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**We are Stronger Together: Faculty Reflections on Competency-Based High School
Completion for Adults in Washington State**

Elizabeth Flanagan

A dissertation in practice submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of the

Doctorate of Education

in Educational Leadership

University of Washington Tacoma

2023

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Abstract

Situated in Washington State during the height of the global Covid-19 pandemic, this qualitative, insider-practitioner study examined the instructional context of four instructors engaged in a competency-based, high school completion for adults faculty praxis on community and technical college campuses through a state-supported program called High School+ (HS+). Guided by three areas of inquiry, this research sought to (1) explore how HS+ faculty describe their instructional praxis in the context of personal identity; (2) probe the cultural, structural, and administrative challenges HS+ faculty face when enacting competency-based instruction on community and technical college campuses oriented toward seat-time models of instruction; and (3) engage with the ideas HS+ faculty have about solutions to these cultural, structural, and administrative challenges aided by formal scholarship and other forms of shared wisdom. Through formal interviews and during the course of sustained, professional engagement with each participant, the following themes emerged: (a) Problematizing the GED; (b) HS+ praxis rooted in holism and defined by identity; (c) Asset-oriented competency-based instruction; (d) Structural misalignment; and (e) Hypervigilance. Discussion is framed around Tema Okun's characteristics *of* and practical antidotes *to* White Supremacy Culture, with particular focus on White Supremacy Culture's fear-based and paternalistic demands for *Perfectionism*, supported by the belief that there is *One Right Way* which must be enacted through the illusion of *Objectivity* and by reducing the complexity of lived human experiences down to *Either/Or Binaries* by individuals deemed *Qualified* due to their status as members of white, formally-educated, and landowning classes of people and always shielded by White Supremacy Culture's ever-present *Defensiveness*.

Keywords: Adult Basic Education (ABE), Basic Education for Adults (BEA), community and technical colleges, community cultural wealth, competency-based education, high school completion for adults, High School Plus (HS+), prior learning assessment, white supremacy culture.

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This Dissertation has an Author

I live from within the work under examination in this dissertation, and it is work I am emotionally invested in. My area of professional focus is high school completion for adults. I pursue this work, in part, because of my own experience of leaving school before high school graduation. I have long-standing, affectionate, and trusting relationships with each person I interviewed; I deeply respect and care about each of them, and my care for them strongly informed the reflexive process I engaged in when considering both my research purpose and design. As Abrego writes, my goals for this research go beyond, “analysis for the sake of contributing to academic knowledge production,” (2022, p. 2) and instead extend toward the hope that this research will benefit the people who allowed me to interview them. So, for me, this research process has entailed “an *emotional* positioning and...emotions, rather than their denial through an expectation of ‘objectivity,’ [produce] more honest and ethical research (Abrego, 2022, p. 4). I am not chasing the appearance of objectivity, and in fact I reject it as a worthy pursuit in this context. Indeed, as Yosso writes, “notions of ‘neutral’ research or ‘objective’ researchers...act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society” (Yosso, 2005, pp. 73-74). Therefore, I speak in the first person, in my own voice, throughout this work because this dissertation has an author (me).

Introduction

Between October 2016 and October 2017, approximately 523,000 young Americans left high school without graduating or completing a high school equivalency credential, such as the

General Education Development (GED). In 2017, the United States Census Bureau reported that approximately 23 million Americans over the age of 25 lacked a high school diploma or equivalency (USCB, 2017), a number which did not include high school completion data for the approximately 10.5 million people living in the United States who contributed to its economy but who did not have legal immigration status (PRC, 2017).

Though national high school graduation rates have improved overall since 1977, a report released in 2020 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that 5.4% of all 16 to 24-year-olds residing in the United States in 2017 were not enrolled in school and did not have a high school diploma or an equivalency such as the GED (NCES, 2020). The authors of the NCES report referred to this high school completion indicator as the *Status Dropout Rate* (SDR). While the SDR for white youth in 2017 was lower than the national average at 4.3%, SDR rates for Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native¹ 16- to 24-year-olds were 2.2%, 3.9%, and 5.8% higher, respectively, when compared with SDR rates for white youth.

In 2020, The U.S. Labor Bureau reported that workers without a high school diploma or equivalency make approximately \$8,424 less per year than those who completed a high school diploma or equivalency. As the level of educational attainment increases, that income disparity grows - with workers with a bachelor's degree making an average of \$35,672 more per year than workers without a high school diploma or equivalency. The same report also found that the higher one's level of educational attainment, the more likely one is to have a job in the first place (USBLS, 2020). Additionally, having a high school diploma or equivalency positively correlates

¹ Outdated and unexamined racialized categories reflect terminology used by the originating source here and in other works cited throughout this dissertation.

with longer lifespans and better physical and psychological health (NCES, 2020; Rumberger, 2011; VCU, 2021).

Until quite recently, the GED ruled the sparse field of options available to adults who left high school before graduation (or never attended) but who now seek a high school diploma or equivalency in Washington State. Indeed, the GED so dominated the high school completion testing market in the U.S. that “educational experts acknowledged the acronym GED had become synonymous with high school equivalency” (SBCTC, 2019, para. 1). In 2014, the GED Testing Service updated the content of the GED tests to “incorporate the Common Core State Standards—which Washington and most other states have adopted—and the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards for Adult Education. The redesign of the test was intended to better assess the depth of critical thinking and problem-solving skills that employers and colleges are seeking” (Gaeta, et al., 2016, p. 1).

Between 1998 and 2013, the GED completion rate in Washington State was approximately 68%, meaning approximately 68% of people who attempted the battery of GED tests successfully completed the GED high school equivalency certificate. When the test content changed in 2014, that rate fell to 47.6% leading many adult education stakeholders to characterize the new tests as much more difficult (Gaeta, et al., 2016). In addition to content changes made due to standards realignment, the GED Testing Service eliminated the pencil and paper testing option in favor of a fully computerized testing experience and raised the cost of attempting each GED test once (with four tests in total) from \$75 to \$120 (Gaeta, et al., 2016).

Alongside the significant drop in GED completion rates in Washington State, fewer people in 2014 were attempting GED tests in the first place. In 2013, the year before the most recent GED updates went live, approximately 22,000 Washington State residents attempted GED

tests. Once the updates were implemented in 2014, the number dropped to 9,000 Washington State residents attempting GED tests - a decrease of approximately 60%. Furthermore, this significant drop in GED participation “disproportionately affected American Indians/Alaskan Natives, African Americans, and Pacific Islanders/Hawaiians” (Gaeta, et al., 2016, p. 6) with decreases of 81.4%, 75.3%, and 77%, respectively when compared to a decrease of 61.2% and 47.4% for people who identified as white and Asian respectively.

In addition to codifying a mandate that community and technical colleges (CTCs) provide courses that transfer to university level-education, Washington State law states that CTCs will “Provide for basic skills and literacy education,” (RCW 28B.50.020) which has historically meant, in the context of high school completion, that CTCs offer courses in preparation for the GED tests. In recent years though, the State Board of Community and Technical College’s (SBCTC’s) interpretation of Washington State law has been reexamined and expanded to allow CTCs to offer high school diploma programs for adults 18 years and older (SBCTC, 2019; T. Goracke, personal communication, May 11, 2022), provided that, “the diploma is issued in compliance with high school graduation requirements established by the state board of education and procedures established by the superintendent of public instruction” (SBCTC, 2020; RCW 28B.50.535; WAC 180-51-053).

In other words, the 2014 decrease in GED testing participation documented above inspired SBCTC to shift its philosophy *of* and resources *for* high school completion for adults in Washington State away from GED preparation in favor of a competency-based adult high school diploma option first named High School 21+ and now called High School+ (HS+) in the interest of streamlining pathways for adult students to secondary credentials (SBCTC, 2019; T. Goracke, personal communication, May 11, 2022). HS+ represents an exciting and monumental shift away

from discriminatory and harmful, for-profit standardized testing practices (Gunzelmann, 2005; Pearson, 2023; Olson, 2009) and toward a holistic, competency-based approach to high school completion which, in keeping with the Washington State Board of Education's shift toward competency-based high school programming, (Muller, 2020; Muller, 2021; WAC 180-51-050; WSBE, 2016) values the experience, training, and knowledge HS+ students have acquired in their adults lives (as parents, professionals, community members, and more) outside the confines of a traditional high school experience.

Research Purpose and Guiding Questions

High School+ (HS+) is a competency-based high school diploma program for adults in Washington State which centers prior learning assessment (PLA) as a fundamental element of programmatic design (SBCTC, 2020; SBCTC, 2021b). HS+'s competency-based approach divorces learning from seat time with instruction focused on scaffolding and supporting students in the development of skills and knowledge needed to meet subject-specific outcomes (Henri, M., et al., 2017, SBCTC 2020), while PLA allows HS+ students to demonstrate competencies for high school credit by reflecting on learning they have acquired through activities such as (but not limited to) work, community and civic engagement, and passing standardized tests like the GED (SBCTC, 2021b).

Research and scholarship about competency-based instruction focuses on practices in *either P-12 or higher education*. Meanwhile, as a competency-based high school completion program for adults on community and technical college campuses, HS+ occupies an unexplored convergence of the secondary and tertiary educational spaces making it problematic to generalize, wholesale, themes from the literature about best practices for competency-based

education to the HS+ context. Furthermore, HS+ was conceived to re-engage adults within an educational system they disengaged from earlier in their lives due to a complex set of factors (APA, 2014) and one which has and continues to, “inflict hidden and long-lasting wounds that result from the structural violence inherent in the ways we organize and evaluate learning” (Olson, 2009, p. xv).

While my professional experience demonstrates a high demand for accessible, affordable, and effective high school completion options for adults in Washington State, the knowledge and expertise of experienced faculty enacting that important work on community and technical college campuses in Washington State are not well documented. In addition, the labor and expertise of Basic Education for Adults (BEAdA) faculty is often described in institutional narratives as less valuable than that of faculty engaged in tuition-yielding instructional programs (Combs, 2015; Hofer & Smith, 2003), and I wish to disrupt this devaluing by facilitating opportunities for experienced and dedicated HS+ faculty to reflect upon and document aspects of the ground-breaking, competency-based high school completion work in which they engage through their HS+ praxes. My goal with this research, then, was to engage with, learn through, and then document the wisdom of HS+ faculty who are laboring, daily, to enact the State Board of Community and Technical College’s (SBCTC) stated vision for HS+’s competency-based programmatic design (SBCTC, 2019; SBCTC, 2020) through inquiry into the following areas:

1. How do HS+ faculty describe their instructional context, and how does personal identity inform their HS+ praxis?
2. What cultural, structural, and administrative challenges do HS+ practitioners face when enacting competency-based high school completion instruction for adults on community and technical college campuses in Washington State?
3. What ideas do HS+ faculty have about solutions to these cultural, structural, and administrative challenges, and how do scholarship and other forms of shared wisdom inform those ideas?

Research Context

A report submitted to the state legislature in 2019 by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) about high school graduation rates included a table of ten possible reasons students left high school before graduation in Washington State in 2018. The ten options were as follows: “Attended 4 years Did Not Graduate; Lacked Progress or Poor Grades; School Not for Me, Chose to Stay Home; Married, Family Support, or Child-Related; Offered Training or Chose to Work; Left to Take GED; Expelled or Suspended; Drug or Alcohol Related; Unconfirmed; and Dropping Out For Other or Unknown Reason” (OSPI, 2019, p.16). For 80% of the students who left school before high school graduation, the cause for leaving school cited in the OSPI report was either *Unconfirmed* or *Dropping Out For Other or Unknown Reason*. In addition to its failure to meaningfully explore or reflect upon the reasons high school students left school before graduation, the authors of the OSPI report to the Washington State Legislature included racialized demographic data about ‘dropouts’ without any reflective analysis about why historically minoritized students left school at much higher rates than their white counterparts (OSPI, 2019).

In his *Banking Model* of education, Paulo Freire challenged a teacher-centric framework in which knowledge is deposited (unsuccessfully in the case of ‘dropouts’) into the passive student who is an empty vessel or a blank slate. As evidenced by the OSPI report referenced above, young people who leave school without a diploma are often treated as objects to which systems of education passively happen instead of as the subjects of their own complex and dynamic life stories (Freire, 1970). In contrast, according to the State Board for Community and

Technical College's (SBCTC's) HS+ Handbook, HS+ centers and values the complexity of adult students' lives through, "a comprehensive, competency-based approach tailored to adult learning styles...designed to recognize the knowledge, skills, and abilities that adults have gained from life, work, and academic experience" (SBCTC, 2021b, para. 4).

With HS+, SBCTC promises a different high school experience to adults who, for various reasons, disengaged from school earlier in their lives. Young adults, "who leave school before graduating are often struggling with overwhelming life circumstances that push school attendance far down their priority lists" (APA, 2014, para. 20). For example, they may need to prioritize earning a wage because they are experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness; they may be responsible for caring for family members, or they may be parents themselves. (APA, 2014). However, for HS+ faculty who seek to deliver on the promises SBCTC makes to students about the HS+ experience, it is critically important to know that many HS+ students disengaged from their previous high school education because they were wounded by school environments they experienced as harmful, toxic, or even violent (APA, 2014; Olson, 2009).

Elizabeth's Research Positionality

I stopped attending high school when I was 15 years old. A cluster of dynamic factors led to my decision to withdraw from school. However, unlike many of the young adults interviewed for the America's Promise Alliance (APA) study referenced earlier, my cluster of factors did not include an incarcerated parent, the experience of homelessness, or involvement in the foster care system (APA, 2014). Though I had my own struggles (including bullying and sexual harassment at school by both classmates and teachers), I left school with the privilege of knowing where my next meal was coming from and where I would be sleeping at night. Though the presence of

unacknowledged and undiagnosed mental health challenges existed in my *very loving* home, I know now how unaware I was that my body was protected outside my home by my white skin, which meant that I did not regularly fear for my own safety when I went out into the world. This combination of privileges supported my unexamined assumption that, despite leaving high school before graduation, I would still be afforded promising opportunities in my adult life.

I completed the GED high school equivalency tests when I was 17 years old. In looking at graduation data for the purposes of this research project, I was surprised to discover that because I obtained a high school equivalency credential before I was scheduled to graduate from high school, I was never counted as a *dropout* in Washington State's graduation data. Having no conception of this, of course, I felt branded as a *dropout* for most of my early adult life and often lied to people about leaving school. I know now that my instinct to lie, instead of celebrating that I successfully completed a high school equivalency credential before my high school peers did, is the direct result of my internalization of white supremacy culture, which fed my harsh inner critic's demand for (at least the appearance of) perfection (Okun, 2021).

After stopping in and out of community college several times as a young adult, I completed an associates (AA) degree and transferred to the University of Washington (UW), where I completed a bachelor's degree in history. By the time I transferred to the UW, I was a single parent to a primary-school-aged child. Where the need for childcare would have been an insurmountable barrier for many single mothers wanting to attend college, I was able to persist in school due to the childcare support provided by my mother, who herself was privileged to have available time because my father earned enough income to provide for them both financially.

I graduated from UW at the height of the Great Recession and struggled to piece a living wage together through a combination of part-time jobs. One of these part-time jobs, and the one

which I (absolutely!) adored, was in the tutoring center at the community college where I completed my AA degree. Through that job, I made two important discoveries. First, I was both emotionally and intellectually attracted to teaching as a profession. Second, community colleges (and technical colleges as well, though I did not know what they were at the time) in Washington State offer instructional programming for adults seeking a high school credential. When I took the battery of GED tests as a teenager, I walked in cold off the street and passed them on the first try. It never occurred to me then that there were GED preparation classes and that those classes had professional, paid teachers. I was excited by this discovery! I did some research and learned that the Jesuit university situated less than six blocks from my community college offered a graduate degree program in adult education. I applied and was accepted.

After completing my (very expensive) master's degree, I started teaching in a high school completion program on a community college campus. At that time, the GED was still the primary high school completion option in Washington State, and High School+ (HS+) was just coming on the scene. Now, in my work as faculty in a robust HS+ program, I am regularly positioned as the authority when assessing the prior learning of multilingual adults who have lived experiences from all over the world, while I speak only English and have spent my whole life living in the United States. And yet, my authority for assessing the prior learning of these linguistically knowledgeable adults is never questioned because of my privileged position as an educated white woman.

I also bring to this work the privilege and status of having a full-time and tenured position in a community and technical college system where the majority of classes are taught by adjunct faculty members who do not have the same job security I do. Additionally, I bring to this work the privilege of having grown personally and professionally through the shared wisdom of the

exemplary HS+ faculty colleagues with whom I team-teach. These esteemed colleagues, who have many years more experience than I do with prior learning assessment in the context of competency-based instruction, invite me into the work as an insider despite the daily battles they face, and which I do not, due anti-Black and anti-Latine² racism.

Despite SBCTC's stated commitment to a competency-based approach to high school completion for adults, HS+ practitioners encounter daily and exhausting cultural, structural, and administrative barriers to valuing student knowledge and enacting authentic competency-based instruction from within institutions designed for a seat-time funding paradigm. In a field (most often called Adult Basic Education or Basic Education for Adults), where there have been historical challenges in retaining faculty due to stress, burnout, and, "a perceived lower status of the profession in the field of education," (Combs, p. xiii), and at a time when more teachers than ever are leaving the field of education overall (Zamarro, et al., 2022), my goal with this research project is to amplify and honor expert HS+ faculty voices, in order to learn from the wisdom of those who are fighting to stay in the work and deliver on the promises made to students by Washington State about the competency-based HS+ experience.

Theoretical Framework

This research relied on Tema Okun's framing of the characteristics *of* and antidotes *to* white supremacy culture. Okun defines white supremacy as, "the ways in which the ruling class elite or the power elite in the colonies of what was to become the United States used the pseudo-

² Research participant Dolores, who identifies as Latine, explained to me (I being a non-Spanish speaker), that Latine is a gender-neutral way to frame her identity while also being easily pronounced in Spanish (whereas Latinx is not).

scientific concept of race to create whiteness and a hierarchy of racialized value” (Okun, 2021, p.

2) specifically to:

- disconnect and divide white people from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC);
- disconnect and divide Black, Indigenous, and People of Color from each other;
- disconnect and divide white people from other white people;
- disconnect and divide each and all of us from the earth, the sun, the wind, the water, the stars, the animals that roam(ed) the earth;
- disconnect and divide each of us from ourselves (Okun, 2021, p. 2).

Furthermore, the power of disconnection Okun describes acts in service of white supremacy culture’s ultimate goal of maintaining “a project of psychic conditioning and toxic belonging,” (Okun, 2021, p. 3) through which we are instructed “to define who is fully human and who is not” (Okun, 2021, p. 2).

Just as the United States was built on a foundational dedication to white supremacy (Okun, 2021), public education in the United States, “from the outset was built on white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and sexism” (Love, 2019, p. 22), and contemporary public schools in the United States continue to perpetuate this violent ideological legacy through a curriculum, hidden in plain sight (Yosso, 2005), that demands that all children internalize the brutality of white supremacy culture (Love, 2019; Okun, 2021; Vaught, 2011). Through HS+, the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) invites adults to voluntarily re-engage with systems of public education, which they previously experienced as so toxic that they walked away from school entirely (APA, 2014), and which continue to perpetuate the dehumanizing violence of white supremacy culture (Love, 2019, Okun, 2021), making Okun’s framing

prerequisite knowledge for HS+ faculty who wish to engage students through an ethical, humane, and reflective HS+ instructional praxis.

Returning to Okun's emphasis on white supremacy culture's power to disconnect human beings from each other, from themselves, and from the planet (Okun, 2021), SBCTC's stated promise that HS+ students will work with advisors and faculty to create a "customized action plan," (SBCTC, 2020, para. 8) which centers student knowledge student and which is individualized to meet each student's credit requirements in alignment with their college and career pathway goals (SBCTC, 2020), necessarily centers connection and human relationships as the core of HS+'s programmatic design. Because connection is antithetical to the alienation and isolation which white supremacy culture demands of us (Okun, 2021), faculty who endeavor to enact SBCTC's individualized vision for what HS+ provides to students are engaged in a daily resistance of the demands of white supremacy culture, making engagement with Okun's framing and antidotes a necessary survival strategy for HS+ faculty.

Through this research, I engaged with and reflected upon the wisdom of HS+ faculty who are themselves engaged, through their own reflexive HS+ praxis, in a daily resistance of the pressures of white supremacy culture, by framing my discussion through the following characteristics, each of which are supported through, "White supremacy culture's number one strategy [which] is to make us afraid" (Okun, 2021, p. 7):

- *Perfectionism*, which drives individuals to focus on what seems 'wrong' or 'incorrect' instead of engaging in a reflective practice which leads to growth.
- *One Right Way*, which believes just that - there is only one right way to do things, which then supports the *Paternalistic* claims made by those already in power that they are the only ones who can define what that one right way of doing things must be.
- *Objectivity* invalidates human emotions and casts those who display them as irrational beings to be dismissed, policed, or criminalized.

- The claim that one is *Qualified* “is internalized primarily by middle and owning class white people, formally educated, who are taught by the culture that they...are qualified and even duty bound to fix, save, and set straight the world” (Okun, 2021, p. 12).
- *Either/Or and the Binary* reduces the complexity of lived relationships to simple binaries such as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ or ‘good’ and ‘bad’, which are then fiercely protected by *Defensiveness* and the destructive practice of disallowing truth-telling (Okun, 2021).

In addition to framing my inquiry around many of the characteristics of white supremacy culture as Okun defines them, I also relied throughout my discussion on Okun’s practical antidotes to the characteristics detailed above. While the list below is not exhaustive, it serves as a sampling of the antidotes to the characteristics of white supremacy culture around which I framed my discussion;

- **Fear. Sample Antidote:** “develop a learning community or organization, where the stated expectation is that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning,” (Okun, 2021, p. 10).
- **Perfectionism. Sample Antidote:** “develop a culture of appreciation; take time to make sure that everyone's work and efforts are appreciated,” (Okun, 2021, p. 10).
- **One Right Way. Sample Antidote:** “accept there are many ways to get to the same goal; once a group has made a decision about what to do, honor that decision and see what you and the community or organization learn from making that decision, even and especially if it is not the way you would have chosen,” (Okun, 2021, p. 11).
- **Paternalism. Sample Antidote:** “avoid making decisions in the absence of those most affected by those decisions or, said more proactively, always include those most affected in the brainstorming and decision making,” (Okun, 2021, p. 11).
- **Objectivity. Sample Antidote:** “realize that everybody has a world view and world view affects the way we understand the world; realize this is true for you too; you are not ‘objective,’ you are steeped in your own world view and if it is the dominant world view, realize how that world view includes the belief that it has the capacity to be objective,” (Okun, 2021, p. 11).
- **Qualified. Sample Antidote:** “We must learn to lean into the racial equity principles of collective action and accountability. We must learn to let go of the need to fix, save, and set straight in the acknowledgement that we are at our best when we are ‘with’ others (and ourselves),” (Okun, 2021, p. 13).

- *Either/Or and the Binary. Sample Antidote:* “Notice when you or others are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made,” (Okun, 2021, p. 15).
- *Defensiveness. Sample Antidote:* “Work on your own defensiveness; ask yourself what you are defending against and why,” (Okun, 2021, p. 22).

With this framing for discussion established, I move now to provide necessary context through the review of literature which follows.

Literature Review

In order to better understand the complex and dynamic contexts through which faculty develop a competency-based HS+ praxis which centers prior learning assessment as a fundamental practice, what follows is a review of literature through which I examine eight areas of focus: (1) Faculty Praxis, Not Practice; (2) Devaluing the Expertise of BEdA Faculty; (3) Why do people leave school before high school graduation? (4) Competency-Based High School Education in Washington State; (5) Prior Learning Assessment in the Context of High School Completion for Adults; (6) A Brief History of Prior Learning Assessment; (7) Prior Learning Assessment: Proponents and Skeptics; and (8) A Community Cultural Wealth Framing for High School+.

Faculty Praxis, Not Practice

In their 2003 self-study, Mercado and Torres directly challenged the positivist notion that teaching is simply the practice of applying, “the theories and techniques of learning and teaching,” which have been developed through research - thereby making educational practice “subordinate to research” (Mercado & Torres, 2003, p. 61). Instead, the authors model self-study

for students in their teacher education courses through the use of “reflective journals, collegial dialogue, and students’ teacher-research reports” (Mercado & Torres, 2003, p. 59) with their precise goal being that prospective teachers move beyond the *practice* of applying educational theory in favor of a reflective teaching *praxis* which incorporates active critical dialogue among professional educators aimed at understanding how “social structures and ideologies...shape and control their daily lives and practices” and how those structures and ideologies “oppress some sectors of society in a variety of ways, by preventing them from achieving full participation as members of society and fulfillment as human beings” (Mercado & Torres, 2003, p. 61).

However, critical dialogue which leads to understanding about the structures and ideologies which dehumanize and oppress human beings (Freire, 1970) cannot be separated from action, because as Friere writes:

An authentic praxis is only possible through engagement with the dialectical relation between the subjective and the objective...[because]...world and action are intimately interdependent. But action is human only when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection” (Freire, 1970, p. 53) and reflection, is essential to action (Friere, 1970, pp. 52-53).

Therefore, action and reflection are inseparable within praxis because, as Friere expounds, when we examine and analyze learnings from critical dialogue about oppression:

we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: *the word*. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed - even in part - the other immediately

suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 87).

When the word is alienated from action, Friere says, reflective processes suffer and the word becomes empty, while:

On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into *activism* [which is] action for action’s sake - [and] negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible. Either dichotomy, by creating unauthentic forms of existence, creates also unauthentic forms of thought, which reinforce the original dichotomy” (Freire, 1970, p. 88).

When neither action nor reflection are sacrificed, then we learn that the “word = work = praxis,” (Friere, 1970, p. 87) which Friere defines as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it,” (Freire, 1970, p. 51) enacted by “Those who authentically commit themselves to people [and who] must re-examine themselves constantly” (Freire, 1970, p. 60).

Devaluing the Expertise of BEdA Faculty

In their two-year study of Adult Basic Education (ABE) (an older formulation of the current ‘Basic Education for Adults’ [BEdA] designation used in Washington State) Jack Mezirow et al. (1975), situate the federal codification of ABE through both the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act and the 1966 Adult Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), within the larger context of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty’ and the dynamic social climate of the 1960’s in the United States which, as the authors described, “were graced with a recrudescence of concern for humanitarian and democratic values. Civil liberties, peace, popular participation, educational relevance, institutional renewal, and consistency in social

values between word and deed commanded widely shared commitments to action” (Mezirow et al., 1975, p. 2).

First focused on English language literacy skills for participation in the American workforce for adults aged 18 years or older, the Adult Education Act was amended during the 1970’s to increase federal funding for Adult Basic Education (ABE) and to include “programs for high school equivalency, and programs to improve employment and educational opportunities,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 14). In 1998, the Workforce Education Act expanded the definition of who was eligible to engage in ABE programming by defining eligible adults as “individuals 16 years of age and older not enrolled or required to be enrolled in school” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 24).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, ABE instructors in the United States are required to have at least a bachelor’s degree (2022), while a 2015 study from the American Institutes for Research of the characteristics and qualifications of ABE instructors found that approximately 55% held master’s degrees. In Washington State, a master’s degree is consistently listed in job postings for ABE faculty (the majority of which are part-time, adjunct faculty assignments) as either required or strongly preferred (SBCTC, 2022b). In addition to educational qualifications, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education defines the following as the essential competencies required of ABE instructors:

1. Monitors and manages student learning and performance through data.
2. Plans and delivers high-quality, evidence-based instruction.
3. Effectively communicates to motivate and engage learners.
4. Pursues professionalism and continually builds knowledge and skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Furthermore, in Washington State, ABE instructors are trained and often expert in contextualized instruction, team-teaching paradigms, best practices for online teaching and learning, instructional technology such as online learning management systems, and more (SBCTC, 2021a). Despite their educational qualifications and professional training and expertise, ABE faculty report a lack of administrative support for their instructional context, as well as a lack of acknowledgement of their skills and abilities, due perceptions about the lower status of adult basic education when compared to ‘traditional’ high school education and college and university-level programming (Combs, 2015; Hofer & Smith, 2003; Reybold, 2008)

Why do people leave school before high school graduation?

When the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) submitted its’ report about graduation rates to the Washington State Legislature in 2019, any student who left “school, for any reason, other than death, before completing a diploma or an equivalency” was coded in the data as a “dropout” (OSPI, 2019, p. 4). With high schools losing approximately 7,000 students per school day in the United States, a figure which does not include students who stopped attending school prior to high school (Rumberger, 2011), America’s Promise (APA) and its Center for Promise at Tufts University pushed back against the term *dropout* and instead sought to learn about the individual experiences of people who left high school before graduating. They wanted to know what young adults said about their experience of leaving high school and why they made that choice. They also wanted to know what students’ lives were like after leaving high school and what the impact had been on themselves and their families (APA, 2014).

After interviewing over 200 young adults in 2014, many of whom had already independently re-engaged in adult high school completion programs, the report found that it is important to learn by listening to people when they talk about their lived experiences. Through this act of listening, the APA identified four core themes running throughout the interviews. First, young people's lives are dynamic, and many factors contributed to them leaving school before graduation. Second, students often navigated home, neighborhood, and school environments that they experienced as toxic. Third, connectedness and interpersonal relationships are more important to many young people than school, and that desire for connection sometimes leads people away from school. Fourth, people are resilient and successfully re-engage with education when meaningful support is provided (APA, 2014).

Though leaving high school is easily characterized as an *event*, Rumberger also describes it as a *process* which can be traced back to the social challenges and academic difficulties students have faced since middle school or before - with students who receive special education or English Language instructional services leaving school at higher rates than students in mainstreamed classroom contexts (Rumberger, 2011). While 'dropout' rates for white youth are consistently lower than the national average, students identified in educational data as Black, Hispanic, or American Indian/Alaska Native are more likely to leave high school before graduation (NCES, 2020), with students who change schools more frequently and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also graduating at significantly lower rates (Rumberger, 2011). Despite hundreds of millions of dollars invested by the federal government and the contributions of private philanthropic organizations focused on equitable access and student success in P-12 education, 'dropout' prevention initiatives which do not address the systemic

forces which create the demographic disparities evident in ‘dropout’ data will continue to fail (Rumberger, 2011).

Competency-Based High School Education in Washington State

Utilizing language specified by the multi-state Achieve Competency-Based Pathways Working Group in 2013, the Washington State Board of Education defines competency-based high school education as that which includes the following characteristics:

1. Students advance upon demonstration of mastery [of defined competencies].
2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
3. Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
4. Students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include the application and creation of knowledge.
6. The process of reaching learning outcomes encourages students to develop skills and dispositions important for success in college, careers and citizenship (WSBE, 2017, p. 1).

Also emphasized throughout the literature is competency-based high school education’s emphasis on interdisciplinary (also called intercurricular) instructional design (Muller, 2020; Muller, 2021). Proponents of competency-based high school education describe interdisciplinary, outcomes-based education, which is tailored to students’ post-high school goals, as more holistic and equitable (Muller 2020; Muller, 2021; Rogers, 2021; Sullivan, et al., 2015; Washington State Board of Education, 2016) than the “traditional seat-time and assessment models” (Muller, 2020, p. 20). Competency-based high school education proponents advocate for doing away with the

“Carnegie public school model that has been in place since the early 1800’s” (Sullivan, et al., p. 5) in which students are exposed to an “instructor-led and text-driven curriculum delivery that is time and credit-based and delivered to all students in a class at the same time” (Sullivan, et al., p. 5), in favor of interdisciplinary competency-based high school education because “life is interdisciplinary, and research supports that interdisciplinary courses can enable deeper learning” (Muller, 2020).

Another theme running throughout the literature is the legislative traction, on both the federal and state levels, gained by policy advisory groups focused on competency-based high school education since the shift to standards-based evaluation based on the Common Core in 2011 (Muller, 2020; Sullivan, 2015). Despite this legislative traction, however, proponents still describe challenges ensuring ongoing funding for competency-based high school education pilots and inconsistencies in transcription of competency-based credits, while also emphasizing the necessity of federal, state, and regional support structures for building capacity for competency-based high school education from within administrative systems and instructional structures designed to support seat-time paradigms (Muller, 2020; Muller, 2021).

Prior Learning Assessment in the Context of High School Completion for Adults

Consistent with the literature about competency-based high school education for youth, the High School Plus (HS+) diploma program for adults in Washington State divorces assessment of student learning from seat time and utilizes “a pedagogical approach that focuses on the mastery of measurable student outcomes,” and which requires “differentiated support [for students] based on their pace of learning,” (Henri, et al., 2017, p. 608). HS+ faculty collaborate with students to design interdisciplinary, and individualized learning plans which value student

knowledge, skills, and experience while incorporating scaffolded learning activities to support progress toward their individual college and career goals (SBCTC, 2020).

Different from competency-based high school education practices for youth, however, is HS+'s emphasis on Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) as a key element of programmatic design. PLA allows adult students to earn high school credit by reflecting on skills and knowledge they developed through activities such as (but not limited to) employment, civic and community engagement, and military experience (SBCTC, 2020; SBCTC, 2021b) to support students in “moving toward the credentials needed to be competitive in the workforce while also completing a high school diploma” (SBCTC, 2020, para. 5).

While proponents argue that competency-based education and allowing students to earn credit for prior learning benefits both students and institutions by shortening timelines to graduation (Travers, 2012) and minimizing ‘equity gaps’ (Evans, et al., 2021, p. 1), critics report skepticism about perceived inconsistencies in the outcomes assessment process itself (Bergman & Herd, 2017; Evans, et al., 2021), as well as concerns that the emphasis on meeting outcomes turns education into a process of “just working your way down a checklist” (Green, 2018, para. 12).

A Brief History of Prior Learning Assessment

By building on the perceived validity of the use of standardized tests to measure college-level learning, a Commission for Non-Traditional Study was established in 1971 to examine, “current practices for nontraditional education” (Travers, 2012, pp. 43-44a). Ultimately, the commission recommended that new instruments for measuring learning must be developed to assess the knowledge adult students have already developed in the arenas of work and civic

engagement. Studies in the 1970s and 1980s showed a growing number of colleges and universities focusing on adult learners and using PLA to capture and value learning which takes place outside the traditional classroom environment (Bamford-Rees, 2008; Willingham, et al., 1970) . Travers' 2012 study tracked both retention and graduation rates and found that PLA “benefited adult learners by decreasing costs and the time it took to complete a degree, while it benefitted the institution by increasing persistence and graduation rates” (Travers, 2012, pp. 44-45a). That same study looked at student outcomes and reported that reflection and portfolio activities increase “student self-awareness and self-regulation” (Travers, 2012, p. 45a), supporting improvements in problem-solving skills and study habits. Travers points toward the growing number of institutions incorporating PLA into their processes, as well as nationally sponsored PLA/Workforce initiatives in countries such as Australia and South Africa, as evidence that PLA is “coming into its own” (Travers, 2012, p. 46a).

Prior Learning Assessment Practices: Proponents and Skeptics

Though HS+ is a high school completion program, the work takes place on community and technical college campuses, making a discussion of PLA in the context of higher education appropriate here. I identified the following five major themes extant across literature authored by champions of PLA: (1) Through the valuing of prior learning, adult students make a smoother transition to higher education supported by a more robust sense of belonging; (2) The use of PLA is strongly correlated with improved retention and graduation rates; (3) PLA shortens pathways for students which benefits them financially; (4) Institutions benefit financially by retaining more students through to graduation; (5) PLA reflection and portfolio activities increase “student self-awareness and self-regulation” (Travers, 2012, p. 45a), as well as supporting improvements in

problem-solving skills and study habits. (Berman & Herd, 2017; Eveslage & Taitsman, 2007; Travers, 2012a).

Though PLA has many fans, critics of PLA argue that the narrative about PLA's positive impact on retention and graduation data provides camouflage for gaps in PLA effectiveness data because only successful PLA students are included in PLA data (Price, 2019). Other PLA skeptics voice concerns about consistency in PLA practices and the ability of PLA evaluators to be objective and consistent in how they are awarding credit from student to student. Finally, PLA detractors point to concerns about the lack of consistency in the training PLA evaluators receive both within and across departments, which has led PLA champions to author research studies to examine and address this perceived lack of consistency. (Berman & Herd, 2017; Joosten-ten Brink, et al., 2009).

While the literature shows that portfolios, personal reflections, interviews, and standardized tests are the most common instruments for capturing prior learning, research that seeks to map and establish best practices for PLA has found variability in several areas. (Berman & Herd, 2017; Eveslage & Taitsman, 2007; Joosten-ten Brink, et al., 2009; Travers, 2012a). Of concern to many PLA critics is the level to which students are involved in the assessment process. Student involvement varies from institution to institution and sometimes from department to department within the same institution. (Joosten-ten Brink, et al., 2009). While some PLA evaluators tout the benefits of including student interviews in the process, others point to concerns about affordability (in terms of paying for the evaluator's time) and recommend that student interviews be used on a case-by-case basis only. This variation in the service model, from student to student, reinforces the critical argument that PLA evaluators lack objectivity and

consistency in their evaluative processes (Berman & Herd, 2017; CAEL, 2010; Joosten-ten Brink, et al., 2009).

In 2012, Travers explored the ways in which PLA in higher education varies across the following five categories: policies and support, evaluation criteria, assessment process, application of credits, and evaluator criteria. Travers found that while some colleges and universities have integrated PLA into their entry process, others treat PLA as an “add-on program, an office separate from the faculty and the academic process that students are either referred to or find on their own” (Travers, 2012, p. 117b). Like the authors cited above, Travers’ examination also found that the level to which students are involved in the evaluation process varies, with some institutions using interviews to deepen evaluator understanding of student knowledge, while others base evaluation on standardized testing and portfolio contents with no interaction with students at all. Some colleges and universities restrict the number of credits that can be earned through PLA in both number and category (most often applied to electives), with other institutions allowing credits for up to three years of a four-year bachelor’s degree to come from PLA. Finally, while some institutions rely only on evaluators from their own faculty, other colleges and universities increase capacity by outsourcing evaluation or relying on evaluation already performed at other institutions of higher education (Travers, 2012b).

Unexamined power dynamics inherent in the prior learning evaluation process are also an important critical theme in the literature about PLA. Based in a workforce education context in Australia, Hamer (2010) raises important concerns about the “limited attention...paid to the operations of power within the assessor-candidate relationship” in the context of PLA. In a direct challenge to the notion that PLA is “a self-evidently benign activity,” the author emphasizes the

need to understand the potential impacts of PLA and critically examine assessment practices in the context of PLA's "emancipatory goals" (Hamer, 2010, pp. 100-101).

Hamer goes on to say that PLA processes that require candidates to reflect on their prior learning in confident, competency-based language create "a substantial gap between the aspirations or acclaimed benefits and the reality of implementation" (Hamer, 2010, p. 103) and privileges those who are already insiders within systems of education. The author also argues that a disproportionate amount of space has been given to concerns about access to PLA without consideration for the harm PLA processes may cause when PLA services are sought by historically marginalized and minoritized people. Hamer expands by describing PLA as a process of taking the learning and lived experiences of individual people and translating "them into competencies that can be credentialled" and validated by the dominant culture, thus inviting an investigation into whether PLA "assessment is mostly, in everyday practice, the application of a normative judgment which actively discounts certain types of knowledge and limits the individual's potential—becoming a vehicle for oppression rather than liberation" (Hamer, 2010, p. 104).

A Community Cultural Wealth Framing for High School+

In her 2005 article *Whose culture has capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth*, Tara J. Yosso directly challenges Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital, which Yosso summarizes as "an accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups in society" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76) which are either passed down within families (which allows them to maintain power) or acquired through formal schooling (which provides opportunities for social mobility)

(Yosso, 2005). As Yosso argues, “while Bourdieu’s work sought to provide a structural critique of social and cultural reproduction, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). This portrayal of Communities of Color as deficient inspires deficit thinking about Students of Color and Yosso characterizes deficit thinking as “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

In her Community Cultural Wealth Framework, Yosso defines six types of cultural capital: *aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant* capital, which Students of Color bring with them into classrooms. Yosso’s scholarship, though never explicitly named in the State Board of Community and Technical College’s (SBCTC’s) materials about HS+, provides an authentic and supportive framing for HS+ faculty who engage in the process of valuing student knowledge through a competency-based programmatic design, with prior learning assessment as a fundamental practice in a HS+ program in which 85% of the students served self-identify as Black, African-American, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or of two more races, while only about 15% of students self-identify as white³.

As Yosso writes, aspirational capital “refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances” (Yosso, 2005, pp. 76 paa-77). Linguistic capital includes the “intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than

³ This data was pulled from an institutional data dashboard which is not available to public view.

one language or style” for children who “most often have been engaged participants in storytelling tradition, that may include listening to and recounting oral histories, parables, stories (*cuentos*) and proverbs (*dichos*)” (Yosso, 2005, pp. 78-79). Familial capital “refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin)...[and]...expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Social capital refers to social and community networks which can “provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79) which is related to Navigational capital which supports “the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind (Yosso, 2005, pp. 79-80). Finally, Resistant capital “refers to the knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” and is “grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color (Yosso, 2005, p.80).

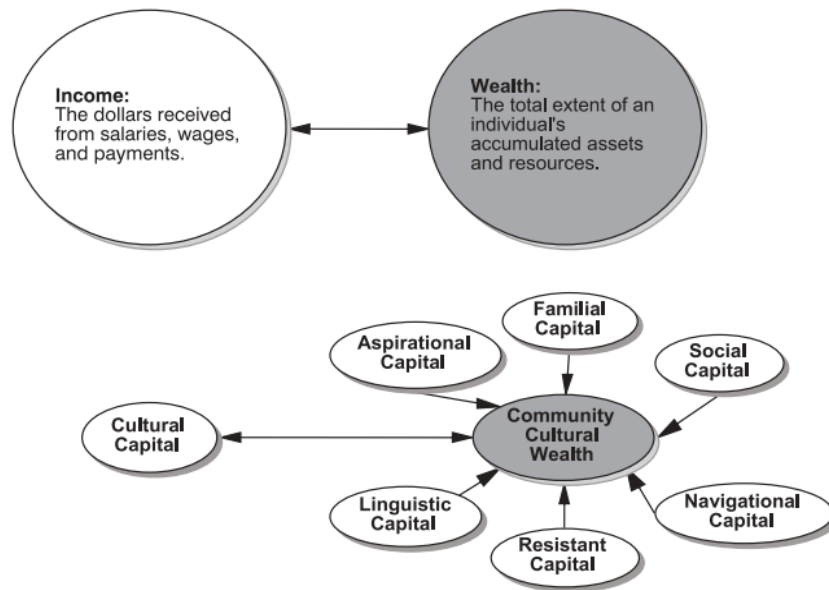


Figure 1. A model of community cultural wealth. Adapted from “Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth,” by Tara J. Yosso (2005) in *Race and Ethnicity in Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

In my own professional experience, in which I am privileged by my whiteness, administrative challenges to HS+ faculty expertise often take the form of professional gaslighting justified by the ‘correctness’ of assessing student learning from within a seat-time model, the implication being that HS+ practitioners are *getting away with something* which should be delegitimized, undermined, and dismantled. Yosso’s framework speaks directly to these challenges to valuing student knowledge and provides a meaningful structure to lean upon when working through the pain, confusion, and self-doubt, which are the direct result of this kind of professional gaslighting. This, even though assessing and awarding credit in this way, is exactly what SBCTC has trained HS+ practitioners for and tasked them with doing (SBCTC, 2020, SBCTC, 2021b).

Summary of the Review of Literature

The preceding review of literature has taken us on a journey through the complex contexts through which HS+ faculty strive to develop a professional praxis rooted equally in critical reflection and action for transformation. Despite their educational qualifications and extensive instructional expertise, adult basic education instructors, which include HS+ faculty, describe experiencing a devaluing of their skills and experiences when compared to ‘traditional’ high school and college and university programming, this despite the fact that adult basic education’s existence is necessitated by an ongoing epidemic of students leaving ‘traditional’ high school education before graduation at a rate of approximately 7,000 students per school day (Rumberger, 2011). HS+’s competency-based design, which promises a different educational experience to adults who left high school before graduation (SBCTC, 2020; SBCTC, 2021b), has

been developed within the larger context of the Washington State Board of Education's push toward competency-based options for high school students. Finally, Tara J. Yosso's community cultural wealth scholarship provides an authentic and supportive framing for the valuing of student knowledge through prior learning assessment in the context of HS+'s competency-based programmatic design.

Methodology

As of this writing, I have been a basic education for adults (BEaA) instructor in programs on community and technical college campuses in Washington State for over a decade. As we continue to contend with the stress of living and working through pandemic conditions, I witness more colleagues than ever before teetering on the brink of burnout or leaving teaching as a profession altogether. Though my professional experience demonstrates the high demand for BEaA programs in Washington State, BEaA instruction on community and technical college campuses is often portrayed in institutional narratives as less valuable to the institutional bottom line than college-level, tuition-bearing programming (Combs, 2015; Hofer & Smith, 2003). The impact of this devaluing of the labor, contributions, and expertise of BEaA faculty has been exacerbated by the extreme stress of the Covid-19 Pandemic. As a result, I have seen colleagues suffering all around me. I have suffered too.

Research Questions

On March 23rd, 2020, Governor Jay Inslee issued Washington State's *Stay Home, Stay Healthy* order in an effort to slow the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Savransky, 2021). While the timeline of that initial order was later extended, it was originally intended to be in place for just

two weeks. I clearly recall posting a note for students on my classroom door to tell them that campus was closed due to the spread of Covid-19, but that I hoped to see them in April (of 2020). As it quickly became apparent that the *temporary* shift to fully online teaching and learning, made in response to the stay-at-home order, was the new normal, I realized we were in for the long-haul with wearing masks, socially distancing, and teaching online from home. For me, that new normal came with a deep sense of isolation and intermittent despair. Thankfully, two esteemed colleagues reached out to me early in the pandemic and suggested we work as an instructional HS+ team to support students *and* one another.

Having experienced for myself the supportive, strengthening, and revitalizing power of team teaching in an authentic community with those two brilliant HS+ faculty colleagues during the COVID-19 Pandemic, I sought to expand that community to include other HS+ faculty members engaged in authentic, competency-based HS+ instruction. I also continually reflected upon and deepened my own HS+ instructional praxis through the stories, wisdom, and shared experiences of each interview participant. Interview questions and follow-up discussions were framed around the following research questions:

1. How do HS+ faculty describe their instructional context, and how does personal identity inform their HS+ praxis?
2. What cultural, structural, and administrative challenges do HS+ practitioners face when enacting competency-based high school completion instruction for adults on community and technical college campuses in Washington State?
3. What ideas do HS+ faculty have about solutions to these cultural, structural, and administrative challenges, and how do scholarship and other forms of shared wisdom inform those ideas?

Then, in what follows, I revisit my research purpose and then describe study design, the selection of participants, and the reflexive process I engaged to prepare to interview deeply respected colleagues.

Research Purpose Revisited

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, I wished to disrupt the devaluing of BEdA faculty labor on community and technical college campuses (Combs, 2015; Hofer & Smith, 2003) by facilitating opportunities for experienced and dedicated HS+ faculty to reflect upon and document aspects of the ground-breaking, competency-based high school completion work they engage in through in professional praxis. The second purpose of this study was for HS+ faculty, myself included, to make space for having critical discussions about the cultural, structural, and/or administrative barriers we face daily when trying to deliver on the promises made to students by SBCTC about what the competency-based HS+ project is designed to provide to students (SBCTC 2020; SBCTC 2021).

Research Design and Selection of Participants

This study is a project of practitioner research. I examined my own professional area of focus and interviewed colleagues with whom I regularly interact in professional and sometimes personal spaces. To explain clearly the value of practitioner research in education, I turn to Atkins and Wallace (2012), who describe a research-based model for professional teaching, with self-reflexive practitioner research as a necessary component of the professional praxis of teachers who seek to “explore and reflect on their work in a critical and systematic manner” to

fully inhabit their values and use information gleaned from such research “to inform their own practice and that of others” (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, Introduction, p. 2)

Important to the design of this study is that I am also positioned in this research as an insider. I interviewed faculty colleagues with whom I regularly work and with whom I already have “established interpersonal relationships” (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, para 8). In fact, I team-teach with two of the study participants. Also consistent with an insider research design, I hope that the results of this study will ultimately “influence or inform developments in practice” (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, para. 9) within my own professional context. Competency-based high school education *for adults* in Washington State is a small professional area, so my professional identity as HS+ faculty positions me uniquely in relationship to each area of inquiry, which “inevitably makes a difference to the research” (Costly et al., 2010, p. 1).

When engaging with reflexive activities about my positionality and position as a researcher, I relied on Archibald’s principles of Indigenous Storywork, which are *Respect, Reverence, Responsibility, and Reciprocity* (2008). Archibald shares that she felt uneasy when entering into insider research with First Nations Elders because she knew she would “benefit from this research by completing a book, which enhances my career,” while “Many of our Elders are not given due recognition [i.e., equality of pay] in educational institutions for their depth of cultural knowledge” (Archibald, 2008, p. 41).

I also leaned on the shared wisdom of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who advises insider researchers to approach their work with humility and in recognition of a “constant need for reflexivity” (Smith, 2012, p. 138). Reflecting on researching from within my professional community, I recognize that I am “positioned in relation to the community in a complicated

way,” which means I occupy a “different space with different responsibilities” (Smith, et al., 2019, p.12).

In the context of HS+ work, each study participant is my Elder. Though I have been a BEdA instructor in Washington State for over a decade, my professional praxis became focused on HS+ only in the last few years. Meanwhile, two of the research participants were integral to the State Board of Community and Technical College’s original HS+ pilot (then called High School 21+), one participant is the architect of the team-teaching Cadre model in which I teach, and all four participants have *significantly* more experience enacting authentic competency-based HS+ instruction than I do. Each participant shared their knowledge and experiences with me out of love, and it is with love that I use this space to document elements of their phenomenal work with the hope that this dissertation can contribute to the establishment of real solutions to the ongoing challenges each participant voiced about enacting competency-based instruction from within seat-time-oriented institutional frameworks which automatically undermine and actively dismantle their work. And yet, going back to Archibald’s uneasiness detailed above, only I will conclude this study with a doctorate.

Key to this research process is that I spent over a year leading up to the formal interviews in a HS+ team teaching Cadre with two of the research participants in the study, and I regularly interacted with the other two research participants about the special challenges and considerations of enacting competency-based high school instruction for adults from within an educational framework designed around seat-time oriented education. Therefore, my key findings are based on three sources of data: my reflexive journals and notes, observations taken during professional engagement, and information shared by participants during formal interviews.

As participants were chosen based on their professional context and expertise, I have employed a purposeful sampling strategy that allowed me to engage with the experiences of especially knowledgeable individuals in a niche educational context (Palinkas, et al., 2015). In the analysis stage, I used inductive reasoning to draw broad themes for understanding from personal and specific conversations - thereby moving from the “particular to the general” (Salkind, 2010, p. 594) and these broad themes are then discussed in the context of Tema Okun’s characteristics *of* and antidotes *to* white supremacy culture’s fear-based and paternalistic demands of *Perfectionism* and *One Right Way*, as well white supremacy cultures claims of being specially *Qualified* due to *Objectivity* and to having a monopoly on the truth about what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ which is shielded through *Defensiveness*.

Participant Profiles

The four faculty members I interviewed for this project are the vanguard of HS+ innovators in the State of Washington. Combined, the four interviewees have over twenty-five years of competency-based HS+ instructional experience. Two participants were integral to the original HS+ pilot, and one interviewee has been asked repeatedly by policy associates at the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) to provide ‘the’ statewide training to BEdA faculty about culturally responsive, competency-based HS+ instruction.

Additionally, SBCTC often consults with members of this group about policy issues and best practices for sustaining and expanding authentic competency-based HS+ instruction in Washington State. Indeed, the HS+ team teaching Cadre (of which one research participant is the architect) through which I have engaged with two of the research participants over the past year has been so successful that SBCTC has asked that group to provide training to BEdA faculty

across Washington State this year with the hope that the Cadre’s model of wrap-around instructional support for HS+ students can be explored, adapted, and implemented statewide (T. Goracke, personal communication, January 24, 2023).

Sylvia

Sylvia, who “grew up as a migrant farm worker,” in the Pacific Northwest, described her HS+ teaching praxis as strongly tied to her early educational experiences which, in turn, were heavily influenced by a childhood car accident which left her with severe loss of vision in her right eye. Due to her loss of vision, Sylvia received special education services until high school at which time, she told me, she became determined to, “work harder than everyone else,” and completed college-level chemistry and math courses while still a high school student. She shared with me that she is very proud to have earned a bachelor’s and master’s is now in the dissertation phase of a doctoral degree. Sylvia came to teaching “purely by accident,” first working for the Washington State Employment Security Department (WSESD) in a worker retraining program. It was through offering WSESD workshops on a community college campus that she became acquainted with the director of workforce education at that college, and it was he who suggested that Sylvia make the move from facilitating workshops to teaching community college classes serving displaced workers. As a native Spanish speaker, Sylvia has spent more than twenty years teaching in bilingual Spanish/English workforce and BEdA programs. Her BEdA experience began with GED instruction, but she is now focused solely on bilingual Spanish/English HS+ instruction.

Hannah

Like Sylvia, Hannah talked a lot during our formal interview about the ways in which her HS+ teaching praxis continues to be influenced by her childhood experiences with institutionalized education. As a Black child with predominantly white classroom teachers, her early experiences of seeing Black boys, especially, treated as “dangerous,” and disciplined at higher rates by white teachers lead her to problematize having majority white teaching staff in schools where the student body is comprised predominantly of Black and Brown children. Hannah also talked about the impact of reading white-centric books in school “like Dick and Jane,” and wondering “where were the stories about the Black and Brown kids,” in her community. She now frames those early reflections in terms of cultural representation and places a heavy emphasis on privileging and emphasizing Black narratives in her curricular choices as a HS+ instructor. Hannah, who is also an editor and published author and poet, spent the first fifteen years of her teaching career providing GED instruction in youth-focused high school re-engagement programs serving students aged 16-21, before transitioning to working exclusively with adult HS+ students seven years ago.

Elena

Elena’s educational background is in business and computer science, and she first taught introductory business and information technology classes at a Washington State community college, where she took an interest in volunteering in a GED preparation classroom in that college’s BEdA department. Elena, who was born and raised in Mexico, defines her relationship to her bilingual Spanish/English HS+ praxis through her own experiences of emigrating to the United States and “leaving family behind,” in Mexico. Throughout our interview, Elena tied her

competency-based practices back to her joy of learning about the richness of the knowledge, skills, and experience of the adults who attend her classes. Though Elena started her BEdA teaching career with GED preparation instruction, she strongly believes that the GED is a racist test which inflicts trauma on students who choose a GED pathway, and Elena has been gratified to focus her BEdA teaching praxis on bilingual Spanish/English HS+ programming exclusively since 2015 as a way to challenge such institutional racism.

Dolores

When I asked during our interview how Dolores explains her teaching context to other people, she said, “I usually say that I’m a critical thinking enthusiast, a math therapist, and a reading coach.” When I pressed her further to explain how she introduces the idea of competency-based education to people who are familiar only with seat-time models of institutionalized education, Dolores said she explains that she, “assesses the learning of life,” and emphasizes that some of the most meaningful knowledges that she relies on in her own day-to-day life come from her experiences of being raised on a ranch and not from her institutionalized educational experiences. Raised with both Spanish and English as her home languages, Dolores had been teaching GED preparation and math in both Spanish and English for over fifteen years when she became involved with the HS+ pilot. She has been integral to the design of the HS+ program, both locally and at the state level, almost since its inception. Though Dolores described the satisfaction she has experienced throughout her BEdA teaching career, she told me that her involvement with HS+, from the ground up, has utilized her, “propensity towards policy and scholarship in this way to actually build a system that felt really incredibly, personally rewarding.”

Preparation for Formal Interviews and Framing Interview Questions

Because I interviewed esteemed colleagues with whom I regularly work, it was important for me to earnestly refrain from assuming that I knew what their responses would be to my interview questions. Because my primary goal was to learn new information from each interviewee, I sought to position myself as an “an explorer in uncharted territory investigating and reflecting on what is there,” (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, para. 26) by entering each interview in an active state of curiosity. Furthermore, though I shared interview questions with each interviewee ahead of time, the interviews themselves were somewhat unstructured in that I used follow-up questions and discussion to ensure that my curiosity was completely satisfied about each area of focus (Sabee, 2018).

To aid me in entering into this active state of curiosity, I took time before each interview to reflect on the questions below. Because long experience has demonstrated that I am an auditory learner, I chose to speak aloud to myself, instead of journaling, so I could process each question and my response through listening:

1. What do you know about [interviewee name here]’s HS+ work?
2. How did you learn what you know about [interviewee name here]’s HS+ work?
3. What assumptions might you be making about [interviewee name here]’s HS+ work?
4. What have you learned about HS+ from [interviewee name here]’s in the past?
5. What are you excited to learn about HS+ during this interview?

Before drafting my interview questions, I created a visual interview framework to help me better understand what I hoped to learn about in each interview. My goal with each interview was to engage with the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how* of each interviewee’s experience

as HS+ faculty. Then, I used the visual interview framework as the foundation for crafting interview questions. I shared both the visual framework and interview questions with each interviewee at least 24 hours before their scheduled interview. The visual interview framework and my interview questions are below.

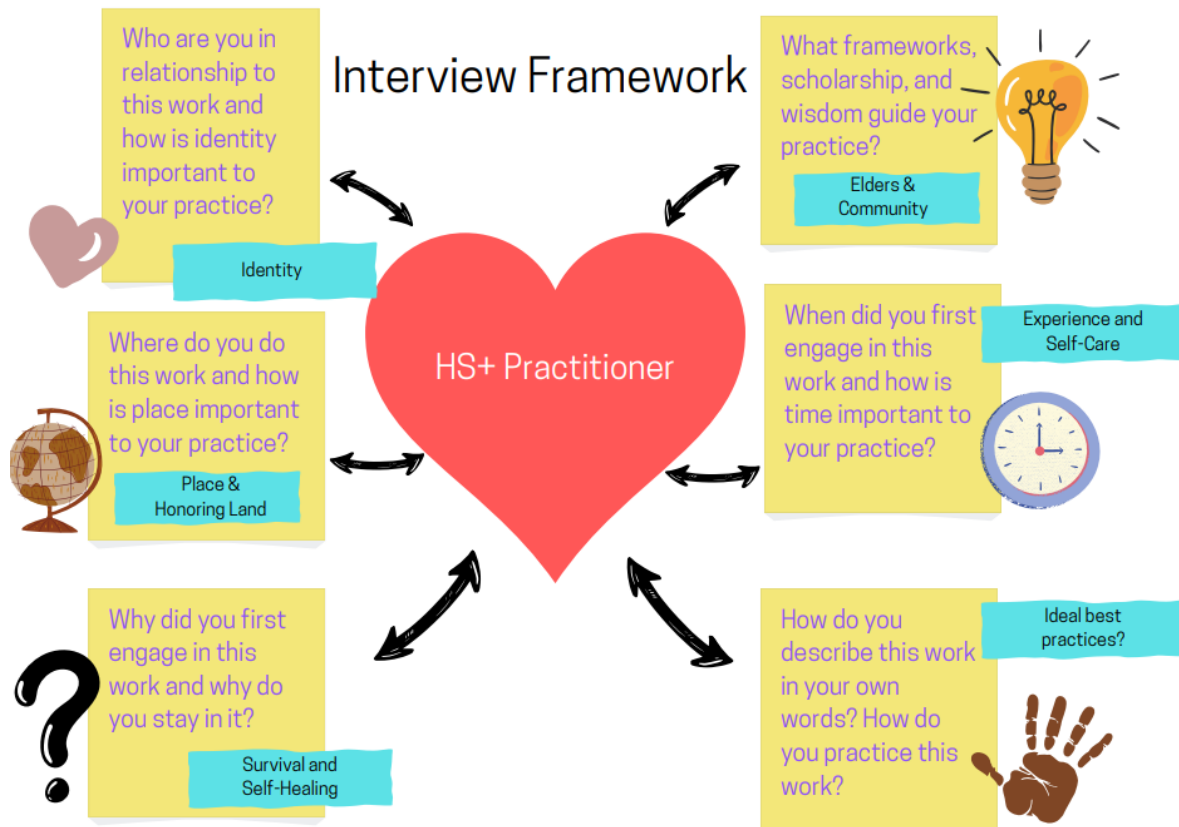


Figure 2. HS+ practitioner interview framework. Created by the author.

Interview Questions

1. How do you describe your HS+ work in your own words?
2. Why did you first engage in this work?
3. When did you first engage in this work?

4. How is time important to your practice?
5. Where do you do this work?
6. How is place important to your practice?
7. How is identity important to this work?
8. What frameworks, scholarship, and wisdom guide your HS+ practice?
9. What do you believe to be ideal best practices when engaging in HS+ work?
10. Why do you stay in this work?
11. Is there anything else you want to share with me about your relationship to your work or practice?

Due to concerns about the transmission of Covid-19, each participant chose to be interviewed virtually. Interviews ranged in length from 90 minutes to two hours. Each interviewee gave their consent to have their virtual interview recorded. Following each interview, I made an individualized digital thank you card for each participant choosing style elements and colors I thought each interviewee would enjoy. In each card, I expressed my deep gratitude for their participation and acknowledged that, in part, they did so out of love and support for my own hopes and dreams.

Pause, Think, and Reflect

I felt a surprising sense of self-doubt almost as soon as I finished the formal interview process. Each time I sat down to begin analyzing and coding the data I had collected, I noticed a deep and emotional urge to pause, think, and reflect on what I had learned through the interview process itself - even if some of those reflections never made their way into this written

document. This compelling desire to pause at this juncture surprised me. Then, my surprise led to self-doubt and my self-doubt led to white supremacy culture's driving force: *fear* (Okun, 2021).

Instead of relaxing toward the focus I felt I needed to be able to move onto the next phase in my writing process, I wrestled with nagging internal questions instead. *Perfectionism* drove me to question my instinct to pause and reflect and instead led me to characterize this desire as misguided or 'wrong' in some way. What if the underlying 'truth' was that I was determined to get in my own way by procrastinating? What did my emotional needs have to do with anything at this point in the process anyway? The *One Right Way*, I told myself, was to get on with the coding and analysis process in a linear and *objective* and unemotional fashion by identifying and connecting to key themes as soon as possible (Okun, 2021).

As my self-recrimination reached its zenith, I am grateful that I remembered two important things. First, as I stated earlier, it was important for me to enter each interview in an active state of curiosity, and I used guiding questions before each interview to get myself into that curious state. Now though, as I moved toward the analysis and coding phase, my curiosity had waned, and I needed to get back into a space where I felt excited to learn. The second thing I remembered, which I also stated earlier, is that I am an auditory learner. So, for me, the first step in organizing and preparing notes and transcripts for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was to put the written word aside and make space for learning through listening. To accomplish this, I went back to the recorded interviews, and I listened to each of them without taking any notes. Then, once each interview recording ended, I spent 30-45 minutes thinking about and talking through each of the following questions:

1. Did anything the interviewee said surprise you?
2. To which questions did the interviewee speak at length?

3. To which questions did the interviewee give more abbreviated answers?
4. What three to five key words, phrases, or ideas shared by the interviewee stood out for you from the interview?
5. Do you have any lingering thoughts or questions you would like to discuss with the interviewee?

Having successfully reseeded myself in an active state of curiosity, I was finally ready to meaningfully engage in reading, analyzing, and coding the interview data I had collected.

Analysis and Findings

While my research methodology is rooted in my own reflexive analysis, as a novice researcher I also wanted a framework upon which to rely when engaging with and coding interview data during my search for key themes. For that purpose I relied upon the six steps outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018), which are as follows: (1) organizing and preparing collected data, (2) reading through all collected data, (3) categorizing and labeling data using codes which represent language used by participants (*in vivo*), (4) generating descriptions of people, places, or events *and* using data codes to identify major themes emerging from the data, (5) reflecting on how the descriptions and major themes are interrelated, as well as how they will be represented in the narrative of key findings, and finally (6) making meaning from descriptions and identified themes. The six steps of Creswell & Creswell's (2018) analytical process are visualized for reference in *Figure 3* below.

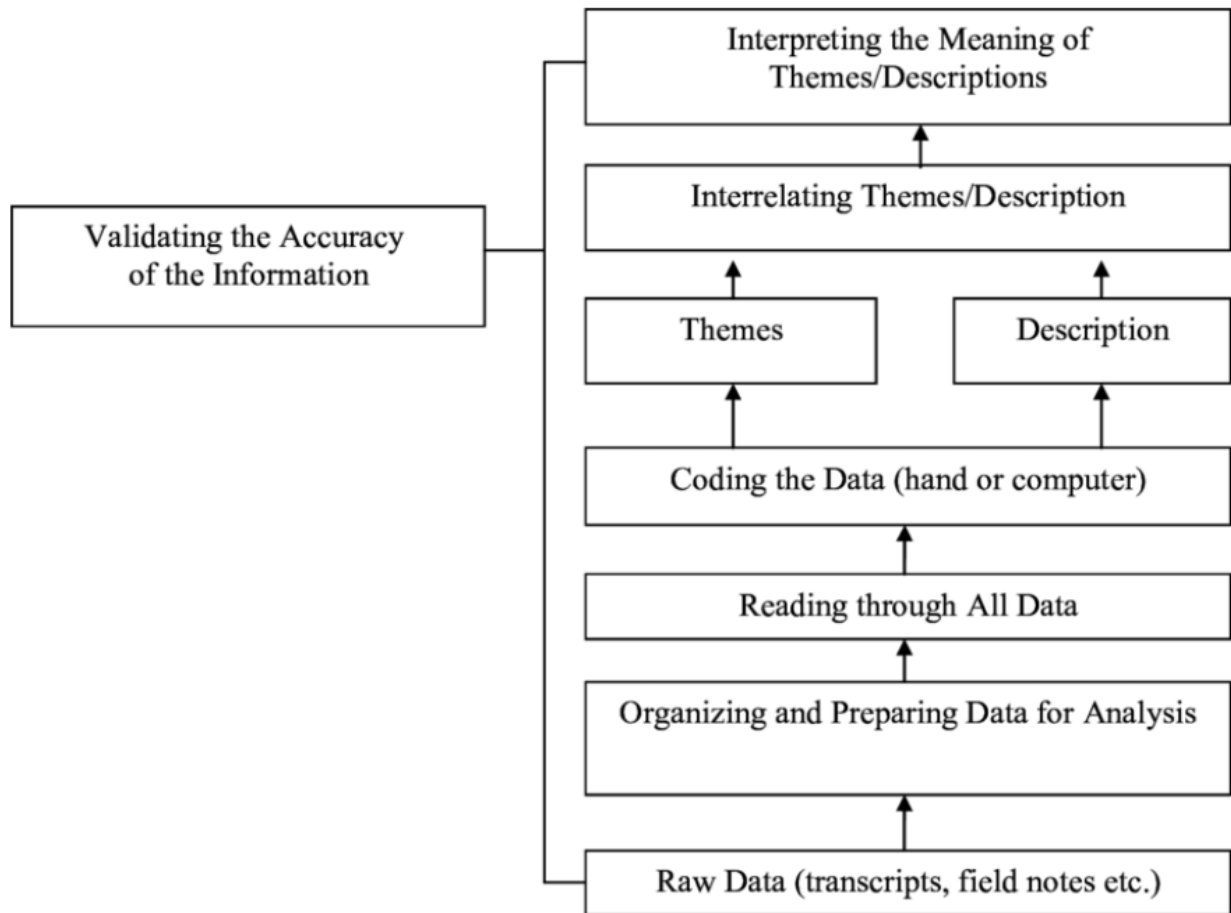


Figure 3. Data Analysis in Qualitative Research. Adapted from *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2018) by John W. Creswell & J. David Creswell. London: Sage.

As interviews were conducted and recorded virtually, my first organizational step was to review and make corrections to the transcripts which were automatically generated by the video conferencing application I used when talking with interviewees. Next, I pulled together texts and emails from pre and post interview conversations which included clarifying details I wanted to review. I read through each transcript and highlighted the questions where they occurred in each conversation for easy reference later.

Before making determinations about a definite coding scheme, I read through each interview transcript, text, and email and highlighted key phrases and passages that stood out to me as powerful and/or significant. As Creswell & Creswell suggest (2018), I took notice of when these key phrases and passages of interest focused on information I expected to find in the data, such as discussions about prior learning assessment and participant descriptions about competency-based instruction. Then, I noticed when I found topics or ideas from the data surprising, such as the length at which some interviewees spoke about the challenges of supporting students in understanding the similarities and differences *and/or* the drawbacks and advantages of choosing a GED versus a HS+ pathway to high school equivalency/completion. Finally, I recognized when interviewees emphasized vocabulary or ideas of unusual, conceptual interest, such as the connections made by participants between identity and valuing knowledge, *or* the emphasis placed by interviewees on the linkages between competency-based education and an asset-oriented positionality to working with HS+ students (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ready now to start coding the data, I revisited each of the key phrases and passages I had highlighted earlier, and coded them as: *E* for expected, *S* for surprising, or *U* or unusual (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Next, I made a draft list of the common themes I saw coming up in each interview. Concurrently, I took note when any of the highlighted key phrases or passages of interest did not fit easily within one of the common themes on my draft list ('one-offs'). Upon revisiting these 'one-offs,' I noticed that they often shared thematic commonalities with 'one-off' ideas from other participants and this helped me to redraft and further refine my draft list of key themes as I worked through them.

Next, I drafted preliminary descriptions for the five key themes I saw emerging from the data and started organizing each key phrase and passage of interest under the heading it seemed

best to fit. Each time I placed a key phrase or passage under a particular heading, I would stop and ask myself whether I was in danger of decontextualizing the participant's thoughts and ideas in the interest of making the quotation fit neatly into one of the themes I had identified. If so, I would set that phrase or passage aside to be revisited later ('leftovers'). As I continued to flush out ideas through my writing process, these 'leftover' key phrases and passages of interest helped me to further revise and refine until I was satisfied with the faithfulness of the list of key themes I will discuss in the next section.

Themes that Emerged During Analysis

In what follows, I detail the five key themes which emerged during formal interviews and throughout the course of my professional engagement with participants during which we engaged in sustained, reflective conversation about (1) the relationship between their instructional context, their personal identities, and their professional HS+ praxis; (2) navigating cultural, structural, and administrative barriers to enacting competency-based high school instruction for adults on community and technical college campuses; and (3) participants' solutions-based ideas for sustainably supporting SBCTC's vision for an individualized, competency-based high school program for adults in Washington State. The five key themes detailed below are: (1) Problematizing GED; (2) HS+ Praxis Rooted in Holism and Defined Through Identity; (3) Asset-Oriented Competency-Based Instruction; (4) Structural Misalignment; and (5) Hypervigilance.

Problematizing GED

To start, it is important to know that up until 2014, the GED had enjoyed a long history as *the* institutionally supported high school equivalency option in Washington State for adults who left high school before graduation or who never attended in the first place (Gaeta, et al., 2016; SBCTC, 2019). Due to this history, by the time the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) began devoting resources to the roll-out of the competency-based HS+ diploma option for adults, each interviewee's instructional praxis had long been focused on supporting students in passing the GED.

This history means that each interviewee's professional, historical narrative followed a *before* and *after* paradigm in which the *before* was GED-focused, and the *after* is HS+ focused. Though each participant talked about how GED test results may fit into the current HS+ landscape in terms of PLA (more on that later), the groups' consensus is that HS+'s competency-based design is a far more humane and, ultimately, a more streamlined and effective pathway for adults seeking a high school credential. However, due to the GED's long-enjoyed dominance in the high school completion marketplace, said Sylvia:

Many new students don't really understand the difference between HS+ and GED because Pearson [the for-profit educational publishing company which owns the GED Testing Service] has done such a good job marketing the GED as the only high school completion option [for adults in Washington State]. Sometimes it is hard to communicate with new students about the HS+ option because they have been told again and again that GED means high school completion - and they think that is their only option.

Elena also talked about the need to explain the difference between GED and the HS+ diploma in early interactions with new students, telling me that while students almost always come into the

program understanding that the GED is a series of timed tests, they usually have not heard of competency-based high school education before. So, she told me that she starts by explaining that:

Competency-based high school is a way for students to expedite their diploma by bringing prior learning and for us to assess the skills they already have and determine how they can meet their credit requirements. I start by helping students understand what credits are and what subjects they would need to work on to earn those credits.

Echoing Sylvia's emphasis above on the challenges created by the GED's long history as *the* high school completion option for adults in Washington State, Dolores's first task with new students can be described as a crash course in competency-based education. Whether in an online space or in-person, Dolores's first statement to new students is, "tell me everything." Often, students start by telling Dolores that they, "want to get their GED," and many times they share that they have been enrolled in GED preparation classes in the past without successfully completing the credential. After assuring students that she can connect them with classes and resources for pursuing their GED if they want to go that direction, she asks them about work and parenting experience, explains how they can get credit for being multilingual, and starts sketching out a plan for how they could meet the competencies for a high school diploma through a combination of prior learning and interdisciplinary projects. Dolores also asks them what they want to do after high school and explains how projects can be tailored toward their college or career goals. Once they see the outlines of this plan come together, Dolores told me, students rarely choose a GED pathway.

In addition to discussing streamlined, competency-based pathways to adult high school completion in terms of time, interviewees raised concerns about the GED in terms of

affordability and accessibility. While students can take HS+ classes on community and technical college campuses in Washington State for \$25 per quarter (a cost which can be waived in many instances), the total cost of attempting each of the four GED subject tests *once* ranges from \$120 to \$144 depending on whether the test-taker chooses to travel to an official GED testing center or to instead use the newly offered remote testing option (GED Testing Service, 2023).

Furthermore, as Hannah observed:

There are additional fees and waiting periods if students need to retest with the GED. Plus the GED used to be a test students took on paper, but everything is computerized now. When the GED model changed [in 2014] and the test became computer-based, it created another barrier for people already facing so many barriers to high school completion.

Adding to Hannah's concerns about barriers created by the technology requirements of the computerized GED, Elena spoke from her bilingual Spanish/English HS+ instructional context and shared her unease with the Spanish language version of the GED, telling me that:

I've had lots of Spanish speakers tell me that the Spanish Language version of the GED is insulting. I've had Spanish speakers who end up trying to do the GED in English because they don't want to read the stuff that's in Spanish and the textbook is not even a good textbook. When they try to do the GED in English, they are usually not successful, but they can do the [HS+] diploma completely in Spanish.

Another point of common discussion across interviews was the practical and emotional loss many students suffered as older GED scores were invalidated when the GED tests were updated in 2014. As Elena shared:

When the new version of the GED came along in 2014, I felt very discouraged because I had students who had passed tests in 2012 and 2013 but were not done yet [with the whole GED certificate]. Those tests they'd passed did not count anymore and they had to start over from zero with the GED. I was very discouraged, and I felt the need of really working towards something that was sustainable.

Echoing Elena, Hannah, and Sylvia both agreed that they saw a huge drop in student success rates with the GED after the test changed in 2014, and all four participants told me that the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) was wise to use the challenges arising from the 2014 GED updates as an opportunity to pilot the competency-based HS+ diploma option. Dolores, who has the most experience out of the four participants in collaborating with other SBCTC colleges about their HS+ programming, expressed concern that many BEdA programs in Washington State still dedicate their instructional resources to GED preparation and have been slow to embrace the streamlined opportunities presented by the competency-based HS+ option.

The drop in GED success rates was not the only factor driving participant advocacy for the competency-based HS+ diploma versus the GED. Dolores, Hannah, and Elena all described the GED as a racist set of tests, with Elena stating bluntly, "The GED inflicts trauma." She went on to explain that:

The culturally responsive and trauma-informed aspects of competency-based instruction, of course, is the complete opposite of what the GED is. The GED is racist, and the GED is not culturally responsive. Competency-based is messy...but the interesting thing about the messiness to me is that human beings are messy, and so it makes sense that if you

build a program that actually engages with individual human beings it makes sense that it's messy to me.

With problematizing standardized testing as a core element of their professional orientation, each participant was eager to engage with critical conversations in which standardized tests, like the GED, were framed as a harmful educational practice (Gunzelmann, 2005; Olson, 2009).

However, interviewees also acknowledged that SBCTC still recognizes the GED as a high school equivalency in Washington State (SBCTC, 2022a). Therefore, any HS+ student who passes one or more of the official GED tests, may then include their official GED test scores in their prior learning assessment portfolio and those scores can then be used by HS+ PLA faculty to assign high school credit toward the student's HS+ diploma in the appropriate subject area. So, as Hannah told me:

We cannot dismiss the GED out of hand completely because many times HS+ students will come to us with some passing GED scores, or even all of them sometimes but they still want the diploma over the GED, and we can grab those scores and give them high school credit for them. That way, the work they put into the GED is not wasted and they are not starting from scratch in a new program...their time, effort, and work count for something and that is a good thing.

Though each interviewee acknowledged that GED test scores can and should be used to award high school credit through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), participants were divided about whether HS+ faculty should encourage HS+ students to try official GED tests as a way to earn high school credit when they do not come to the program with passing GED scores already in hand. Hannah and Sylvia both felt that, if they are already prepared to pass a subject test, then attempting an official GED test may be a quick and efficient way to earn high school credit

toward their diploma. Dolores and Elena, though, who were skeptical about encouraging HS+ students to attempt GED tests as a regular PLA practice framed their concerns around mitigating harm to students whenever possible.

Though participants were in disagreement about to what extent the GED may still have a part to play in the context of PLA for high school completion for adults, participants were in complete agreement about the vocabulary they used to frame their competency-based HS+ praxis, which brings us to the next key theme's focus on holism and identity.

HS+ Praxis Rooted in Holism and Defined by Identity

Throughout interviews and in the course of our professional engagement, when asked to discuss and reflect upon their HS+ praxis, each participant repeatedly used the term *holistic* to describe both the nature of the competency-based structure of the HS+ program, as well as to define their philosophical approach to engaging with HS+ students. For example, Hannah told me that:

I take a holistic approach to working with [HS+] students and embrace the model where each student's learning plan is individualized. That means the plan for getting their high school diploma is connected to their lives and goals. Then, I look for opportunities to celebrate even the smallest wins with students when they meet one of their goals. I call those soul wins.

Dolores also used the term *holistic* to describe her approach to the, "intercurricular, project based learning," which is fundamental to HS+ programmatic design (SBCTC, 2020). As she shared with me, project-based learning, which she bases on the PBL Works framework for essential design elements of project-based design (PBL Works, 2020), must:

...be based on student goals and interests, with individualized support based on authentic relationships, and culturally responsive feedback.

To illustrate what a holistic, competency-based approach can look like in practice, Dolores walked me through a recent interaction she had with a new HS+ student. During a 30-minute, one-on-one conversation, Dolores started by asking the student what she wanted to do *after* she finished her high school diploma. Following their discussion about the student's goals, Dolores then asked questions about the student's professional experience and follow-up questions, as those arose organically in the course of conversation, about the student's other activities and interests outside of work. Through their one-on-one conversation, in which the student had her focused attention, Dolores built the summary profile below which she later shared with me:

The student, who went to high school through tenth grade and has a copy of her unofficial high school transcript, has been a state certified nursing assistant for over a decade. She has additional professional certifications such as CPR, first aid, and medication administration. She thinks she would like to study for a nursing degree, but she has not decided for sure. She might also be interested in a shorter certification such as medical assisting. In addition to her extensive professional, medical experience, she is a parent and volunteers regularly through her church community. Finally, the student is multilingual, and regularly attends appointments with older family members, who speak mainly Arabic, to assist with language translation when necessary.

Using a visual planner, Dolores started by showing the student which competencies she had already met for high school credit through her state nursing assistant certification training and other healthcare certifications, as well as the earned credit recorded on her unofficial transcript

from ninth and tenth grade (i.e., prior learning). Then, Dolores supported the student in evaluating her own reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in Arabic using a holistic, descriptive rubric based on an internationally recognized framework for assessing language production. Dolores then evaluated the scored rubric for high school credit and added those totals to the student's planner. Next, Dolores explained that there may be some outcomes for additional credit areas, such as health, communications, occupational, civics, and electives which may be met through her employment, parenting, and volunteer experience both with her church and in her larger community when she volunteers her time providing Arabic to English and English to Arabic language translation for family members. Dolores provided the student with some guided reflection questions, and they agreed on the next time they would meet. During the next one-on-one meeting, Dolores will evaluate the student's completed reflections, ask follow-up questions for clarification and additional detail, and start the process of building an interdisciplinary project which will likely be contextualized in terms of healthcare professions due to the student's stated educational goals. "And that," Dolores told me:

...is just the first meeting with a student. Later today, I will update the student's diploma planner and make sure everything we talked about is documented. Then, I will send the student a follow-up email summarizing everything we talked about and include live links [to cloud-based documents] with the employment, volunteering, and parenting reflection questions she and I talked about today.

Dolores described holistic, high school re-engagement work as complex, because:

Not only does it demand that faculty have instructional and intercurricular expertise, it also requires an enormous amount of tracking, coordination, communication, and

intellectual and emotional energy. But our conversation today was glorious and we have a good plan started for her to finish her high school diploma.

When describing her conceptualization of a holistic approach to competency-based HS+ instruction, Sylvia emphasized the importance of shared community and community support as key elements for making instructional programming based on authentic relationships and individualized support sustainable for faculty who are tasked with filling many roles in order to provide wrap-around support for students. Echoing Sylvia, Elena agreed that community support structures are important for making individualized instruction sustainable, because on any given day:

In my role as a teacher, I may also be pulled to be a Spanish Language interpreter, an academic advisor, a counselor, a community resource expert, an administrative assistant, a career counselor, and a bridge for communication for students with other departments on campus. This can be exhausting, especially when I am also trying to be present for myself and for my family.

Then, drawing a straight line from exhaustion through to disconnection from self, Elena explained:

I feel guilty. Yeah, I know it sounds kind of weird, but when I cannot take good care of myself it makes it impossible for me to offer good care to students. So, then it is like not only have I failed myself, but I am failing other people too by being overworked. When that happens I feel very alienated from myself - from who I am - and I start to lose track of why I am doing this work in the first place. So, you can see how important that sense

of identity is to doing HS+ work. If I lose it, lose my connection to myself, then I don't do this [HS+] work as well.

When reflecting on the convergences between identity and their HS+ praxis, interviewees expressed grief about sometimes losing perspective when they feel tired and disconnected from themselves. They also discussed struggling to maintain a sense of internal balance when they feel overworked, overwhelmed, and stressed out. During these times, reconnecting to personal identities is vital because, as Elena said:

Identity is 100% important to my work. The only way to create a good rapport with students is by being authentic...by letting them know that I am a human being and that I also have gone through the pathway that they are walking.

But, as she went on to say:

Identity is something that gets lost when we are overwhelmed because we are just working hard to make sure everything is done, and we forget to eat, we forget to sleep, we forget to exercise.

Each interviewee described disconnection from self due to exhaustion as a sorrowful, personal experience because, when rested, focused, and firmly rooted in their faculty praxis through identity they each told me that, as Dolores phrased it, their engagement with HS+ is, "an amazing, exciting, and complex journey." Echoing the complexity highlighted by Dolores, Elena connected identity to culture and shared experience in the context of her HS+ praxis, explaining that:

One other thing that I know that makes me feel successful in my work is that I look like my students, and I speak their language. I have the same culture and the same

understanding that they do, and I am an immigrant too. I know what it takes to leave your family behind.

Then, connecting shared cultural identity to her desire to serve HS+ students well, Sylvia asked:

How can you possibly serve a community very well if you don't know who they are?

When speaking to the relationship between identity and culture, Dolores cautioned that, while her relationship-based HS+ praxis is strengthened by the cultural knowledge she shares with some students (e.g. speaking Spanish for one), it is also important to resist making assumptions about how students identify and about how much she has in common with them. She explained it this way:

I have multiple identities which give me a whole lot more space for shared experience [and] because I have fluency through shared experiences, I can have solidarity [with HS+ students] even in educational spaces students may have experienced as hostile in the past.

But, as Dolores went on to say:

We have to be careful not to impose or force a sense of solidarity on other people though. Like, I can think through a mother's lens right, like how I want to impose some of my identities and values on my son, but my son is totally disenfranchised from them by choice...and sometimes I have to come to terms with that.

Another common theme across interviews was the important conjunction between identity and racial and cultural representation in educational spaces. When reflecting on her bilingual Spanish/English instructional context, Sylvia shared that focus on racial and cultural representation in educational spaces is of, "key importance," because:

I've always thought that students do better if they have instructors that look like them...I know it would have made a difference for me. It would have been nice to have a Person of Color as one of my teachers in school. Most of my teachers were white men. I did have a Spanish-speaking guidance counselor in high school though and he was one of the main reasons I made it to college right out of high school.

Extending Sylvia's observations about representation in classroom settings, Hannah often discussed the impact of her focus on racial and cultural representation has on her instructional choices. As she explained:

If you can't see yourself reflected back in a career or in a classroom, you start to believe certain things. Like, when I was a youth, when I was growing up, I was like, everything is so white, so white people must know something we don't know...they are in everything. They are in all the books and all the TV shows...wow. As I got older, I had to check how I felt about that and I looked for myself in educational spaces too. Those experiences, and my awareness of the importance of representation, influences curricular choices I make when supporting HS+ students in developing projects.

For example, Hannah explained, when working with Black, male-identifying HS+ students in developing interdisciplinary English language arts/U.S. history/contemporary world issues projects, she likes to weave in excerpts from scholar, poet, and author Clint Smith III's work in which he explicitly problematizes the narratives taught in U.S. schools about the history and legacy of chattel slavery in the United States (Smith, 2021).

During our conversations about racial and cultural representation in educational spaces, Hannah often framed discussions about her own intersecting identities through her knowledge of

and experiences *with* contexts of oppression, only to then have the truths about these histories openly disputed by people powerfully positioned through proximity to whiteness. As Hannah shared with me during our interview:

Telling someone they don't know the history of their own people is gaslighting and I am like who are you to tell me I don't know my own history? Meanwhile, they have not read a book and they have the audacity to tell me something that is not true is the truth...which is inhumane when you are talking about the history of people.

Tensions, like those Hannah identified, between dominant historical narratives in educational spaces and the lived experiences of HS+ students must be explicitly and intentionally grappled with by faculty engaged in a relationship-based HS+ praxis because, as Dolores told me during our interview:

How you know who you are is based on knowledge and experience, so if you really want to engage in what is human about learning, then a sense of belonging is the center of this work and identity is absolutely everything.

Therefore, as Elena told me:

When students choose to share their stories with you...believe them. They know what they are talking about.

By emphasizing the importance of believing students when they share stories from their own lives with HS+ faculty, Elena introduces participant discussions about valuing and assessing student knowledge in the context of a competency-based instructional approach, which frames the next key theme's focus on assets.

Asset-Oriented Competency-Based Instruction

As highlighted earlier in the methodology section of this paper, the first thing I asked each participant during formal interviews was: *How do you describe HS+ work in your own words?* During interview discussion with Sylvia, I learned that, though she is now focused exclusively on HS+ instruction, her faculty praxis was, until quite recently, evenly divided between HS+ and GED preparation. As a GED completer and someone whose early teaching focus was exclusively on GED preparation, I wanted to know how Sylvia would explain HS+'s competency-based approach to a novice instructor who has taught in a GED preparation context only. Sylvia responded by explaining that:

In HS+, our goal is to recognize that everybody comes in with strengths, and we honor those strengths. We acknowledge them, and we encourage students to tap into those other strengths that they have. I think that's one of the beautiful things about the program when compared with a GED-only program.

Sylvia who, like me, is a student in a doctoral degree program, told me early in our interview that her dissertation is structured around Yosso's (2005) scholarship about community cultural wealth, which was also highlighted earlier in this written work as a framing for valuing student knowledge through the State Board of Community and Technical College's competency-based programmatic design for HS+. As soon as she realized that we had the vocabulary of Yosso's framework in common, Sylvia seemed excited to expand on her comments above about honoring the strengths HS+ students bring with them to the program by explaining that:

Yosso talks about deficit-oriented thinking about the skills and abilities of Students of Color, and points to that as an example of systemic racism in [U.S.] schools. On the other hand, High School Plus is an asset-oriented approach to high school completion. We start

with the assumption that adult students are bringing extraordinary talents, knowledge, and experience to the table, which is an asset-based way to view people and HS+ instructors must be oriented that way in their thinking about student knowledge.

Echoing Sylvia's comments above, while also building on the shared emphasis on holism and identity outlined in the previous section, each participant told me numerous times that a holistic, competency-based instructional paradigm requires that HS+ faculty approach valuing and assessing student knowledge from an asset-oriented perspective. Relying on the HS+ student profile from the previous interview theme, Dolores shared a concrete example of what asset-oriented outcomes assessment looks like in practice and provided a historical narrative about the practice and impact of deficit-oriented outcomes assessment in HS+. Returning to the student profile from the discussion of the previous theme, recall that, in addition to professional experience as a certified nursing assistant, personal experience as a parent, and community engagement through her church community, the HS+ student from Dolores's summary profile:

...is multilingual, and regularly attends appointments with older family members, who speak mainly Arabic, to assist with language translation when necessary.

Due to the student's fluency in both Arabic and English, in the course of her first one-on-one meeting with this student, Dolores introduced the student to a holistic, descriptive rubric based on an internationally recognized framework for assessing language production, and supported the student in evaluating her own reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in Arabic. Dolores then evaluated the scored rubric for high school credit and added those totals to the student's planner. Dolores, a key figure in the original HS+ pilot, told me that the pilot's original language assessment strategy, at the institution where she is employed, required that multilingual students

take an online test, created by a third-party organization, which would then score them in their skills with their home language. Dolores characterized the demand that students take a test to prove they are fluent in their home language as a deficit-oriented (and extremely hurtful) assessment strategy. Then, Dolores, who is fluent in both Spanish and English (and conversant in several additional languages), put herself in the place of a student and shared this perspective with me:

So, HS+ instructors were saying to students: you know how to speak your own language, and I don't, but here's an exam of your own language from the colonists, and if you don't pass it you don't actually know your own language. People said things like that with an absolute straight face, [during the original HS+ pilot], and then turned around and defended the online test by saying something like, with my high school-level Spanish skills, I took the test, and it seems fine. These are really well-intentioned people, which makes this a poignant example because the language you use to talk to people is fundamentally part of your identity, and education systems have the audacity to tell you that you can or cannot do that well, and that your language abilities cannot be valued unless you take and pass a test.

Also woven throughout participant stories about the key importance of an asset orientation to valuing and assessing student knowledge were participant narratives about clear evidence of deficit-oriented thinking, on the part of departmental and college leadership, about HS+'s competency-based approach to high school completion for adults. Participants reminded me that this is despite the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges' (SBCTC) stated commitment to a competency-based approach to high school completion for adults (SBCTC,

2020; SBCTC, 2021b). To illustrate the shape deficit-oriented thinking about HS+'s competency-based design often takes, Hannah, Elena, and Dolores each reflected, during formal interviews and in the course of our professional engagement, on their experiences with a former departmental administrator who shared in a professional meeting space that HS+ made them uncomfortable because, as they said, "HS+ is nebulous." The administrator then went on to say that, "I wish HS+ was more like an OSPI [the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction] program with higher standards and rigor." Dolores, in particular, pushed back on this criticism of the standards and rigor of HS+'s competency-based design, reminding me that awarding high school credit through student mastery of learning outcomes is enshrined in state law and supported by the Washington State Department of Education's shift toward mastery/competency-based high school education (Muller, 2020; Muller, 2021; WAC 180-51-050; WSBE, 2018).

Besides, as Dolores pondered:

How can we say with a straight face that someone who has developed depth and breadth of knowledge in multiple areas through sustained engagement, over many years, in a professional job has learned those skills under less rigorous conditions than a high school student sitting in a classroom for a semester?

In addition to a demonstrated, deficit-orientation toward HS+'s competency-based programmatic design, each participant also told me that they had experienced direct challenges, from departmental and college leadership, to their faculty expertise in assessing whether students have met the competencies needed to earn a high school diploma. In a HS+ program where approximately 85% of the students self-identify as Black, African-American, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or of two more races, while

only about 15% of students self-identify as white⁴, each participant described these critiques as racist, whereby deficit-thinking is applied to the knowledge, skills, and abilities of both HS+ Students of Color and to the expertise of HS+ Faculty of Color. Hannah described having experienced “professional gaslighting,” from administrators, while Dolores pointed to “constant pressure on HS+ faculty to prove that they are not doing something untoward or getting away with something they shouldn’t,” when enacting the authentic competency-based HS+ instructional work held up by SBCTC policy associates as exemplary in the state.

While all expressed pain and frustration when contending with deficit-oriented thinking about HS+ students, faculty, and programmatic design, Elena, Hannah, and Dolores described deficit thinking as a symptom of the struggles experienced by all HS+ stakeholders: administrators, faculty, staff, and students, due to the challenges created by enacting competency-based HS+ instructional practices from within college systems designed, primarily, around a seat-time funding paradigm. This connection between deficit-thinking about HS+ and the challenges HS+ stakeholders face when trying to deliver on SBCTC’s promises to students about what a competency-based high school experience will look like, leads us to the next key theme’s focus on the challenges of enacting competency-based instructional practices when college support structures are oriented toward seat time.

Structural Misalignment

This key theme’s focus is the inherent tension, identified and described by faculty participants, which exists between the aspirations expressed by SBCTC’s individualized, competency-based HS+ programmatic design, and the existing community and technical college

⁴ This data, also referenced in the review of literature in this paper, was pulled from an institutional data dashboard which is not available to public view.

support structures designed for funding models based on seat-time and tied to an academic calendar based on quarters. Hannah introduced the impact this tension has on her first one-on-one meeting with new HS+ students, by sharing that:

The first time I meet with new students, they usually ask me how long it is going to take them to get their high school diploma, but they are surprised when I talk about quarters and that sometimes makes them feel nervous. They have their own goals and life and work schedules they have to work around, and they don't come in thinking about a calendar of quarters. So, the way I frame an [academic] term for them is by explaining that we have start and end dates that we have to know about because of registration and other things, but HS+ is designed to be a flexible model and we will work around their schedule.

Reiterated multiple times by each participant, Sylvia, Elena, and Dolores all agreed with Hannah that flexibility is a central feature of SBCTC's programmatic design for HS+, with the goal being that a competency-based educational structure, "allows a student to master a competency and meet learning outcomes more quickly, or slowly, depending on student needs" (SBCTC, 2020, para. 2). Indeed, as Sylvia shared:

HS+ is not like a college program. Students can stop in and stop out, and that is completely fine because the program is designed to give them that flexibility. That is part of making a [learning] plan individualized to each student, and that piece can be very time consuming for instructors.

Expanding on Sylvia's comments about the challenges, in terms of time, which faculty face in providing individualized and flexible instructional support to students, Dolores told me that many college structures and systems, including Canvas (SBCTC's learning management system

for students), are not designed to account for flexible considerations such as open enrollment and students working on interdisciplinary projects between or across multiple quarters. This means that, as Dolores said:

Faculty have to get really creative about facilitating flexible learning plans for students when administrative systems don't support that flexibility. It requires a lot of individual tracking on the part of faculty and, on some days, everything can start to feel like a workaround.

Each participant shared with me examples of what these workarounds can look like for faculty in practice. Elena and Sylvia spend many hours each quarter facilitating their own new student orientations in Spanish for their bilingual HS+ students without receiving any additional compensation. For Hannah, connecting with students in the way that works for them is a defining hallmark of how she provides individualized support for HS+ students. She can meet them in person or online during scheduled class times, but she is also happy to call them to check in when they are picking up groceries on their way home from work. Though many of Dolores students complete course work through the college's learning management system each quarter, she has also developed cloud-based versions of reflections, curriculum, and project prompts, so students who need to work between and across quarters can continue to make progress on their high school credit requirements even after the college has closed the Canvas course in which they are enrolled.

Consistent with SBCTC's assertion that a competency-based diploma program allows HS+ students to meet learning outcomes more quickly than they would in a traditional seat-time model (SBCTC, 2020), Elena told me that she frames HS+ for new students as a way to shorten student pathways to a high school diploma by incorporating Prior Learning Assessment (PLA),

and by doing interdisciplinary projects through which students achieve credits in multiple subject areas. While each participant supports and celebrates the accelerated nature of the competency-based model, they also shared with me that there are difficulties created by the mismatch between how the college defines a credit, and how credits are awarded in a competency-based educational program like HS+. As Dolores explained during the course of our professional engagement, how a credit is defined depends a lot on context:

First, there are the high school credits students need to graduate with their diploma and which are based on the high school graduation requirements for the high school cohort they were originally scheduled to graduate with. Then, there is the credit amount assigned to HS+ classes by the college based on seat-time and that is how faculty pay is calculated. The credit amount assigned to the class has nothing to do with how many high school credits a student can earn in that class because that all depends on the competencies they demonstrate during that quarter.

Participants reported that the mismatch between the credit amount assigned to a course and the number of high school credits a HS+ student may earn during a quarter creates confusion for administrative staff and, as a result, faculty spend a lot of time educating and then re-educating non-faculty college employees about HS+'s competency-based design and that, Elena told me, usually leads to push back and requires faculty to defend SBCTC's model as if faculty are doing something wrong or engaging in something dishonest. Echoing Elena, each participant described similar experiences and also shared that this constant need to defend HS+'s programmatic design is emotionally exhausting for HS+ faculty.

In addition to sharing with me about the challenges they grapple with, participants shared many solutions-oriented ideas with me. For example, when detailing the pushback to

competency-based education described above, the primary recommendation made by research participants is that non-faculty college employees and stakeholders who are new to HS+'s competency-based instructional design, should position themselves as learners and trust that they can rely on the expertise of highly trained and experienced HS+ faculty. Otherwise, as Elena told me, HS+ faculty face:

The additional challenge of when we have leaders who do not understand the competency-based design of HS+. They seem to get focused on small details instead of trying to learn about the kind of program it is and how many people have benefited from it. It would be easy to learn from faculty and people at SBCTC who are HS+ experts but they sometimes actively work against HS+ instead.

When trying to make sense of these challenges to HS+ faculty expertise, Dolores asked:

How many program administrators are going into classrooms and challenging the way that a welding expert is teaching their trade to students? What about math? Do administrators walk into college calculus classes and question the expertise of the teaching faculty? Why are HS+ faculty in particular treated with so much suspicion?

Despite the frustrating challenges they described, interviewees expressed a desire to explain the benefits of a competency-based instructional approach as well as a willingness to teach people who want to learn about HS+. As Elena explained:

I would challenge the belief that a competency approach should be treated with suspicion by administrators and stakeholders. Think about it this way...not all learning worldwide comes from an American classroom. I think that has to do with white culture not wanting to be flexible or understand where people are coming from. Someone may come from

Egypt where they were a successful mechanic. They did not speak English while they were fixing cars there, but they still know how to fix cars...they have that knowledge and those skills.

Echoing Elena's desire to teach others about the benefits of a competency-based approach to high school completion for adults, Dolores described the excitement she has witnessed when someone finally "gets it." As she told me:

So, whenever I explain that my job is to assessing the learning of life, people really engage with the ideas. Like, just wow...do you mean school doesn't have to be completely disassociated from meaning? It's not just a merit...and I'm like well, it still is, but you know I feel like this work is that paradox of boldly audacious and just completely natural and normal. Like duh, so commonsensical and it's only audacious because it is proof-positive that educational systems were built to keep people out, not built to include them in learning and certainly not built to help people as an equitable mechanism of self-actualization.

As detailed throughout this key theme, each participant is excited about the possibilities of HS+'s competency-based design, but they often face challenges to enacting that design when working from within administrative structures which are designed for seat-time funding models. When these challenges lead non-faculty college employees to treat the competency-based work of HS+ faculty with skepticism, or even suspicion, each participant described feeling weary. This weariness, as they all explained, leads them to feel protective of HS+ as a construct, and that urge to protect leads participants toward an exhausting posture of hypervigilance in which they

are prepared to defend SBCTC's competency-based programmatic design for HS+ at any given moment.

Hypervigilance

During formal interviews and in the course of our professional engagement, participants discussed both the joy they experience through their HS+ praxis *and* an almost unrelenting worry that the lack of understanding about SBCTC's competency-based design for HS+ will cause the program to be undermined or, worse, sabotaged or dismantled in favor of a programmatic design more legible to those familiar only with seat-time-oriented instructional design. Each participant agreed that this ongoing anxiety often leads them into an exhausting posture of hypervigilance. Dolores and Elena, who were both involved in the original HS+ pilot, told me that concerns about HS+ being undermined or dismantled have been present for them since the program's inception. To illustrate, Dolores recounted a conversation she had with a Black, male-identifying colleague who, early on in the original HS+ pilot, advised her:

[To] get as many students through to the diploma as possible, while you can, because as soon as they find out that HS+ is serving Black, male students really well, the swarms will arrive to question, discredit, delegitimize, undermine, and sabotage the valuing of Black knowledge and they will shut it down.

When discussing their own urge to protect the competency-based structure of HS+ from sabotage, Hannah and Sylvia both framed their comments in terms of the improved completion rates they have seen since shifting their teaching praxis to HS+ instruction and away from GED preparation, and then spoke to the direct and positive impact having a high school diploma can have on the lives of the students they work with. While Sylvia framed her comments in terms of

increased student access to “cultural capital,” Hannah spoke in terms of the economic impact of not having a high school diploma when she shared that:

The American Dream has been painted as something that starts with the high school diploma, so it can also become the American Nightmare if you don’t have it. Even if it means a few dollars more or a few dollars less that adds up and really impacts your family.

Participants described hypervigilance as taking many forms. For Dolores, hypervigilance has meant becoming an expert in the state laws and policies which give HS+ its legal standing to exist as a competency-based high school diploma program for adults on community and technical college campuses. While she describes her statutory knowledge as empowering, Dolores also framed her desire to have what is essentially a legal defense of HS+ at the ready at anytime as a symptom of hypervigilance. For Elena and Dolores both, their fierce drive to advocate for improved structural support for HS+ and HS+ students, has led them to over-commit to college committee and initiative work - often to the detriment of their health and well-being. For Elena and Sylvia, facilitating new student orientations in Spanish for their bilingual Spanish/English HS+ program is a workaround, as described in the last key theme. However, they also characterized their motivation to conduct their own new student orientations in Spanish as a symptom of hypervigilance in that the lack of support services for Spanish-speaking students leads them to take on administrative and student-services responsibilities in order to protect the viability of the bilingual HS+ program. For Hannah, who told me many times that “rest is resistance,” the exhaustion caused by working from a posture of hypervigilance leads her to

become overextended and requires her to take a break and, “allow [her] personal identity to reassert itself by setting boundaries.”

In addition to the forms hypervigilance can take, participants explained that it can be very difficult to relax away from a vigilant and protective positionality, due to the challenges of supporting the paradigm shift represented by SBCTC’s vision for HS+ from within bureaucratic support structures which are slow to adapt to change; Or as Dolores described it, “we have been building the plane while we fly it.” Each interviewee talked about, as Dolores framed them, “self-correcting systems,” which make everything from recording competency-based credits on student transcripts to helping HS+ students apply for graduation a constant struggle - with HS+ faculty on the front lines of each individual issue with students as it arises. During the course of our professional engagement, Elena and Dolores, told me about entire days spent supporting students in overcoming difficulties created by mismatched bureaucratic support structures, instead of focusing their attention and energy on their instructional role which, as Elena said, “is draining.”

While each participant talked about exhaustion, those stories were always balanced by expressions of their deep commitment to HS’s competency-based approach to high school completion for adults, and their desire to find structural solutions for, as Elena framed it, “making HS+ [faculty] work sustainable.” Furthermore, each participant pointed to the key importance of being in solidarity and supportive community with HS+ faculty colleagues, both for surviving the daily grind of navigating systems not designed for competency-based education, *and* for the coalition and consensus building and labor required to transform systems to better support HS+ while also continuing to strengthen their HS+ praxis. For example, when

discussing how she has continued to strengthen her HS+ praxis throughout the isolating events of the Covid-19 pandemic, Hannah talked about team-teaching with faculty colleagues who are:

Really great models because they lead from the heart, but they are also experts with [state high school graduation] standards and assessing learning outcomes. I am always learning from everyone about how we can be creative and flexible, but still have a rigorous program where students are scaffolded from where they are to the standards they need to meet to graduate.

Sylvia framed supportive solidarity in terms of “community” and “community-building,” while Elena talked about the need for:

HS+ faculty to see ourselves as a team and to support each other instead of working alone or in a silo...we cannot all be in every meeting and on every council, and we cannot all be on every hiring committee, but we can work together to share knowledge, and that makes us stronger because we are all working toward the same goals and we share the same values.

Adding to Elena’s focus on HS+ faculty colleagues working as a supportive team, Dolores placed heavy emphasis on the value of formalized communities of practice in which HS+ faculty can:

Collaborate around systemic barriers, build consensus about best practices, and work together to develop or identify solutions to the systemic issues we face...when battling support structures designed to capture and commodify the amount of time students spend in a seat in a classroom...and not for a competency-based model. This is how we started building the program during the HS+ pilot, and this pattern of collaborative work led

directly to the HS+ Cadre team-teaching model which has been such a success for faculty and students both.

Adding to this, Dolores also shared her belief that, by working collaboratively and in community with one another, HS+ faculty are better equipped to:

To face the direct challenges we have, and will continue, to face from those who treat HS+'s competency-based design and our instructional expertise with that model as something to be policed and, when possible, dismantled.

Because, as Elena told me, "We are stronger together."

Summary of Key Themes

During formal interviews, and throughout the course of our professional engagement, participants communicated their fervent desire to deliver on SBCTC's promises to students about what a competency-based high school experience for adults should look like. With each having many years of prior instructional experience with GED preparation, participants described HS+'s competency-based model as a more humane, and ultimately a more effective and streamlined, high school completion option for adults than GED preparation. When sharing about their instructional practices, each participant described a reflective and holistic HS+ praxis which is rooted in personal and cultural identity, as well as an asset-orientation toward valuing the knowledge, skills, and abilities HS+ students bring with them when they enter the program. However, participants also described problematic tensions between SBCTC's design for an individualized, competency-based high school completion option for adults, and college support systems and philosophies historically and practically rooted in seat-time paradigms. The daily grind of trying to enact authentic, competency-based instruction in the context of this structural

misalignment often pushes HS+ faculty into an exhausting, hypervigilant posture in defense of HS+. However, as participants told me, they continue to advocate for SBCTC's stated vision for HS+'s individualized, competency-based structure (SBCTC, 2020; SBCTC, 2021b), and resolve to keep striving to achieve a sustainable HS+ praxis in collaboration with, and by being in supportive community with, their HS+ faculty colleagues of which I am one.

Discussion

When discussing the cultural, structural, and administrative barriers they face when struggling to deliver on SBCTC's promises about HS+'s competency-based programmatic design, participants often spoke about their desire to find sustainable solutions to the challenges which have repeatedly sent them into a hypervigilant posture leading to exhaustion and disconnection from self. In her 2021 update to the characteristics *of* and antidotes *to* white supremacy culture, Tema Okun identifies disconnection from self as one of the intended consequences of living within systems framed upon the fear-based tenets of white supremacy culture because, "White supremacy, white supremacy culture, and racism use fear to divide and conquer, always in the service of profit and power for a few at the expense of the many" (Okun, 2021, p. 7). As Okun explains, this detachment from self harms everyone because it is, "a disconnection from our basic humanity in service of a false safety based on the idea that those of us who are white are both better and normal" (Okun, 2021, p. 5) and, ultimately, white supremacy is a construct through we are directed to, "define who is fully human and who is not" (Okun, 2021, p. 2).

Throughout the concluding discussion which follows, I lean on Tema Okun's descriptions of the characteristics of white supremacy culture, upon which public education in

the United States is built (Love, 2019, Okun, 2021; Vaught, 2011), as a framing for understanding the challenges described by participants, which lead to the exhausting hypervigilance they each described. Specifically, I focus on white supremacy culture's demands for *Perfectionism* in the service of the *Paternalistic* preservation of power for those who already hold it (Okun, 2021) and who use claims of *One Right Way* to define standards which must be enacted by those who are *Qualified* through their status as "white middle and owning class educated" (Okun, 2021, p. 12) individuals whose charge it is to identify and fix that which is 'broken' in service of *Either/Or and the Binary's* claims that any deviation from their defined standards are wrong, all the while shielded by *Defensiveness* which denies new or challenging ideas and creates an "oppressive culture where people are afraid to speak their truth" (Okun, 2021, p. 12).

Following this summary of some of the tenets of white supremacy culture, I look to Okun's antidotes to those characteristics as a source from which solutions to those challenges can grow. Important to note is that, though I did engage with Okun's scholarship during the course of my doctoral studies, it was Dolores who first shared Okun's work with me and the characteristics *of* and antidotes *to* white supremacy culture have become the shared vocabulary we rely upon during discourse about our HS+ faculty praxes, making the application of Okun's framework not just an academic exercise, but an authentic framing for discussion about the key themes that emerged during interviews and throughout the course of our professional engagement.

What are they getting away with here?

As introduced during the previous examination of key themes in this paper, when discussing the pushback they have received to a competency-based programmatic design for HS+, Elena highlighted:

The additional challenge of when we have leaders who do not understand the competency-based design of HS+. They seem to get focused on small details instead of trying to learn about the kind of program it is and how many people have benefited from it.

Each participant responded to this lack of understanding by recommending that HS+ stakeholders who do not have competency-based instructional expertise instead position themselves as learners and trust that they can rely on the expertise of highly trained and experienced HS+ faculty who are regularly described by SBCTC policy associates as state experts and who design and provide state-sponsored training about HS+'s competency-based design to faculty and administrative staff at SBCTC colleges across Washington State (T. Goracke, personal communication, April 20th, 2023). Following Elena's advice, I have also sought to position myself as a learner throughout the course of my professional engagement with each research participant, because I first entered into HS+ instructional work with the very same deficit-oriented sense of suspicion about competency-based education which participants described regularly and repeatedly facing.

Previous to my full-time employment with the institution where I now focus on HS+ instruction, I taught as an adjunct faculty member for a high school equivalency program in a community college Basic Education for Adults (BEA) program completely focused on GED instruction. Though I took and passed a much older version of the GED high school equivalency

tests when I was a teenager, I did not begin as a GED preparation instructor until *after* the GED Testing Service made the updates to the GED tests in 2014 which led many adult education stakeholders to characterize the new tests as much more difficult (Gaeta, et al., 2016) and motivated SBCTC to shift its philosophy *of* and resources *for* high school completion for adults in Washington State away from GED preparation.

This difference in historical experience means that, unlike each of the four research participants, I was not cognizant of the drop in GED completion rates they saw when the GED tests were updated to more closely align with the Common Core Standards in 2014 (Gaeta, et al., 2016). For me, having just a few students passing the GED each quarter had been normalized through an institutional culture in which the messaging was that fewer students passing the GED meant that it was now more rigorous (meaning better) than it had been previously, and that it was due to shortfalls in the intellectual capabilities of BEdA students that fewer students were now passing the GED. Indeed, I once had a conversation with a supervising faculty colleague during which they explicitly told me that “our students are not smart enough to pass the new GED tests.”

Though my own reflexive teaching practices, and my past experiences with leaving high school before graduation while still managing to become a capable college student, caused me to problematize this deficit-oriented thinking about BEdA students pursuing a GED, I never questioned the assessment instrument itself. In my experience, the GED had always been the only option for adults to obtain a high school equivalency credential in Washington State and, as far as I was concerned at the time, that would continue to be true for all eternity. Instead, as I saw that the GED math test was regularly the biggest barrier to GED completion for the students I

worked with, I spent about three years becoming an expert in teaching BEdA students to pass the GED math test.

In 2016, I shifted from my adjunct teaching position focused on GED preparation, to a full-time faculty position at an institution with a highly successful HS+ program. In my last year of GED preparation instruction, about 50 of the hundreds of BEdA students in my classes successfully completed all four GED tests - a marked improvement over the number of GED graduates in my first year of teaching who I could have counted using just the fingers on my two hands. I started in my new full-time position during spring quarter, which meant I hardly had time to get settled and engage with my new colleagues before I attended the first college graduation in June where I saw, literally, hundreds of students graduating with their HS+ diploma⁵. Informed by my lifelong indoctrination in the characteristics of white supremacy culture, my immediate and unexamined reaction was to ask the very same question identified by each research participant: *what are they getting away with here?*

The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

As of this writing, it is spring quarter of 2023, and graduation is again approaching. It brings me to tears now as I am writing, to reflect on the life-changing learning I have experienced through my professional engagement with each of the participants who supported my educational dreams by allowing me to interview them for this research project. Connection,

⁵ While HS+ graduation data belongs to the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) which administers HS+ in Washington State, GED completion data belongs to the for-profit Pearson Education Corporation which develops and markets the GED high school completion tests. Neither Pearson nor SBCTC have any means in place for tracking the GED completion rates for Basic Education for Adults (BEdA), making the anecdotal accounts of faculty the only source of data about student success with the GED versus the competency-based HS+ diploma (A. Cohen, personal communication, May 26th, 2023).

through community with these brilliant individuals, gave me the strength to face my fears about competency-based instructional practices, fears I now realize were rooted in my own successful indoctrination to the demands of white supremacy culture. As Okun writes, “White supremacy culture's number one strategy is to make us afraid,” meaning, “We must collectively and individually develop skills to meet our fear, sit with our fear, name our fear, and work to avoid letting fear drive our beliefs, actions, and decisions.” (Okun, 2021, p. 7).

The strength of Okun’s framework, for which I will be forever grateful, provides me with the tools I need to externalize the roots of my initial fears about HS+’s competency-based structure, and recognize that, due in part to the imposter syndrome I still strongly experienced in 2016 as a ‘high school dropout’ working in the context of higher education, my internalized drive for *Perfectionism* led me to believe that I knew what “perfection is while [assuming that] others are doing it wrong or falling short (Okun, 2021, p. 8) by the shift in instructional focus away from the ‘rigor’ of the GED in favor of HS+’s competency-based approach. White supremacy culture’s belief in *One Right Way* supported my *Paternalistic* assumption that the GED’s historical positioning as *the* high school completion option for adults in Washington State was, in and of itself, evidence of its worthiness to occupy that singular position. I viewed the GED “as being objective or neutral,” (Okun, 2021, p. 10), as opposed to what it is: an educational product marketed to adults who lack a high school credential by Pearson Education, which is a for profit company which makes hundreds of millions of dollars in profits (Pearson, 2023) in part through GED testing fees, and fees for other GED preparation products, paid for by adults who make lower wages and are more likely to be unemployed than adults who have a high school credential (USBLS, 2020).

Also important for me to interrogate for understanding, are the ways in which I have internalized white supremacy culture's belief that, as a formally educated white person, I am specially *Qualified* or "even duty bound to fix, save, and set straight the world" (Okun, 2021, p. 12), which disallows the reality that I should enter into any unfamiliar, occupied space positioned, with an open mind, as a learner. Okun describes the *Qualified* characteristic of white supremacy culture as "all around us" (Okun, 2021, p. 12) and provides the following example:

Academia defines "the classics" as all things Roman and Greek and male, while the word "classic" means that which is judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding. And so with the simple use of a word to describe a body of work, a whole category of knowledge assigns superiority to a very limited body of knowing and being, consigning other ways of knowing and being as "less than" while rarely recognizing other cultural and community-based ways of knowing at all. Examples include how white people lead, make decisions, and define reality for BIPOC and poor communities, from Congress and its policymaking to funders and their assessment of who and what is deserving to whole fields that overtly or subtly assume they can and should make decisions that impact people and communities with whom they have no real relationship (Okun, 2021, pp. 12-13).

Despite knowing nothing about the instructional approach, the history of the establishment of the program at both the state and local levels, or even very much about the state graduation standards (the GED kept me from having to look under the hood with those), My belief that I was specially *Qualified* led me to react to HS+'s competency-based design through white supremacy culture's *Either/Or and the Binary* characteristic, which made me believe that

if what I knew how to do instructionally was ‘right’ than the competency-based structure, which I did not understand and had no experience with, must be ‘wrong.’ I also realize now that my lack of familiarity with competency-based instructional design led me toward white supremacy culture’s predilection for *Defensiveness*, in which “People respond to new or challenging ideas with objections or criticism, making it very difficult to raise these ideas” (Okun, 2021, p. 22).

Community and the Antidotes to White Supremacy Culture

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an *antidote* is, “a remedy to counteract the effects of poison,” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). As Okun defines it, “White supremacy is a project of psychic conditioning and toxic belonging” (Okun, 2021, p. 3) with defined characteristics *and* antidotes to the poisonous effects, on individuals, communities, and organizations, of the pursuit of such toxic inclusion. The good news, says Okun, “is that while white supremacy culture informs us, it does not define us. It is a construct, and anything constructed can be deconstructed and replaced” (Okun, 2021, p. 5), with the first step being refusal to comply (Okun, 2021).

Fear-based *Perfectionism* which, Okun clarifies as different from demanding excellence of one’s self (Okun, 2021), prevented me from openly engaging with HS+’s competency-based design when I first encountered it in 2016 instead of allowing myself, “room to consider how a different path or paths might improve [my] approach,” (Okun, 2021, p. 11) in the face of the relatively low number of students in my classes who successfully completed the GED. Now, blessed through the learning I have experienced as a member of the HS+ Cadre, in which I team-teach with two of the participants from this study, I describe being in community with my HS+ faculty colleagues as a direct challenge to white supremacy culture’s toxic demands of *Perfectionism* which assured me that I knew, “what perfection is while others are doing it wrong

or falling short” (Okun, 2021, p. 8). Instead, the supportive structure of the Cadre community has enveloped me in a culture of appreciative inquiry in which ‘mistakes’ are normalized and celebrated for the learning opportunities they present (Okun, 2021).

To illustrate how the HS+ team-teaching Cadre is a direct challenge to white supremacy culture’s demands for *Perfectionism*, I want to highlight that HS+ is still a young program and, as Dolores shared earlier, we continue to be, “building the plane while we fly it,” as our understanding of the work continues to evolve. In addition to the individualized knowledges and skills HS+ students bring with them to the program, around which we build their personalized learning plan for completing their diploma, each student has “the right and obligation to meet the minimum graduation requirements in place for their ninth grade cohort at the time they enter a public high school, regardless of whether their expected graduation year has been extended or what year they actually graduate” (WAC 180-51-030); In other words, each student comes into the program with different assets on which to build their learning plan *and* they have differing graduation requirements depending on what year they were scheduled to enter the ninth grade base on their current age. Each of these moving parts adds beautiful complexity to this individualized work, making HS+ instruction, as Dolores frames it, an “ever-emergent practice,” which requires the members of the HS+ Cadre to engage in frequent and sustained consensus building as we, “accept there are many ways to get to the same goal [and once the Cadre] group has made a decision about what to do, [we] honor that decision,” (Okun, 2021, p. 11) even if the determination runs contrary to the positionality through which an individual Cadre member entered the conversation. I will provide an example.

During the key findings section of this paper, Dolores shared the HS+ student summary profile below:

The student, who went to high school through tenth grade and has a copy of her unofficial high school transcript, has been a state certified nursing assistant for over a decade. She has additional professional certifications such as CPR, first aid, and medication administration. She thinks she would like to study for a nursing degree, but she has not decided for sure. She might also be interested in a shorter certification such as medical assisting. In addition to her extensive professional, medical experience, she is a parent and volunteers regularly through her church community. Finally, the student is multilingual, and regularly attends appointments with older family members, who speak mainly Arabic, to assist with language translation when necessary.

Not mentioned in the profile above, though, is that the student also had a hefty stack of additional county and state-sponsored certifications, related to her work in healthcare, with which no member of the Cadre team was familiar. Though Dolores was the first point of contact here, the team-teaching Cadre structure means that any member of the instructional team may work with any student enrolled with the Cadre at any time. In this case, because I had also been a state certified nursing assistant in the past, the Cadre group discussed the student's additional certifications, and we decided that I would meet with this student to discuss those additional training experiences. Explicit to the positionality of the Cadre group is that while HS+ faculty must be experts in assessing outcomes, HS+ students are the experts about their own knowledge and experiences. Therefore, I entered the conversation with the student positioned as a learner ready to discover what she could teach me about her own experiences.

One of the many certifications the student had, but with which we were unfamiliar, was a county-sponsored training course about 'cultural competence.' In talking with the student, she provided me with specific details about what knowledge areas were covered during the course,

and then illustrated several examples from her own professional context in which she connected the learnings from the training to her professional practice of caring for adults, from diverse backgrounds, in their own homes. During the next Cadre team meeting following my conversation with the student, we discussed the details of the training the student had shared with me, and we worked together to build consensus about what learning outcomes were satisfied by the certification and what credit amounts were appropriate given the depth and breadth of what the student shared with me. Ultimately, the Cadre team connected the student's training about 'cultural competence' to contemporary world issues outcomes and, though I voiced doubts at first, we engaged in robust and open discussion, in which no one was 'right' or 'wrong' and came to a consensus which we all stand behind as a team.

Though we each engage in authentic competency-based instruction, each Cadre member approaches their work through their own intersecting identities and experiences, which means we often have different approaches and perspectives that we bring to working with students. We agree that there is no *One Right Way* to communicate with students or develop project-based curriculum. Instead, we "accept there are many ways to get to the same goal," (Okun, 2021, p. 11) and celebrate the diversity of ideas which we can generate through collaboration. To frame it another way, I have better ideas when working in community with my colleagues, than I do working alone in my own silo. For me, when we made the shift to exclusively teaching online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, working alone led to "isolation and loneliness," (Okun, 2021, p. 20), and coming together in community with my colleagues felt life-preserving.

White supremacy culture's commitment to *Paternalism*, which means that, "those without power are marginalized from decision-making processes," (Okun, 2021, p. 10), while feeling the full brunt of the results of those decisions (Okun, 2021), means that new HS+

students come into the program conditioned to expect a hierarchical power structure in which they have no agency and are not involved in making decisions about how they will complete their high school credit requirements. Instead, my Cadre colleagues and I, “avoid making decisions in the absence of those most affected by those decisions,” (Okun, 2021, p. 11), and instead engage HS+ students in conversations about their how their high school graduation requirements are determined and then work in collaboration with students, and with one another, to develop an individualized learning plan which centers their knowledge, skills, and experiences and which is tied to the education and professional goals they have for their own futures.

While white supremacy’s claims of *Objectivity* advertise, “the belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process,” (Okun, 2021, p. 10), my HS+ Cadre colleagues and I continue to give voice to the truth that anything and everything a student has shared with us about their past experiences with school-trauma must inform the development of their individualized learning plan for completing their diploma. Furthermore, as a collective, we have a stated commitment to understanding in practice that, “emotional intelligence is real and valuable,” and to engage with and support one another through critical conversation as we “work to become more emotionally intelligent” (Okun, 2021, p. 12), as a part of our larger mission to support healing for everyone, ourselves included, engaged in HS+ work.

Okun describes white supremacy culture’s claims of being specially *Qualified* as, “the ways those of us who are white internalize the sense that we know when we actually don’t” (Okun, 2021, p. 14). Each participant described having experienced direct challenges to their expertise in assessing whether students have met the competencies needed to earn a high school diploma, and participants experienced those challenges as racist whereby deficit-oriented

thinking is applied to the skills and talents of Faculty of Color. Meanwhile, white supremacy culture's insistence that, as a white-identifying and formally educated person, I am specially *Qualified* has meant that, despite my relative lack of experience with competency-based instructional practices, I have not experienced those challenges to my expertise in assessing outcomes. In reflecting on this disturbing fact for the purposes of this discussion (and for the health and wellness of my professional HS+ praxis), I lean on Abrego's challenge to the claims to objectivity within qualitative research contexts in which they are positioned as an insider, when they wrote that:

Scholars who are members of the majority racial group who benefit from patriarchy and white supremacy, have the privilege of intellectualizing and distancing, and are more likely to be endorsed as appropriately objective and rigorous" (Abrego, 2022, p. 3).

With Abrego's formulization to instruct my reflective practice, I understand that white supremacy culture's claims that I am *Qualified* combine with the fantasy of objectivity such that I am deemed to be appropriately distanced from the interests of the Communities of Color I serve. Therefore, I am not perceived as a threat to white supremacy and my valuing of student knowledge goes unchallenged.

Conclusion

From its inception, white supremacy culture has been a construct through which we are instructed to determine who is fully human and who is not (Okun, 2021) by demanding that we see the world through *Either/Or and the Binary* meaning that the 'rightness' of whiteness results in the 'wrongness' of People and Communities of Color. Through my professional engagement with research participants, and by relying on Okun's wisdom for framing, I have learned to

actively and explicitly, “Notice when you or others are simplifying complex issues,” and I now problematize such simplification as a rejection of the humanness of everyone in the spaces in which I live and work. I explicitly choose to engage with human beings who speak their truth, *especially* when the truth of their lived reality challenges my own experiences and understanding. I actively work to notice when *Defensiveness* makes its insistent demands on me and I reflect on the ways I have been complicit with white supremacy culture’s “dis-ease with truth telling” (Okun, 2021, p. 22) with the ultimate goal that, through my HS+ praxis, I may contribute to a present and a future in which all human beings are treated as fully human because this is what education must provide. To close, I want to share the enduring wisdom of Dr. Rochelle Brock who wrote that:

Education should provide students care for their being with a pedagogy that teaches love of self and others, inner strength, humanity and humanness, survival and struggle, and hope and knowledge” (Brock, p. 18).

I return to Brock’s elucidation daily, and I will keep struggling to enact Brock’s vision for what education should provide, through my HS+ faculty praxis and in supportive community with the brilliant HS+ faculty colleagues who engaged in this research project with me. *Thank you forever, always, and from the bottom of my heart. I love each of you.*

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