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“It’s Like a Prison without Bars”: Experiences in a Mandatory GED Program

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Abstract: *The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe how adult students experience a legally coerced GED program in a community alternative to prison program. A phenomenological-hermeneutical approach was used to derive common themes that represented essence of the students’ experiences.*

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, reports that 41.3% of the corrections population does not have a high school diploma or equivalent compared to 18.4% in the general population (Harlow, 2003). Research suggests a link between correctional education and lower rates of recidivism among offenders (Nuttal, 2003). For this reason, mandatory education is a growing trend in the United States, especially within programs that are designed to be alternatives to prison (McCollum, 1990; Ryan & McCabe, 1994). Although there is a robust body of literature that exists dealing with the experience of incarcerated individuals in correctional education programs, much less is known about the experiences of individuals who participate in educational programs as an alternative to prison in community corrections programs (Mageehon, 2003; Moeller, Day, & Rivera, 2004). Mandatory education programs within community corrections are increasingly being used by the court for individuals who have been convicted of a crime and lack basic education or high school completion (Bahn & Davis, 1998). A review of literature in both adult education and corrections education has failed to produce scholarly peer-reviewed research related to the experience of adult students in mandatory education programs in a community corrections setting (Marion, 2002). The community setting is a setting inherently filled with opportunities and distractions that do not exist for incarcerated individuals. Unlike those who are incarcerated, individuals in community corrections live at home and are responsible for working, paying bills, dealing with transportation, and at the same time, attending mandatory classes, what we refer to as *legally coerced* education programs, a term common in the corrections literature. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how adult students experience a legally coerced GED (General Education Development) program in a community alternative to prison program. Findings may help adult educators in community programs improve their practice by understanding how their students experience the GED program.

Theoretical and Philosophical Framework

This research is situated in an existential-phenomenological framework. One of the criticisms of phenomenological research is that a proper foundational definition is not often presented in research studies (Gadamer, 1976). Patton (1990) points out that over time, the term *phenomenology* has been used to refer to a philosophy, an inquiry paradigm, an interpretive theory, a social science analytical perspective, a qualitative tradition, or a research methods

framework. In this existential- phenomenological study, we consider phenomenology the combination of a philosophy and method, calling on philosophical traditions when defining phenomenology. Phenomenological research is one that is interested in the lived experiences of the phenomenon of interest, assumes there is an essence or essences to shared experience (Van Manen, 1990), and emphasizes the “directional nature of human experience” (Thomas & Pollio, p. 14). It is through this orienting framework that we place ourselves and chose existential-phenomenology, acknowledging the interconnectedness between us and the world that results in the person and the world co-constructing one another. In this study the “phenomenon” described by participants was their experience in a *legally coerced* GED program.

In existential-phenomenological thought, the interdependency of meaning and existence are central to this philosophy, stressing Heidegger’s (1962) notion of “being in the world.” Hermeneutics is traditionally described as interpretation; be if of texts or theory (Gadamer, 1976). Kvale (1983) puts forth the idea of a *hermeneutical circle* in which “the understanding of a text takes place through a process, where the meaning of the separate parts is determined by the global meaning of text” (p. 185). Using a hermeneutical approach in existential-phenomenological interpretation of data, speaks to a constructivist approach and one that assumes “multiple socially constructed realities exist” (Hatch, 2002, p. 30).

Research Design

Participants

Participants were nine adult students attending a community corrections GED program as required by the conditions of their probation or parole to attend high school equivalency classes.

Community corrections programs like this one encompass community corrections, probation and parole or any combination of those programs. The community corrections program mentioned here is funded by the state Board of Probation and Parole and administered by the sheriff’s office.

Data Collection

In conducting a phenomenological study, the interviewer is the primary interview tool and the participant or interviewee is the authority on the experience being described. As Thomas & Pollio (2002) explain, it is not the job of the interviewer to tell the participant how to talk about his life. Rather, the interviewer should only be responsive to the participant’s descriptions “as they unfold in the texture of the conversation” (p. 25). This is critical to the phenomenological interview as the researcher has the responsibility to unpack themes and seek detail while allowing the participant to set the flow of dialogue.

The Phenomenological Interview

The sole data source for this study was phenomenological interview data. The purpose of the phenomenological interview was to explore the students’ descriptions of their experience in the GED program. In order to best capture the participants’ experiences, unstructured interviews using the prompt, “What is your experience in a coerced GED program?” were conducted. Probing questions were left open-ended as to encourage elaboration from the participant. Each participant was interviewed separately at the program center as close to the beginning or end of class as possible to make it convenient for participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The names of people, places, and other data that might serve to identify the

participant were removed and participants were assigned pseudonyms. The transcribed, edited, and revised interviews served as the data of the analysis.

Epoche

Prior to interviewing participants, each researcher was interviewed regarding their own experiences of legally coerced GED programs. Edmund Husserl first used the term *epoche* to refer to a process in which the researcher tries to put aside any a priori theory, knowledge, assumptions, beliefs, interest, bias, or preconception regarding the phenomena at hand aside and it is commonly referred to today as *bracketing* in phenomenological research (Hatch, 2002; Moran, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1989; Pollio, et al. 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Two members of the phenomenological research group at The University of Tennessee conducted each researcher's bracketing interview. Once the interviews were transcribed, the text was analyzed by the phenomenological research group using the same process of analysis that was used for the participants' interviews. The research group proposed themes for potential bias that emerged from each of the interviews. During the *epoche* process, we described our experience with legally coerced GED programs and any presuppositions they may have had regarding such programs or program participants. Themes that emerged from the interviews included: (1) critical perspectives of marginalized population groups, (2) focus on thinking errors versus students' lived experiences, (3) the expectation that students would see benefits in the program for personal satisfaction and as role model for children but not necessarily for job benefits, (4) the notion that students would feel controlled and may be resistant, and (6) bias towards social change through education.

For us, the *epoche* process involved the challenge of being transparent to ourselves through careful reflection. We did not seek objectivity in this study because it cannot be achieved as "some entities are simply not 'bracketable'" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). We constantly re-examine our positionality as we interview and attempt to make meaning of the data. This is a recursive process. As researchers, knowledge of our own bias and acknowledgement of things we normally take for granted, will make us more mindful of asking leading questions or allowing our own beliefs to interfere with the interview process. This positionality was repeatedly referenced during the interview and data analysis portions of the research.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological-hermeneutical approach was used to analyze the transcripts for this study. The interpretive process was three-part. First, once all the interviews had been transcribed, the researchers presented three selected transcripts, on different occasions, to the research group. Twelve to fifteen members of the research group participated in analysis sessions at any given time. Figural themes were noted by members of the research group and the researchers, ensuring each theme was supported by passages in the text of participant transcripts. Second, after three interviews were analyzed by the group, both researchers continued analysis of the remaining seven interviews. This analysis was first conducted individually by each researcher and then jointly as they sorted out global themes observed across interviews and relationships between these themes. In the final step, considering experience a figure/ground phenomena, that is, experience is contextualized making the experience *figure* and the context of the experience, *ground* (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), we identified the ground and developed a thematic structure from the figural themes identified. This thematic structure was presented to the phenomenology research group one more time for interpretation and feedback.

Discussion of the Findings

One major ground and four figural themes emerged from the data. The experience of participating in a coerced GED program is grounded in the participants' prior experiences in school. From this ground four figural themes emerged.

Themes

Evolution is present in each of the figural themes as they are inter-related, moving in time and shaping the participants' experience. These themes are "re-presented" using the students' own words to describe their experience.

Constraint: "It's like a prison without bars." All students experienced some amount of coercion related to attending the GED program. These experiences ranged from students insight that they needed some coercion, "you gotta push me to do things" to the experience of having the requirement forced on them, "I don't believe it should be forced on me." Students described coercion constraining at first but leading to freedom of choice in the end. Experiences regarding coercion fell along a continuum of positive to a form of punishment. For example, one student expressed, "Coming over here, since I've been on probation, has really helped me a whole lot because if I wasn't over here I probably would still not be getting my GED." Yet, other students experienced coercion as a form of punishment, "There ain't nothing I can do about it. They know I don't want to be here to do it." Despite these extremes, the experiences described seem to have changed as the student's time in the program continued. One student remarked that the program was "something I didn't want to do but after being here so long doing it, I can see my benefits from doing it." Another student expressed his change deeply, "It [coerced program] made me feel messed up at first but whenever I took the first test and passed it, the first moment that I found out that I passed it, that was something that really, really meant a lot to me. I felt it in my heart."

Learning alone and together: "Everybody learns different." Students identified their experiences with the GED program in relation to previous learning experiences. The experience of learning in the program appeared was tightly coupled (Weick, 1976) with their concept of traditional educational practices. Data illustrated that the students' perceptions of learning were based in traditional pedagogy, "It's different than I thought it was going to be. I thought there was going to be a teacher standing up, like back in school, like on a chalkboard." Though all participants described teaching as different than they thought it would be, their experiences were not the same. We identified four different ways participants described their learning experience: (1) "It's up to the students" (working alone), (2) "You'll learn faster if you do it yourself" (I like working alone), (3) "There should be somebody in there helping you out" (the teacher should be there to aid learning, what they expect and how they expect to learn), and (4) "I applied myself and he [the instructor] helped me apply myself" (I need the teacher).

Benefits: "I think it will affect my life real, real, good." Students saw benefits to attending educational classes. These benefits were experienced in different ways and students described their experience as one with present and future benefits in the areas of maturity, personal achievement, children, and jobs.

Maturity revealed itself in statements from students such as "I still could be out in the streets, using, you know, doing whatever but this program has helped me to mature a lot," and "...now that I'm grown, I be seeing stuff that I really need." Maturity manifested itself in knowing the difference between right and wrong, "You know, when all else fails, you ain't got

nothing else to do but the right thing." Along with maturity came a sense of personal achievement for students. Students described this new sense of achievement with statements like, "just achieving something that you haven't achieved" and "I'm accomplishing something with what I'm doing and that feels good." Another stated, "It's giving me the opportunity to go back and get something that I want, my education." Others reflected and realized how far they had come, "I wasn't able to finish high school so this is my little sense of finishing high school" and "It means a lot because now I am actually in a position to actually better myself..."

Obtaining a GED was experienced as beneficial to students with children. Several students with children expressed, "It's important for me to be a role model for them [children]" and "I wanna do it for myself too and I wanna do it for my children too because I push my kids to do good in school." Benefits related to increased employment opportunity also stood out. Some students tied their educational experience in the GED program to family and employment. Statements such as, "I've got a family now and I'm getting my kids back and the GED is going to help me find stability in my job. I need stability and benefits in my job now. It ain't like I'm by myself anymore." Others tied the GED to stability stating, "I gotta have the GED to get the kind of job I want" and "I need my education. You know, most jobs require you to have an education."

Awakening: "It's not just jail talk." Students' experiences in the coerced GED program indicated that they had an awakening as they moved from seeing education as a burden to seeing education as a form of release. Even those that described their experience as negative, experienced an awakening regarding their own education. "I reckon that probably I am more embarrassed [now] because of where I didn't learn nothing when I was going to school." Other students described their awakening in coming to the realization that education was important. One student remembered, "I've always heard people say, 'Do good in school because you are going to need it later.' But I didn't really look at it that way. I didn't feel like I needed it that way until actually getting out in the main world and seeing how hard it really is with no education or no trade or nothing up under your belt." Another student spoke for himself and his peers, "Most of us didn't really want to go to school. Most of us turned to the streets and, you know, instead of going to school we was in the streets. You know, you're out there making money – four or five hundred dollars a night– two or three thousand dollars a week. What do you need school for? Then, after you get in trouble for doing what you're doing, you think about it. It's either straighten up and fly right or go to the penitentiary."

Implications for Adult Education

Based on the findings, while students saw benefits from engaging in educational studies and receiving their GED diploma, they also required some amount of coercion to continue the educational process. The theme of "you gotta push me" became evident in the research aligning with Flowers (2000) findings which noted that a motivating factor for continued participation comes from being mandated by the courts. Educators who expect students to be entirely self-directed with their education upon entering the program may be frustrated (Warner, 2007). This frustration may be exacerbated by students' understandings of how learning takes place.

Against the ground of prior experience of school the theme of "they ain't babysitting you down here" revealed that students' conceptions of learning are based in typical pedagogical traditions. Themes relating to an understanding of teaching and learning provide the adult educator working in legally coerced GED programs important information about what pre-

conceptions students bring with them to the classroom. Non-traditional education is an unfamiliar experience for many students. Educators who realize that legally coerced students come into the program without a sound understanding of either the teaching or learning process more likely will be attuned to students' understandings and experiences with education. In order to meet students where they are in the educational process, educators must consider orienting students to different types of teaching and learning early on. It is our hope that such attunement and action will be informed by this research and may create a more effective learning experience. By understanding students' perceptions about learning, we hope to form a consciousness among adult educators in community based programs that will promote more research in the area of community corrections.

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