on "pushouts" that boredom is one of the leading causes of students disengaging and even dropping out of high school (Bridgeland et al. 2006). Therefore, the ability to stimulate students intellectually, thereby engaging their intellect is crucial to re-engaging them in formal learning. We also know from the data in this study as well as other recent research (Tuck, 2008) that many young men have experienced educational trauma or neglect. And we know that they respond to affective relationships in safety and security. We also know that they are emergent adults, or *almost* adults, who come to learning with an array of life experiences.

Therefore, learning activities that provide choice, connection, and community make sense from adult education theory and practice. Adult education theory states that learning makes connections to the learner's needs, interests and life experience, guided by the learner's choices in and for collective or community enterprise (Lindeman, 1961). Paulo Friere's adult education learner-centered philosophy begins with the learner's needs, wants and goals rather than a teacher-centered model where instruction is directed by the teacher (Friere, 1970). Furthermore, adult education theory aligns in part with recent research on the brain and learning, from which we now understand that intellectual stimulation, enhanced memory and learning occurs where connections are made between prior knowledge and new knowledge (Goldsmith, 2009).

The learning activities at the DLC which provide choice in what to study and how to study, connection to prior knowledge, experience and interest, and meet the need of being and functioning in community engage the young men because those are crucial needs that they have as adults and as young men of color who have been disengaged from learning.

These activities were absent in their previous school experiences, but are now present and able to engage them at the DLC. The young men have been bored and need choice and flexibility to allow them to explore their own interests rather than a set curriculum, as in their past school experience. The young men need learning that is connected to their experience and relevant to their lives. And, they need learning in community that is emotionally and physically safe and where they feel secure. Although not empirically grounded in best practice, the DLC's learning activities seem to be able to actualize and put into practice adult education theory. It is this theory to practice that seems to be able to engage the young of this study.

The DLC's activities of goal setting, SSR, discussion groups, reflection, celebration, and the more traditional GED test preparation work appeared consistent with adult education theory focusing on the learner and his needs. Instruction was eclectic including individual, small-group, and whole groupings. Learner reflection and meta-cognitive activities were present, and learning in community seemed to underlie the activities and tools used in instruction. There appeared to be a conscious effort to make "theory into practice" by the choice of instructional tools operating within the Center. The adult education theory of andragogy (Knowles, 1970) was apparent through choice, connection, and community to both students and tutors as articulated by a DLC graduate turned tutor, Angelina.

> The students engage when they feel there is something in it for them, and they interact with the material, and they bring to it what they know... They increase their knowledge, not just facts, by the way they interact with the world. They have something to add. It's more of an interaction, more active learning. That is engagement. **(Angelina – tutor)**

Having stated the importance of all three threads, one clarification seems indicated from the data. "Who" was teaching and "what" relationship they were to develop (affective), "where" instruction occurred (spaces), and "how" the instruction was delivered (learning activities) were all important. These three threads do not operate in isolation, but interdependently. From the explicit responses of the young men and observations of them at the DLC, all three threads in combination were critical factors in the young men's engagement.

CHAPTER 9   -   THREATS TO ENGAGEMENT

"Black males in American society are in trouble. With respect to health, education, employment, income, and overall well-being, all of the most reliable data consistently indicate that Black males constitute a segment of the population that is distinguished by hardships, disadvantages, and vulnerability."

Pedro A. Noguera (2008, xi)

"Yes, you are black and you are starting the race from somewhere in the back. It's a fact; race does play an issue in American society because it was never fully addressed."

Marlon – Research Participant

Throughout this study multiple threads, representing multiple facets of the learning center community have been presented. All threads presented have connection with and are intertwined to promote the engagement of the young men in learning. These threads, affective relationship, space, and learning activities operate within certain support systems including the church, the location, and the management style of the DLC. When all these complex systems, supports and threads, are in place at the DLC, stakeholders report engagement is likely to occur.

 Unfortunately, there is one more dynamic at work that has the potential to threaten engagement. These threats are both external and internal to the Center. To ignore this dynamic, is to give an incomplete picture of the process of re-engagement.

Threats to Engagement

Sometimes the metaphor does not fit the data on the young men or engagement closely; however, if ever there was data in this study where the metaphor of the web fits

almost perfectly, it is in describing the Threats to Engagement. The forces that come

upon the young men while they are at the learning center are like the wind blowing on the

spider's web. This wind blows sometimes suddenly without warning but often

destructively, disengaging them from learning, even when the web puts up strong

resistance. Like the wind in their invisibility, these forces are hard to track, hard to

understand, yet capable of great destruction. You can't always see them but you can see

their effect -- the disruption, and sometimes destruction, of their engagement. Most often

this destruction means a disappearance without explanation, leaving the learning center

suddenly. Often they are difficult to locate by phone and reports about them are sketchy.

No one seems to know quite where they are or why they left the learning center and

disengaged from learning. The affective relationships, connection to the spaces, and

participation in the learning activities are interrupted by these threats or forces.

Figure 9:1 shows potential threats to engagement even when the three threads in the web

are strong.

Figure 9:1 - Threats to Engagement with the potential to disrupt learning.
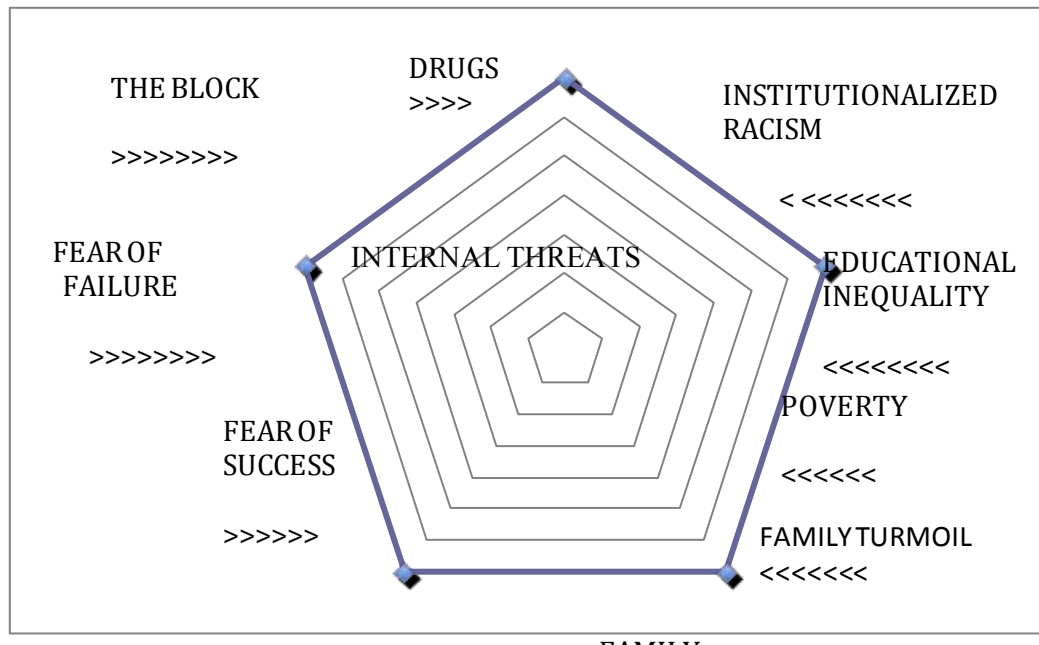
Like the threats of wind and rain and human hands on the spider's web, there are forces

at work in the young men's lives that are often beyond their control but threaten their

survival in the learning process and sometimes threaten the learning center itself. Cultural

Historical Activity Theory (Engstrom, 1999) as well as Communities of Practice

(Wenger, 1998) contend that learning takes place in a social context, and in the case of

CHAT and Critical Race Theory (Delgado, 1995), this context is shaped by historical as

well as societal influences. For the young men these forces often involve racism but also

include related forces of poverty, unemployment, violence, lack of social capital, and fear

of failure and success.

Examining these threats warrants a re-examination of the web as a whole because

these threats demand that the three threads be in place, and strong (Figure 8:3). With the

first thread, affective relationship, one or two significant affective relationships in the

learning center, holds the young men at the DLC and engages them in the learning

process. By combining that with the second thread, space – physical, healing, safe, voice,

growth - the likelihood that the young men will engage in the learning process seems to

increase. Thirdly, learning activities including goal-setting and other informal, hands-on

activities and tools balanced with traditional GED workbook instruction makes the web

of engagement additionally strong, increasing the likelihood that the young men will

engage and go on to pursue further education or employment. The remainder of this

chapter examines threats to these threads of engagement.

"The Block"

   In Figure 5:1 the location of the learning center was established in relationship to the

surrounding environment. All five of the key informants of the study currently live in

Brooklyn. All live in segregated neighborhoods populated by people of color classified as

low to low-middle income areas of the city. All key informants attended public high

schools marked by violence and high "pushout" rates. Their neighborhoods rank high in

NYC for illegal drug use, unemployment, and AIDS (Neighborhood Scout, 2009).   All

neighborhoods are considered high poverty areas (Neighborhood Scout, 2009).

       How these neighborhoods evolved to their present state is beyond the scope of this

study, but both Critical Race Theory and CHAT are based on the premise that history

plays out in the present context, and the current social situations cannot be separated from

the past. However, within the scope of this study is the fact that the young men who

engage at the DLC go home to what they call "the block". On the block they are part of a

strong social structure and community; in many instances, these provide good community

and good friendships. They are also tremendously affected by crime, violence, drugs, unemployment, and poverty. To ignore these destructive forces is to try to understand educational engagement in a vacuum.

The influence of the block and ramifications for the young men are profound and often manifested through peer pressure, drawing the young men away from engagement at the Center. From verbal reports in the focus groups, peers often did not place a high premium on educational engagement. Rather peer pressure pulled them toward illegal behavior, including drug use and selling, teen fatherhood, video game addiction, drug addiction and weapons possession, which all too frequently resulted in violence and incarceration.

Perhaps less harmful, but destructive nonetheless, is that peer relationships are usually maintained in the afternoon and evenings. Young men report that they go to bed very late, and then they have difficulty sleeping. This makes waking up for classes difficult. Because of high "push out" rates in many of these neighborhoods and many young people not getting up for school, there is little support among peers for getting up and going to the Center, or engaging in learning activities at home.

In addition, most of the young men in these Brooklyn neighborhoods are unemployed. Youth and young adult unemployment in NYC is highest for high school pushouts. Now with the economic recession in progress, we know from labor market statistics that the group most affected by unemployment and job loss is the high school dropout (Harrington, 2009). Furthermore, we know that level of educational attainment is directly related to income and ultimately over time to poverty (Harrington, 2009).

All five of the key informants come from low income homes and single parent

families where the effects of poverty manifest themselves in very basic ways, specifically

having no money for transportation to school, food for lunch, or school supplies and

books. This does not mean that the young men's parent or family members did not work,

in most instances they were employed and worked consistently, but often still were not

able to adequately support their families. During the course of the study, research

participants' phone numbers were often changed or out of order. When asked why this

was the case, the most frequent response was that there was not enough money to pay the

phone bill. These are small examples of life on the block, life marked by unemployment

and poverty – potential threats to engagement.

These blocks where the young men live generally do not have resources for after

school programs, so older siblings often become the caretakers for younger siblings after

school. Violence and the pressure of drugs on the block make supervision of children

extremely important. Focus group participants reported having responsibility for younger

siblings, which included babysitting, picking them up after school and in some cases

watching them while parents are working. These responsibilities can detract from

attendance and retention in the DLC and ultimately engagement in learning.

The block is a "small world", limiting the young men's perspectives on possibilities

for change in their lives and alternative ways of being. Often the young men's

understanding of other worlds such as work, education and even other neighborhoods is

limited (Harrington, 2009). For example, Jamal stated that the New York Times is not

sold in his neighborhood; other young men reported not traveling outside their block (or

Brooklyn) even to Manhattan. Javier referred to the DLC and said "Welcome to My

World"; the world of the DLC became very important to the young men, connecting them

to new and broader worlds: employment, college, and other neighborhoods and cultures.

The threat to engagement lies in that without alternate perspectives of where and how

education can open doors, what those doors look like, and that new possibilities outside

the block are possible, the young men may be less likely to value engagement in learning.

If they can visualize a larger world with new possibilities of lives with wider options, the

likelihood that they will engage in and value learning is more feasible. The DLC served

as a way to usher the young men into these "other worlds" exposing them to new people,

new experiences, and new opportunities.

The block can be a threat to engagement, therefore producing re-disengagement,

because of the access to drugs, limited employment options, prevalence of crime and

potential violence, which are powerful distractions to coming to school. Javier spoke of

violence and threats on the street during one final interview.

> It is just getting worse out there in the neighborhood. It's always been bad. But it
> is getting tougher and wow – mad bad [dangerous].

Gang activity was reported by research participants as a threat to engagement, as gang

members do not generally attend school, and have a powerful influence over the young

men not attending school. Peer pressure to not go to school, not to connect with non-

gang members, and potential threats of violence, should the young men want to leave the

gang is real. A focus group member reported the following frightening experience on this

block.

> I got a gun put to my head on that block. You don't know. It's bad. It's real
> bad. I can't go there for awhile. You don't know, I saw one of my friends shot.
> It'sfor real.   **(Youth #6)**

Despite the limitations and potentially destructive forces of their blocks, these are

their neighborhoods and their homes, and they feel a level of connection to it. At the

conclusion of the first men's focus group, the men talked about the level of responsibility

they feel to the young children in their communities to warn them against the destructive

forces.

> That is why I am participating in this [focus group] to help our community and
> to finally get out of this oppression that we have [in the community].
> Like as I say, help kids. Like go to different types of high schools and get them
> our point of mind, and let them know what is out there [on the block] is bad.
> **(Youth #4)**

There was a very real sense that although the forces of destruction were present, and

continue to disrupt their engagement in learning, they wanted other young men coming

up on the block to be aware of these threats and to be forewarned.

Institutionalized Racism

According to Critical Race Theory, race and racism are intercentric, endemic and

ordinary in American society (Solorzano, 1997). This assertion suggests that the young

men experience racism daily, especially as a part of our institutions: schools, churches,

police department, prisons, and places of employment. This is institutionalized racism,

racism that is built into the institutions of our society – the very fabric of our society.

The data indicates that institutionalized racism has a potentially profound effect on

engagement in learning, or the destruction of engagement.

The institutions that support the DLC, the church, neighborhood and larger societal

organizations, are not exempt from this institutionalized racism. Building on the

background of Chapter 5 and the intersections between the church and the DLC, this

examination makes the case that not unlike other institutions, the police department,

schools and places of employment, one of the most important institutional supports for

the DLC, the church, unlikely as it may seem can subtly be a threat to the engagement of

the young men in the web as well. As with much racism that is present in our institutions,

it is not always intentional, most often subtle, and very hard to describe.

> Institutional racism is more subtle, less visible, and less identifiable than individual
> acts of racism, but no less destructive to human life and human dignity. The people
> who manage our institutions may not be racists as individuals, but they may well
> discriminate as part of simply carrying out their job, often without being aware that
> their role in an institution is contributing to a discriminatory outcome (Copeland,
> 2005).

Copeland's description of institutionalized racism is pertinent to the church's

support of the DLC, and ultimately its ability to engage the young men, and its potential

to pose a threat to continued engagement. Based on this description of institutionalized

racism, this research is not saying that the people of the church are racist as individuals

but that the role the church plays in regard to the DLC and the young men may be.

Sometimes the very institutions that intend to assist in engagement end up threatening

that very engagement.

It is important to understand that for young men of color the church is historically,

and remains still, a powerful institution in their lives. It is because of the strong influence

of the church in African American community that makes institutionalized racism even

more subtle, insidious, and potentially threatening. Almost without exception, the young

men had or have relatives who are active in the church. All the young men have a lot of

respect for religion and the Bible. The church is a part of their culture and their

upbringing. The impact of the church on their lives, directly or indirectly, should not be

minimized. A counselor at the DLC described the young men's connection to the church.

> [The young men] they come willing to have prayer, or they say that they have been

connected with the church in some capacity. They are more open, and they feel free and knowing that I [the counselor] is someone who is not just natural but supernatural thinking ….they relate to the teachers, the tutors, the counselors in terms of being a connection with the church. **(Counselor)**

The young men's connection to the church makes intersections with the church all the more important because the young men have a propensity to trust the church. According to the data, this connection of trust seems to be threatened due to issues of institutionalized racism.

In the case of human services, the church staff provides needed services to the DLC and interacts with the students as well. The church and the DLC have the same security staff and repeatedly the young and older men spoke of the security personnel. As the young men enter the church and the DLC, they are greeted by a security guard who requires them to sign in and show their ID card. Focus group participants talked about some security staff telling them to "pull up their pants" and "take off their hats" in less than a pleasant manner, and security guards treating the young men in an interrogating manner, gruffly, and sometimes with disrespect rather than with a welcoming, respectful greeting. Often they were questioned repeatedly and made to wait unnecessarily. Stakeholders and the young men reported that it reminded them of the way that police treat young men on the street with at best indifference and, at worst, suspicion and disrespect. One stakeholder compared the reception at the DLC by church security with how young men are treated by the police.

> Look at the mentality that we are imparting to our young men as they come through these doors. Right away you are greeted by security that often treats you the same way as the New York City Police Department. They treat them as though they were nothing... they are criminalized the minute they walk through the door. **(Marlon – tutor)**

Racial stereotyping of young men of color is well documented and poor treatment

by police officers is a familiar story for young men. Comment associating church security

guards with abusive police treatment is clearly not indicating an association that

engenders engagement. One of the young men spoke to the effects of this treatment and

how it is a threat to re-engagement.

> What we are discussing [affects] the identity of the students. It is profiling by the system. That affects engaging whether it is education [at the DLC], or whether professional or social in our communities… I have experienced it [racism] here [the church]. I have experienced it everywhere I have probably been in my life. …The reality is that a lot of these young men who walk through the doors they are bringing baggage with them… but if you set up a barrier when they walk through the doors, in a lot of ways it is like an inferiority complex imposed upon yourself. You don't come in. You don't speak. You don't shine. You don't engage. **(Youth #9)**

In addition to communication with security guards, communication with additional

church staff was observed. David, a key informant, and another young man, Terrell,

videotaped the church focus group. The young men responded, and I responded to a

subtle tone of condescension that we felt. Excerpts from this staff focus group as the

member's spoke of the young men exemplify this tone.

> They [the students] should be grateful. They are getting free classes and the staff [DLC] work really hard and many of the tutors are doing it [teaching] for nothing. They volunteer. You can't get that anywhere. **(Administrator #1)**

> Immigrants come from all over the world and they graduate. They work hard. I think they [young men] just have the wrong attitude. You have to work hard. Other people work hard, learn English, come to this country and make it. **(Administrator #2)**

> To engage the young men? I don't think you should have separate classes just for them [the young men]. That would be discrimination and unfair… They [the young men] just don't appreciate. They have learn how to act for a job interview, write a resume, dress right, pull up their pants… **(Administrator #3)**

In responding to these comments by church members, as well as the entire tone of the church focus group, David and Terrell spoke about the relationship of the church to the DLC and their feelings about what they heard.

> To me there is a great divide [BT and DLC], two different paradigms and ways of thinking. There is a wall dividing the thinking. Welcome to my world. Did he [BT staff] say that his brother has AIDS and he came from the streets, and he thinks the school system is fine and that the school system is not a problem? He says he has been there and the problem is not the schools? **(Terrell)**

> You're talking about [focus group] becoming the Uncle Tom, the colonized and the colonizer [speaking of minority focus group members]. **(David)**

The young men felt that rather than supporting them at the DLC, the BT staff focus group was blaming them for their failure, thinking that they were just not trying hard enough, and that the young men should show their gratitude to the DLC for all that the staff there had done. The young men picked up a tone of condescension from the BT staff.

> Why are you [BT staff] so harsh against us? Now I know when we were at the DLC what is going on over here [the church]. They don't know what is going on over there [at the DLC]. This was consistent with what other [focus] groups said about them. **(David)**

> It was so hard for me to keep my mouth shut. I was so angry. I really want to confront them. This was the hardest group. I really would like to get them all in a room and have it out. This is the mentality that is in the school system. That is why it is so messed up. **(David)**

The young men were visibly troubled by the comments they heard in the church focus group while they did the filming. David stated that he would never attend the church, although he would continue to attend the DLC, because of what he heard and the negative perceptions he felt the group had of him.

In the case of a second intersection between the church and the DLC, the funding,

stakeholders reported concerns about the distribution of funds to the DLC and

specifically the lack of input from DLC in the decision-making process in regard to how

funds were distributed. Church authorities made all major decisions for money spent for

the DLC with only minor input from the DLC staff or students as reported by the director

and staff in older men's focus groups. One tutor described the lack of funding to the

DLC, transparency in the spending, and its potential threat to engagement. Stakeholders

linked the lack of input to race.

> I don't think the financial support is there [from church to DLC]. I have
> seen a definite need for much here at the Center regarding supplies, services,
> staffing for the students. It goes to the point of indifference, if I should be so
> strong to say. Indifference on the part of the church... [the DLC] is truly
> hampered by the church. And we are hampered by the lack of transparency with
> the funding.   **(Lenox – Stakeholder)**

The questions and discussions raised by stakeholders acknowledged that the DLC

was in fact doing a good job of re-engaging young men with the resources allocated to it

by the church. However, stakeholders raised questions about how much better the DLC

could engage young men, if there were financial transparency and more input into

funding discussions on how to best spend resources. An example is adequate monies

allocated for class hours, class design, and staffing. Because we know that affective

relationships are primary, it is crucial that staff have the ability to develop these kinds of

relationships. Yet church officials decide who is hired for positions at the DLC; this can

adversely affect engagement if appropriate staff is not hired. Space design of classrooms

has proved significant to engagement, yet all major decisions in design are dictated

through church management. At best, the allocation of funds, without input from DLC

students and staff, disregards the expertise and experience of DLC stakeholders; at worst,

it demonstrates a sort of "slaveholder mentality- we know what is best for you". One

stakeholder, student-turned-tutor, describes this process with subtle racial undertones.

> There is a tremendous need and from where I sit. I don't think that the church
> generally, not just this church, has taken time to find out what the need really is.
> So that at the end of the day, what they do is send things down. They send
> programs down, and they say this should suffice but if it is not in response to the
> need that is there then it will never suffice… I think it is really in poor taste for us
> to determine what their needs are and what should suffice. I think that is unfair,
> but I have seen it happen all the time. And I think it is a real painful thing to look
> at. **(Marlon – tutor)**

The lack of systems in top down management of the church by which the young men's

needs can be heard and responded to affects decision-making related to funding

allocations, marketing strategies, staffing decisions, all having possible impact on the

establishment of affective relationships, engaging spaces, and instructional delivery. The

fact that the DLC is able to create threads of engagement, despite limited input and

resources, seems to indicate that with more input and allocations even more substantial

engagement for young men could be possible.

But for purposes of this chapter, the way the decisions around funding were made by

the church for the DLC seems to be another instance of institutionalized silencing. Much

like other institutions in the young men's lives, the DLC staff and young men reported

that they had little voice or power in funding decisions that would ramifications for the

DLC. The covert nature of institutionalized racism in any institution, and in this case the

church and its relationship to the DLC, is why it is so difficult to describe. One staff

member and DLC stakeholder struggled to articulate what she felt was going on.

> I think there are a lot of wonderful things, obviously if it wasn't for the church we
> probably would not have this learning center… and that's a very powerful thing and

very overt message, but we don't realize there are probably covert messages as well. And one of them seems to me that it could be that there is no racism… because outside in the business world mainly the man, the police officer is mostly white, and the church leader is white, and we say there is no racism, and yet the one who is in charge is white and there are some probably underlying messages. **(DLC – staff)**

A third point of intersection between the church and the DLC is marketing. In Chapter 5, marketing is described as a support to the DLC and it is, but stakeholders perceived it as a possible threat as well. One stakeholder describes a music conference held at the DLC that is a marketing event to promote the church, its music sales and its choir. He attempts to describe the complicated implications for students at the DLC.

> There is a big music conference [for marketing purposes]. Things that you guys [DLC] have been trying to get done here [at DLC] to the facility for so long suddenly seem to be a priority when it was not a priority in the past [before the conference].
> Does race play into that? When you look at who is coming into the building [for the conference- whites] to be catered to, yeh, you have to look at that and go, wow, when we are here on a regular basis these things aren't taken care of. A perfect example is when I had to go to the men's room. There is a urinal in There that has been out for a long time… With a plastic bag over it. When the Conference comes it is fixed… I am a student coming here, I would say you know I see certain things happen when certain people are coming to the building... and these people are not looking like me. **(Lenox – Stakeholder)**

Tutors, staff and other volunteers from the DLC stakeholder's group felt that the church marketed the DLC, but that the actual benefits to the DLC were questionable. They felt that the Whites coming to the church were treated differently than the students and that marketing the program to them superseded the attention to the delivery of services. The data indicated that there are contradictions arising around this *interest convergence* (Bell, 2004). Coming out of Critical Race Theory (CRT), interest convergences (Bell, 2008) are situations where Whites will encourage advances for Blacks when the promotion of their own self-interest is also involved (Delgado, 1995). It

was generally felt by the DLC stakeholders that the church uses the DLC when the DLC

interests converge with the church's own interests, but otherwise ignores the DLC. This

interest convergence is felt most acutely in the areas where the organizations intersect:

marketing, funding and human resources but particularly in marketing.

The following example from the data explains an instance when the DLC was

required to close its classes so that the church could paint and decorate for a large church

conference. It seems the interests of the marketing for the conference was placed before

providing classes for the students and the perceived impact on students. The DLC is a

tool to market the church but when the needs of the students come in conflict with the

needs to project a good image for the public, the needs of the students seemed to be

subverted. An employee stakeholder described the situation.

> I think it does have a negative effect, impact on, those young men, those
> ladies whomever come to the DLC, and see guys scrambling around trying to
> get things done and they find out, Oh, the DLC is closed for x amount of days
> Why? Because there is this big church conference going on. That sends the
> wrong message to the organization as a whole. How people perceive it.
> **(Donald – Stakeholder)**

Stakeholders also said they had concern about the impression made and message

communicated by the "showcasing" of the center and students at conferences, on videos

and during church services. They felt the message was "help these poor people who

dropped out who need help." Stakeholders stated that they felt this practice was often

patronizing and undermined the dignity of the students with possible ramifications for

engagement. This is a particularly salient point in that the audience for the marketing is

predominantly white evangelicals from around the country.

> There is an "us" and "them" kind of thing – I'm here to help you, and you should
> be grateful, kind of thing. Not only race, but I would add to that even class. I
> think implied in that there is an element that you are not as good as I am, right? I

am speaking from experience and because it can't go beyond these doors, I can speak plainly.   **(Donald – employee)**

We said something before about whether the church supports the learning center or whether the learning center supports the church. A lot of times we take what we do a lot of places, and we present it [market the DLC] to people to give them a sense of like they are contributing to something, or that they are giving back, or they are helping someone less fortunate and the thing is if there is no accountability in attitude because we're equal to them [the students]. He [Jesus] went lower than the person that he was coming to serve… And I think that if the church is going to serve the learning center [and engage] the students, I feel they [the church] has to be lower [in attitude] than the students. **(Marlon –tutor)**

Related to funding is that the money donated through these marketing practices is never "fully accounted for"; the church does not have financial transparency. The majority of the men's stakeholder group believed that the DLC was raising money for the church and the DLC was in fact supporting the church also.

We say, or it is said [marketed] that the church supports the learning center, but I I know, for a fact in times past, that the learning center has been more of a support to the church. I just have to say that. **(Roger – tutor)**

As discussed previously, there is no system, according to the stakeholders, to ascertain that the money reaches the DLC. In addition, the stakeholders felt that if the young men were going to be "used" to raise money, they should have some sort of say in how it is spent. This goes back to the previous argument of institutionalized silencing.

Being inclusive. That would imply that people would have a voice and have input to making a decision when it comes to forging out policy [budgets] that affect the students. That doesn't happen here [BT]… It is just fundamentals. Can I see what the organization has spent in regard to missions, the DLC, how much people make? Because we are [BT-DLC] a non-profit group, so we are suppose to be transparent with how monies are spent… And that doesn't happen. **(Merlton – tutor)**

The data indicates that while the church raises substantial support for the DLC, research participants feel very conflicted about how the money is raised, the program is marketed, and the lack of financial transparency. It should be noted that these are the feelings of the participants and that the data did not include further evidence or knowledge in regard to these perceptions.

The point is that the institution of the church, and by association the DLC, is not unlike other institutions in our society that covertly work against the engagement of our young men in learning. Because the stakeholders frequently cited these concerns in the data, it seems relevant. The data suggests that these issues of disempowerment are subtle threats to re-engagement and that at the least should be acknowledged and examined.

Educational Inequality

Beyond issues of racism, but certainly not disconnected from it, is educational inequality. The young men of this study attended urban schools less equipped, less funded, and less effective than schools in the suburbs of New York, or even in wealthier neighborhoods of the NYC. Similar to some of the students, discussed in great detail in Kozol's "Savage Inequalities" (1991), the young abuse in the schools was discussed in detail in previous chapters. It suffices to say that the quality of education that the young men received was inadequate, destructive to further educational achievement, and sometimes made achieving the GED additionally challenging despite the fact that many of the young passed the GED or showed progress toward that goal. This kind of destructive threat ill-prepares them academically, putting them behind particularly in math, science and technology (The Black Male Initiative, 2009).

How aware the young men were of these inequalities was uncertain. Most of what they spoke about was their own school experiences. Most of them had no other educational experiences to compare with except for David and Shawn. David spoke about schools his friends attended, his thoughts on the high dropout rate, and inequality of educational opportunity.

> Well, I look at Manhattan schools. A lot of those kids graduate good. A lot of kids who went to Manhattan schools; they did perfect. I think their schools are better than Brooklyn schools. They have a better budget. I have a friend who went to a Manhattan school and told me that the stuff they are learning there is way different than the stuff I was learning in my school. The stuff was way superior to what I was learning. So to me, they were making people to be more successful if you live in Manhattan... This is deep man, like I said the government they want people, they want a certain number of dropouts. **(David)**

Shawn attended school down South for a period of time and reflects on the differences he perceived in those schools and those in New York.

> Schools down South offer a whole bunch of stuff, track team, football team, and a band. They offer a lot in the school. Like the schools in New York City don't offer too much. They might have a basketball team. That's about it... Schools down South have colors on the wall and just the atmosphere is inviting not dull... And pizza for lunch not cock roaches. [laughing] **(Shawn)**

The young men seemed to have a vague sense that their school experiences were not like some other schools, schools in Manhattan, the suburbs, or down South. Particularly Javier and Shawn voiced the opinion that they had not been prepared adequately from high school, and even though they passed the GED at the DLC, they were somehow at a disadvantage particularly in math and science as they entered college. While at the DLC working on the GED, math and science was often a struggle and was a frustration to the young men often making them feel like giving up, threatening engagement.

Upon entering college they both passed the entrance exams in reading and writing, but failed the math exam, which meant taking a remedial math course before they could take a credit course. Shawn blames his placement in special education for needing college math remediation. Javier also blames his previously poor math instruction for his difficulty with math at the DLC and prolonged time spent there, and the need for remediation once he got to college.

But beyond poor instruction in math and science, both Javier and Shawn lacked the social capital necessary to navigate college life. For both of them, they represent the first generation in their families to attend college. Initially, neither one of them had access to the sixty-five dollar application fee; in both instances, they were too ashamed to ask someone at the DLC to help. However, their need became clear during the research study, and the fee was provided for them. Perhaps more difficult than having the money, was having the social and cultural capital to understand the academic environment and to negotiate it. This became increasingly crucial as the DLC key informants moved on to college. It is now well documented that young men of color drop out of college as well as high school in record numbers (Black Male Initiative, 2008), which may signal that the same threads of engagement needed for completion of the GED are needed for retention and engagement in college, although no data from this study was collected in this regard.

The following are notes from an observation of Javier when he was applying for college. From his past educational and home experiences, Javier did not understand the process of applying for college and what was expected of him.

> Javier listens to the registrar, asks a few questions, He seems to be trying to process what she is saying. He apologizes for himself when he asks questions. The registrar is friendly, warm and accommodating. Javier will need proof of residency and immunization records, neither of which he has. Javier reminds me of an innocent

child having to become a man, someone sensitive, soft on the inside with a hard
shell like an egg – somehow fragile, easily broken, and needing to keep the hard
shell in place to protect himself. We talk about the experience he has just had. He
says, "I am excited but frustrated. He says I am not going to lie; sometimes I have
wondered should I do this?" But he has masked his feelings well.

Because of having attended substandard high schools, and coming from families
without the social and cultural capital to prepare them for education, the academic
environment of college presents many obstacles and threats that easily bring frustration
and fear. Understanding the language of academia, credits, major, minor, prerequisite,
bachelors, masters, associate's degree and transcript is a challenge. Knowing how to ask
questions, to challenge authority respectfully, communicate with peers, work
independently, and manage time are all skills that the young men need to learn.

Javier and Shawn live at home while going to college. It is questionable whether
they will have quiet spaces for study as they both live in small apartments with many
people, whether they will have access to computers at home for research, and how they
will access additional tutoring help. They will need to "play catch up" to students who
were prepared in more rigorous schools.

The DLC staff provided on-site to support continued engagement, and combat threats
to that engagement for the young men who graduated. They encouraged continued
participation in the DLC after graduation – volunteering. They also provided space for
study, use of computers, and help with college homework on-site. The DLC also
combated the threat of inequality of previous educational opportunity by attempting to
make links with local colleges to bridge the transition for the young men (Black Male
Initiative, 2008).

Fear of Failure/Fear of Success

Previously established in this study has been the presence of past educational abuse and trauma that many young men bring to new learning environments. In addition, the need for healing spaces has been established. Unaddressed and unresolved abuse, of any sort, can erupt in the present when the victim feels threatened (Tuck, 2008).

No matter how much effort is put into establishing affective relationships, creating engaging spaces and learning activities, fear of failure or even fear of succeeding (Brooks, 2009) can emerge, primarily when a student is in testing situations or during the transition to a new level of instruction or educational setting. Change is hard enough when one feels safe in one setting and engagement has been established, but then they move to a new setting that may, or may not, provide this support.

Javier, Dustin and David all spoke about forces of fear while at the DLC, fears that stayed with them after graduating and wanting to move on. It should be noted that all three of these young men earnestly stated they wanted to move on to college and to progress in educational attainment. However, when faced with the issue or actually needing to move on, fears of failure emerged and often destroyed engagement and educational progress. Shawn then David speaks of these fears.

> The reason I am scared, I'm nervous about going to college because I don't know if there is going to be somebody there like (my tutor) or like someone who is going to grab me and get my attention and get me thinking and get you know like working, I don't know. **(Shawn)**

> But sometimes I just tell myself, "Why don't you just do this? Why don't you work on this? You want to get out of here and go to college? Then do this." You know what I mean? But I'm afraid." **(David)**

Shawn anticipates going to college and has tremendous fear that he won't have the support he did at the DLC. Shawn stated that the fears always threatened his engagement at the DLC, but the supportive relationships overcame the fears. He is concerned that he will not have the affective relationships that he previously experienced. Also because of his traumatic experience with special education misplacement, he always questions is ability to succeed. Although most college students have normal fears, Shawn's fears are of such a severe nature that they stopped him from completing his first semester. After several weeks of college, he withdraws because he missed so many classes and speaks about his fears.

> I was taking remedial math. Mmmmm. Sometimes I be down on myself, and I say am I smart enough to do this? Then all I want to do is sleep… but then I just turn to this marijuana, it is just so, so easy to go to as a comfort zone [from my fears]. **(Shawn)**

David's fears are of a different nature. He is afraid to succeed and move on. This does not threaten his continued participation at the DLC but it does threaten engagement in learning in the sense that he will not move forward with his educational goals. In a sense, he will attend the DLC but be stagnant in his learning. Surprisingly, his comfort at the DLC almost prevents him from wanting to pass the test and leave.

 Shawn's fears of success and failure are both external and internal. One of Shawn's DLC goals was to apply for college once he received his GED. Externally, he doesn't possess the social and cultural capital to navigate the college admission process, and while attending the DLC, admitted to having fears of entering the college environment. His fears are also internal, the results of past failure and low self- confidence around learning.

No matter the reason for leaving school, not completing high school frequently brings with it inherent feelings of failure and anxiety about succeeding in future academic environments as discussed with the key informants in chapter 4. These internalized fears are strong forces for disengagement and along with the external threats seem sometimes too powerful to withstand.

Other Threats – Poverty, Addiction, Family Turmoil

Research participants reported, in addition to threats mentioned on "the block", that issues related to poverty, drug addiction, and family turmoil threatened their continued attendance at the DLC and ultimate engagement. Data indicates that 73% of the young men reported living in poverty that affected their engagement; 60% reported some type of significant family turmoil; and, 20% reported drug addiction threatening re-disengagement at the DLC.

In terms of poverty, the young men reported not having enough money for transportation, having to get a job to help pay the rent, threats of eviction, no money to pay phone bill, inadequate food in the home, and no winter coat or jacket for the cold months. Study participants stated that these issues often prevented them from attending class and forced them to look for work at low wage jobs with long hours, babysit young siblings, and often made them depressed. For these reasons they would not come to the DLC regularly. One young man reported having to get a job at McDonalds to help pay the rent, but the job threatened his consistent engagement at the DLC. David stated the following, in regard to participation in the research.

> I want to be part of the study. I believe in it, but I don't have a metro-card to get here [DLC]. Sometimes it's hard to get here [DLC]. I can walk but it's too far when it's cold. **(David)**

In addition, to poverty 60% of the young men reported domestic violence, loss of a parent or parents, emotional and/or physical illness of a parent, serious illness or tragic death of a sibling, murder of a parent or parents, drug addiction by a parent or a close family member in prison. The young men did not speak directly to how this family turmoil correlated with their engagement at the DLC, but it can only be assumed that these events in their lives do not encourage engagement, and most probably seriously threaten engagement.

20% of the young men specifically reported drug addiction as a challenge to their engagement in learning. Of the 20%, 33.3% of the young men had sought drug treatment, another 33.3% were contemplating treatment, and 33.3% were seeking no treatment. All young men who reported issues of drug addiction in their own lives, were engaged in learning at the DLC but often were late to class, had attendance problems and self-reported wanting to be in class, and enjoying the DLC. But they stated that the drug use did threaten their completion of the GED and their continued engagement at the DLC.

With threats of destruction just outside the web, violence, gangs, drugs, inequality of opportunity, racism, poverty breeding an array of fears, it is amazing that the young men move forward. The presence of these threats, so close to the young men, substantiates the argument that the three threads – affective relationship, space and learning activities – must be built with intentionality and strength. The DLC implements these threads, in order to "hold at bay" the forces that threaten re-engagement, and utilizes these same threads to bridge the transition to college as demonstrated in the data by some of the work done with key informants at the DLC.

Internal Threats

Besides the external threats to engagement, there are two identifiable threats to engagement within the DLC itself. One is the balance of the requirements of standardized testing (the GED exam) with the non-traditional learning activities, and how both students and particularly volunteer tutors perceive this balance. There is tension regarding whether or not the DLC learning activities were the best way to prepare the students for test-taking. This tension was more passively expressed during observations than it was openly spoken about during data collection. Observations of small groups, uncovered tutors and some small groups not utilizing the DLC learning activities but opting almost exclusively for teacher-centered, lecture driven, and test driven approaches. If it is accurate as the data suggests, that the instructional approach does engage the young men, then the failure to use these instructional approaches is a break in a thread and a threat to engagement from the Center.

The second threat from within, although not directly observed from the data, is the ability to establish affective relationships, or even the desire to, by tutors and staff. This study looked at young men who were engaged at the DLC. It is very probable that some men do not engage, and this is in part due to tutors' inability to form affective relationships, thereby limiting the program's effectiveness. The almost total dependence upon volunteer tutors and the need for large numbers of tutors to work in small group settings, limits the ability to be selective when choosing tutors.

If not all tutors are able to establish affective relationships, and some tutors question the efficacy of creating safe spaces and engaging learning activities, this is a threat to engagement. Unless a young man is assigned to a tutor who uses the learning activities

described creating safe and healing spaces through an affective relationship, then there are threats to engagement for those men in the DLC. Although not directly reported by stakeholders and key informants, these are very probable tensions threatening engagement seemingly indicated in the observations. Buy in to the findings of this study by all within the DLC is questionable and uncertain, and this threatens the web and the ability of the web to engage, if all parties are not convinced of the effectiveness of the threads for engagement, or do not possess the skills to create the threads.

The final chapter summarizes the findings and discusses the possible implications of all four findings of this study for adult educators and adult education settings and for all educators interested in the re-engagement of out-of-school youth. In addition, the final chapter will take one last look at the key informants – Javier, Dustin, David, Jamal and Shawn – where they are, in terms of their engagement in learning as well as some of the effects of the forces of destruction on their continued engagement in learning, at the completion of this study. Finally, it will describe Participatory Action Research that is evolving from the ideas of the young men who participated in this study.

CHAPTER 10   -   PULLING TOGETHER THE THREADS

"Sometimes it is very dark. We cannot understand what we are doing. We do not see the web we are weaving."
                                                                Anonymous

"This research is coming out good!"
                                                                Javier

Sitting on my backyard deck, I was surprised to see a relatively large spider web draped across the deck bars. The web was difficult to see and could only be viewed from a specific angle and with the right light. It was camouflaged, transparent, fragile, and imperfect in design. I had to walk nearer to examine it close up. I thought how unless your attention was drawn to it by someone pointing it out to you, it was still hard to see.

The web seemed so fragile, and indeed it was. I felt so big and powerful standing up so close examining it, and I knew with one stroke of my arm and hand that I could destroy the web and the spider's connection to it. My instinct was almost to do that, but I didn't. I was a force to be reckoned with but went unnoticed. The web was amazing in its patterned imperfection and the entangled threads of which was comprised.

The next day the web was gone. But another one had cropped up in another spot on the deck. This one was even more expansive than the first, stretching between two branches and the side of the deck, and hanging from threads. This time I examined it from several angles to truly appreciate its beauty, complexities, and imperfections. Later in the day I visited the web again; this time I noticed that a portion of the web had been destroyed, not by me, but perhaps by the wind or another element. Parts of the web seemed to be destroyed from within, as well as without, by spiders wrapping up their

prey. In this case, however, the spider was still in the same spot attached to the web still spinning, clinging to several strands of threads.

Like my examination of the webs on the deck, this study has looked closely at the DLC from specific frameworks and many angles. It has tried to understand the young men within the context of their larger environment both inside and outside the DLC, but has focused closely on their engagement within the DLC. This final chapter takes a critical look at the findings in summary, and what the findings do and do not say, describes the five key informants' responses to the research findings, their current engagement in learning, three projects they will potentially be involved with following this study, and the implications and relevance of the findings for practice in adult education and beyond.

Summary of the Findings

The findings of this study seemed to indicate that for one learning center, the DLC, the combination of affective relationships with one or more mentors, spaces for safety, healing and growth, plus learning activities of a differentiated nature engaged young men in learning. The findings also indicate that for this learning center the attention to these threads was intentional and that the threads did not operate in isolation. It seems that it is a combination of these threads that made a difference.

The DLC Student Handbook (2001), although not using the exact same terminology of the three threads of the findings of this research, nevertheless intentionally includes them in the description of the Center. The following excerpts from the handbook are examples.

> Both tutors and students are learners [in relationship]. The learner is a vital participant in all aspects of [the DLC]… Learning at its best is experiential, "hands-on", participatory… we use one-on-one and small group instruction… students and tutors will meet their goals [together] and learn to love the Lord with their minds as well as their hearts. [Spaces] are created for prayer, counseling, and special events [celebration]. **(The DLC, p.3)**

The language of the Student Handbook reflects the ideas of affective relationship, spaces for healing, safety and growth as well as attention to the activities of learning, sometimes explicitly stated, and in other instances implied. The written data from the Center indicate that the threads were, in part, intentional in design.

Also as mentioned in Chapter 8, the threads do not operate in isolation. In fact, often the set-up of activities strengthens the other threads. For example, the small groups design mentioned in the handbook and observed throughout the Center, created a space for affective relationships to develop. The very nature of the small group activities encourages intensive contact with individuals over time and can encourage the development of affective relationships. These small groups tend also to be emotionally safer than larger groups, helping students "let down their guard", providing space for friendships, more intimate conversations, and disclosure of pain (often through sharing of writing). The hands-on nature of the learning activities seemed to foster repeated interaction in the form of conversation, peer-tutoring, disclosure of feelings, which, in turn, created the spaces and relationships that impacted engagement.

But even with affective relationships, supportive spaces, and rich learning activities of the kind described at the DLC, this study indicates that threats to re-disengagement are still present within the learning center itself, the young men's' communities, families, and institutions. For the young men of this study, although engagement did occur as an

apparent result of these three threads, the progress for all the young men was not smooth

but erratic as they move forward beyond the GED and college. The findings indicate that

even with affective relationships, safe and healing spaces, and differentiated learning

activities the engagement process is clear, but not linear, and not without obstacles.

Responses to Research Findings by Key Informants

The research findings were shared with key informants for the purpose of member

checking. Feedback from the young men informed this final report and also substantiated

the reliability of the findings. Without exception, the key informants agreed and

resonated with the findings. In one instance, where I was concerned about my

terminology, I asked the key informants their opinions. Specifically, one question stands

out: "Is the word "trauma" too strong a word for the "baggage" with which the young

men come to the learning center?"

In response to this question, all key informants stated that they felt that the study

captured the fundamental nature of their experiences quite well. Furthermore, the use of

the word trauma to describe instances of past educational abuse, personal violations, and

school experiences was deemed very appropriate and accurate. Dustin used these words

to describe his reaction to both the metaphor and the use of the word "trauma".

> No, it is all just right. It seems just like it is. I never thought of [the problem] this
> way.   But the "web" is true and so many of my friends, yes, have had trauma. Wow,
> I never thought about it like this. **(Dustin)**

In addition to sharing research findings, the final meeting with the key informants

broached Javier, Shawn, David, Dustin and Jamal's current engagement in learning. The

meetings were spirited and, in general, the key informants were eager to give feedback on

the findings and to think about future ideas, now that this study was completed.

Javier

Currently Javier works at the church in the maintenance department and lives with

church members. In addition, Javier teaches small children in the church Sunday School.

Despite the contradictions with the church community, of which Javier is aware, he is

busy, active and involved in the church community and seems to enjoy his participation.

Javier entered college after passing the GED and a reading/writing college entrance

exam. However, he failed the math entrance exam. Therefore in his first semester in

college, he needed to take one remedial non- credit class. The remainder of his courses

was for credit. But Javier withdrew from his college classes during the first semester.

When asked about this, Javier describes his discouragement and poor decision-making.

> I got discouraged when I didn't pass my summer remedial class. I didn't
> ask the teacher for help. I got discouraged. The class is vital to my field.
> I was just lazy and overwhelmed. I knew there was support. It was on
> me but then I felt like I made a bad decision – how am I going to pay for
> this? I really want to go back to school.

Javier said that even though he quit college he didn't stop learning and that learning

was always "calling him." For example, currently he is reading the Bible extensively.

Science still interests him, and he said when he was attending college and saw the labs,

they really excited him. As we spoke, Javier said that he planned to go back to college

next fall but needed some "hand holding." He stated that he needed me, and others, to

support him so that he would not be discouraged or overwhelmed this time.

We set up a plan. Javier now attends math tutoring on Saturdays at the college in

preparation for his fall return to college, and he worked with a counselor at the college to

help him go through the reapplication process and to address his anxiety. Javier is now

re-registered for classes and will try again. Javier is clear that he will need the threads of

engagement, especially relationships, to re-engage once again.

<div align="center">Shawn</div>

Shawn enrolled in college after he passed the GED. However, he reported that when

he began he did not have all his paperwork done so that his financial aid did not go

through, and he could not continue classes. He wants to go back to college in the near

future.

Shawn, however, still battles with drug addiction; he uses drugs on a daily basis. When

we discussed how he would be able to handle school with this level of drug use, Shawn

expressed conflict. Shawn admits to addiction, but has mixed feelings about whether he

can handle school and the addiction, and whether he even really wants to stop using

drugs.

Following the completion of Shawn's participation in this study, I presented Shawn

with options for treatment and encouraged him to enter a residential treatment program

for a year and then go back to college. At the present writing, Shawn is contemplating his

options and is trying to make a decision regarding both treatment and when to return to

college. He still wants to be a veterinarian.

Shawn was genuinely interested in the research findings, responding to them with,

"it's real" and "it makes perfect sense", but he had some confusion about the web

metaphor and felt that it needed to be clarified to represent only The Downtown Learning

Center, not public education in general. As a result of this input, I re-examined this

metaphor for clarity and to ensure that is not too far reaching. Shawn's input was very helpful.

Dustin

Walking into the learning center, I spotted Dustin in his small group with his baseball cap and "hoody" on his head, leaning back in his chair and listening to his tutor. When he spotted me he smiled a slow grin. I went over to greet him and asked if I could have a few minutes with him. The few minutes became an hour during which Dustin and I reviewed the research findings and talked about his current engagement in learning. Dustin was interested in the findings and responded to the metaphor's appropriateness and significance.

> I never really looked at it like this. I think the spider and web is a good analogy. It is interesting that the three threads need to be way more powerful but that the one threats to engagement is way bigger.

Dustin felt that gangs should definitely be added to the list of forces of destruction, and they subsequently were. As Dustin contemplated the statistics on high school dropouts, he held up his hand and began to name his ten best friends, one on each finger. When he finished, he said,

"You're right! Seven out of ten of my friends dropped out, and they were not stupid."

Dustin is signed up to take the GED exam again. We recalled the last time he took the exam, almost a year ago, and his asthma attack. He states that now, with the economic recession, he is more determined to go to college once he passes the GED. He now wants to study some sort of medical subject matter, computers, or x-ray technology. We agreed that once he passes his GED and enrolls in college, we would celebrate with dinner, as he doesn't like large groups and will not attend his graduation.

Jamal

Jamal continues to tutor at the Learning Center two days a week and works at his

uncle's real estate business the rest of the week. He has completed an AA degree and

does not intend to complete a BA. He does plan on taking real estate classes in

anticipation of taking over his uncle's business someday.

Jamal has goals for his future and seems content with what he is doing and where he is

going. He continues to enjoy tutoring at the Learning Center and will probably do it again

next year. He believed that the web analogy was an accurate metaphor for the DLC.

Jamal stated that he would help in any way he could with future projects around

engagement. Jamal is now participating the PAR Think Tank Project described later in

this chapter.

David

David and I spent well over an hour looking over and discussing the research findings,

and talking about David's current engagement in learning. Not unlike the other key

informants, David agreed that the young men came with "trauma" and that trauma was an

appropriate choice of words. He spoke of his need for healing and friendship that he

didn't know he had when he first came to the DLC.

> I came looking for a GED. I didn't come looking for healing and friendship,
> but I got it at the DLC.

David failed the GED math and writing exams by only a few points. This was deeply

discouraging to him and has increased his fear of testing. David's girlfriend has graduated

from college, and David spends a good deal of time with his girlfriend's college friends.

He has not yet told his girlfriend that he dropped out of high school. When he is with

these college friends, David says he generally can "hold his own" in conversation, but if

he doesn't know something about a subject being discussed, he goes home and researches

it so that he can hold his own in conversation next time. David enjoys intellectual debate,

controversy, and conversation.

David admits he loves to learn but has a great deal of fear that he will fail the test

again. During this final meeting, I convinced David to try to pass the GED one more time

by coming to math and writing tutoring at a local college on Saturdays. One recent

Saturday David attended and took homework; he says he enjoyed the tutor and would

return next Saturday. By his own admission, he battles with a mixture of self-doubt,

laziness, and fear of failure. David did not return the next Saturday and was unable to be

reached by his tutor. His home phone was disconnected leaving no forwarding number.

At the time of this writing, David was reached by email and wants to keep in contact.

Next Steps

During data collection, the consciousness of the young men was raised in regard to the

scope, causes and ramifications of the "pushout" issue. Particularly during focus groups,

young men said they wanted to "give back", to inform others about dropping out, to

caution children not to drop out – basically to be part of a solution. Three opportunities

for the young men to be involved in projects have emerged. Following the completion of

this study, these projects are anticipated to begin.

Project #1 –Completion of a GED Manual for Potential GED Students

This is a student written manual, which is in its revision stages. It is an outgrowth of

the research of Dr. Eve Tuck, and The Participatory Action Research (PAR) Collective at

the Graduate Center of The City University of New York. The students from this study

have been asked if they would like to be co-authors for this manual. The manual is in

second draft form and needs additional input from more GED graduates and GED

students. The manual will assist potential GED students in understanding the GED exam

and negotiating the system of test taking. Also, it will normalize the experience of

dropping out, and taking an alternative route to high school completion and college

entrance. It is a student manual written for students by students.

Project #2- Documentary

This project is the outgrowth of the first young men's focus group. The young men

had the idea to do a documentary on young men who had been pushed out-of-school. We

have secured a documentary filmmaker, Marcos Miranda, who is willing to direct the

project with the young men beginning upon completion of this study. Filming we hope

will begin in conjunction with Project #3 -- a proposed collaborative project between

New York City College of Technology and the CUNY PAR Collective.

Project #3- Collaborative Think Tank

In collaboration with the PAR Collective at the CUNY Graduate Center, a Think Tank

is being organized at New York City College of Technology by The Black Male Initiative

for March 2010 to grapple with issues of non-completion of both high school and college.

The proposed question for the Think Tank is, "What can public schools and institutions

of higher education learn from high school and college non-completers?" Knowledge will

be generated through dialogue among educators, administrators, and high school and

college non-completers. The young men of this study have expressed interest in

participating.

During the final meetings with key informants, Javier, Jamal, Dustin and David stated that they wanted to be part of several or all of the three projects. They were enthusiastic in their desire to continue investigating the issues raised in this study, and they felt a deep responsibility to let others know about high school pushouts, their educational experiences, engagement in learning and ways in which young men can be engaged in learning.

Furthermore, these three projects will potentially utilize the findings of this study by creating spaces for voice and dialogue around the pushout issue and the re-engagement of young men. Project #1 provides space for the young men's ideas and concerns about the GED. This student produced GED manual has the potential to assist other young people preparing for the GED and helping them avoid some of the obstacles experienced by the participants in this study. Project #2 can bring awareness to the pushout epidemic in this country (Orfield, 2004) and the specific ramifications for young men of color (Mincy, 2006) from a primary source perspective while again providing space for voice and healing for the young men. As a facet of the Think Tank, Project #3, the findings of this study will be presented, along with other research findings on pushouts with the aim to encourage dialogue and awareness around re-engagement of young men in learning.

When talking about these projects, Dustin, who often appeared the most tentative of the key informants, spoke of the unanimous desire to participate in the projects by clearly stating, "I want to be a part of that!" They continue to demonstrate once again a desire to build and create.

Implications for Practice

Beyond the young men and their re-engagement, the findings of this study have implication for practice. Referring back to the metaphor, if the threads of engagement are each strong and the web is well constructed with intentionality and creativity despite limited resources, then the web at the DLC can withstand most of the threats to engagement. If the web is flexible and can sway with the wind, its resiliency should be able to provide engagement. If the threads are strong, they will provide the strands of engagement needed to successfully support the young men's transition to college and the workforce.

According to stakeholders at the DLC, this study makes the case that to successfully engage out-of-school male youth in learning, the three threads of affective relationship, intentionally designed interior and exterior spaces, and specific types of learning activities promoting engagement must be present in an educational environment and that these threads must be of a certain type and quality. Pulling these three threads together makes engagement likely despite very strong outside and inside forces. This study also maintains that these same threads are needed once the young men leave adult education and move into higher education. There are many threads in educational programs, but this study is suggesting that these three particular threads be present, attaching and interacting with all other threads.

One of the threats to engagement is limited funding and resources for adult education centers serving this population. This is a real concern as the three threads of engagement require educators who are able to establish affective relationships, training to teach and

support those relational skills, and program directors that understand and can develop

space and instruction conducive to engagement. This study indicates that the largest

financial investment that adult education centers will need to make is in its educators; not

just any educator will do.

Because of the type of instruction, program development and communication skills

indicated from the findings of this study, it is suggested that professionals working with

this population should be full-time, and that their salaries should be commensurate with

salaries for college level educational professionals. These professionals should be

provided with a minimum of eight hours per month of professional development training

and leave time, including sabbaticals for writing and practitioner research.

Professional development should include training in communication skills, non-

traditional teaching practices, differentiated and collaborative learning, counseling,

healthy boundary setting, process writing, and adult education theory. It could also

include a discussion of literature on teacher-student relationships. The DLC was able to

provide some of this training to its volunteers and staff; nevertheless, staff and volunteers

reported that they worked with less than adequate staff and professional development.

Professional development was not sustained on an on-going basis for volunteers, the

main source of this training being an initial nine-week orientation. Despite these

limitations, the DLC did relatively well with the young men of this study. The

assumption is that with consistent and on-going professional development, particularly

around the three findings, more young men will benefit and experience successful

transition to higher education with greater frequency.

The three threads of engagement, when "pulled together" in one program by all stakeholders, make for very strong engagement with these young men that over time yields success with high school (GED) completion and entrance into college and gainful employment. The will must be there by all stakeholders, however. There also must be an understanding that for these young men, it is not too late. They are young enough, hopeful enough, and have their whole lives ahead of them. A financial investment in professional educators, and their ongoing professional development, is a good place to begin toward yielding results for this population.

In President Obama's recent State of the Nation address (Obama, 2009), he referred to high school dropouts. It seems a rare occurrence for this population even to be mentioned by a president, much less in a major national address. This reference in the speech brings some measure of hope for our young men and the educators who work with them. The hope is that this group of young men will no longer be invisible.

Beyond the invisibility of high school dropouts, this study indicates that this invisibility may extend to young men who drop out of college, as well. The same three threads "pulled" together are also important for success in the early years of higher education. Three of the five key informants in this study have completed the GED and enrolled in college. It appears, based on their initial performance in college, that the threads which engaged them at The Downtown Learning Center may still be needed as they enter the arena of higher education.

Wider Implications Looking Forward

When this study began, the United States was not in what we now commonly call, an economic recession. But at the conclusion of this study we arguably are. Paul

Harrington's 2009 research on levels of educational attainment and lifetime annual income firmly asserts that male high school dropouts are the most vulnerable to the effects of the recession. Furthermore, Harrington's extensive research makes the case that disengagement in learning is, in fact, an economic issue (Harrington, 2009) and learning to re-engage young men who have left school is of crucial importance, not only because of the personal cost to individual lives, but to the economic state of our nation.

Perhaps now more than ever, the findings from *Engaging Out-of-school Males in Learning* are pertinent to educational reform as we grapple with how to create spaces and instruction within programs and schools that truly engage the disengaged, and foster professional development that create educators who are able to combine the affective and cognitive in their relationships with their students.

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