My Sister, Our Stories: Exploring the Lived Experience of School Leavers through Narrative and Poetics

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of two adult female siblings who are both school leavers. Through the use of thematic narrative analysis, sibling narratives and poetic re-presentations, their stories were developed. These stories represent the participants' experiences of prior schooling and their current commitments to education. While each story conveyed a profound similarity in terms of prior schooling, contrasting narratives were illustrated through description of transitional moments and sibling relationship. The analysis also explored the intersections of race, gender, and social class within educative moments of the life experiences of the participants. Keywords: Adult Basic Education, Narrative, Thematic Analysis, Poetic Representations

One of the pioneers of adult education, Edward Lindeman (1926), wrote, "…experience is the adult learner's living textbook" (p.10). He suggested that the learner's experience was the resource of highest value in adult education. Historically, empirical studies on experience have looked at "cognitive or conceptual development with regard to how experiences are transformed into learning" (Belzer, 2004, p. 44). Over time, particularly as experience relates to adult basic education (ABE), it has become well established that prior schooling experience influences the way in which adults approach learning in adulthood (Beder, 1990; Belzer, 2004; Fenwick, 2000; Miller, 2000; Quigley, 1992, 1997). Despite this affirmation, perceptions of schooling and educational experiences from the perspective of the students themselves have largely been left out of adult education literature. This article is an attempt to open that space. While the data focus on the experiences of only two women, the implications of their stories have the potential to intersect with a wider range of adult learners, opening the space for their voices, not yet attended to in adult education literature.

Review of Literature

We believe it is important to give context to this research and provide our readers with some background to the research that has been done in adult education around school leaving and participation in adult basic education programs. While there is a breadth of literature available, we have chosen to concentrate on what we consider to be the most significant pieces that led to our desire to conduct the research presented here.

Before presenting the literature, it is necessary to define some particular terms that will be used throughout this piece.

Title II of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) supports adult literacy programs in the United States and dictates that Adult Basic Education programs (ABE) must assist (a) adults in becoming literate and obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency; (b) adults who are parents in obtaining the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children; and (c) adults in the completion of secondary school education. Most ABE programs, used interchangeably with the term "adult literacy" programs, provide instruction in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics to adult learners in order to prepare them to transition into the labor market or higher academic or vocational training. General Education Development (GED) courses are also included under the umbrella of adult basic education for adults who left school and did not receive a high school diploma. When used colloquially, "a GED" refers to a group of five subject tests which, when passed, certifies that the taker has high school-level academic skills and is often viewed as the equivalent to a high school diploma.

There is a stigma attached to leaving high school within particular social and cultural contexts. Students from certain social backgrounds are more prone than others to leaving school (Weis, Farrar, & Pétrie, 1989). The term "dropout" was coined in the 1960s and brought with it political, social, cultural, and economic interpretations (Anders, 2009; Dorn, 1993). In our work here, the term "school leaver" has been chosen to avoid negative connotations associated with the term "dropout" (Dorn, 1993).

Literature connected to reasons contributing to school leaving informed our research and over time has been investigated and reported in a multitude of ways. Azzam (2007) examined the views of youth aged 16-25 that had left high school. The participants in the study identified five major reasons for leaving school: (a) boredom in school; (b) high truancy rates; (c) peers not in school; (d) too much freedom and not enough rules; (e) failing marks or not enough credits to graduate. Surprisingly, most participants blamed themselves for leaving school rather than their schools or teachers. Because the ninth-grade year has been considered crucial to retention in high school, Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2008) addressed the role the ninth-grade year has in relation to leaving school. The data these researchers collected showed that more academic engagement in eighth grade decreased the likelihood of leaving school once students began high school. Student age, however, was significantly associated with leaving school. For each additional year older a student was at the start of high school, the greater the odds of leaving school early. Of particular interest in Neild et al.'s research was the report that students who were in special education programs in eighth grade were less likely to drop out of high school than other students. This finding stands in stark contrast to Scanlon and Mellard's (2002) work that found a disproportionate amount of adolescents labeled with learning disabilities leave school before the eleventh grade. Most recently, Meeker, Edmonson, and Fisher (2009) investigated factors that prevented students from completing school. The researchers found that the factors listed byparticipants were considered what Scanlon and Mellard (2002) considered "pull factors" (beyond the school's control) rather than "push factors" (taking place within the school). Interview data from this study reported that pregnancy and parenting were the highest rated factor preventing completion of high school. Also included were bad

attitude/poor choices, dysfunctional school/conflict with teachers, dysfunctional home, not fitting in, work outside of school, moved too often to earn credits, frequent discipline referrals, peer pressure to leave, and substance abuse. Rumberger and Lim (2008), who found sibling relationships to be a determinant to school leaving with students more likely to leave school if they have a sibling who has already left school, also noted pull factors.

Outside of adult basic education mandated by the judicial system or within correctional facilities, participation in adult basic education is voluntary (Davis, Mottern, & Ziegler, 2010). The questions of who participates in adult education programs, who does not, and why they do so, have been of central concern since the beginnings of the organized field of adult education (Cervero & Kirkpatrick, 1990). Early on, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) found that women were less likely to participate in adult education than men and that barriers to participation could be either situational or dispositional. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) added to Johnstone and Rivera's work by categorizing four types of barriers to participation in adult education: situational, institutional, informational, and psychological. Beder (1990) found situational barriers were significant in determining participation but the reasons for non-participation more readily identified relate to adults' attitudes toward or perceptions of ABE. Beder found that students elect not to participate in adult education because of low perception of need, the perception that participation would entail too much effort, because of dislike of school and because of situational barriers. Ellsworth, Pierson, Welborn, and Frost (1991) identified lack of confidence, family responsibilities, institutional encouragement, and time to be factors of non-participation. King (2002) reiterated the significance of situational barriers in determining the primary barrier to participation in GED programs among school leavers was related to family constraints.

Motivation has also been explored as a reason for participation in adult basic education programs. Beder and Valentine (1990) investigated the motivational profiles of adult learners as they related to participation in adult literacy programs. Their findings provided a meaningful understanding that motivation goes well beyond just the desire to attain a high school diploma. Motivation included dimensions of the value of literacy education in order to perform adult roles, the social nature of literacy education, external persuasion, and learner affect or the desire for self-improvement.

For many adults who do participate, school may not have been a positive or successful experience the first time around (Belzer, 2004). Quigley (1987, 1990, 1992) has presented over a decade of research on adult literacy populations and factors that affect their participation in basic education programs. Over the years, each of Quigley's studies has built upon the next, positing that adults who choose not to participate in basic education make a conscious choice to resist schooling, that those who resist school in their earlier years are more likely to resist education as adults, and that memories of earlier schooling are a powerful factor in adults' decision not to participate in basic education classes. Belzer (2004) looked specifically at the impact of past and present learning contexts, specifically how past learning contexts influence learners' perceptions of current adult education learning contexts. In the data reported, the "context of school" was the primary experience adult students brought with them when they returned to school.

Even though adult education researchers have considered participation in adult education for more than 60 years, nearly as many questions as answers exist for researchers who study the topic (Cervero & Kirkpatrick, 1990). As we mentioned earlier, research in this area has historically been empirical studies on experience focusing on cognitive development rather than experiences. Very few studies have actually opened a space for the voices of the students themselves to be heard. As instructors and researchers, we believe making a space for these voices to share such experiences influences how and what we learn and it is through stories that we make our experiences known.

For educators, stories can inform praxis by offering a deeper understanding of students. The purpose of this article is to attend to the particularities of two sister's life worlds including their perceptions of schooling, experiences of prior schooling, and the influence class, race, and sibling relationship have had on that experience. In this research we take up Noblit's (1999) description of particularity by reminding ourselves as researchers that particularities "push us to consider the details of the entire [research] process, not just the details of the scene being studied" (p. 3). We choose to re-present the sisters' stories here because both authors of this manuscript hold the belief that in order to better serve a population of adults with varied backgrounds, each of us in our own role, as a practitioner, researcher, volunteer, or fellow student, should hear their stories. Stories give us the opportunity to make meaning in social relations both as the reader and storyteller (Eakin, 1999). For the primary researcher, her commitment to exploring storied lives guides the layout of this piece. We begin with background information on this project, introducing two sisters, Amy and Susan, as well as the conceptual framework and method used in this research. This is followed by a re-presentation of their individual stories and identification of themes that emerged from their stories. The article ends with the primary researcher reflecting upon her own position within this project as researcher, student, educator, and family member. In keeping with a narrative format, the remainder this article is written from a first person perspective from the view of the primary author.

Background to this Project

During my career in the field of adult basic education and literacy I have encountered student populations that challenge me daily, while touching my heart profoundly. I have been drawn to the stories these students have shared with me over the years and grown aware of the issues many adult students, particularly women, face. I am committed to creating a space for student voices to be heard, and I wanted to share the stories of two women in a non-traditional research format. It is my belief that once student voices are heard, practitioners and program planners become aware of the issues that affect the population they serve and can better frame the areas of practice in need of improvement. For this study, I chose to use qualitative methods, particularly a narrative format, because it best illuminates the experiences of these two women, and those of many women like them.

It was two years ago when I approached Amy and Susan about letting me interview them as part of a narrative research project. Having known both women since I was a child, both as a family member and now as a researcher, I sought answers to my questions regarding their educational experiences. The impetus for this project was my

own experience with and interest in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) populations. In my experience as a practitioner, I have found one of the most pragmatic ways to better serve my students is to be well-versed in the literature and stories of experience that surround the population with whom I work. While my experience over the years has given me the opportunity to work with school leavers like Amy and Susan, and the literature I read has given me theoretical reasons for why women like Amy and Susan leave school and make certain decisions regarding education, I wanted to know more.

Amy and Susan are White sisters, eighteen months apart in age, who grew up in an urban area of the southern United States. Their mother was killed when they were two and a half and four years old, respectively. Abandoned by their biological father, Amy and Susan were raised by their maternal grandparents. Susan is the younger, age 39, and like her older sister, Amy, age 41, has three children and left school in the ninth grade. Although they both left school in the ninth grade, they had strikingly different educational experiences. Susan received her GED. Amy did not.

As a close family member, I had grown up with their stories. They were older than me and I knew they both left high school and were married with kids before they were 20 years old. I also knew their lives had taken very different turns over the years and were in sharp contrast to my life of privilege. I wondered how their lives had ended up so dissimilar to my own since we were in the same extended family. I also wondered how their lives had ended up so divergent from one another.

Conceptual Framework

This work is situated in a narrative framework. Narrative inquiry as set forth by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) guided this project. Attending to the ways Amy and Susan experience their world historically and socially was best accomplished through narrative inquiry because "the study of narrative is the study of the way humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 1). To gain an understanding of the lived experiences of Amy and Susan, I conducted in-depth interviews to investigate the lived experience of the participants and to create a particular understanding of the world using their voices (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004). The use of in-depth interviews allowed me the means to research the lived experience of the participants and also myself in relation to them. I found support from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) for the inclusion of personal narrative voice into the research writing.

A social-constructivist and interpretive approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) was taken in designing this study. Because the purpose of this qualitative study was to determine what two female adults, who are siblings and both high school leavers, believe about education and how these beliefs have influenced their lives, open-ended interviews were crucial in meeting the social constructivist knowledge claim of this study. "In narrative inquiry, the research act of coming to a participant's storied account is also an interpretive one" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, p. 275). Moreover, analyzing data by theme is an inductive process from which the themes emerge from the data rather than imposed by the researcher. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) see this as an advantage in narrative inquiry as "data more clearly tell their own story" (p. 11). A critical framework was employed to interpret the data through class, race, gender, prior experiences in

school, and sibling relationship with the intent that findings from this study may illuminate ideas about adults who lack basic education and in the hopes that some form of consciousness will come from this research.

Position as Researcher

It is my belief that the researcher is never completely detached from the research. In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is a critical piece that must not go unmentioned. Sonyini Madison (2005) notes, "Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects" (p. 7). Having spent most of my career in adult basic education instruction and program administration, I, as the primary researcher, must acknowledge my own presuppositions and assumptions as my positionality situates me within my approach to this research.

I self-identify as a white, middle-class, American female who is drawn to critical research as a means to empower targeted populations. I recognize the fixed positions I embody including my race, gender, class, and nationality as those things I cannot change about myself. There is no doubt issues surrounding white privilege, whiteness, level of education, and social class affect my positionality. My research is led by my commitment to lived experiences and stories, coupled with my desire to interrogate why certain groups are privileged and others not. I chose to approach this research from a critical constructivist perspective (Kincheloe, 2005). My choice in drawing on critical constructivism is based on my belief that knowledge is socially constructed, multiple realities exist, and that power plays a vital role in the construction of knowledge.

Due to my tenure in the field of adult basic education, I bring particular biases to this study. In my experience as a practitioner, I have found one of the most pragmatic ways to better serve my students is to be well-versed in the literature and stories of experience that surround the population with whom I work. Historically, the adult basic education population is made up of minority students from low socio-economic backgrounds and often links to negative prior schooling experiences and intergenerational low-literacy (Belzer, 2004; Quigley, 1997). The populations I have encountered over the years are ones that challenge me daily and touch my heart profoundly. In working with adult basic education (ABE) students, I have become aware of the issues many adult students face. This awareness, I believe, allows me to conduct research that creates a space for student voices to be heard. It is my belief that once these voices are heard and I, as a practitioner, become aware of the issues that affect the population I serve, I can better frame the areas of practice in need of improvement. Further, it is my hope as a researcher that through hearing and witnessing the shared stories of my participants, practitioners will gain insight into the types of educational experiences that new adult students may have had and how the gendered, racial, cultural, and social roles they embody shape their experience with education.

I came to this research having known both women since I was a child, already aware of information that was not necessarily made evident in the interview transcripts. There are two reasons I mention this: (a) my personal knowledge of the participants' lives may provide bias in my coding and interpretation of the data; and (b) my relationship with the participants may compel them to share only particular aspects of their experience

with me. This could present two different limitations. First, the participants may not feel the need to go into great detail regarding their experience as they might automatically assume I am aware or have a conscious understanding of what they are trying to explain. Second, the participants may not feel comfortable sharing their experiences freely due to our close relationship and particular upbringings. Nevertheless, all of the data I draw upon to re-present the lived experiences of Amy and Susan is drawn from what they shared with me. Yet, I acknowledge that the lens through which I interpret their stories is laced with my own experiences and perceptions of the two women. As such, prior to beginning my work with the two participants, I considered my own assumptions about this project and hopes for the broader group of adult basic educators (Pillow, 2003). To add to the trustworthiness of this work and provide a means for acknowledging my own bias, I kept a research journal and my assumptions were discussed with third parties. An effort was made to maintain researcher transparency throughout this research journey. I honor the element of reflexivity in qualitative research and try to weave my positionality throughout my work in an attempt to practice reflexivity (Leary, Minichiello, & Kottler, 2009; Pillow, 2003). Practicing regular reflection on my own work, in this case through the use of a research journal, allowed me to consider how my assumptions, actions, and understandings changed over time. This, in turn, contributed to my own reflexive poetic narrative re-presented in this article.

Data Collection

When I invited the women to participate in this project, I had no idea what their responses might be. We had been out of touch for many years. Further, I had no idea where the project would lead if they agreed to participate. I struggled to explain why I wanted to interview them and how I would go about doing so. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the University of Tennessee, and eventually I met with both Amy and Susan at their homes. I reviewed the purpose of the study and explained the interview process using the description on the informed consent form. I also asked each woman for permission to digitally record the interview and explained that the transcripts from the interviews would be useful for data analysis. Any questions Amy and Susan had about the study were answered.

Using the interview prompt, "Tell me about your education experiences and what they meant to you," I engaged in in-depth, unstructured interviews with both Amy and Susan. Probing questions that requested more explanation, clarification, and description (Glesne, 2010) followed this prompt. Each participant was interviewed separately.

Since I was asking each woman to share reflectively on lived experiences, three-hour interviews were necessary to capture data broad and deep enough from which to generate themes and patterns (Glesne, 2010; Spradley, 1979). Questions were directed towards the participants' experiences, feelings, and beliefs regarding educational experiences and commitment to the value of education over time. Because the interviews were reciprocal, both researcher and participant took part in a dialogue around educational experiences. As I recorded the conversations, Amy and Susan remained open and willing to share their experiences with me. Each interview was transcribed and all references that might identify the individual were removed and each woman was given a pseudonym. Data storage included digital recording of the interviews as well as hard

copies of interview notes, transcripts, and communication between participant and researcher. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were sent via post and email to Amy and Susan, respectively, for their review. A telephone conversation with each woman verified that the transcripts were accurate. I was sure to give each woman the chance to remove anything she said from the transcripts. Both women agreed to keep the transcripts as they were, without any changes, edits, or deletions being made to their words or stories.

It must be noted there are both advantages and limitations to the data collection type chosen for this project. Face-to-face interviews are advantageous in capturing the "lived" experience of the participants, as they are the only ones who can provide historical information on their experience. Open interviews also allow the researcher to guide each interview but do not limit the direction the interview can take (Merriam, 2009). On the other hand, because the method of data collection used in this study is solely open-ended interviews, according to Creswell (2003), the interview method of gathering data poses limitations that include (a) the memory of the interviewees; (b) truthfulness of the interviewees; and (c) the potential of the researcher's presence to cause biased responses from participants. Further, with the interviewer serving as the primary data collection instrument, the narrative described may be tainted with bias of the interviewer.

Data Analysis

Different methods of analysis informed this research. I drew upon Denzin and Lincoln's (2003) claim that using a variety of interpretive analyses enables a better understanding of the world. Foremost, Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic analysis was used to break the interview data into categories and themes rather than synthesize the data as done through narrative analysis. This method of analysis allowed me to bring order to Amy and Susan's experiences by "seeing individual things belonging to a category" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 10). After each interview was conducted and transcribed, I took on the task of the interpretation and coding process of the narratives. From the stories collected, I identified commonalities and produced themes, along with the chronological story of each woman's life. In the analysis, I employed a critical perspective (Kincheloe, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002), using the constructs of class and race along with prior experiences in school and sibling relationship to interpret the data. During the initial coding procedures, I used an open coding scheme to sort the data, identify themes, events, and patterns that are of interest. The data was sorted two separate times. The data was first sorted chronologically to construct linear personal histories and then sorted by aspects of the themes of the participant's experiences. From themes that emerged after the data was sorted a first time, the data was coded again based on those emerging themes. Coding procedures involved both sociologically constructed codes and in vivo codes as described by Strauss (1987). In vivo codes are derived directly from the language used by the participants in the course of interviews. These codes can often lead the researcher towards associated theoretical codes. Sociologically constructed codes are developed based on the researcher's knowledge of the field of study. These codes go beyond in vivo codes to "broader social science concerns," adding more depth and utility for analysis (Strauss, 1987, pp. 33-34).

Considering the importance of the inductive process, paradigmatic analysis of narrative was used to identify commonalities that existed across participants' stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). According to Polkinghorne (1995), this type of analysis of narrative moves from stories to common elements and thus allows themes to be inductively derived from the data (p. 13). Moreover, paradigmatic analysis of narrative "is employed not simply to discover or describe the categories that identify particular occurrences within the data but also to note relationships among categories" (p. 14).

The constructs of class and race along with prior experiences in school and sibling relationship were used as a lens through which sociologically constructed codes were created. Paradigmatic analysis of narrative was used to identify commonalities that existed across participants' stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). The following categories were identified through paradigmatic analysis of each participant's story: (a) describing the past; (b) times of transition; and (c) current ways of thinking. The stories re-presented in this piece are laid out according to these categories, titled with the participants' words, and re-presented in narrative form. Codes produced using a critical lens led to the following categories that included their own sub-themes: (a) school leaving; (b) education; (c) work; and (d) social class. Following analysis, poetics (Glesne, 2010; Madison, 2008; Norum, 2000) were developed to re-present transitional moments for each participant, illustrating the narrative tensions that exist in and across their lives while capturing the tenor of self-disclosure that was shared. In order to create the poems, lines of text from the transcripts were reduced to shorter lines or only a few words while, at the same time, maintaining the interconnectedness of thoughts. In creating the poems I worked to reproduce the stories shared with me by using only the participants' actual words.

Re-presentation

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) posit that narrative inquiry is "concerned with the representation of experience, causality, temporality and the difference between the experience of time and the telling of time in narrative form" (p. 139). In re-presenting Amy's and Susan's stories, I worked to maintain their words, including when they did not employ Standard English. The stories are re-presented here chronologically as that is the way the stories were told to me. I take up the term "re-presented" because these stories are a product of my interpretation yet have been carefully constructed to allow the sisters' voices to be heard, rather than solely the voice of the researcher. Considering that "how we re-present data on the page matters" (Norum, 2000, p. 249), poetic text (Glesne, 2010; Madison, 2008; Norum, 2000) has been woven into both women's stories to capture transformational moments in their lives, illustrating the tensions that exist in and across their lives, while capturing the tenor of self-disclosure that was shared. Poetic transcriptions were used because it is my position that poetic approaches can contribute to a richer and more complex understanding of others' lives and "capture the content of *what* is said and the form of *how* it is said in gesture, movement, vocal affect, and the symbolic surrounding reported and expressed" (Madison, 2008, p. 393). Amy and Susan's poems are constructed entirely from the words of the women themselves and the titles of each story and poem are direct quotes.

Once the poems were written, I contacted Amy and Susan by telephone. I was able to reach Susan and read the poem constructed of her words to her. Before reading the poem I explained how the poem had been written and that it was meant to capture what I interpreted as a time of transition in her life. After reading the poem, I asked Susan for her initial reaction. She responded, "That sounds about right. Yep." I asked Susan if I had accurately captured that time in her life and she said she thought I had. Following my conversation with Susan, I tried to contact Amy via phone but the line had been disconnected. I resorted to mailing Amy her poem but never heard back from her. I have seen Amy only twice since interviewing her in 2009 but neither meeting was conducive to discussing our time as researcher and participant.

Although Amy and Susan each shared unique individual stories, these stories were connected through tales of growing up, going to school, life transitions, and their relationship with one another. It is through Susan's story that we gain more insight into Amy and vice versa. Barone (1995) noted, "Sometimes the conversation between writer, reader and characters should be allowed to wane before additional voices interject themselves into the dialogue" (p. 72). It is with this in mind that I invite you to "fill in the gaps, noting places where the experiences escape your language, or, perhaps, pushes it to places and spaces that are difficult to fully understand or interpret" (Davis, 2012, p. 227). Amy's and Susan's stories are not explicit constructions of 'truth', but rather one version of the participants' multidimensional and storied lives. These are their stories.

Amy's Story

My Grandmother Did My Homework for Me

I remember a little bit of elementary school but mainly middle school. It was hard. I was in special classes. I can't remember what they were called. I went into those [classes] probably about the 4th or 5th grade. My grandmother put me in them because on the tests I took, I was way behind. Math was my hardest. I couldn't get any of it and at home my grandmother would do my homework for me. She wouldn't make me do it because I would throw a fit and this and that so she'd do it and that was our routine.

I was transported by the special ed buses; back then that's what the kids called it, "The Special Ed Bus." I was bused far from home and it just seemed like you got picked on. We lived in the east of the city and we were bused to the west. They just sent them [those] little yellow cab buses out to us. I would tell the driver sometimes, "I'm not going tomorrow so you don't need to come by" and he wouldn't come by. My grandmother would be like, "I wonder where that driver is?" I would laugh and say, "I don't know where he is." So, I went into those special classes and stayed in the same class all day up until I went into high school; the year I dropped out.

Now, that year, the year I dropped out, I moved around to different classes but I think they were still special education classes. I didn't have any friends. I had met Tommy, my first husband, then. We weren't married yet but he was more or less pushing me. "You need to just drop out. Drop out," he'd say. I guess moving around class to class, I won't [was not] used to that and I was nervous about that and the work was even harder than before and I still couldn't get it and I just decided to go. I was sixteen and in the ninth grade. I didn't want to be at school. Education was the last thing on my mind. I

just had a really hard time doing the work and that's when I decided just to drop out. School – I just couldn't get it. At that time, I didn't care if I had an education or not.

I ran away. Actually, I left school before I turned sixteen. After I had left, my grandmother and grandfather managed to find me and brought me back home. They told me I won't [wasn't] going to get married. But when I turned sixteen, my [biological] dad signed a piece of paper saying that I could because you needed a parent's signature.

I was raised by my grandparents because my mother passed away when I was four. She was killed and my grandparents took us [Amy and her sister, Susan] and raised us. They never had guardianship of us I don't think. They went back and forth fighting in court with our dad and then one day our dad just up and left us. My grandparents never got anything I don't think.

We knew our dad was in Georgia. He had been there for a while. I think my sister had his address or something. I don't remember how I got it. But anyway, he sent me a piece of paper with his signature and notarized and all that stuff and they took it at South Carolina. I called him and I said, "I want to get married. I need your signature." He said, "Okay." He sent the paper. He knew it would get to my grandparents so he did it, probably out of spite to be honest. He signed and I went to South Carolina. I left home, went to South Carolina, and got married.

My Power Was Shut Off: Amy's Poem

I was still a child.
I was thinking like a child,
     having them at such a young age.
I was stupid and didn't take birth control.
I had to grow up and try to raise them the best I could.
Life was taken from me at the age of 16.
I wish I had waited.

He kept me for them twenty years.
I was real shielded from the outside.
He was so protective.
He reprogrammed my head,
     being there with him for so long.
I couldn't talk to people.
Go to work, come home.
He drilled into my head,
     "It's going to be *this* way."

I never had nothing to eat.
My power was shut off.
We were moving every month because
     I couldn't pay the rent.
It was bad.
We slept in the car some.

I grew up fast.
We lived on welfare the whole time.
He would take my food card in the middle of the night,
Sell it, and leave me thirty dollars for the month.
He was breaking into people's houses
It was bad.

All the arguing.
And fights.
And cops.
The drug abuse.
The law called me one day,
Told me him and my oldest son been fighting.
Told me I needed to come home.
When I got home,
When I seen our house,
        it was terrible.

He tore everything up.
He destroyed everything.
It just woke me up that day.
That was it.
I packed up what was left of our home.
I had had enough.

It was hard adjusting to living normal.
It's hard to describe.
He had me so sheltered.
I didn't know how to live without him.
When you have lived that way for so long,
        that's all you know.
Even though he did what he did,
after being with somebody for that long,
for the first month it was in the back of my head,
        "go back - just go back."

I was experiencing life all over again.
He won't there.
I had to do for myself.
He won't there to tell me what to do, when to do, how to do.
I was able to start talking to people.
It took me a while but,
I started opening up.

Because of the hell my husband put me through,
 I'm not going to get married no more.
The way he treated me,
There ain't no man that's gon' tell me

what to do, how to do it, who to talk to, who not to talk to,
what to wear, what not to wear, all that kind of stuff,
No more.

I've struggled

As I got older, it [education] was in my mind. I never related education with money before. It won't until I started working that I knew that. I wanted to try to get a GED. I did go back to school for a little while. But now I still can't – I can't read something and keep it in. So, I stopped going again. I went to ABC Literacy for a couple of months. It was at night. There was probably maybe five of us in there. They were all a lot younger than I was. You just go in and take a test. They put you in workbooks and you just work by yourself out of those books. They didn't stand up and teach you. Everybody kept to themselves in a little cubby and worked on your stuff at their own pace. The teacher just sat there more or less. Nobody asked for help and she [the teacher] didn't get up to offer none. They put me in English first. I had to work through that part then I could go to my next step, whatever that would have been. I stopped before that. You see, if I read something, I can't keep it in for it to come back. I don't know how to describe it. Like if I had a story to read and then answer questions, I can't remember what I read to answer those questions. It just got harder and harder and when it got harder, I more or less gave up. I used the excuse I was too old and been out of school too long. I had been out almost 23 years when I went back there. That was the only time I tried to go back.

I have three kids and they all dropped out of school. My kids know about my education. A little bit of me wants to go back to school but then a little bit says "no", because I am just afraid I can't do it. I'm afraid of not being able to finish. I don't want my family to see me fail again. It's important to show my kids so they won't struggle or have to work really hard in low-paying jobs or no jobs. Just to show them that they can do it. If my kids wanted to go back to school, I might go with them. You see, if I had somebody there with me, in the same boat per se that I was in, we could help each other. Then, maybe, I would stay in it. I struggled. I lived a hard life not having an education. To have a good job to make money to be able to you know pay your bills and eat and all that stuff. If I had a GED it would open doors for me.

Susan's Story

I Just Didn't Want to Be There

I honestly don't really have any memories of school at all. In later years, I just had a lot of problems in school. I didn't understand things and I couldn't keep up with the other kids and being in special education classes, or whatever you want to call it, you get picked on a lot. I remember a first-grade teacher named Ms. Peacock but I couldn't tell you what she looked like. I just remember the name. I don't know why but I have completely blocked everything out. I've had people say maybe it was because of some traumatic event, which is possible, therefore you block things out. You remember but you don't want to remember. Maybe I got in a lot of trouble in her class. I have no clue why, I

just remember the name. She was one of my first teachers, maybe. She was an older lady – I remember that much about her. That's all I remember.

I can remember my grandmother taking us to kindergarten but other than that, I remember Amy went to one middle school and I had to go to another. We both had learning disabilities but we, for whatever reason, were at different schools. I don't really remember anything about being in class or in school. But, I do remember in middle school when I got pulled out of classes with my friends. I couldn't go to classes with the friends that I had. I had to go to other classes. I just knew something was different. I didn't know what.

Education wasn't ever made an issue at home. I don't know why. I guess it was because we were being raised by our grandparents and in their time you didn't need that [education] necessarily. Kids didn't go through school and finish school or whatever. They went out and worked and it just wasn't made an issue. When we were in school, if we got bad grades, we got bad grades. It didn't matter.

I was raised by my grandparents because my mother was killed in a car wreck and they took us in. My grandmother's neighborhood was predominantly black. There were four of us white kids on the bus; me and my sister and two friends of ours that lived in the neighborhood. Because we rode that bus and got off that bus with all the little black kids, we lived in the ghetto, so to speak; in the bad section of town. That's where we lived and we were labeled that way, "ghetto kids." It was embarrassing. I hated we had to ride the bus. Me and my sister were embarrassed. Just to get off the bus and have everybody see all those black kids piling off the bus and then four little white kids hopping off. I guess because back then black people were the lower race and they automatically lived in the slums and the ghetto or whatever you want to call it. Because we lived there too, we were from the wrong side of the tracks as well.

Being that where I lived was predominantly a black area, and where I was bused to school was a more rich area of town, all of the friends that I had lived on that side of town. I never invited anybody to my house. For one, I was embarrassed because we lived in this little cracker-jack box of a house. Two, it was my grandparents and not my parents, and three, my grandfather drank a lot and I never knew what to expect. Everybody else's house was two or three story houses and they had all these luxury things that I would never have or didn't have. Therefore, I didn't deny anything if asked but I never offered any information either about where I was living or my family situation or anything like that.

I guess the way my childhood impacted the school situation was being told by my grandfather, "You're never going to amount to anything. You're just like your father." My father, in my eyes, was a sorry human being. And, being told that I was never going to be good for anything and that I was stupid, stuff like that. If you get told that enough, then that's what you are. To be told that you're never going to be good for anything, that's what you start believing. So when I was in school and when I dropped out of school, I just figured I was never good enough to be there anyway. I wasn't going to get it regardless. It was a waste of time.

When I dropped out of school, education was not important. I was concentrating on getting out of my house. I had a full time job and I was making pretty good money. Education didn't matter. School was there; I was just there. I didn't want to be there. I just didn't care. I didn't have a whole lot of friends and it wasn't like a social time for me

and I just hated it. I didn't get along very well with other students. But back when I was in school, in high school, there was smoking allowed in school. You could smoke at school in the smoking court. That's pretty much where I stayed most of the time. So even when I was there, I wasn't *really* there. I didn't go to classes very much. I would get aggravated and just stay out there in the smoking court and smoke.

By the age of 16, I got a full-time job and quit school. I was in the ninth grade. I felt so relieved. I didn't have to worry about what anybody else was saying. I didn't have to worry about anything like homework or bedtime. I didn't have to worry about anything. I didn't have to worry about being one of only three white kids on the bus. I didn't have to be labeled because of where I lived. I did it because that's what I believed was right for me to do at the time.

He Was My Push: Susan's Poem

I didn't get along very well with other students in
  high school.
I stayed in a lot of fights.
I started smoking at 12.
I started drinking and doing drugs.
It was just a way to feel accepted.

Education didn't matter at that time.
School was there,
I was just there.
By the time I was 16,
I got a full time job and
  Quit school.

I drank and partied
  Until
  I got pregnant with Jake.
I was 20 years old.
My entire outlook changed.
Everything was completely different.

I was a different person.
I realized it wasn't just me anymore.
I could no longer be that carefree,
  don't give a crap,
  do what I want to do person that I was
  9 months earlier.
Now I had someone completely reliant
  on me.
If he Jake had never been born,
  I might be like
  My sister.
When I had my first kid,

She was on her third
        and struggling.
I wanted to give Jake better.
He was my push.

It's Not Okay to Dropout

Before, when things got rough, I used to just quit. I'd just give up just like in school. Had I pursued finding out what was wrong or had someone helped me get the help I needed then I guess I wouldn't be where I am at now. Maybe I would have gone on and been that nurse I wanted to be or be in forensic science, which is what I always wanted to do. Maybe I wouldn't have given up on all that like I did.

I have three kids and they definitely don't have a choice; they will be in college. I want all my kids to finish school with a good education so they can go out and be whatever it is they want to be. I don't want them to have to struggle. I don't want them to have to dig ditches because they can't get anything else. I make sure their homework is done. I get weekly emails from teachers on things like their progress. I check their homework. Up until a couple years ago the routine was Sunday-Thursday, they had two hours a night of homework and if they weren't doing homework, they had to read. No TV, no phones, no nothing for two hours it is strictly dedicated to school. I just try to make sure that everything's done the way it should be. I have one child that has a learning disability as I do and I am making sure she gets whatever helps she needs to get through school. I don't want her to even consider dropping out. She's in special ed classes, IEP classes, to get help with her reading disability and she is doing very well.

I haven't told my kids about my high school education. I don't want them to think it is okay to dropout or to give up. I want them to know you have to be your own person and stand on your own two feet. You can't do something because everybody else is doing it. You have to do whatever you believe in and while at the time that I dropped out of school, I believed that was the best thing for me to do, looking back I realize my mistake. When I went back to school, I believed it was the right time and that is what I needed to do. I needed to give my kids more than what I had and having a GED has allowed me to do that. It has made me understand how important education is. To me, without a college degree, you are never going to go anywhere. It's too hard out there.

Findings

Recognizing that the re-presentation of another's life experience is imbued with power dynamics between the researcher and the participant, I chose to carefully report the data in narrative form (Norum, 2000). Participants' own words were used throughout the narratives in the attempt to communicate a holistic picture of their stories of educational experience and bring the lived experience to life (Butler-Kisber, 1998). Poetic form was used specifically to represent transitional time periods in each participant's story. Two major themes, each including their own sub-themes, were developed from these narratives: (a) School experience and leaving school; and (b) Education, work, and social class.

School Experience and Leaving School

Adults returning to school bring with them powerful images and experiences from prior schooling (Belzer, 2004). Amy and Susan both saw themselves as having been pushed or forced out of school, rather than having flunked out.

Keeping up and feeling different. Though Amy and Susan claimed to have felt "different" in school, which led to their decisions to leave, Amy appears to have been more relationally motivated than Susan, who was self-motivated to leave.

Amy: It [school] was hard. I was in special classes. Being transported by the special ed, I guess buses, back then that's what the kids called it, "Special Ed Bus"…seemed like you got *picked on*. I just *couldn't get it*. [In high school] the work was even harder than before and I still *couldn't get it*. I had met Tommy [ex-husband] then. He was   more or less pushing me – 'You need to just drop out. Drop out.' So, I just decided to go.

Susan: I didn't understand things and I *couldn't keep up* with the other kids and being   in special classes or whatever you want to call it, you get *picked on* a lot. I didn't understand a lot of the stuff. I couldn't read something on my own and grasp what it said. I *couldn't keep up* so I had a lot of problems.

"Picked on" and "couldn't keep up" appear in both sibling narratives and are in vivo codes interpreted as feelings of inferiority and inadequacy in prior schooling experiences. Perhaps this can be attributed to difficulty learning. Susan self-identifies with "I have learning disability." While Amy does not self-identify, her distinct memories of the "Special Ed bus" evoke images of students labeled learning disabled. Research indicates that academic failure puts students with and without disabilities at risk for leaving school and is often a primary reason for leaving (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002) and is recognizable in Amy and Susan's stories.

Race. Race factors weighed heavily on both sisters during their early schooling experiences. Both sisters refer to race when describing the neighborhood where they grew up. Though similar memories are recollected, there is significant contrast identified between their experiences and perceptions.

Amy: It was mainly black neighborhood. We stayed close to home. We had three white friends that we pretty much hung out with. There was a couple black boys who rode the bus and would always take up for us if anything happened or went down or whatever. I mean it was alright we just stayed close to home.

Susan: My grandmother's neighborhood was predominantly black. There were four of us white kids on the bus…we lived in the ghetto…in the bad section of town. That's where we lived and we were labeled that way. I hated we had to ride the bus. Me and my sister were embarrassed just to get off the bus and everybody see all those black kids piling off the bus and then four little white kids hopping off. I guess because back then black people were the lower race and they automatically lived in the slums and the

ghetto or whatever you want to call it and, because we lived there, we were from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak.

Neighborhood social environments and influences have both risk factors and protective factors that can affect children (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Amy's reference to race implies a 'safety' factor she felt from her black neighbors. She takes on the neighborhood as her own. In contrast, race is much more centered for Susan, who feels shame regarding her black neighbors, couples race and/or racism tightly with housing, and does not take on the neighborhood as her own but instead clarifying it as "my grandmother's neighborhood". While Susan and Amy both describe themselves as middle-class growing up, Susan describes race in a manner usually used by upper-class whites by equating race to low-income and pitting whites against blacks (Anyon, 1981).

Education, Work, and Social Class

Both sisters used the word "struggle", which was found to have symbolic meaning referring to life without education and equating work and income with social class. Ironically, the word [struggle] is not far removed in adult basic education settings either and has been identified as a word used by adult basic education instructors to classify students (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992).

Struggle. Amy and Susan both use the word "struggle" when considering life and work without education. They both consider potential implications for their children as well.

Amy: So they [kids] won't *struggle*…Having to work really hard in low-paying jobs or no jobs. I *struggle*. I *struggled*. I lived a hard life – living a hard life – not having an education. To have a good job to make money to be able to you know pay your bills and eat and all that stuff.

Susan: I want them [my kids] to finish school with a good education so they can go out and be whatever it is they want to be. I don't want them to have to *struggle*. I don't want them to have to dig ditches because they can't get anything else. To me, without that [a college degree], this day in time, you are never going to go anywhere. It's too hard out there. You never amount to anything without it at this point.

Amy never completed her GED coursework. Susan, who obtained her GED at age twenty-one, explains in her own words how her life in terms of work has differed from her sister's:

Susan: I worked at the hospital for 6 years, a medical supply company for 6 years, a shoe company for 6 years, decent jobs. She has only managed to get very hard – she has *struggled* with everything. She has only been able to get very lower-level blue-collar jobs. She has always *struggled*.

In vivo codes used for both sisters signifying class included words like "struggle," "blue-collar," "decent" and "digging ditches" bring out class perceptions from the

narratives when considering economic return and education. Many school leavers pursue a GED credential because they believe that it will lead to better employment (Tyler, 2004). Amy and Susan model these same expectations and like other working-class women (Johnson, 2002), they view education as a pathway to work, and work a way to a better life.

Education cannot be separated from personal experience. "Who we are, to whom we are related, how we are situated all matter in what we learn, what we value, and how we approach intellectual and moral life" (Noddings, 1992, p. xiii). What I found was that the women's lived experiences conjoin with previous field literature and research findings displaying how prior schooling experience, race and social class act to powerfully influence one's overall educational experiences (Anyon, 1981; Belzer 2004; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). A reading of these stories provides the reader with striking similarities and obvious differences between Amy and Susan and their educational experiences, as well as my own. In their stories, Susan was more vocal than Amy and her discourse articulated one of full disclosure and recognition of social factors directly impacting her educational experience. Amy, on the other hand, though more reserved, did not eliminate her recognition of the same social factors mentioned by Susan, but rather minimized its impact to some degree. For example, though they experienced the same neighborhood as children, their experience of that space was not the same.

Re-Knowing the Past

As I stated earlier, I am closely linked to Amy and Susan. This made this particular research far more personal than I expected. When I think back to the three of us growing up, I remember us as young, playful girls who spent hours in our grandparents' backyard swinging on a swing our grandfather made for us. I always went home when we were done playing. They stayed. My upper middle-class lifestyle and education have indeed provided privilege I did not recognize as a child. Until now, I never realized how much the life they led contrasted with the life I went back to each time I left. Somewhere in the middle things get blurred. It becomes more difficult to recall any time we spent together after we were in elementary school. I can only remember the things being said around me about Amy and Susan leaving school. I do not remember any tears or any anger. It was almost as if it had been expected. The family just left it at that.

Through the process of our interviews, I found myself becoming part of the stories I was hearing and at times, overwhelmed with guilt. Why had I not reached out to Amy and Susan before now? As a basic education instructor, why had I not offered support to Amy as she tried to go back to school? Why had I not been to visit Susan and her family, who had lived near me for many years? Was it possible that I embodied more than one persona; one of a literacy instructor and one of a relative who had become numb to the stories of her family? These questions stay with me, for Amy's and Susan's stories became part of my imagined community (Anderson, 1991) and stories that I will not be able to put down but will carry with me. I share what I have learned with you in the form of poetic text.

Thank You For Letting Me Be Part of Your Story: Amelia's Poem

Thank you for letting me be part of
          your stories.
I have to admit I feel guilty.
Had I known what you were going through,
Had I known you needed someone to care,
Had I known you felt alone,
Had I known you felt like a failure,
I would have been there.

I would have been there to give you support.
I would have been there to help you with math,
          reading, or the like.
I would have been there listening to
          your stories.
I am listening now.
What more do you want to tell me?

You embody courage.
You embody humility.
You embody womanhood.
You embody childhood.
You embody daughter, granddaughter, wife, mother
          but most importantly
          you embody Sister.

Your stories are powerful
          your strength to overcome is even more powerful.
You have struggled
          but kept on moving.
You have seen hard times
          but looked ahead.
You are able to tell your stories with grace and integrity.
You are
          Two sisters with
          Two ways of knowing.

Thank you for sharing your stories.
Thank you for trusting me.
Thank you for opening the door for other women to tell their stories.
Thank you for being yourselves.
Thank you for never giving up.
Thank you for inspiring me.
Thank you, Amy and Susan.
Thank you for letting me be part of
          your stories.

Implications

The lived experiences re-presented here conjoin with previous field literature in adult education regarding how school leaving and previous schooling experience act to powerfully influence one's overall educational experiences (Beder, 1990; Belzer, 2004; King, 2002). A reading of these narratives provides the reader with striking similarities and obvious differences between participants and their educational experiences. In their narratives, Susan was more vocal than Amy and her discourse articulated one of full disclosure and recognition of social factors directly impacting her educational experience. Amy, on the other hand, though more reserved, did not eliminate her recognition of the same social factors mentioned by Susan, but rather minimized their impact to some degree. For example, though they experienced the same neighborhood as children, their experience of that space is not the same. Although each of these women maintained their own individual narratives, their stories are connected through tales of growing up and going to school, transitions, and their relationship to one another.

There is still much more to be learned about the relative importance of these stories individually and collectively. Researchers must continue to explore how some women, like Susan, have become more actively engaged in educational pursuits and economic opportunity while her sister, with many similar experiences, has not. It is through stories like these that we can work to increase adult basic education practitioner awareness of the diverse student population and begin to break down any a priori theories that may exist regarding adult basic education students. Increasing this awareness has the potential to form a consciousness among adult basic educators to gain deeper insights into the types of educational experiences their students may have had. With social awareness and sensitivity, practitioners can begin to unpack the issues adult students face so that they might better facilitate adult learning. As socially conscious educators (Horton & Freire, 1990) who want to best meet the needs of adult basic education students, there is a need to ensure that programs are not socially, culturally, and/or racially biased. As an adult educator, I am obligated to let adult students know that they are welcomed, and that their experiences are valid. The result has the potential to increase participation and be rewarding for both student and educator. Awareness and understanding of stories like the ones Amy and Susan have to tell and the roles they embody is a first step in that direction.

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