A PHENOMENOLOGY OF PLACEMENT: EXPLORING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE LINKS AMONG REMEDIAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES, ACADEMIC ABILITY, AND BELONGING IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored both the students' lived experiences of placement processes at an urban community college and their consciousness of those experiences. By applying phenomenological methodology within an engaged inquiry framework, this study integrates multiple perspectives into a narrative thread to make sense of students' experiences with placement and the prospect of remediation. Further, this study sought to understand not only how that prospect is socially constructed but how it affects the students' integration into higher education. By applying socio-cultural theories of ability and ability development as a lens, the study focused on the relationships among the students' understanding of remedial structures, of their own academic ability, and of their sense of belonging in higher education.

DEDICATION

For *all* my participants

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Does remediation in community college offer a second chance for academically underprepared students? Does it offer a path to economic and social mobility for historically disadvantaged groups of students? Or, does remediation drain the students of whatever aspirations for higher education they may hold? (Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2015). While a great deal of research explores the effectiveness of remediation, the mixed empirical findings have only fueled what has become a heated debate: is remediation "a help or a hindrance" for today's community college student (Martorell & McFarlin, 2010; Bailey, Jaggars, & Clayton, 2013)?

This question is particularly critical in an urban community college setting, in which most students referred for remediation are racial, ethnic, and economic minorities (Attewell, Lavin, Domina & Levey, 2006). The setting increases the poignancy of the question given the historical educational debt owed to such students and the constant budgetary pressures limiting resources within such institutions (Ladson-Billings, 2007). If community colleges are to fulfill a transformative social role—opening opportunity for advancement for the historically marginalized students-—they will need to do more than offer a more affordable path to higher education; they will also need to provide access to the cultural world of higher education, a way to integrate underprepared and underrepresented students into academic culture and discourse (Xu, 2016; Karp & Bork, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

From the institution's point of view, remediation1 has been the dominant integration model since the end of what came to be known as the Open Door Movement (Xu, 2016; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). In the 1970s, many American community colleges experimented with true open access. Embracing a "student's right to fail" philosophy, these community colleges abandoned the traditional placement processes and allowed all high school graduates and equivalents to enroll directly into college-level coursework without any assessment of readiness (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Considering the high failure rate of English and Math gateway courses, however, most institutional stakeholders concluded that true open access at American community colleges was untenable. College personnel and researchers alike argued something needed to be done–both for the students (to help them develop the skills needed for success at the college level) and for the institution (to maintain academic standards and the integrity of its transfer mission) (Rounds & Anderson, 1984; Kingan & Alfred, 1993; Hadden, 2000).

Critics of entry assessment, however, questioned the equity of this return to placement screening and remedial classes. Their reasoning echoed the viewpoint of earlier critical theorists, like Karabel (1972) and Clark (1960), who had argued that the increased educational stratification manifest in the rise of the community college merely submerged class conflict without redressing social inequalities. Like their predecessors, critics of entry assessment argued that the educational structures formed by placement assessment ultimately act as diversionary, or tracking, mechanisms that further shunt poor students and student of color—disproportionately

screened for remediation—away from the baccalaureate degree and away from opportunities for meaningful social advancement (Gumport & Bastedo, 2001; Brint & Karabel, 1989).

The return to entry assessment was not the only policy shift that raised the concerns of critical theorists. Following the end of the Open Door Movement, another shift further undermined opportunities to obtain a baccalaureate degree for low income and minority students. Concerns about prestige at four-year colleges, beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s, led some states and large cities, such as New York, to shift remedial courses in English and math to two-year schools, further transforming the community college into the educational structure most responsible for integrating, or diverting, growing numbers of un- and under-prepared students into the academic culture of higher learning (Bettinger & Long, 2004; Attewell, Lavin, Domina & Levey, 2006). Students assigned to remediation at two year schools, these critics argued, would eventually give up on their aspirations to transfer to four-year schools and would, instead, enroll in one of the community college's vocational programs and settle for a "lesser degree" (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Gumport & Bastedo, 2001).

Although the dimension of the problem is in dispute, researchers have found some empirical support for the concern of critical theorists, who argued that the stigma of remediation, raised by the second-class status of the junior college, would divert the higher aspirations of nontraditional college students—the same students that community colleges are most inclined to serve. After CUNY's system shifted its remediation to two-year colleges, researchers found that many black and Latinx students shunned the idea of it. While CUNY had offered it at its four-year schools, 60 to 70% of minorities who earned a bachelor's degree began their college coursework in remedial classes. Yet, when obligated to complete remediation at a two-year

school, many black and Latinx opted out of college altogether (Lavin, 2000; Gumport & Bastedo, 2001).

The concerns of the critical theorists have not abated; they had been, however, largely subsumed by the orthodoxy of the developmental movement that arose after the apparent failure of the Open Door Movement. Advocates of developmental education hold that, while always in need of improvement, mandatory placement assessment and developmental pedagogy are considered best practices on America's community colleges (Boylan, 2002; Kingan & Alfred, 1993). But the focus on skill and knowledge development in this paradigm creates the elongated remedial structures that are more recently under attack, even though research, when it finds positive effects for remediation, finds it among outcomes for lower-level students (Hodara, Jaggar, & Karp 2012; Long & Boatman, 2012; Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2012).

Often adopting the discourse of medical diagnoses (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, Belfield, 2012), policymakers and researchers assessing remedial programs focus their attention on improving either the screening for treatment (e.g. devising more accurate placement processes) or the treatment (e.g., improving pedagogy to redress the perceived deficits of the students) (Hodara, Jaggars, & Karp, 2012). Whether placement can be accurate or valid, however, is thrown all together into question if the treatment does not work. Assessment theorists refer to this as the "'actionable placement' hypothesis" (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011, p. 2). Empirically evaluating the effectiveness of remediation—the treatment, in this metaphor—is methodologically difficult for several reasons. Grubb (2001) delineates many of them as he reviews the various approaches to evaluation that researchers and administrators have employed over the years. Among them are a failure to control for background characteristics of students,

test validity, maturation effects, and selection effects. The students selected for remediation are different from those selected for college-level work, so a direct comparison of their outcomes in college-level classes cannot be made (Bettinger & Long, 2005). Moreover, researchers can't compare students who complete their remedial coursework to those who don't, given self-selection bias (Levin & Calcagno, 2008).

Yet an additional problem lies in the great diversity of placement processes between and within community college systems (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011), which makes it difficult to generalize from one study to the other and work toward iterative improvement (Prince, 2005). Most significant, for this study, is the counter-factual question at the heart of the matter: Would the student have been successful had he or she enrolled directly into college level courses? Given this question and the great diversity of practices, establishing a causal relationship between remedial treatment and student outcomes is "the main statistical problem" researchers need to overcome (Levin & Calcagno, 2008, p. 190); students are not selected randomly for remediation, so the gold standard for causality—a double-blind randomized experiment (Cook, Campbell, & Shadish, 2002)—is not available to researchers.

Although researchers have found ways to create quasi-experimental designs by exploiting policy differences and employing advanced statistics, like propensity scoring (e.g., Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006) and regression discontinuity analysis (e.g., Martorell & McFarlin, 2010; Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2012), the question of whether remediation improves students' chances at college-level success remains unsettled (Bailey, Jaggars, & Scott-Clayton, 2013). Yet the research into this question converges on two points, both of which suggest an under-theorized subjective and intersubjective nature of remediation. First, decades of

mixed empirical results reveal the heterogeneity of remedial effects (Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2012; Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2012). How is it that remedial structures undermine some students more than others? The negative effects of remedial assignment seem the greatest for low-risk, or high-ability, students (Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2012), older students[2], men, part-time students, vocational students, and African Americans (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2008; Xu, 2016). The mechanisms underlying these effects are, however, un-examined (Xu, 2016). Second, the great variety of approaches to placement and remediation that we see across and within state systems not only makes discerning the effectiveness of remediation difficult (Martorel & MacFarlin, 2011; Hodara, Jaggars, Karp, 2012; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006); it suggests that the objective frameworks employed in assessing the problem of remediation—which embrace a purely materialistic view of structure and ignore the social construction of concepts like college readiness, academic ability, and remediation (Sewell, 1992)—will continue to confound our efforts to improve the chances of traditionally disadvantaged students.

A recent shift in how the problem is framed, largely made by researchers associated with the Community College Research Center (CCRC), has revitalized questions about the stigmatizing effect of remedial placement and its role in social reproduction. These researchers argue that, when analyzing the effects of remediation, we cannot continue to ignore the large number of students who do not enroll after remedial assignment (Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2012; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2008). Taken all together, the existing research on the effects of remediation recalls the concerns of the critical theorists: There is something about the idea of remediation and the message about ability and belonging received by students that impacts outcomes, a notion which challenges the validity of placement from within an interpretive

paradigm. From this perspective, placement based on ability sorting—and in particular, mandatory placement—cannot be objective, neutral, or valid in that abilities and perceptions of abilities are socially constructed (Oakes, Wells, & Jones, 1997; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984).

The high cost and poor outcomes of remediation (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, Belfield, 2012; Breneman & Haarlow, 1997) coupled with the ambiguous empirical record has given critics of remediation new political voice. Based largely on this research from the CCRC, Florida's legislation passed reforms in 2013 (HB 1720) limiting money for remediation and ending placement assessment for recent high school graduates. In response, colleges converted remediation at Florida's two-year schools from the standard practice of mandatory prerequisites to a revised practice of voluntary co-requisites. Although researchers have yet to fully assess the results of this policy change, initial findings suggest that, while the failure rate is higher than it was before the legislation, the overall number of students completing college-level classes has increased (Hu, Park, Woods, Richard, Tandberg & Jones, 2016).

We don't know yet whether these changes have shifted attrition processes forward, whether they've eroded standards (Hu, Tandberg, Nix, Collins, & Hankerson, 2014), or whether they have closed or widened equity gaps, but these initial results lend further credence to the notion, first raised by critical theorists concerned about the equity of remediation, that traditional remedial structures are more of a hindrance than a help in that they discourage many students at the very onset of their college aspirations, a problem which calls for interpretive inquiry. What social mechanisms make up this discouraging effect? How does student perception of ability—in particular, academic ability—shape the sense students make of their placement as well as their subsequent approach to remedial coursework? And how might social messages—about

remediation, community colleges, and ability—amplify the effects (Dweck, 2008; Steele & Aaronson, 1995)?

Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological study explored both the students' lived experiences of placement processes at an urban community college and their consciousness of those experiences. By applying phenomenological methodology within an engaged inquiry framework, I integrated multiple perspectives into a narrative thread to make sense of students' experiences with placement and the prospect of remediation. Further, this study sought to understand not only how that prospect is socially constructed but how it affects the students' integration into higher education. By applying socio-cultural theories of ability and ability development as a lens, the study focused on the relationships among the students' understanding of remedial structures, of their own academic ability, and of their sense of belonging in higher education. In particular, I extend Dweck's work on implicit theories and motivation, and Lareau's work on cultural differences between social classes. I do so to consider the larger socio-cultural prism of meanings students use to develop their self-theories and their field-theories—their sense of how things like placement and remediation work. To this end, I designed my research questions to explore themes as participants worked with me to make sense of their remedial assignment in a semi-structured sequence of interviews over one and a half semesters.

My research questions are as follows:

1. How do students at an urban community college make sense of their remedial assignments? That is, what frames of reference do they use to interpret or understand their placement?

2. How do students' experiences with prior ability (and belonging) messages shape their meaning making around the current ability (and belonging) messages of their remedial assignment?
3. How do students' interpretations influence subsequent orientation to the remedial coursework? That is (how) does their interpretation of their placement affect their integration into the academic culture of their community college?
4. How are such understandings inflected by social messages of fixed or natural abilities along dimensions of class and race?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The ambiguous findings of empirical research on placement and remedial outcomes implies that subjective and intersubjective social mechanisms are at work, yet little of the existing research directly investigates student meaning-making around placement processes. That remedial placement would be discouraging is perhaps obvious; however, studies that include students who do not enroll after remedial referral underline the notion: Something about remedial placement itself depresses student outcomes. Whether to include these non-enrolling students in an analysis of the effectiveness of remediation is debated in the literature. Yet, as Scott-Clayton and Rodriguez (2012) point out, one can ignore such students only if "one is willing to assume away any direct effects of the remedial label" on student outcomes (p. 7).

The question of stigma and the remedial label is raised by quantitative researchers as they examine their findings, but given their research methods, it is left unexplored. One study referenced to support Florida's new legislation, Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2008), examines remedial attrition from initial placement referral to eventual outcome. Using Achieving the Dream data (AtD) as well as National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88/2000), these researchers look at the relationship between multiple levels of remediation and student outcomes in college-level courses. Although it is not surprising to find that student persistence is negatively related to the number of levels, Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2008) had not expected the pattern of attrition they found: At each level, nearly two-fifths (almost 40%) of the students fail to enroll in the next level. This includes students placed just below the college level, which seems counter-intuitive. One might assume that since only one semester of remediation is

required, these students would be more likely to enroll in the next course—the college-level course—than students placed at a lower level. That these effects are larger for men, African-Americans, and older students adds to concerns about equity and access. Those who aren't discouraged, however, are just as likely to succeed in the relevant gate-keeper course regardless of where they started in their developmental sequences.

Given the limitations of their methodology, Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2008) state they cannot discern whether the instruction in the developmental sequence has lifted successful students to the same level as their peers or whether these students are somehow remarkable or exceptional themselves. Their achievement, however, is overshadowed by the failure of their numerous counterparts, including those who did not enroll after their remedial referral. In the end, Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2008) conclude that most students don't complete their remedial sequence and don't enroll in college-level courses, not because they fail their remedial classes, but because they fail to enroll in the next course in the sequence. Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2008) contend that this pattern suggests "either the prospect or the experience of remediation discourages students who therefore give up and leave college" (my emphasis, pp. 13-14).

Research investigating the experience of non-traditional students at four-year colleges and two-year colleges can inform our understanding of the experience of remediation. A subset of this research explores the non-traditional student's experience specifically in remedial writing classes at community colleges, such as Rebecca Cox's provocatively named The College Fear Factor (2009). Cox argues, as have others more generally (Penrose, 2002; London, 1986; Weis, 1985/2018), that students from nontraditional backgrounds are alienated, and often intimidated by traditional academic culture and discourse. Such students may find themselves "juggling two

worlds" as they strive to "leave their blue-collar communities by way of the college" (London, 1986, p. 92). But, with the help of teachers who act as intermediaries, students can be integrated into a community of practice and encouraged to persist despite their fears (Cox, 2009; London, 1986; Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, & Solorzano, 2015; White & Lowenthal, 2011). Taken altogether, the research on the non-traditional students' experiences in remedial classrooms suggests the quality of the remedial experience matters. A focus on critical thinking and demystifying college processes seems to help the most students (Grubb, 2001; Boylan, 2002). Nevertheless, this research supports the notion that, for many non-traditional students, the experience of remediation can be quite daunting.

Given the difficulties of gathering evidence directly from those students who drop out early and those students who never enroll, little, if any, empirical research investigates the prospect of remediation directly from the student's point of view, especially as held by the student who doesn't enroll. However, a few recent studies examine student perspective of placement and remedial structures as they engage them. With their use of student focus groups and numerous interviews with students and staff, these studies provide valuable insights into the social mechanisms that underlie the poor remedial outcomes revealed in the numbers. Although these studies largely employ descriptive rather than interpretative qualitative methods, they hint at the different conceptualizations of ability and educational opportunity structures that underlie the discouragement, frustration, and confusion students experience. In doing so, these studies offer a solid foundation for the current study, which seeks to move beyond "'giving voice'" to the concerns of participants to "making sense" of them (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith & Osborn, M. 2004).

Stigma or Stigma Free?

Critical theorists Karabel (1972; 1986) and Clark (1960) worried that the stigma of community colleges coupled with the stigma of remediation would discourage or "cool off" students' aspirations. They feared students—especially minority students—would become so discouraged, they would move to the vocational side of the emerging dual-purpose junior college turned community college. In contrast, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) argue that attempts to de-stigmatize remediation structures at community colleges leads to the same ends—perhaps even more pernicious ends—through slightly different mechanisms, or means. Instead of discouraging students out right, the stigma-free approach "cools off" aspirations by delaying the students' consideration of "realistic backup options" (p. 265), such as vocational programs or certificates, the "lesser degrees" Karabel and earlier theorists worried about. This intertextual discussion reflects the contradictory nature of the community college's social identity, which embodies the divergent evaluative norms of liberal and vocational education (Brint & Karabel, 1991; Dougherty, 1994; Clark, 1960). In doing so, it reveals the thicket of ambiguous and seemingly contradictory expectations and assumptions that make up "the micro-interactional processes" (Lareau & Weininger, 2003) through which students must somehow navigate if they want to succeed.

Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) situate their study within the work of these earlier critical theorists but point out that today's community college is very different from that at the center of Karabel's (1972) and Clark's (1960) concerns. The main difference is the "enormous growth of remedial programs" (p. 250). This growth, they argue, forces a reevaluation of the underlying mechanisms of the "cooling off" theory. Clark (1960) had held that community

colleges can fill their vocational rolls by channeling unprepared students through a series of discouraging "pre-entrance testing, counseling, orientation classes, notices of unsatisfactory work, further referrals for counseling, and probation" (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002, p. 250) —all processes that work to "legitim[ize] the process" so that students "blame themselves" (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002, p. 251) for their failure. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) argue that today's community college student arrives at the same conclusion —that they ought to set their sights "lower" (p. 250)—but they do so on their own, without a nagging counselor; and, they are not informed of alternative options.

To draw these conclusions, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) look at data collected from interviews and surveys of faculty, staff, and students at two urban, Midwestern community colleges. They found that the faculty and staff espouse strong beliefs in students' ability, regardless of past performance, consistent with a developmental approach to learning and the "college-for-all" ethos of Turner's contest mobility model (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Rosenbaum, 1997). Faculty hold out the possibility that all students can achieve by recalling stories of the few students who surprised them. They want to keep open that possibility—that the student may catch fire and achieve more than anyone expected, including the students themselves. Moreover, faculty and staff in this study tend to emphasize the college's role as a transfer institution over its vocational mission as they define their own role in terms of maintaining academic standards. The combination of optimism and high expectations, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) suggest, is an "appropriate strategy given […] students' fragile academic egos" (p. 257). One participant, a reverse transfer student, benefited from this stigma-

free approach. He stated, “I feel more tenacious…I’m trying to find a word for it. I don’t feel that I don’t belong here. I feel like this is what I want to do and I am going to do” (p. 257).

Deil-Amen and Roenbaum (2002) underscore that this approach, however, doesn’t work for many students, especially those least familiar with college processes. They argue that “a reluctance to use language that may have negative implications can prevent students from receiving clear information” (p. 257) about their ability and their chances of academic success in college. Most students, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) contend, are ultimately misled by the stigma-free approach and fail to realize that their remedial course work doesn’t count toward graduation or toward any degree or certificate. They are led to believe that the placement test is low-stakes, even meaningless, but come to find out that is not the case. The result, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) conclude, is that students are essentially “swindled” by well-meaning college personnel, in a process akin to that revealed by Goffman’s (1953) analysis of the confidence scam (p. 260). In their effort to avoid discouraging students, students are “trick[ed]” (p. 264) into spending time, money, and effort in classes that don’t have the value students think they have, while they pursue a goal for which, these researchers seem to suggest, they haven’t adequate ability.

Readiness and Open Access

Like Deil-Amen and Rosebaum (2002), Venezia, Bracco and Nodine (2010) gathered student impressions of placement and remediation, as well as the impressions of faculty, counselors, and advisors. They conducted 28 focus groups involving 257 students, and 12 interviews with counselors and advisors. They collected additional information from the matriculation officers of all 110 California community colleges through phone surveys. Drawing

from this comprehensive data set, these researchers echo the findings of their own earlier study (Valencia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003) as well as those of other studies (Karp, & Bork, 2012), including Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) described above: The disconnect between high school and community college assessment and coursework creates significant barriers to student success. Looking at five community colleges within California's system, these researchers contend that students are ill-served by the large system's decentralized governance structures and understaffed support services. Inconsistent standards and policies regarding placement, coupled with insufficient staffing, lead to student confusion, frustration, and, in some cases, helplessness.

While these researchers initially intended to center their study on student perceptions of community college processes, their participants drew their focus toward high school experiences and issues of college readiness. Reflecting on their lack of preparation, students expressed misconceptions about the rigors of community college and the purpose of placement testing. In the first case, remedial students lamented that they hadn't taken more challenging courses in high school, revealing that they hadn't realized that community colleges have the same standards, largely, as regular colleges. One student reported: "'At my high school, they said junior college is at the bottom. I always thought junior college was for people who really didn't care about school and weren't going to do anything with their life'" (p. 7). Students placed in remediation felt in some instances that they had essentially returned to high school. Overall, students were discouraged that community colleges were not what they had expected, suggesting, as Rosenbaum (2011) argues, that students confuse "open-access" with "easy-access."

In the second case, remedial students revealed that they hadn't fully understood the placement process. One student believed the placement test was a career inventory designed to

help him find the best fitting "placement," or occupation, for him, a misconception that is heartbreaking to this researcher. Given the impression that the test was low-stakes, students indicated that they hadn't adequately prepared for the test or put in much effort while taking it. Indeed, they discounted the relevance of the test to judge their ability to succeed in college: "It wasn't a test of what you could do, but about what you could remember from a long time ago" (p. 9). Further, they revealed the same effects of stigma-free messaging found by Deil-Amen and Rosebaum (2002); one student reported: "'[The woman at the test center] said, "It doesn't matter how you place. It's just to see where you are." Looking back, that's not true. It's really important'" (p. 10). In the end, Venezia, Bracco, and Nodine (2010) present a picture of community college placement and remediation that is full of disjunction and ambiguity, and offer recommendations to improve the alignment among standards, policies, and messaging between California's secondary and post-secondary systems.

Educational Opportunity Structures and Student Habitus

The third study, Person, Rosenbaum, and Deil-Amen (2006), takes as its central focus problems with messaging. They argue that the unclear standards and expectations consistent with Turner's contest mobility model hinders low-income and black and Latinx students' access as effectively as the more explicit barriers of the past. Using interviews with administrators and students along with survey results from 4,400 students, Person, Rosenbaum, and Deil-Amen (2006) explore the relationship between college structures and the information problems of students. They also make explicit the theoretical framework that is implied in the first two studies discussed above; that is, while the first two studies argued that unprepared students were the most affected by remedial processes, this study makes explicit that students' apparent mis-

understanding of college structures may be ascribed to their background, or—more conceptually—their habitus, and their subsequent lack of cultural and social capital. The first two studies suggest that college policies, procedures, and academic culture at large can exacerbate those misunderstandings. Person, Rosenbaum, and Deil-Amen (2006) seeks to prove, or at least offer tentative proof, of that supposition.

To do so, Person, Rosenbaum, and Deil-Amen (2006) compare the information problems of students at two types of two year colleges: the community college and the occupational—or technical—college. The point of the comparison is to discern whether the more rigid, and less ambiguous, structures of the latter can lead to better information flows and to greater student confidence that they will achieve their educational goals. Cautioning that their findings are tentative, Person, Rosenbaum, and Deil-Amen (2006) argue that, while both types of colleges serve similar types of students, students at each institution differ significantly on how well they understand the requirements of their programs and the value of their remedial classes. The implication is that for the new type of college student served by these two-year schools, the greater structure, less choice, and mandatory advising of the occupational college, in line with Turner's sponsorship model of mobility, may account for higher levels of non-traditional student completion at such institutions. By undermining the students' security and comfort, Person, Rosenbaum, and Deil-Amen (2006) seem to suggest, uncertainty is the discouraging and diverting mechanism in play in the social reproduction that occurs within community college structures.

Taken together, these three studies (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Venezia, Bracco & Nodine, 2010; Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006)—all of which explicitly examine

student impression of placement and remediation—suggest that the non-traditional student has a harder time understanding the ambiguous remedial structures within community colleges, especially those aligned with the contest mobility of the junior college model (Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006), and that this lack of understanding, by causing frustration and confusion, results in depressed academic outcomes. This research demonstrates how a failure of the system to prepare students for post-secondary education is internalized by students as their individual failures. While confused and frustrated by their remedial placement, they blame few others then themselves. Moreover, this research supports the notion that ambiguous messaging and expectations create very real barriers to student success. And, it suggests the need for a fuller investigation of how the desire to not discourage students—on the part of both high school and community college instructors and staff–may contribute to the problem of readiness and the poor outcomes of remediation (Rosenbaum, 1998; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). Given their breadth, however, these studies cannot adequately explore the relationships among the students' understanding of the educational opportunity structures of community colleges, their view of their own academic abilities, and their sense of belonging within institutions of higher learning.

While it is clear in the existing literature that students hold many misconceptions about placement processes, remedial coursework, and community college expectations, the antecedents and implications of these conceptions are both under-explored and under-theorized. First, existing studies present student misconceptions as either the result of poor messaging or faulty information flows on the part of institutions (Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010); or as the lack, on the student's part, of cultural capital, or "know-how" (Lareau & Weininger, 2007, p. 3). Either way, the misconception exists in the students' mind, although it may be caused by administrative

ambiguity or cultural distance. These studies capture only glimpses of the deeper meaning systems or "figured worlds" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001) that shape student experience. Both the social construction of ability (Oakes, Wells, & Jones, 1997; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984) and the meaning of remediation are left out of the theoretical framing; therefore, the quest for understanding is limited to an investigative, or technocratic, desire to get things right (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012).

Second, student perceptions—or misperceptions—of remedial processes are presented as static entities. How these conceptions affect the student's subsequent orientation to their course work is unexplored. We do not know how students' view of remediation is related to their motivation or the effort they put into their coursework. Researchers tend to focus on either placement or pedagogy–it is either "the prospect or the experience of remediation" driving attrition (my emphasis, Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2008, pp. 13-14). How the experience of placement shapes the student's experience integrating into the academic culture of community college is overlooked. Further, we don't know how the student forms his or her mental representation, or understanding, of remediation; researchers may refer to student conceptions as misconceptions, but misperceptions—like all perceptions—are socially constructed, part of an already figured world. How, for example, does the second-class status of community colleges and the myth of open-access (Rosenbaum, 1997) contribute to problems of student readiness and the discouraging effects of remedial placement?

Third, the discouraging effect of remedial referral is taken at face value; that is, we assume all students are discouraged in the same way and that this discouragement is obvious or sub-theoretical. Indeed, we know little about how students interpret their remedial placement,

other than that they see it as discouraging. Yet, we also know from the research that students who choose remediation benefit from it (Weissman, Bulakowski, & Jumisko, 1997; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). How is the student's interpretation of remediation reconciled with their view of their academic ability and their sense of belonging in higher education? Further, we don't know what remediation looks like to the student who doesn't enroll—based solely on the prospect of it. Given the insight of the symbolic interactionalists—that people act towards things depending on the meaning those things hold for them and that those meanings are constructed through social interaction (Blumer, 1986; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001)—we may understand remedial structures better by exploring how they appear to students and what they see as their prospects within such structures (Dweck & London, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

An interpretive qualitative study of placement processes at an urban community college addresses the deficits in the placement literature outlined above and allows for a deeper exploration of the roles of social and cultural capital in shaping student experiences within placement and remedial processes. This interpretive study extends those existing lines of inquiry to consider how students understand their remedial placement as well as how those understandings shape their orientation to remedial coursework. It asks, how do students interpret the difficulties wrought by missing social and cultural capital? To what do they attribute their "failure" to meet the evaluative norms of school at this junction in their college aspirations? Do their attributions of placement processes—their mental representation of how things work—facilitate engagement with the existing educational opportunity structure of remediation, or undermine it? Such an extension invites a re-examination of the mechanisms underlying what has been conveyed in many studies as an "uncomplicated" relationship among the perceived social, institutional, and instructional barriers, academic achievement, and motivation (O'Conner, 1999, p. 137; Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009). Can we blame an assumption of real structural barriers for the lack of effort some black and Latinx students put into their school work? Do we expect the achievement ideology of the student to over-ride whatever belonging message a remedial placement might send? What relationships between perception and motivation and structures might need a deeper exploration, and a less individual or psychological focus?

The existing research on students' experiences with remedial placement processes suggest that further application of social and cultural capital theory is warranted. Scholars

interested in the relationship between social stratification and education have profited from Bourdieu's extension of Marx's capital into the social and cultural domains (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). The concepts of social and cultural capital provide useful tools to explore how class distinction reproduces inequality within educational opportunity structures by creating both institutional and instructional barriers. One central tenet of this research is that economic or material realities create distinctive social class-based attitudes, behaviors, and discourse (Lareau, 2011, 2002); taken together as "a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Bourdieu 1977 p. 82-83, qtd. in Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 39), these distinctions shape an individual's "predispositions," or habitus. Students whose primary habitus is distal to the middle-class culture of schools are at a distinct disadvantage because they don't have the cultural and social capital—the cultural know-how and social networks—needed to exploit existing educational opportunity structures (Roksa & Potter, 2011).

Bourdieu's explanation for the reproduction of social inequality counters the determinism of functionalism by revealing the power relationships working through control of evaluative norms. Existing achievement gaps along class and race lines can be seen as the net result of inadequate social and cultural capital related to student habitus—not ability or natural processes; that is, there is nothing inevitable about social reproduction (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Social reproduction may, however, appear inevitable when viewed on a macro-level (Mehan, 1992); it may also feel inevitable when experienced by the individual (MacLeod, 2018; Willis, 1977). In their overview of empirical studies using social and cultural capital theory, Weininger and Lareau (2003) call for more research examining the micro-interactional processes that make up "moments of social inclusion and exclusion" leading to social reproduction (Lareau & Horvat,

1999, p. 48; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). With this reframing, the student is not merely at the whim of social forces; their fate—or outcome—is determined by how well "they play [their] cards" (Lareau, & Horvat, 1999, p. 39) in "the field of interaction" (p. 49). The macro-level obscures individual and group agency and consequently obscures the interactional processes that researchers, educators, and stakeholders need to understand better to design effective interventions and work toward social transformation (Mehan, 1992).

Further application of social and cultural capital theory within an interpretive framework helped reveal the casual threads that, woven together in the flow of experience, perpetuate lower outcomes for economic and racial minorities. It highlights the social pain experienced by students from marginalized communities as they encounter unfamiliar evaluative norms and sense the shame of their misunderstandings or fear the shaming of it. These encounters act as virtual structures keeping such students "stuck in place" even though the overt, explicit barriers of our prior society have been, ostensibly, removed (Sharkey, 2013). Indeed, researchers need to better understand how proportionally fewer minorities earn a baccalaureate degree now—amid "a college-for-all" ethos—than in the 1970s (Lang, 1992; "Chapter 3"). Rosenbaum and others (2011; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996) argues that the "college for all" ethos undermines the non-traditional students' college chances by "heating up" their aspirations without adequately preparing them for college-level work or giving them useful feedback on ability, largely out of fear of discouraging them. The result is that many non-traditional students, working from the widely-held belief that anyone can go to community college, do not adequately prepare for college. When they get to college and "fail" the placement test, how then do they interpret their remedial placement? Do they understand it as inadequate preparation or inadequate know-how,

which can be remedied? Or, do students make other attributions, attributions that may undermine their agency within remedial opportunity structures? In short, how do students assigned to remediation—the field of interaction—see their prospects—their ability to play their cards and get the degree to which they aspire? These are the questions I have sought to answer here.

Research into student perception of educational opportunity structures and achievement orientation have posited that students who are aware of race and class barriers to status attainment are "less willing to accommodate to the norms and expectations of schools" (O'Connor, 1999, p. 137). In terms of attributional theory, social inequalities may appear as barriers over which students have no control, factors external to the students' locus of control. Yet other researchers have found that such a formulation is overly simplistic. Indeed, African American students, for example, overwhelmingly espouse a belief in the uplifting power of education, appearing to buy into the dominant achievement ideology, which holds that effort and hard work lead to positive social and economic outcomes (O'Connor, 1999; MacLeod, 2018; Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009). Yet, many of these same students may put little effort into their school work, a pattern referred to as "the achievement paradox" in the attribution literature (Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009). Seeking to understand this paradox, O'Connor (1999) argues that researchers overlook the complexity of situated social identities.

Interviewing high school students attending an economically disadvantaged inner city high school about their adherence to the dominant achievement ideology, O'Connor (1999) found that, while both high academic achievers and low academic achievers espoused the achievement ideology, variations of that ideology—what O'Connor calls "co-narratives"—distinguished the two. That is, the high achievers had a potent way to explain the social failure

they saw around them; when asked why so many African American were poor, the high achievers could evoke a co-narrative that is "highly attuned to structural barriers to opportunity" (p. 153). This co-narrative counters the implication within the dominant achievement ideology that poverty is the result of personal failings. The high achievers, therefore, could point to historical facts of American racism and unequal opportunities to explain the social failure they saw around them. The low achievers, however, had no way of explaining that failure, other than to cast it in terms of will power, which, in the formulation they have learned, one either has or doesn't have. For O'Connor, the interplay of multiple social identities along class and gender lines begins to explain the variability in student perceptions and their relationship to academic achievement.

But her study also implies another avenue of inquiry, which this study takes up. Left unexplored is the relationship between the co-narrative's existence in "the cultural tool kit" (Swindler, 1986) of the student and their academic success. Does the co-narrative give the high achieving student a way to externalize the failure of people who look just like him or her, thereby leaving room for development of a positive view of his or her own academic ability—a view that would give the student agency within existing educational opportunity structures? Does the co-narrative, perhaps even counterintuitively, help recouple effort and outcome within the achievement ideology framework for African American students? Does it do so because it helps counter a deeper, and more seductive, narrative embedded in our social fabric, that social stratification is natural—the result of fixed or innate abilities, the cream rising to the top (Lockhart, Keil, & Aw, 2012; Dweck, 2008)?

Academic success and failure may be interpreted within these competing meaning systems. On one hand, the achievement ideology of the American Dream holds that one's position in society—one's place—is the result of hard work and self-determination; on the other hand, another ideology, equally American and historically dominant, holds that one's place in society is the result of one's innate abilities and talent, akin to the notion of a God-given or natural order. Dweck 's research on self-theories (Dweck, 2013; Dweck & Molden, 2000; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin & Wan, 1999) helps explain what happens at the intersection of these competing ideologies. She posits that the way an individual views their own ability affects his or her motivation because it changes the meaning of effort. An individual who sees his or her academic ability, for example, as something that can increase with effort over time holds what Dweck refers to an incrementalist view. For such an individual, the achievement ideology makes sense. One who sees ability as something largely gifted at birth, a thing or an entity that one has or doesn't have, adheres to what Dweck refers to as an entity view. For the entity theorist, effort has a different meaning than it does for the incremental theorist; indeed, within an entity framework, the requirement of effort means one doesn't have it—having it means success comes effortlessly, naturally. For this individual, the achievement ideology is a trap. These views of one's own ability, or "self-theories," are developed through social interaction; that is, the meaning of ability is, as all meanings are, socially constructed. And, as symbolic interactionalists argue, we act toward things based on the meanings those things hold; and that those meanings are constantly re-negotiated through on-going interactions (Blumer, 1986). A symbolic interactionalist approach keeps the focus on structural barriers—even if they are "virtual"

structures (Sewell, 1992) in an already "figured world" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001)—rather than on the psychology or "personality" of the student.

Depending on the meanings given to it—meanings negotiated within social interactions among students, friends, teachers, parents, administrators and staff, remediation may facilitate student success or obstruct it. Why do some students seem to readily avail themselves of this opportunity structure, while others do not? Do motivated and engaged students see remediation —or their prospects within it—differently than those who are unmotivated and disengaged? Do they see their own academic ability differently? Dweck and London (2004) argue that exploring student mental representation is, in general, an under-applied but highly fruitful approach to uncovering social mechanisms affecting student development. The mental representation of how things work constitutes the memory of these micro-interactions as well as the accumulated meaning of those interactions. Mental representations are "carriers of socialization" (Dweck & London, 2004, p. 429), the way the "figured world" reproduces itself. As such, they tell us about how phenomenon—the lived experience and the consciousness of that experience—are carried forward in memory and shape the interpretations of future experiences. These mental representations—the "virtual" structures of the already "figured world"—can help us better see how remedial opportunity structures work to support some and frustrate others (Sewell, 1992; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I introduce the research methodology for this phenomenological study which explores student perceptions of their remedial placement as they engage with their remedial coursework and move into their college-level work. The qualitative approach taken here allowed for a deeper understanding of student experience with remedial structures to understand what motivates some students to engage with their remedial course work and integrate into academic culture. In the sections below, I describe the relevance of my research plan, including the methodology, data collection and analysis procedures, and strategies for validation. Ethical concerns and the role of the researcher close out the chapter.

Given my interest in student meaning-making around the experience of remedial placement; and, given that I plan on conducting my research at an institution I also work at, I apply qualitative methods within phenomenological and engaged-inquiry frameworks to answer my research questions. Both the engaged inquiry traditions and the phenomenological traditions, like qualitative research in general, begin by recognizing our shared human ability to make sense of the world around us (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Hatch, 2002; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). By drawing on these traditions, this study aimed to understand the lived experiences of community college students as they worked to make sense of their remedial placements over the course of nearly two semesters.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Exploration of human meaning making around a particular event or phenomenon is ultimately an interpretive phenomenological pursuit. The history of phenomenology is a reckoning of, or a coming to terms with, the epistemic and ontological consequences of its first principle—the rejection of the Cartesian "dualistic separation of egos from worlds" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 105; Throop & Murphy, 2002; LeVasseur, 2003; Laverty, 2003). While the term "phenomenology" had been used by prior thinkers, such as Hegel for whom it signified "knowledge as it appears in consciousness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25), Husserl's adoption of the term in at the start of the twentieth century marks the beginning of phenomenology as a methodological approach founded on "subjective openness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 23). His approach signaled a radical break from the objective science of his day, which posited a "real" reality outside of human consciousness that can be apprehended through a careful walling-off of the observer from the observed. In rejecting the notion that the researcher can know an object on its own terms using logic and cognition, Husserl advanced a wholly different view of reality, one that can only be apprehended through consciousness. For Husserl, as well as his critical protégé, Heidegger, only the object of consciousness—what consciousness is about as it plays on the physical world—is real or knowable (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Troop & Murphy, 2002). While Husserl maintained that the researcher could bracket her assumptions and thereby objectively approach an ultimate truth about a particular phenomenon, Heidegger rejected the notion that such a bracketing is even possible. Rather he and others, like Geertz (1973) and Bourdieu (1977), argued that Husserl's view of bracketing returns the researcher to the epistemic trap of Cartesian dualism and positivist foundations (Troop & Murphy, 2002). To his critics,

Husserl's stance that the researcher can objectively approach another's subjective reality misses the consequence of his own first principle; the researcher, like all human individuals, is "essentially embedded, intertwined and […] otherwise immersed in the world that [she] inhabits" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, p. X, 2006; Troop & Murphy, 2002; Laverty, 2003).

While numerous schools of phenomenology have emerged since Husserl's seminal Phenomenology of Spirit (1900) and Heidegger's critique of it in Being and Time (1927), one increasingly common version used most extensively in health research, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) informs the methodological stance taken here. IPA addresses the dominant criticism of phenomenological research—that its interest in subjective reality is ultimately unscientific and lacks rigor—by codifying phenomenological analysis as a two-stage, or double hermeneutical process (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). As first proposed by Smith (1996), the aim of the first stage is to "give voice" by describing "the essence"—that which transcends any individual experience—of an otherwise unknowable subjective experience. During the second stage, the researcher develops an interpretation of the essences, derived during the first stage, connecting them to "a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical context" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, p. 104, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2004; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In doing so, IPA makes clear the inter-subjectivity of human meaning making and the interpretive phenomenologist's debt to symbolic interactionism, which articulates the mechanisms involved in the social construction of meaning (Smith & Osborn, 2004). As such, IPA was appropriate for this study, which sought to understand student meaning making around specific shared phenomenon while exploring the social origins and implications of that meaning making.

The adoption of IPA as the primary methodological framework for this study necessarily affects nearly all aspects of its design. At the most fundamental level, it clarifies the epistemological and ontological basis for the research, discussed above. Less abstractly, it informs my choice of in-depth interviewing as the dominant data collection method; it provides me with analytical tools that allow findings to emerge from the data, while engaging with an existing theoretical framework, in an inductive-deductive-abductive process; it clarifies the rationale for non-random sampling and provides guidance for writing up the report—all discussed in the sections below. A full consideration of my positionality and the situated context of the study site, however, prompts me to also draw on of the principle of engaged inquiry developed by Chevalier and Buckles (2013) as part of my selected methodology.

Engaged Inquiry

Doing research in one's own workplace has been referred to as "insider research" or, more derisively, "backyard research" (Creswell, 2014). The main critique of such a design choice is the effect of "familiarity"; that is, my familiarity with the site of study and the influence of power relationships therein may impede both my ability to withhold preconceived notions and my ability to analytically penetrate the normalness of my work life (Trowler, 2011; Caruana, 2015). The idea of engaged inquiry provides a more robust conceptualization of embeddedness of the researcher than IPA.

Engaged inquiry recognizes that researchers must often work to solve problems in places in which they cannot authentically adopt a neutral or bracketed stance. While familiarity is a problem when viewed in an objective paradigm, it is transformed in a engaged inquiry framework into a source of "authentic caring," which guides thoughtful and careful sense-

making (Chevalier & Buckles, p. 116-117, 2013), and calls forth the need for "'authentic' criteria" in evaluating the worth of my research product, which I discuss below (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Rather than ensuring validity by manufacturing a disengaged, unbiased perspective, an engaged inquiry approach draws its strengths from the rub of different value systems (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). The concept of authentic caring sustained me throughout the study. It was the concept I drew most heavily on when my own experiences working at the study site filled my mind. I recognized in the common stories of my participants my own role in the social pain they often described. I saw myself reflected in their stories about teachers who didn't seem to care, and see more clearly now how I've been complicit in maintaining structures that reproduce social inequality.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for the study included transcripts from in-depth student interviews and, to a lesser extent, institutional webpages discussing placement.

In-Depth Interviews

I collected the bulk of my data for this study through multiple participant interviews. During each interview, I focused my efforts on collecting concrete-level data, prompting students to provide specifics to any generalizations they may make. Sound qualitative research principles dictate that the success of later analysis depends on the careful encoding of experience during the data collection stage of the process (Weiss, 1995; Charmez, 2014). This principle cuts across qualitative methodologies, but IPA presents a straightforward rationale: The researcher wants to get "as 'close' to the participant's view as is possible" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 104). Notably, thought, it is not truly a first-person account, as the researcher/interviewer and

participant work together to reconstruct the encounter with the phenomenon under study (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2004). Nevertheless, like most qualitative researchers, the IPA researcher seeks to bring both the interviewee and the IPA interviewer as close to concrete experience—the Lebenswelt, or "life world"—as possible (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 410).

Interviewing was an appropriate method considering the interpretive focus of my research questions. It is important to note that "all [methods] have blind spots." Awareness of methodological limitations, however, increases the likelihood that a researcher will make the most of the tool. Lamont and Swindler (2014) argue that coming up against the limitations of a method can drive innovative use of that method. These researchers, for example, have developed interviewing techniques that transcend what are seen as the main weaknesses of the method: the narrow focus on individual views and the shaky relationship between attitudes and behavior. By prompting their interviewees to engage in boundary work, Lamont and Swindler (2014) push past these limitations, which grow out of an overly narrow view of human behavior. Instead, they describe it as exploring "the supra-individual" (p. 157), the collective and shared landscape of meaning-making that guides and shapes behavior in complex and non-linear ways within the already "figured world" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001). Such an approach informs this study and my approach. I am less interested in establishing causal connections between individual attitudes and behavior than I am in exploring the kinds of meaning systems students have access to and how they use those systems to make sense of their own experiences (Swindler, 1986; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001)).

I conducted these interviews with each participant either on CCC's campus or over the phone from the start of Summer 2019 semester through the Spring 2021 semester. First, this

technique allowed me to collect data on the temporal effects of placement phenomenon—how meanings change over time with further experience (Hermanowicz, 2013). Specifically, it allowed me to see how student interpretation of placement interacts with their interpretation of ability messages throughout their coursework. Second, according to Hermanowicz, it offered opportunities for further elaboration, member reflection (described above), and the building of rapport, all of which contribute to the depth and rigor of my subsequent analysis Although I wanted to avoid phone interviews, they became necessary after March 2020, when the campus closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3.1 depicts data collection by placement levels within my conceptual sample. My intention was to conduct a total of four interviews with each participant. The first three interviews were roughly spaced out over the first semester with the final interview taking place after the participant had begun their second semester and entered their college level classes. Of the 19 participants who enrolled in the study, 12 participants completed all four interviews with me. Four more participants completed three interviews. The remaining three participants each completed two interviews. A handful of participants even came back for a fifth interview, for a total of 71 interviews and over 54 hours' worth of transcriptions.

Table 3.1 Conceptual Sample by Placement Level—Date (and Length) of Interviews

Level	Participant	Data Collection
Level 1 Workshop	Byrnn	These Participants Had Initial Level 1 Placements. I Interviewed Them After They Had Moved On To Level 2 And Level 4.
	Jailyn	
	Princess	
Level 2 (English 098-English 099)	Connor	5/23/19 (1:10:00); 07/11/19 (00:36:34); 08/26/19 (00:38:48); 11/08/19 (01:06:14); 07/06/20 (01:04:38)
	Byrnn	6/04/19 (00:43:00); 07/17/19 (00:31:26); 11/5/19 (01:07:00); 06/25/20 (01:05:25)
	Jailyn	05/23/19 (01:00:00); 08/01/2019 (00:32:03)
	John	10/15/19 (01:03:23); 11/19/19 (01:00:34); 12/09/19 (00:32:24); 06/29/20 (01:00:35)
	Princess	10/09/19 (1:11:10); 11/20/19 (00:34:16); 12/11/19 (00:38:06); 02/27/20 (00:47:23)
Level 3 (English 098- English 108)	Piper	5/29/19 (1:09:00); 07/16/19 (00:30:23); 09/18/19 (00:34:46); 11/13/19 (01:34:30); 08/20/20 (01:08:41)
	Charlene	6/04/19 (1:02:00); 7/10/19 (00:35:00); 08/27/19 (00:32:00); 11/08/19 (01:03:06)
	Jerome	10/25/19 (00:55:48); 11/20/19 (00:30:12); 12/12/19 (00:34:29)
Level 4 (English 101- English 098)	Emily	10/17/19 (00:47:50); 11/18/19 (00:35:49); 12/09/19 (00:36:11); 02/19/20 (00:50:34; 06/25/20 (01:11:46))
	Gemaia	10/03/19 (1:00:13); 11/22/19 (00:31:56)
	Kelly	10/04/19 (1:04:39); 11/25/19 (00:31:34)
	James	10/08/19 (1:05:46); 11/21/19 (00:32:01); 12/10/19 (00:36:01); 2/20/20 (00:55:13); 06/26/20 (01:04:16)
	Lilibeth	10/08/19 (1:02:14); 11/21/19 (00:24:33); 12/11/19 (00:35:11)
	Franklin	10/10/19 (00:56:57); 11/18/19 (00:31:54); 12/09/19 (00:34:38); 02/26/20 (01:02:53); 06/29/20 (00:39:27)
	Greg	10/11/19 (00:59:29); 11/27/19 (00:28:24); 12/11/19 (00:32:14)
	William	10/16/19 (01:01:40); 11/20/19 (00:33:23); 12/11/19 (00:50:25); 02/26/20 (01:09:36)
	Starry	10/16/19 (00:51:49); 12/13/19 (00:32:19); 06/25/20 (00:55:58)
	Asher	10/17/19 (00:57:55); 11/26/19 (00:35:50); 12/10/19 (00:38:45); 02/24/20 (00:51:53)
	Ana	10/18/19 (00:48:45); 11/25/19 (00:28:30); 12/10/19 (00:39:25); 07/07/20 (00:52:40)

During each of these interviews, I was mindful of the kind of discursive space my questions created. I anticipated that students may be sensitive to questions regarding their remedial placement and their beliefs about academic ability. I understood it is the researcher's responsibility to create safe and inclusive discursive space for all participants to feel that their perspectives are valued and validated (Smith & Osborn, 2004; Rapley, 2001). My interview questions asked students about their perspectives and gave them a chance to talk about past and present experiences in classroom settings. I also asked students how they understood their experiences in relation to others, prompting the boundary work that Lamont and Swindler (2014) found fruitful (discussed above). Other questions were derived from items on Dweck's mindset inventory—such as inquiries about potential to change, challenging classes, and comfort zones. (See appendix for interview schedule)

I employed two recruiting strategies. First, I recruited students from within various classrooms, enabling me to create a conceptual sample that captured the different paths of integration students take after placement. Second, I posted a recruitment flyer in the placement center, providing me with a few more participants who had more experience at CCC. Such a sampling was guided by my understanding of the setting as well as the phenomenon under study (Smith & Osborn, 2004; Crewell, 2014). My conceptual sample consisted of four groups with different "impact profiles" (Chevalier & Buckles, p. 142, 2013) as delineated in Table 3.1.

Each of these remedial levels takes students down different pathways. Students placed in Level 1 workshops engage in five weeks of instruction and retake the placement test at the end of those five weeks; they also have the option to retake after a two week interlude. Level 2 places students into traditional, prerequisite, remedial classes; these students take linked reading and

writing courses, and pass to the next level by demonstrated competency, largely determined by their professor. Level 3 links English 098, a pre-college level course, with English 108, a college-level academic reading course that effects GPA but fulfills no certificate or degree requirements. Level 4 placement puts students into an accelerated model (institutionally referred to as the Accelerated Learning Program, or ALP). In an ALP link, students are enrolled in both a remedial writing class (English 098) and a college-level writing class (English 101).

All of the participants in the study hail from lower middle class and working class backgrounds, conclusions I draw from the interviews themselves. I never asked students directly about social class or racial identity. But I gathered enough details during my interview to make some generalizations. A few participants had parents or close family members who had been to college, but many did not (see Table 3.2). I make these generalizations because doing so will allow me to draw connections between the existing literature on social class, education, and inequality. Table 3.2 provides what information I learned through interaction about each participant's age, race and ethnicity, and familiarity with college culture. I also noted in Table 3.2 what I learned about Conner and Emily's age of immigration because they offered the study unique perspectives. Connor, for example, helped me understand how attitudes toward writing are socially constructed as he explained to me how the educational structures in The Central Africa Republic socialized him to believe that being good at writing depended first on having a natural aptitude that not everyone has. This belief, I suspect, reflects the attitudes toward ability and prestige that underpinned the caste system of the colonial and post-colonial period of his native country and (I argue by implication throughout this study), the post-feudal system of his adopted country.

Table 3.2 Participant Demographics

Participant Psuedonym	Age & Gender	Race & Immigrant Status	Family Member With College Experience
Level 2			
Connor	25 Male	Black Immigrated Age 19	Older Siblings All Went To College In Car
John	24 Male	Black	
Byrnn	26 Female	White	
Jailyn	18 Female	Black	Cousin She Is Not Close With
Level 3			
Charlene	18 Female	Black	
Jerome	18 Male	Black	Older Half-Brother Went Away One Year
Piper	20 Female	White	
Level 4			
Emily	22 Female	Black Immigrated Age 6	FAther, FrOm Liberia, Has Masters
Gemaia	18 Female	Black	
Kelly	18 Female	Black	Both Parents Are Ccc Graduates
Princess	21 Female	Black	Cousins, Friends
William	28 Male	Black	
Asher	17 Male	Black	
Ana	18 Female	Black	Mother, Graduated

Participant Psuedonym	Age & Gender	Race & Immigrant Status	Family Member With College Experience
Franklin	17 Male	Black	Aunts, Uncles, And Grandmother, Graduates
James	18 Male	White	Mother And Uncle, Some College
Lilibeth	18 Female	White	
Greg	17 Male	Hispanic	
Starry	18 Female	Hispanic	

Placement Webpages

In addition to collecting data to discern student meaning systems, I conducted a discourse analysis of the institution's placement webpages. I treated the webpages as the last case, or last participant, in my analysis. By this I mean that I "asked" the webpages how the institution interpreted remedial placement and what messages about ability and belonging it held. My goal in this task was to better understand the meaning and value systems—the "figured worlds" that students find themselves within (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001). Such an analysis provided context to the meaning systems emerging from my analysis of participant transcripts. Although this analysis takes the discussion momentarily away from student voices, it is valuable support to an important point that I want to emphasize throughout—while Dweck's research conceptualizes incremental and entity frameworks as shapers of individual personality and motivation, these frameworks are not separate from the competing ideas of human ability and

belonging that undergird social stratification systems at large, and the educational opportunity structures at the study site.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a two-stage process that works, first, to capture the lived experience of participants and, second, to make sense of that experience within wider historical, contextual, and theoretical frameworks. Between the first-order analysis and the second-order, the analyst moves from an "empathetic hermeneutics" to a "questioning hermeneutics" (Smith & Osborn, p. 53, 2004). The success of the whole process requires a certain methodical patience, sustained by a clear understanding of each analytical phase and of the concept of bracketing (Smith & Osborn, 2004; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). I've borrowed much of this methodology as Smith and Osborn (2004) describe, but I have amended the idea of bracketing, which I explain below, because of my positionality and my familiarity with the study site.

First Order Analysis

The goal of first order analysis is to reveal or expose "the cultural patterning of subjective experience" around a given phenomenon (Troop & Murphey, p. 200, 2002). To achieve this goal, I engaged in a careful analysis of each individual case, resisting for as long as possible, the urge to jump to generalizations (Smith & Osborn, p. 56, 2004). At this stage, the unit of analysis was the individual experience of, or "relatedness to," the phenomenon under study, which in this study is remedial placement (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, p. 110, 2006). In reviewing each transcript, I, therefore, took an idiographic approach, treating each case as a single case study (Smith & Osborne, 2004, p. 67). I focused on each individual participant's concerns and

experiential claims arising from their encounters with the phenomenon, and then I moved to the next case. In this way, I worked from the specific to the increasingly abstract, scaffolding my analysis, initially, with "cumulative coding" to capture patterns within a single case, and then with "integrative coding" as I brought more cases under scrutiny (Smith & Osborn, p. 53, 2004), including the last case of the college's webpages.

Bracketing

During this first order analysis, the IPA researcher, like the grounded theorist, works inductively from the data. To do this, I adopted what Husserl referred to as the "philosophical attitude" – a bracketing of one's preconceptions to approach the subjective experiences of the participants on their own terms. The nature of this bracketing, however, is contested in the literature and complicated by my own position of employment within the study site. To what extent can the researcher—given the embedded-ness of the individual in the meaningful world and already "figured world"—approach the subjective experience of others without applying her own frames of reference? Theorists since Husserl resolve this apparent epistemological conflict by modifying the notion of bracketing from an actual achievement to a good-faith attempt. That is, while we cannot actually withhold our interpretive lens, the IPA researcher attempts "to do the most sensitive and responsive job we can" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, p. 108, 2006). For LeVasseur (2003), what is bracketed is the assumption of understanding, what Husserl refers to as the un-reflective, "natural attitude" that we bring to our everyday experience. My positionally, however, made even a good faith attempt at withholding my preconceptions—my natural attitude —problematic. In response to this reality, I adopted the concept of "authentic caring" from the engaged inquiry framework that guides member-participant research. Such a concept allowed me

to lean forward and account for my preconceptions and natural attitude rather than push them aside.

Second Order Analysis

During the second stage of IPA, the researcher works deductively, no longer bracketing her preconceptions or withholding her interpretive lens. Instead, the researcher engages in what LeVasseur described as the "overt naming of assumptions and influences" (2003, p. 428), elucidating the themes derived during the first order analysis by connecting them to existing literature (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In this study, my second-order analysis prompted me to consider the themes that emerged during the first-order analysis in terms of my theoretical framework.

As discussed in the last part of chapter 2, my theoretical framework synthesizes the cultural and social capital research of Lareau with the attributional meanings-system approach taken by Dweck. I ask, how do students interpret, or make sense, of the evaluative norms they encounter beginning with the placement test itself? What conclusions do they draw about themselves, their abilities, and their place in the world, if they sense their failure to meet unfamiliar evaluative norms? In my analysis, I sought to extend these preexisting frameworks—Lareau's work on the effects of social class and Dweck's entity vs. incremental self-theories—to make sense of the themes that arose during my first order analysis. Dweck does not consider the effects of social class in her research on self-theories and motivation. Lareau does not consider the implications of social class differences on students' self-theories. The Kindergarten student who starts behind her classmates because there are less books in her home does not recognize the social class construction of her behind-ness. Rather, I argue based on participant interviews from

this study, the student concludes that she is not as smart as the other students. This conclusion is legitimized by standardized test scores which create a figured world in which one's intelligence is separate from one's experience and some are naturally smarter or brighter or more intelligent than others in a measure-able and meaningful way. By withholding the urge to draw conclusions until the second order analysis, I opened myself up to the possibility of analytical surprise (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012): How students theorize about their own abilities and chances of college success is inseparable from elitist assumptions about who belongs in college and who doesn't, who from the lower classes can become somebody and who shouldn't bother trying.

Strategies for Validation

Creswell (2014) asserts that, to remedy the presumed weaknesses of insider research, the researcher should employ additional processes for the validation of findings, a strategy meant bolster the researcher's credibility and the study's rigor. However, another school of thought suggests what is needed are different sets of evaluative criteria, criteria drawn out of an interpretivist epistemology rather than those that mimic the conventional set educed from investigative or objective paradigms (Tracy, 2011; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

As an interpretive approach used largely in health research, most IPA studies rely on the "'trustworthiness' criteria," which have developed as the accepted qualitative version of traditional standards. These standards see rigor in terms that parallel conventional criteria used in objective inquiry. Thus, what is referred to in traditional (e.g., quantitative) research as internal validity becomes, in qualitative research, credibility; external validity becomes transferability; reliability becomes dependability and objectivity becomes confirmability (Lincoln & Guba,

1986). The rise of qualitative methods, and concomitant desire for prestige, led qualitative researchers to recognize the need for qualitative evaluative standards (Lincoln and Guba, 1986; Tracy, 2011; Phillips & Burbules, 2000); "[U]sing the conventional criteria as analogs or metaphoric counterparts" seemed a likely place to start (Lincoln and Guba, p. 18, 1986). Yet, these conventional criteria focus on the product of the research and "overlook the influence of context" (Lincoln and Guba, p. 19, 1986); moreover, there is growing awareness that the traditional criteria are incongruent with the epistemological and ontological axioms undergirding the interpretive paradigm (Tracy, 2011; Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Both weakness—the bracketing of context and the lack of the "meaningful coherence"—are relevant to my research design. Tracy argues that a qualitative researcher should derive her procedures for evaluation based on a close analysis of her role and the study context. Further, the procedures should be consistent with the research paradigm to ensure "the study hangs together well" (Tracy, 2011, p. 848). Therefore, with these guiding propositions in mind, I adopted the following principles and procedures for validation delineated below; these criteria also served as "short hand" for the values underlying my research (Tracy, 2010, p. 838).

Crystallization. While the term "triangulation" suggests the researcher is attempting to hone in on a single reality or truth, a better term offered by Tracy (2011), "crystallization," captures the possibility of multiple facets and multidimensional truths. My research design calls for capturing multiple perspectives, a common procedure in most qualitative work. Crystallization captures the idea that multiple truths can arise from analysis, and that these truths can shift when considered in different lights.

Member reflection. Tracy (2011) recommends “member reflection” over “member checking,” another refinement of terminology that draws the practice more fully in line with the underlying interpretive paradigm. By asking members to reflect on current findings rather than to simply confirm, member reflection allows for additional opportunities for “collaboration and reflexive elaboration” (Tracy, 2011, p. 844). To these ends, I often shared my insights with my participants during subsequent interviews and folded their reflections back into my data collection and data analysis processes. This strategy meant that my interpretation of earlier utterances changed after discussing them again with the participants in later interviews. (An example is discussed on pp. 126-127 in which Darlene helped me understand an earlier utterance better in a later interview.)

Transferability. A major goal of this research is to add to the knowledge base in such a way as to improve the educational outcomes for minorities and low-income students, not just at this urban community college but also at similar institutions. To make my interpretation of placement phenomenon transferable to other contexts, I provide a thick description of my methods and findings as well as a thick description of the context, including details of our ongoing discussions regarding placement and remedial processes. Such discussions, if I faithfully practice the directive “to show” rather than to simply tell (Tracy, p. 843, 2011), will most likely ring true to audiences in similar contexts.

Transparency. I extend the idea of thick description to include a detailed discussion of my role as a researcher, my background as a developmental teacher, and my likely biases. Transparency comprises being upfront about my role and forthright about all aspects of my research methods and procedures, including challenges, setbacks and modifications in approach,

as well as the act of giving credit where it is due. Moreover, my use of the first person "I" will serve to continuously remind my audience of "[my] presence and influence in participating and interpreting the scene" (Tracy, p.842, 2011).

Reflectivity. Given that the researcher is a participant in the construction of the data and her humanness is an instrument in the analysis of the data, the researcher herself—her interests, her background, and her prior training are all in play during the analytic process. One consequence of this is the researcher needs to "check" her instrument—herself—during the analytical process. To do so, I wrote countless memos about how I interpreted certain incidents in the field, turning my subjective experience into part of the data under scrutiny and subject to subsequent analysis. I grappled with painful memories as I reflected on how my own class biases and liberal assumptions might have given former students a message of exclusion; but I also realize that my biases and assumptions are, if I see them, more data for analysis. I was dedicated to a reflective process within the analytical process to "maintain the balance between the personal and the universal" (Berger, p. 220, 2005). Reflectivity acted as a compass, steering me (hopefully) away from pitfalls, such as easy conclusions and unexamined assumptions, while holding me true to the guiding principles of exacting research I've drawn from the literature (Creswell, 2014).

Fairness. Fairness sets the stage for "authentic dialogue" (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). As a way to manage "value-pluralism," fairness guides the researcher who works to reveal and make sense of complex and conflicting "value frameworks" without legitimizing one over others (Tracy, 2011). Fairness is not just a rhetorical stance in the presentation of the findings; rather, it

is a deep commitment to understanding the meaning making of others by carefully articulating the underlying architectures of competing frameworks.

Authentic dialogue. To achieve the standard of "authenticity" implicit in the criteria described above, I have shared my findings in open, albeit informal, forum with other developmental faculty and administrators, after I've completed my research but before writing up my final findings. This strategy allowed me a public auditing of the coherence between subject, methods, and presentation of findings, as well as for collaboration on recommendations and suggestions for further research. To fulfill my commitment to collaborative, multi-vocal, and responsible research, I have used feedback from these informal forums to redress weaknesses, and finalize my analysis.

Ethical Issues

The engaged-inquiry tradition, perhaps more so than other qualitative traditions, recognizes that risks and tensions may evolve and shift as a research project moves forward. A consideration of ethics, therefore, cannot be limited to the design and proposal phase of a research project like this one. As Chevalier and Buckles (2013) explain, "The ongoing assessment of expectations that are met/not met is key to success and must take place at the appropriate time, as the project unfolds" (p. 174). This ongoing assessment is guided by not just the "procedural ethics" of IRB approval and the protection of privacy; but also by the "relational ethics" grounded in the principle of respect for participants (Tracy, 2011). (See appendix for informed consent form.)

Respect for the participants is demonstrated in the following three ways. First, the purpose of the research was disclosed to participants to underscore the value of their unique

perspective in the enlistment of their help. Participants were reminded, at all points, that they do not have to consent but that their help is needed and valued (Buckles & Cheveliar, 2013). Second, the research problem that participants are enlisted to help solve will benefit future students much like them; as a "worthy topic," it is relevant, timely, and significant (Tracy, 2011, p.840). Finally, this researcher has not "used" the participants or "co-opt [them] just to get a 'great story'" (Tracy, 2011, p. 847; Buckles & Cheveliar, 2013). Rather, this research, conducted within an engaged framework, aims to "contribute to the pursuit of collective goals in a particular historical setting" (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p. 173). My hope is that it will inform current efforts within the institution to reinvent remediation at CCC.

Positionality

As a qualitative researcher in this project, I understand that "research is an interactive process shaped by [my own] personal history" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012, p. 6) and by the context of the study itself (Hatch, 2002; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). This interactive process means that I must attend to the validity and ethical concerns that arise by doing research, on a controversial topic, in a setting in which I also earn my livelihood.

I am currently working as a developmental English Professor at the City Community College, the proposed site for this study. I could be described stereotypically as a middle-class, liberal, white female. I understand that this is how I am seen. My own identification, like most people, is more complicated. I do not identify with my whiteness although I work to understand the privileges it has given me and continues to give me. I recognize my European ancestry but know it is only more recent than the common African roots every human shares. But more concretely, I have been teaching at this institution for close to twenty years, so my social identity

—the view of myself I want others to hold—is wrapped up in being a good developmental teacher at this urban institution. In reviewing the literature for this study, I brindled at the critiques of remediation, which can feel like an attack on myself and my colleagues (also mostly liberal white females), who consciously adhere to the mission of developmental education and who would like to see themselves as helping rather than hindering their (mostly non-white) students. I recognize that my research may spark similar reactions in my colleagues, who, like me, find themselves caught within competing tensions as various stakeholders push for innovation

Like many urban community colleges, the site for this study is under pressure from within and without to improve its educational outcomes and the overall quality of education (Bailey, 2009). But wider historic and economic factors make this a herculean task. It is situated in the nation's poorest large city, a minority-majority city with entrenched, racially segregated neighborhoods. The local school district's history of segregation and race relations had a lasting impact on the make-up of the city's schools and neighborhoods (Maslow, 1961). This historical segregation has only been exasperated by the district's on-going embrace of market-driven reforms that cater to (mostly white) middle class families and their interests (Simon, Gold, & Cucchiara, 2010). The result is that the city's poorest students continue to attend the lowest performing schools, reproducing both concentrated poverty and racial segregation. Consequently, most of this urban community college's developmental students are lower-income, Black and Latinx students. These historic and economic dimensions' help explain the institution's low graduation rates and create an imperative for the engaged researcher to consider the context of the study site deeply in all aspects of her research.

In studying the question of why postsecondary reform efforts often fail, Jaggars and Hodara (2011) found that competing values create tensions within institutional culture that swamp efforts to innovate. Studying the institutional culture of CUNY as it worked to improve its placement and remedial processes, researchers found tensions between standards and access, effectiveness and efficiency, and localized versus centralized control. Similar tensions exist within the site for this study. Recently the English department, in consultation with the placement center and under pressure from administrators, lowered its writing cut-scores for college-level placement and has been closely monitoring the success rate of these newcomers. Yet teachers are reporting stress in their classrooms as they are challenged to teach to a wider range of skill levels, revealing the dueling commitments of standards and access.

Similarly, in an effort to improve the accuracy of placement, placement officials have just begun considering high school transcripts, only to realize they lack the staff needed to evaluate those transcripts. Given the large and decentralized nature of the city's school district, the meaning of grades and the learning outcomes of classes vary greatly and need careful consideration for accurate placement, revealing the dueling commitments of effectiveness and efficiency. And, finally, within the last ten years, the administration has acted unilaterally to make changes to both developmental English and Math that have undermined the relational trust between them and faculty, revealing an on-going tension between local and central control.

Acting within these tensions, faculty and staff may resist change they see as coming from the outside and instead hold onto their insider notions of what works and what doesn't within their institution. Efforts to innovate, therefore, dissolve within such tensions and existing structures are reproduced rather than transformed (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011). Research developed

from within engaged frameworks may be more likely to effect meaningful change. A reflective understanding of both my role and the context of the study, therefore, have figured heavily into my plans to ensure the validity of my research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter explicates findings and themes that emerged from the two-stage analysis of participant interviews and placement webpages described in chapter 3. In this previous chapter, I explained that my research questions follow a meaning systems approach to motivation (Dweck, 2000). A meaning systems approach to motivation in this context means asking questions about how students understand their remedial placement to understand why they take divergent approaches to their remedial coursework. It means understanding the figured worlds of community college, remediation, and the different notions of ability and belonging held within.

The first section provides an overview and explication of the dominate theme that emerged in my analysis: student interpretation of remedial placement follows either a developmental framework or an entrance framework. Each framework is underpinned by divergent views of human ability and mechanisms of social mobility. In this opening section, I demonstrate how these frameworks appear in both student discourse and institutional discourse. The second section develops the related themes that arose as I considered how student meaning-making around remedial placement resonated with their reflections on prior messages of ability and belonging. This section deepens the discussion of social class and conceptions of academic ability begun in the first section.

The third section discusses the themes revealed as I examined how student interpretation of remedial placement evolved as they engaged with their remedial coursework. In this penultimate section, I focus on the illustrative cases of Jerome, Piper, and Princess. I showcase their stories because each demonstrates the different ways that students relate to their remedial

placement as well as the factors that shape and frustrate their engagement with their remedial coursework. In the fourth and final section, I present the complex theme that became visible as I considered the effects of race and class in student meaning-making. This concluding theme encapsulates the themes of the first three sections. It ties student meaning-making around remedial placement to the social context of an urban community college, a neighborhood college.

A meanings systems approach to understanding motivation is—"how you look at it," as Kelly, a CCC student and study participant, conveys in the passage below. Her parents went to CCC for "passion jobs" and started in remedial classes. They helped her move past her initial interpretation of her remedial placement as a sign she didn't belong in college. The passage captures her impression of what "a lot of people" expect when they enroll in community college. She is referring to students like herself, recent high school graduates who imagine that they would place in "the highest class" and "then they graduate," as if the idea in the air is a degree from community ought to be fairly easy work if one is "smart"—"above 'proficient'" or "above 'average' for college-level." CCC is, after all, what another participant, Princess, told me is called a "neighborhood college," akin to a "neighborhood school," a place that is generally considered "not serious." Students find out this is not true when they get there, at least not true in the most negative sense. It's like a neighborhood school in that it's "comfortable" and "easier" and "less stressful" and "closer." It's unlike a neighborhood school, though, in that "it's serious" and "they get you where you need to be."

Kelly's coming to productive terms with her remedial placement included a reassessment of her assumptions about CCC and a reassessment of her own abilities: Breezing through CCC

may be the case for the exceptional, as if it does happen for a few, but not for most. She sees herself as different because she understands that she is not an exception. She focuses on where she is right now instead of fitting into the imagined scenario, the common expectation. According to Kelly,

> A lot of people's expectation is like to that, they go to college, they get like the highest class and then they graduate. I think that's a, that's, that's not- that's, an exception and not the rule. So I think that my experience is different because I've kind of made peace with where I am. I'm kinda like, 'Okay, this is where I am right now.' I can improve upon that. I can't harp on it, but I will improve upon that. And I think that's what really kind of differs is how you look at it. I think the way you see things is very important to the way that you're going to be able to deal with it. So if you see it as a learning step, then you'll be fine. But if you see it as just something that's holding you back or just this is where you're going to be forever, you don't see the future with it, you just kind of see where you are right now, then that's going to be a huge deciding [factor]. (Kelly, first interview)

The two competing frameworks—or meaning systems—in my analysis are essentially the same divergent ways of looking at remediation that Kelly sees: "a learning step"; or, a kind of black-hole, "where you're going to be forever." On one hand is a framework of development based on the notion that everyone has the ability to benefit from instruction at the college-level. Everyone may learn differently and have different learning needs, but everyone can "build up to that level"—as William puts it. On the other hand, is a framework of entrance, based on the notion that not everyone has the ability to benefit from college-level instruction. That ability (to get to that level) is something the student may or may not have.

Kelly struggled with the implications of her remedial placement, first in terms of entrance. It had made her question whether she should even bother trying college since she wasn't placed where she imagines everyone else is placed after high school—in college-level

classes at the neighborhood college. It's a sign that she is no longer on pace—naturally, for the lack of a better term—the way everyone else is, the way she's always been. Her remedial placement pulled her up from her tracks: She told me she was "like, 'Whoa—I don't know how I feel about this.'" But then she came to terms—"made peace"— with the help of her parents who pointed out to her that her remedial coursework would help her with things she's had trouble with, things that could hold back "in the long run." They helped her see her placement in developmental terms: Everyone has differing needs and being different from the imagined pack is not a sign one doesn't belong or one doesn't have enough ability to succeed. Reconciliation of these competing frameworks—coming to individual terms—is, more often than not, painful.

While the focus of this study is on student interpretation of remedial placement, I spend some time in my first section with a discussion of how these ways of thinking about remediation are embedded in the way placement is talked about on the college's webpages. I do so to contextualize student interpretation, not to suggest causality between institutional interpretation of remedial placement and student behavior. I wish to demonstrate that student meaning-making around remedial placement is not separate from the competing meaning systems running through institutional discourse; their relationship is co-axial—the meaning systems are driven by the same diverging notions of who belongs in community college and what abilities are needed.

John's experience taking the placement test demonstrates how students pick up these divergent messages—about ability and belonging—and try to make sense of what the messages mean for them. The messages are in the air, so to speak, emanating from the institutional language that shapes one's interaction with the remedial structures, beginning with taking the placement test. When I asked John during our first interview what the placement center itself was

like, he lifted his head, like he was looking around—reading the room—in his memory. He summed up the institutional setting: “But everything was copacetic. Uh, wasn't loud. It wasn't destructive. It was just peaceful and rows, numbers, and reading and writing, like, ‘If you don't get this right, then I don't know what to tell you.’” The room he is describing presents a large sign immediately upon entering that lists the rules about cameras, phones, handbags, eating, talking. Along the floor, cut out shoe-prints mark a short arc to the double-doors that open to the computer room; I, myself, am always reminded of the paw prints that make finding the children’s section in the public library easy and fun.

Given all that he had been through between his first time and his second time taking the placement test, John said he expected the whole enrollment experience to give him “a little welcome back to school vibe”; instead, he said, the message he got from the test itself was, ’“Oh, we are going to make you work for this.’” His desire to return to school and “do better so [he] can have better” is met with what he calls a “slap down” and “a rise and shine” moment. He conveys a keen sense of being sized up, measured, judged—risk-assessed—and compares the whole process to other kinds of requirements he has had trouble navigating in a commercial context.

> It's like renter- rental properties. they want the credit score too. They want your credit score to be at a certain level. CCC wants your education to be a certain level, so they can put you in certain classes. So it was like a hand-in-hand fair exchange. So it's like taking a test was like, ‘Oh-kay, I've been here before, I want to go home. I don't like it here.’ (John, first interview)

John seems to pick up first a message of inclusion and support, with a tinge of condescension, and meets the second message of prestige and exclusion—the test itself—with fear and confusion.

What is in the air is the idea that anyone can go to community college; what is not in the air is the idea that everyone needs to prepare for college—even community college. Being determined, intelligent, smart, naturally quick, above 'proficient' or—as John is often called—articulate is not what's needed, actually. What is in the air is CCC is a "neighborhood college"—the counterpart to the "neighborhood school"; what is not in the air, however, is the notion that a concerted effort is needed, for everyone—even those who made it through their other neighborhood schools without one.

The Developmental and Entrance Frameworks

Recall that research question 1 asks, "How do students interpret their remedial placement? That is, what frames of reference do they use as they make sense of their remedial placement?" To answer this question, I considered the references students made as they told me about their placement and how they felt about it. I begin this section with an overview that summarizes the two frameworks that emerged from this analysis, with illustrative examples from participant interviews and the college's webpages (see Table 4.1). Then, I detail the assumptions about ability and belonging underpinning each framework, including an analysis of the college's webpages before returning to student voices.

Table 4.1 Illustrative Utterances of Each Framework

Source	Entrance Framework	Developmental Framework
Participant Interviews	I don't know, there's nothing I can really do about it. I just have to work my way through these classes, but it would have been nice if I were just start at that one class and then do, then take the classes that I want to take from there. (Jailyn)	They really help you. You got to improve yourself before you go to your major. You got some other courses you got to go through— they help you out, like, like build your confidence. (Connor)
Placement Webpages	**The placement tests are very important** because the results—in English and math—are used to determine if you will be placed into college-level courses. If not, you may first need to enroll in developmental classes or pre-college workshops, for which you do not earn credit toward a degree program. **Good performance on this test makes you exempt from taking pre-college level mathematics and English courses, which do not count toward a degree or certificate.**	Based on your performance on the placement test, and depending on your specific English language and mathematics abilities and needs you will be placed in one of CCC's college level courses or pre-college level courses and workshops.

Overview of Frameworks

In an entrance framework, remedial classes are seen as hindering or holding students back, adding a whole extra class, covering unimportant or already familiar content. Because remedial placement signals a deviation from the standard, the placement test itself is seen as globally assessing one's viability as a college student, and a bad performance prompts risk assessment for each student in individual terms. In an entrance framework, a student who rushes through the placement test is left to wonder about their ability and question their belonging, unsure of how to attribute their remedial placement. It is harder for the student to come to terms with their remedial placement, too, when levels of institutional trust are low.

Jailyn approached the placement test in an entrance framework. At first, she had gone from her neighborhood school to Small Liberal Arts University. On orientation day, she got "a giant syllabus and then another syllabus and then another syllabus, and […] it was

overwhelming.” She dropped out half-way through her first semester. She didn't really think she was prepared for Small Liberal Arts, but her teachers told her that she would be fine. She had been in AVID classes for four full years. She believed if she didn't go away to school then somehow she had failed. Coming to community meant letting go of that idea. She didn’t prepare for the placement test. Preparing would've meant more writing, and she hates writing. The thought of all the writing she'd have to do at Small Liberal Arts is part of why she left. She imagines the expectations at CCC to be much lighter. So far, she's been right. At Small Liberal Arts, she had math, sociology, psychology, and “a history-type class.” At CCC, she’s only taking one or two classes at a time. She’s disappointed by her remedial English placement; it "would have been nice" to only have the college-level writing classes to make it through. She doesn’t want to fail because then she will “be even further behind.” When she gets to the classes she wants to take, she figures the only writing she'll do is note-taking.

In a developmental framework, the placement test and remedial structures are seen as helping. Students referred to their self-theories – what they think they may be good or bad at, what they may need more help with – as they told me about the "accuracy" of their placement. These references commonly included mentions of prior schooling and self-awareness of on-going struggles with certain subjects—usually math, sometimes writing, never reading. There is a sense that everyone learns differently, may have different learning needs; everyone comes from different high schools, and has different levels of comfort with academic literacy and academic culture. Even if their remedial placement is unexpected, there is a sense that the institution might know better, and has good intentions, as any caring institution would. The placement test, they

come to believe, placed them where they needed to be, even if, at the time, they didn't completely know it.

Connor approached the placement test in a developmental framework. He made a last-minute decision to come back to CCC after benefiting from its ESL program a few years ago, but he checked out CCC's website and downloaded some study materials. He already knew he needed more help with his English, so he didn't worry much about his placement there. But math – he had had many math courses before, including at university in the Central African Republic (CAR), so he wanted to get the best math placement he could. He sees the test as a way to place himself into the courses he imagined he needed or didn't need. These "other courses" that he's "got to go through" will build his confidence before he goes on to the more difficult courses of his major. Even though he is a computer science guy and never considered himself as a writer, he is now thinking about taking advanced writing classes when he moves on to Temple.

Although a majority of CCC's first-year, first-time students place into one or more remedial classes, the idea that somehow they are not where they are supposed to be or where everyone else is permeates the discourse of entrance both in the participants' interviews and in the institutional literature. A "good performance on the test" puts "you" in "college-level classes" (boldfaced—college webpages) where you need to be, in classes that "count"; the implied "bad performance" puts "you" else-where, "behind everyone else" (participant interview), in classes that "do not count" (college webpages)— even if you put forth your best effort on the test and your remedial needs could be addressed with purposeful engagement, guided by caring, loving teachers. Students who interpret their remedial placement within an entrance framework feel the

stigma of being other-ly placed—of being measured as different from what is perceived as normal, standard, or average.

Table 4-2 Illustrative Utterances of Study Participants

Entrance Framework	Developmental Framework
Jailyn I don't know, um, there's nothing I can really do about it. I just have to work my way through these classes, but it would have been nice if I were just start at that one class and then do then take the classes that I want to take from there.	Connor Uh, they really help you. They uh, based on the placement test, they are stuff like that kind of helps you out. Uh they put you in the classes. You got to, improve yourself before you go to your major. You got some other courses and got to go through the help you out. Like, like build your confidence.
Byrnn Well, I went, took the placement test, but each time I was reminded like, 'Wow, if I can't get past this, like, what makes me think I'm gonna get past anything else.'	James As for myself, I probably would throw myself in the classes that I'm in. Cause I always like even, even if I know that I know this stuff, I still want to re-familiarize myself with everything. So I would still throw myself in like the lower class, even if I had higher intelligence. Cause I like having like everything fresh. I don't like to have to like dig deep into my mind to remember stuff.
John It was like rise and shine. I'm like, 'Okay, why am I getting- why am I in this remedial class?' Because- And then I used to also think, 'Okay- [inaudible]' so to me in my mind, how I internalized everything is, 'Okay, why, I'll be in the slow class first, so I could be in the smart class next semester and then I'll be up with the smart kids.' Um, so that's how I felt about that.	Charlene Yeah, writing I do need a lot of help on. Reading. I'm pretty smart so they gave me college-level reading. And algebra, I definitely need a lot more help because in an alternative school it's kinda like if there's more like people need more, like, I don't want to say slow, but there's more like kids who are like not the most like intelligent as me. They are going focus more on that, then focus on one intelligent person, you know?
Jerome I would say I'm going- want to be in a higher placement that's because like basic level for me. Cause- like, yeah, but like, and I kind of know somethings that's be being taught, it's just that it's either, I forgot about it when I was taking the placement or I just didn't know how to use it use it, how it's supposed to be used, like semicolon, all of that stuff. So I want to be in higher placement, but yeah.	Ana It just shows you like what level classes you have to take. And so I was like, the math is, everyone's like, I kind of like, I just kinda assumed that I would have to take a pre level college course. Um, and then like my English class because of like where I am with like writing and stuff like that, I already knew like I, I would be placed in the class. I was like, that will count towards my degree. So I kinda had like an understanding [already].

Ability and Belonging

The frameworks are underpinned by different notions of what the placement test measures as well as different senses about what capabilities are needed for success. In the entrance framework, the placement test works as an entrance test and gives an indication of whether the student really belongs in college. The notion is, not everyone can graduate from such an institution if it is to maintain the hegemony of its social identity. Its need to maintain standards means that some must be culled from the whole —otherwise, the institution's ability to confer prestige onto capable students will be undermined, the capable held back. The effects of the framework are evident in the following passage—Jerome's answer to my question, "What do you think would happen if there was no placement test?"

> I would say like, there'll be like a ton of people at different like skill levels in one class. And 'Oh, I already know how you do that' or like bringing other people- they don't know how to do something so basic or like this class getting slowed down to a halt cause like a few people don't know what they're doing. I think placement test is good because of that. But it's kind of not, because like if someone from a higher, higher placement like talks to someone with a lower placement, like think you can like, um, I'm not saying they would do that, but like they could like kinda bully them. Cause like they know like, 'Oh I scored higher than- so you don't know like as much stuff as I do' and stuff like that. So it has its like benefits, and downsides. (Jerome interview 1)

Such a framework pits students against each-other. The focus is on making sure a certain pace can be maintained and higher placement confers power that can be wielded over those with a lower placement.

In a developmental framework, the placement test is a "placement" test and places students at their most appropriate starting level. It's a more democratic notion of human ability—everyone is capable of maintaining the social identity of CCC as an hegemonic institution; the

markers of elitism and prestige given are those that can be attained by everyone ready to be taught at the college-level, which "regular people" can "build up to." The purpose of the placement test in this framework is to make sure everyone feels like they belong, no matter their starting level. Without the placement test, William imagines people will be "like, 'Nah, this ain't for me," if the class is "too far" for them. They'll feel overwhelmed and conclude they don't belong, not understanding that whatever gap there is "that they can just learn it":

> I think the test is fine because you have to be able to evaluate the people in the class you want to put them in. You don't want to put somebody in so they are just totally overwhelmed with what they are doing. Some people just aren't as advanced as other people. When you put someone in the class that's just way too far for them, they might just get overwhelmed and just be like, 'You know what, I'm not going to be here. I'm just going to leave.' You can easily see people doing that, just like, 'Nah, this ain't for me.' (William interview 1)

What is important in a developmental framework is keeping people comfortable, assuring them, no matter their level, they belong.

This divergent framework also appeared in my analysis of the colleges webpages, which I took as the last case in my interpretive phenomenological analysis. I discuss how these frameworks appear in the college webpages (see Table 4.3) in the next section.

Table 4.3 Illustrative Utterances: Placement Testing Webpages

Source	#	Utterance/Quote	Gfi
Webpage “What Are Placement Tests?”	1	Before entering City Community College and registering for classes, you will need to take a placement test if you do not qualify for a test waiver.	18.21
	2	**If you are not exempt, you need to take the placement tests.**	5.68
	3	**The placement tests are very important** because the results —in English and math—are used to determine if you will be placed into college-level courses. If not, you may first need to enroll in developmental classes or pre-college workshops, for which you do not earn credit toward a degree program. **Good performance on this test makes you exempt from taking pre-college level mathematics and English courses, which do not count toward a degree or certificate.** We HIGHLY recommend that you:	14.19
Webpage “Test Descriptions”	4	In order for students to begin classes at City Community College, the first step to enrollment is to take the ACCUPLACER test to determine the most appropriate starting level of both English and math.	13.86
	5	Because the test determines your first-year course load, it is very important that you familiarize yourself with the test format, test questions, and test strategies and that you practice taking the test. To do so, we HIGHLY recommend that you:	18.05
Webpage: “Placement Levels And Courses”	6	Based on your performance on the placement test, and depending on your specific English language and mathematics abilities and needs you will be placed in one of CCC’s college level courses or pre-college level courses and workshops.	20.73
Webpage “Placement Tests—Level One Category”	7	If you placed into Level 1 Reading, Level 1 Writing or into the Level 1 Reading and Writing category on the College’s placement test, you need to improve your reading and/or writing skills, retake the College placement test to improve to Level 2, and then start City Community College classes.	24.65

The Framework of Entrance in the Discourse of Placement

To uncover the implicit theories of ability and belonging in bedded in the colleges webpages, I applied Fairclough’s (2015) approach to critical discourse analysis as I looked at

examples of institutional literature on the placement process. This slight shift in my methods was called for given the web-pages are, from the beginning, written texts. As such, I needed to consider the visual features of discourse use and order of discussion with intentionality to understand the social acts being carried out. I found the college's webpages draw on what Fairclough refers to as a "new hybrid genre" that is characteristic of contemporary educational institutions of higher learning. According to Fairclough, this hybrid grows as traditional institutions manage their social identity by drawing on promotional discourse in response to democratizing forces. The democratizing force in this context is the growing notion that everyone should have access to higher education, and therefore (should have) access to positions of authority and power—the "higher positions" John tells me about, "so you don't have to live paycheck-by-paycheck." The promotional discourses show up in institutional discourse in the use of "you" and "we" and its use of "need" and "important" to create "a synthetic personalization"—a contrast to the authoritative "students must" in the traditional discourse of educational institutions. Fairclough worries such discourse prompts cynicism in people the same way it prompts cynicism in commercial contexts; the transactional nature of experience in a commercial context is brought into an educational context by the use of similar discourse features. Teachers find it frustrating when students approach their coursework in such terms—John's "hand-in-hand fair exchange"; yet, it's everywhere on the institution's website.

The webpages also use what I am referring to as the discourse of entrance much more frequently than it uses what we might similarly refer to as the discourse of placement. The discourse of entrance positions remedial coursework as something to avoid; while the discourse of placement positions remedial coursework in terms of development. The first stigmatizes

remedial placement, the second grants the notion that all students have different needs but all can do well at CCC. The first sentence (utterance #1) leads with a dependent clause that works to link the placement test with entrance criteria. It reveals the role of placement testing as management of the college's social identity. Before becoming one of us—it seems to say—you must prove your worthiness if you don't "qualify for a waiver" (eg. have some proof of your college worthiness that would waive the institution's right to test your capabilities before allowing entrance). The conditional nature of entrance is conveyed in the restrictive phrasing; that is, there is no comma after the independent clause ("[…] you will need)") and before the dependent clause ("if you don't") insuring its dependence. The need is contingent on not getting a waiver and not getting a waiver makes entrance contingent.

Although few CCC applicants end up getting a waiver, the first page proceeds to delineate what qualifies first, conferring privilege on holders of traditional evidence of college-preparedness. Qualifications for waivers include a 3.5 GPA in high school, as well as specific scores on such standardized tests as the ACT and the SATs along with various ESL tests. After delineating those who don't have to take the placement test, the tone changes, becoming less deferential, as if the only audience now are those who don't have any traditional markers of college-readiness. While the first sentence (utterance #1) used simple future tense ("will need") and restrictive phrasing to convey the factual, conditional relationship between placement testing and entrance, the later restatement, which resolves the opening salvo, hedges little (see utterance #2). Employing abrupt, shortened, non-restrictive phrasing, the webpage seems, at this point, to be addressing only those who don't qualify for waivers (that is the majority of CCC applicants) and it does so in boldface—it's Gunning Fog Index score is far lower than any other utterance.

The word choice of “need” rather than “must” lays the obligation as arising from some as yet unknown capacity of the individual students as opposed to an imposition on the part of the institution as necessary for pedagogical purposes.

Next, in another use of boldface, the webpages attempt to generate some urgency on the part of the waiver-less-student-client to take the placement test seriously (utterance #3), but it does so using the discourse of entrance as opposed to the discourse of placement. The imagined reader, at this point (assuming the same vertical reading of the text assumed by the institutional writers) is whittled down to only those who have to take the placement test. They have yet to learn about the purpose or role of the placement test—only that they need to take it. They are told that the test is important because it decides whether they are actually in college (eg., taking college-level classes that earn credit) or whether they are “pre-college" and have to take classes or workshops that don’t earn credit. “Good performance” (boldfaced) is cast in terms of placing directly into college-level classes—not placed in the most appropriate starting level as would characterize the discourse of placement in a developmental framework. Instead, “good” is associated with being placed in classes that matter, which characterizes the discourse of entrance. Students are then encouraged to study for the test—given its use in determining who receives “credit” toward degree and who doesn’t. The institutional “we” (the other pronoun making up the synthetic personalization indicative of the hybrid genre Fairclough describes) suddenly appears: “We <u>HIGHLY</u> recommend that you:” The colon directs the waiver-less-student-client to the ACCUPLACER website for a practice test and the FREE Study APP. The recommendation leaves the responsibility up to the individual to follow through. It absolves the institution of any blame it may incur when students don’t study and don’t have a “good performance” on the test—

even though the majority will ultimately place in a remedial class—a bad performance, in the terms cast here, even if there are developmental needs.

The first web-page, in short, is dominated by the discourse of entrance. Students are first sorted into two categories—those who must take the test and those who don't. The overall effect creates a stigma around the test itself. Those who must take it are marginalized and differentially positioned; their entrance into the college is conditional and ambiguous. The second webpage, however, begins with a sentence (utterance #4) that offers an illustrative counterpoint to those of the first page. It employs traditional institutional discourse and avoids the synthetic personalization of promotional discourse. With its third person use of "students," it positions the reader as part of a group—not a single individual. It positions the placement test as a helpful educational tool used "to determine the most appropriate starting level of both English and math" for everyone under the mantel "student." Here the test is cast within the discourse of developmental education: placement is about starting level, not entrance; entrance here is assumed, not contingent, everyone ultimately belongs. This view of the test more closely aligns with the developmental pedagogy that sanctifies "placement" over "entrance" testing and casts ability as something that can be developed, however incrementally, through good instruction. The student placed in developmental classes, in this paradigm, is a novice or apprentice member, who will, given time, integrate into full membership and thereby perpetuate, rather than undercut, the institution's social identity as able to confer privilege and status on its graduates. It offers a more optimistic view of the potential of those deemed underprepared for college-level classes.

This optimism, however, is undercut by the discourse of entrance that dominates other webpages. On the final web page, "Placement Tests—Level 1 Category," it becomes evident that the placement test is indeed an entrance test. The convoluted phrasing (in particular, "take the placement test to improve to level 2") obscures the fact that if a student doesn't eventually place at level 2, they cannot enter the college. That means they cannot even take developmental classes that confer "college credits." College credits, while not applicable to a degree, do give students access to Pell grant money and longer periods of time and deeper instruction to develop their skills to the necessary level (as if that is a point that can be nailed down). Clearly, a 15-week semester, for example, is different than a 5-week or three week "workshop." What social practice takes place when a "placement" test is really an "entrance" test? The free workshops students can take, in hopes of raising their placement test scores, focus on standard English grammar, revealing the anti-vernacular bias of the placement test itself. Such bias is fairly unchallenged by most stakeholders because the prestige of standard English is taken for granted. Students who are flagged for remedial classes because of their non-standard use of the "to be" verb tend to have no idea that they may be flagged or have been flagged in this way.

In sum, the placement discourse on the college's webpages is more committed to the social act of warning capable students against complacency and incapable students against misconceptions than encouraging all students to take a developmental approach to an evaluation of their current level of abilities—and to everything else that follows, for that matter. It does so in the order of its discussion, its predominate use of entrance discourse, and its assumption that all incoming students have obvious points of reference for terms like "pre-college" and "college-level."

The Non-obvious Nature of Pre-college and College-level Abilities

That there is a college-level for which one needs to be ready—that may be separate from the question whether one is smart or mature enough for college, any college—is not obvious to placement test-takers, especially those who are least familiar with the academic culture of college. Lareau's research helps us understand how home culture or habitus can affect one's integration into the classroom. Her research focuses on highlighting the cultural knowledge working class and poor families have when it comes to helping their children in school. I'd like to highlight the repercussions of the implicit theories of ability in play, particularly academic ability. In a natural growth family context, a child's ability—like everything else— is a matter of natural accomplishment; if some are smarter than others at a certain age, the assumption is those differences are meaningful and will stay meaningful throughout the students' natural development. Those are the fast-paced learners Princess admires and the smart kids John hopes to be with some day. In a working class family context of natural growth, there is an assumption that these are the kids who will go off to college and do well if anyone does.

William's story about his placement test experience during an enrollment event helps reveal the non-obvious nature of "college-level" as well as the use of "below-college," a workplace translation of the official "pre-college." In the following passage, he recounts an exchange with college personal over his roster and how it took him a moment to come to terms with the purpose of the placement test.

> William: When I looked at the classes that they was giving me for a roster, I was asking like, 'Well, what is this class and this class?' 'This is 098.' What is 098? […] They explained to me that some of those classes aren't college courses that you get credit for. 'Wait a minute, that doesn't make any sense? How come I don't get any credit?' 'Because your writing was not actually on college-level.' 'Oh, is

> that from- that's from the placement test?' 'Yeah.' And I'm like, 'Oh, because I just wrote, wrote it out.' Like, I just wrote whatever I was thinking from the question that they asked me without doing the punctuations, and they're like, 'Probably come to that.' And I'm like, 'Ah, that makes sense.'
>
> Marcotte: So what did you think about, what did you think the test was gonna do before you came to that understanding? Like when you first came in for the registration event-
>
> William: I assumed it would be all college courses and you take the placement test, they just put you in to a college class. It's just, how I looked at it. I figured it's college so it's all college courses until they explained to me that no, you have to actually qualify for the college classes. You need to take below college writing. You need to take below college classes. I'm just like, 'Oh wow, okay. That doesn't make any sense.' *But now I understand it as I look at it.* I understand because some people aren't on that level just yet. Even though it's college, you still aren't on that level, so you need to be able to build up to that level. So I understand that. But I understand that from the placement test and like I said, if I would have taken that again, I would have scored much higher than that cause I know how to put periods and commas and things like that.
>
> Then, I just wrote it out. Like I said, I wasn't in school for awhile, so I just kind of just wrote. And then I write books and I write my little poetry and I write raps. So I kind of wrote [the placement essay] like a rap. That's pretty much how I wrote that. (William interview 1, *my emphasis*)

When William was in school, he was a good student, "serious"—not "a class clown." He prepared for his tests and expected to do well because he prepared. But that was twenty years ago. He had come to the enrollment event to get some information. When it came time to take the placement test, he balked. He was told, "It's an 'enrollment event'" and taking the test was part of that process. He went through with it because everyone was so friendly and seemed like they really wanted him to come to Community. When he said he wasn't prepared to take the test, he was told not to worry about it. The test is just to place him in his classes—the "<u>HIGHLY</u> recommend" of the webpages brushed away. He says his mis-understanding is on him. He should have researched a little better what would happen at an enrollment event.

Students from natural growth orientated families equate a certain amount of maturity and a certain amount of natural, or general, intelligence with being ready for the college-level—not a certain amount of academic literacy and academic preparation that "regular people" can build up to, given the right experiences and motivation. In an entrance framework, smart people belong in college; in a developmental framework, mature people go to college—they just need to be about the work. In other words, it takes William a moment to see remedial structures in a concerted accomplishment framework. Not everyone is prepared for college simply by turning 18; readiness is not a matter of natural accomplishment. It makes perfect sense to him after he sees it. But it was not clear to him earlier on enrollment day. By the middle of his second semester at CCC, William recognized the need to build up to a certain level of academic ability much more pointedly. College-level work isn't difficult: "It's just more school. You put in the work and it comes together." Sometimes he has a couple of tests and has to write a couple of pages a week. He said he wouldn't have been ready to jump right into a full load of college courses; he didn't know that either on enrollment day.

The Mirage Between Natural Growth and Concerted Cultivation

Research question 2 states asks, "How do their experiences with prior ability (and belonging) messages shape their meaning-making around the current ability (and belonging) messages of their remedial assignment?" To answer this question, I considered how students reflections on prior classroom experiences related to their reflections on their remedial placement. I found that student interpretation of remedial placement resonated with prior messages of ability and belonging in ways that highlighted the powerful influence of tests and grades in the social construction of self-theories. My analysis also revealed the problematic

nature of CCC's dual identity as transfer institution and trade school—especially for working class participants with little family experience with college.

"Tests Are Like How Smart You Are"

An entrance framework is preceded by the idea that the placement test, like other tests and grades in general, can measure some variable, innate in the student that is separate from any social dynamic—a student's high school, for example. The placement test, like other tests, can therefore say something about the test taker's life chances in comparison to others. In the following passage, Kelly captures this meaning-system which pivots on the notion that there is a fixed ability, a threshold to one's ultimate capacity.

> Kelly: It kind of makes you question your own intelligence. Um, and then when you're finished the tests and you kind of just get your classes, I think, um, you kind of reflect on how fast you were, how [inaudible], and why you got this placement and someone else got that placement. And I think that can be really stressful and it really can even in some cases sway your decision to go to college and at all.
>
> Marcotte:
> Do you think that it, that it might sway people?
>
> Kelly: Yes. I think some people, I think for some people it would be like, it would kind of be like, "Well, if I took this long and I got this placement, I clearly don't need to go to college.'

When asked what the placement test measures, participants almost always responded first in terms that catch the social context of a classroom: "what you can do in school" or "the level you got up to in school"—what we might call academic ability. But in their response to my follow-up ("Does it measure intelligence?"), many believe that the test is capturing a glimpse of

their intelligence, something separate from school– even if, as Jerome says, “It’s not, like, their fault.” It’s not like the test-taker is going to “fail the test” because of their intelligence — there is a place for everyone at Community, participants like Jerome mistakenly believe; but, the test does measure the taker’s intelligence, even though it’s “not completely intentional,” because there is an overlap between the notion of intelligence and the notion of academic ability in a culture of natural accomplishment. If you don’t know something by a certain age and a certain grade, you might not be that quick, you might be a little slow. Your natural intelligence comes with getting older and moving through the grades. Putting in a concerted effort to know something really isn't needed. It just happens. If you can’t keep up with others, that means you are one of the slower ones. Being faster or quicker than others in your age grouping is a sign of your above average natural intelligence. It’s a sign that your life chances, too, are better, that things will come more naturally to you than it comes to others, that you will be favored and are already favored, that you are more likely to go off to college, and do well there because better than average natural intelligence is what matters in college.

Jerome’s remedial placement makes him feel really sad because he interprets it as saying something about himself in comparison to others, giving him an indication of his life chances in the long run, just like other tests have given him an indication of his chances. His Level 3 placement is difficult for him to come to terms with because he's always been "the best at reading and writing" and the placement test tells him now that he is “below average for college-level.” He believed the test message in the past; he is hurt by the message in the present. The notion that one's capacity in the long run can be determined by a test taken in the short run creates the notion that intelligence is a fixed trait and future outcomes (and even worth) are predictable based on

present outcomes. A low test score at the outset begins risk assessment—is my effort worth it in the long run or would I be better off taking my chances somewhere else? It's hard not to believe the test says something in these terms when students have had so many prior experiences with tests that purportedly have said something about their capacity in the long run.

Byrnn interprets her remedial placement (Level I workshops) as a sign that she doesn't have what it takes in the long run. She thinks, "'Wow, if I can't get past this, like, what makes me think I'm gonna get past anything else.'" She doesn't bother with the workshops; they wouldn't make a difference—she's got to be able to make it through the test on her own if she is to stand a chance. It's not the first time she's gotten a message that her chances can be summed up by a test. Before coming to CCC with the hopes of becoming an RN, Byrnn had gone back to Job Corps where she had gotten her CNA to get her EMT training; she was told that her scores on the math test she took two years prior were not high enough. Their rejection of her was painful. She told me that she thinks she could have learned. She'd matured a lot in that time. And I tend to believe she could learn (maybe more than she really believes it), but the test tells the institution something different. And the test is supposedly the objective arbiter. Indeed, it seems a little bit of a luxury to see tests in any other terms.

Even as participants like Ana tell me that they didn't see the placement test—and no longer see any test—as something that measures intelligence, they reveal that they had thought that way previously and think that others continue to think that way.

> Ana: So I don't think tests are like- they are- I don't think they're built off like how smart you are. I think it's more so like what you know and like what you're capable of doing. Um, and I, know not everyone thinks like that, I know that people do think like tests are like how smart you are. And I try not to feel that way

> because like I know- I know who I am and I know how smart I am, so I don't like to think about it that way. [Right.]
>
> Marcotte: But you maybe thought about it that way previously?
>
> Ana: Not like I, well, previous years, like when I was younger, but like my, I took the test recently, placement tests for, um, for CCC. I didn't think that way at all. I just, I just knew like I did have, um, stuff that I didn't know, but like I didn't think I was any less of like a student or not as smart as everyone else. So there's some things you know and some things you don't know, and that doesn't have to do with intelligence, but it has to do with what like basically how I took my time in high school to learn everything and pay attention. (Ana interview 1)

Ana has a new understanding from previous years but she has to remind herself of it. Like others who have had such a revelation—that they are smart enough to do well in school, they just need to "[take] time" and "pay attention"—she is thankful to be on the other side of the illusion, thankful to no longer feel "as though [she] wasn't smart enough" to pursue her dreams and be happy; her mother, though, helped her recognize the need to study, to actually try and make the course material stick, a shift from understanding academic ability in natural terms to concerted terms, separate from her intelligence or who she is—but a part of her preparation for the future she wanted.

> When I was first starting high school I, I wasn't getting the grades that I wanted. I wasn't getting like the straight A's a lot of students were getting and it was because I hadn't really, I hadn't really been prepared as far as like studying wise, so I wouldn't get like the best grades on tests and I would just like, I would work- it didn't take me- it took me to like after like parent-teacher conferences where my mom was like, 'You need to, like, be on top of it.' So, like, I realize like I need to, like, honestly figure out a way that I could like retain information for tests and stuff like that.
>
> So like throughout high school I would like, I struggled with like feeling as though I wasn't smart enough because I was getting these grades on these tests

> and it just wasn't like- it beat me up inside. And I feel like I- since then I just like, I didn't like taking tests, but I now I like have an understanding of myself, whereas I like I'm not gonna use like a piece of paper or like a grade, a letter grade, like define like my intelligence and I had to stick- it just worked for me. But I still have like, anxiety. (Ana)

When she says the words "beat me up inside," I hear a catch in her voice. She still has anxiety about her ability to be somebody, to make it in the long run, to work in a field related to her degree…, but she is determined "not to let a letter grade define [her] intelligence."

Many students do not recognize that there are differences in households, schools, and prior experiences that have more influence over what a student knows and doesn't know than a student's natural intelligence and their age. Many students from working class backgrounds do not see the concerted effort their more affluent classmates—pushed by their more educated parents—are putting into their schoolwork after class at home, "studying-wise" as Ana puts it. They draw conclusions about what they believe to be their own natural abilities and the life outcomes that follow, without recognizing they may be comparing themselves to a mirage created by not only the concerted effort of the student but also the accumulated concerted effort of the parents. When they don't get something as quickly as their classmates, they assume that means they aren't as smart—and since smartness is what ultimately what matters in the long run when it comes to college (not the content of the lesson or the accumulated knowledge built up lesson after lesson)—there is no reason then to start accumulating knowledge and skills in the short run.

Connor, like Ana, had a parent step in and show him the mirage between natural accomplishment and concerted accomplishment. When he first went to middle school, his

attention and effort dropped off. Other kids seemed quicker than him. His father took him aside and explained that everyone learns at a different pace and what matters is not who learned something first or with greater ease—what matters in the long run is that you know the material well and you can put it to use. Connor didn't want to do the homework assigned, but when he did, he got a good score on the test. When Connor says some people go to school just to go to school, what he means is this: they don't understand the purpose of school is to prepare them for the future they want, not to keep them busy until the future arrives.

"Writing Doesn't Even Go With my Trade… I Mean Major"

The entrance framework is also preceded by the idea that the only knowledge and skills worth learning are those related to one's future career. Such an idea shapes the students' approach to the classroom from an early age, often over a number of years, and limits their preparation for higher education because it limits their understanding of writing, in particular. It also shapes their interpretation of their remedial placement: Because they do not understand the broader general education and liberal arts project of community college and because their focus is on career and trade preparation, they see remedial classes as "extra" classes—not designed to lift their skills so that they can feel secure in their reading and writing and math abilities in their college-level classes, and beyond. The helpful constructions of remedial classes as learning steps or as a transition to college life are less clear and, therefore, less accessible in light of these notions. When institutional trust is low, these extra classes exist to fill the institution's coffers.

Some participants expressed confusion over the purpose of general education and writing intensive classes they would need to take in college to get a degree or a certificate. Charlene, for example, didn't understand why she has to take general education classes and other writing

intensive classes to learn digital video production. She imagined she might need to read or write for a contract, she but didn't see a reason to practice or develop her skills beyond that. And she's been taking general education classes since grade school. By our fourth interview, Charlene had persisted through her English 102. When I asked her about her earlier view on writing, she almost seemed a little embarrassed. She explained to me that kids like her don't have the same guidance as middle class kids, so there were a number of things about her chosen major she didn't understand. Jailyn expressed a similar notion, imagining that once she got past her English classes she would have no use for writing in her content courses other than to take notes. Franklin, too, saw little reason for reading and writing in his future career as an aerospace engineer. He was quite sure he wouldn't need reading and writing to help him solve complex problems in his future. He gets plenty of practice doing that in his math classes. Similar beliefs about the uselessness of history and science for those who weren't going into history or science also suggested confusion about the liberal arts and general education project embedded in the required curriculum for degrees and certificates. These beliefs follow years of educational reform that linked student abilities with money making potential, devalued the liberal arts focus in the humanities, and cast even public education purely as a private good instead of a public good in the service of democracy.

Being unfamiliar with the liberal arts idea behind the college part of community college means not understanding the high expectations of the placement test itself, as John's experience taking the placement test demonstrated at the start of this chapter. It also means, in John's case, that he doesn't see his remedial classes in terms of preparing him for what he will need to do to earn his certificate for medical billing and coding. During our first interview, John expressed

discouragement about his placement: He didn't see how writing "even goes with [his] trade." He corrected himself and said, "I mean major" demonstrating a growing awareness of the college context. When I saw John for our second interview, he had just come from registration and was "so stressed out." His friends had told him they all take four classes to get finished in two years. But the advisor in registration had suggested two college-level English classes and two real estate classes might be too much. He had also just learned that the six course certificate, for which John has come to CCC, is a 13 course certificate, in total—for him, because of his remedial placement and missing high school biology. Because John's institutional trust is low, he feels hood-winked, not in the hands of an institution that will get him where he needs to be, that offers him tutoring and other support services to ensure that he is ultimately capable and competent in his work life.

Byrnn told me she saw every writing assignment before college as something to simply get through. She believed she had limited natural abilities, so taking each writing assignment as an individual hurtle seemed to her, at the time, to make the most sense. She did not understand writing skills were things that she could be working on, building up overtime, skills that would help her in her future if she decided to go to college at community, or anywhere else. She says, when she looked out at the world, she did not see people reading and writing at work, or anywhere really. If her grandmother showed interest in her education, it would be a sharp comment about grades and a directive that Byrnn needed to "make time" for her work; but, because she never actually helped Byrnn study or read to her, or engaged her in conversations about emotions or dreams or other impractical notions—Byrnn didn't exactly know what she was supposed to do with any time that she did make for homework. She never saw the projects

she did in school as building her skills up to the level of comfort needed to do well enough in college or to feel comfortable having adult conversations about democratic choices or issues of importance to her community. She hadn't come to understand the purpose of education as a way to better herself and prepare herself for "higher positions," as Ana had, after her mother stepped in and helped her see the need for a concerted effort. For Byrnn and other participants from home cultures of natural accomplishment, school was just something to get through. She says, "If older me could go back and kick younger me, I would."

One might not be reading and writing per se as a nurse, Byrnn's goal in coming to CCC; but one needs reading and writing skills to acquire the knowledge and skills that they need for future work or careers. Reading and writing are intellectual technologies; practice using them translates into improved critical thinking skills, making good decisions in the moment, expressing oneself thoughtfully—all of these things are inherently important in any adult social behavior. It is higher level literacy skills that students need for success in college and it is a higher level literacy that regular people can build up to.

Charlene also told me that she liked writing when she was little. One day she asked her adoptive uncle about the income potential of writers. After his reply—that writers don't make good money—her interest fell off. Ana shares a similar story. She too liked writing, until her mom told her that writers don't really make much money and that writing is too insecure of a thing to bet on. For Charlene in particular, this meant there was no reason to practice the skill if one is not going to make money doing it. In fact she resented times when she had to work on her writing or had her writing critiqued. Until her notions about writing were challenged in her

English remedial classes, she had come to the conclusion that there was no need for writing in her future plans, and therefore no need to build her confidence and ease with writing.

Working class students, like Jailyn, Byrnn, Charlene, and John, imagine once they get to their major classes that they won't have to do essay writing, for example; that kind of writing— argumentative, interpretive, analytical— won't be in their work future. It may be true that not everyone will apply analytic thinking skills, for example, through writing but certainly one will need all of these higher order thinking skills in such a job as nursing. And one will need to practice reading and writing in high school to have enough felicity with higher literacy to read and assimilate information from textbooks and course notes. Students from natural accomplishment culture assume their more confident middle class classmates are smarter or smart in the way that is valued in school, as if only some are that way. They draw conclusions about their own abilities based on the figured world of the classroom that seems to tell them their place. Hatt (2012) argues that the middle class children benefit in the classroom from their middle class socialization. Their "smartness" is more accurately described as their ability to meet the evaluative norms, given their increased practice with those norms. In this figured world, then, the child from the natural accomplishment culture is at a disadvantage because she is being compared to students from middle class households. The comparison puts less enculturated students behavior in the category of less smart. This is a convoluted way to say that when the children talk about smartness, they are of course not talking about natural abilities. I'd like to call attention to the notion that they don't know that. The superior abilities of some students to meet the evaluative norms is misinterpreted—not just by the teachers, but also by the students themselves—as natural ability. When one struggles to meet unfamiliar evaluative norms, they

don't make the same socio-cultural explanation that I am making here. Instead, they conclude as many of the participants here told me, that they are stupid or worried about being seen as stupid. If their disassociation from the classroom is interpreted as maladaptive or oppositional or a matter of choice, the student interprets that teacher's indifference as confirmation that they indeed are not worth chasing after. Indeed, having a teacher chase after you, was a sign that you are special, that maybe you really did have what it takes to really make it, to matter.

This pre-figured world of evaluative norms is or was at one point invisible to most of the participants, however, before they get to college. Some students make the transition; some come to see college as a place to open one's mind and learn from other people, but for many these notions that commodify and stratify abilities—and thereby shape self-theories along social class lines—stand in the way.

Coming to Productive Terms of Engagement

Recall research question 3 asks, "How do students' interpretations influence subsequent orientation to the remedial coursework? That is (how) does their interpretation of their placement affect their integration into the academic culture of their community college?" To answer this question, I analyzed how participant interpretation of their remedial placement evolved over time. I found that how students attributed their remedial placement—to a "bad performance" on the placement test in an entrance framework or to a matter of need in a developmental framework— influenced their orientation to their coursework and shifted over time. Coming to terms with remedial placement in a developmental framework meant seeing remedial coursework as a learning step or as a transition to college life. Essentially, this means seeing the

classes as needed and helpful, and not the consequence of "bad performance" on the placement test.

A few enrollment procedures made it harder for some participants to make clear attributions of need. First, participants were curious about their roster and what their placement meant. College personnel, however, don't have a clear answer to their questions, as illustrated by William's story about enrollment day discussed in response to my first research question. I suspect no one would feel comfortable pointing out his non-standard use of the 'to-be' verb while explaining his roster to him. Some participants also suggested that they expected the placement test to list a kind of inventory of what they needed to work on, suggesting that they are open to an evaluation but unsure of what had been evaluated. The college tells test-takers that they should familiarize themselves with the test and practice taking it, but this is not actively encouraged in any way other than the use of all caps and underlining on institutional web-pages. The ambiguity around placement standards makes it easier for students, like Byrnn, to make a global assessment about their performance on the placement tests and assume they are not capable of doing well in college. Since remedial placement is to be avoided in an entrance framework, it signals the student is not one of the pack (an inherently unsafe position for a social mammal).

Second, participants commented on the cold, dark, and unpleasant nature of the testing experience itself, recalled the groans of stress expressed by others, and their own anxiety. This unpleasantness, compounded by the notion that the test was (just) a step in the enrollment process, meant some did not put forth their best effort or take as much time as they could have taken; they wanted to get out of the testing center as soon as possible. They have taken many

tests before that ultimately didn't seem to matter; sure, in hindsight, they recognize they messed up, but it makes it harder for them to make a clear attribution of need if they believe their performance was bad in some way, and they feel they don't really belong in, or need, a remedial class.

The participants in the study who persisted into their college-level courses and beyond came to see their remedial placement, at least in English, in terms of "need," "help," and "transition"—even if some at first saw their remedial placement in terms of "messing up" on the placement test. A couple of classroom related factors seemed to help these participants come to productive terms of engagement in classes that they initially didn't want to take: college-level co-requistes and highly-involved teachers. Yet there were other participants who were un-able to come to productive terms, and ultimately unable to persist.

The experiences of Jerome, Piper, and Princess help illustrate how student meaning making around remedial placement shapes integration into academic culture. Each of these student-participants relate to their remedial assignment in ways that typified the two frameworks and demonstrated their dynamics. I start with Jerome, who was unable to come to productive terms of engagement in time. His story illustrates what seems like a kind of trap that ensnares otherwise capable students who underestimate the time needed to do a good job and meet the expectations of college—an underestimation that began with his approach to the placement test. Piper's story illustrates the role of college-level co-requistes in student meaning-making around remedial placement; it also illuminates how remedial placements are often seen as a transition into academic life, appreciated more in hindsight than in foresight. Like Jerome, she was a capable student, who put no concerted effort into the placement test; but unlike Jerome, she was

able to see her remedial placement in productive terms. And I end with Princess's story because her transition from an entrance framework to a developmental framework demonstrates the teacher's role in helping students come to productive terms of engagement. She provides us with a picture of the capable student, who is, however, unprepared for the pace and the expectations of college-level work.

Jerome's Story: "'Oh, I Already Know This So I'm Not Going To Learn It'"

Throughout the semester, Jerome struggled to come to terms with his remedial placement in English. Even though he persisted until the end of the semester, he passed neither his English 098 nor his English 108, the writing and reading courses that make up the level 3 placement. Jerome had expected a college-level placement – at least English 101. His charter school emphasized going to college, and he had, he believed, more natural ability that made it easy for him to get through school without really trying. Like some of the other participants who were confident in their writing skills and who had four-year college ambitions, Jerome even hoped for an English 102 placement. He resisted seeing his remedial placement in terms of "need" or "help" because his notion of his own writing abilities—his "self-theory" — and his understanding of the educational opportunity in front of him—his "field-theory"— made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to put forth a concerted effort, even though by the end of the semester he realizes that that is exactly what is needed if he wants to "get anything done."

When Jerome explained why he "wants a higher placement," his first reason, half-articulated, suggested that it is the idea that the class is "basic" that was, "for [him]," problematic. Seeing the class in these terms, Jerome planned to just get through with the basic

amount of effort. The terms of engagement sound like his own approach throughout high school —one of minimum care—and he uses himself as an example. Jerome commented.

> I would say that just like if you want like—first show up to class cause like that's really like helpful. Cause like even if you're not paying attention, fully like you're getting some information that could help you if you're struggling. Um, with whatever you're writing or doing. And I would also say, uh, um, try your best cause like, cause I always just try my best. I usually end up ok, not like bad, but usually okay. So that just like try, so your, your professor or teacher knows that you're like, yeah, actually trying, it might not be right, but they might give you like something cause you actually put something down instead of just leaving it blank. So yeah.

When Jerome advises "try your best," he repeats a phrase that, in it's over-use, is synonymous with do what you can. He repeats the phrasing, referring to his own strategy, adding "just" before "try my best," slightly altering the meaning to do it without worrying about it. His elaboration further diminishes the phrase: in the end, "try your best" is synonymous with "[putting] something down instead of just leaving it blank." Jerome had explained to me that because he was naturally good at things like reading and writing, he got through high school with less apparent effort than others. Given the way he thinks about his own ability—that he has more than others—an attribution of need would mean, in an entrance framework, he was indeed "below average for college level"— a thought that made him very sad. An attribution of a bad performance on the placement test left him disappointed with himself; he beat himself up for not actually trying to get a college-level placement—but, this attribution does not prime him to improve his reading and writing skills. If he were to engage, it would be to perform, which he sees no need to do. For now, his plan is to get by unnoticed:

> Yeah, just like skim, like skim on the edge of it and like just like not be like the best one, but like just like, 'Oh, you're there, you're just like some other person in there for the same thing.' Yeah…

In our second interview, Jerome answers my question about the accuracy of his placement with some ambiguity. There are somethings, he confesses, he forgot while taking the placement test; somethings he's learned but didn't know the terms for, some sentence-structure "stuff" he seems to minimize. Because Jerome believes the class is basic and the classwork is easy, he pushes it off until later and then finds himself in a catch-22:

> But if I do that, I usually end up forgetting that I pushed it off and then when its due I'm just scrambling trying to hurry it up. And that's usually how it becomes wrong and all that stuff. So….

He believes the work he turns in last minute doesn't really demonstrate what he is capable of, which, as he sees it now, is what actually matters – he could do the work, so he doesn't really need the class. From his perspective college is not as hard as he thought it would be.

> Honestly, I would say, since I'm in developmental courses, it's easier cause people always say like, 'Oh, college is a struggle, you have to manage your time.' But like right now I'm just like, 'Oh, I can just do it later and just like do it like later' and then like 'I'm fine.' Math. The math is easy and English I usually do it like at the last minute, so that's fine for me. But like I can understand, like if you have a job, I can understand like why it would be hard for you because of that, it's also eating up at your time and like, I'm really doing nothing most of my day. I can really like push it off to like the last minute to do it. [me: Right.] I can understand why people say that college is hard.

By our third interview, Jerome wishes for a challenge—however vague the notion is—that might change the terms of his engagement—so he "wouldn't be like 'Oh, I already know this, so I'm not going to learn it.'" He has resisted the implications of his grades throughout the

semester. He says he forgets to do something and loses points and is frustrated because he "did all that work" on the parts he didn't forget. The terms of membership in his developmental class are different than what he is used to. In his high school, PursueYourDreams Charter, Jerome had status as a slacker, whose natural abilities allowed him to get by with the bare minimum. Yet in his remedial English classes, he feels "hurt" when he sees some of his classmates putting in effort and not procrastinating.

By the end of the semester, Jerome sensed that he needed to change. He had been pushed out of his comfort zone twice: once, in his English class for an impromptu presentation with another classmate, and once in math with a mandatory conference after a series of failed quizzes. Jerome told me he hated having to conference with his math professor because it made him feel like he was on a lower level than he was before; in high school, he was "extremely" good at math. He avoids the work rather than catching up and restoring his prior math prowess because he had been good without effort in the past, had always been able to get by with less effort than others, and he had gotten the message fairly early on that some have natural ability and others need effort to get by. Doing well without effort, in terms of natural accomplishment, means that one is naturally better. Doing something before others your age, too, was a sign of higher abilities—another notion of natural abilities that that Jerome put stock in.

Nevertheless, Jerome appreciated being pushed in these ways. He sensed it's a "good thing." He'd come to see that what is needed to do well in college is "mental readiness" marked by concerted effort—to "like, actually do the work." This time when Jerome describes the terms of engagement needed for success, he uses himself as a counter-example.

Marcotte: Can you describe what that mental readiness would look like?

> Jerome: I say you have to be able to do things on a schedule because like a lot of people say that they can do it, but like a lot of people can't actually, because once like something comes up, like that's kind of not important, like going out with friends or like playing games or something like that- We will usually do that until actually do our homework. I know I did that a lot, but uh, also, um, keep up, like, actually like do the work in all your classes, cause like I phase out a lot in classes and that makes me like lose a lot of stuff. So you have to like always be attentive and like write down anything also, like don't be afraid to like go to your professor and ask for help. Cause I definitely don't do that, especially in my math class.

Jerome is unable to change his behavior and engage with his teachers or classwork on different terms although he knows change is needed. He is tired of his inconsistent efforts, his habit of doing the bare minimum, of dropping projects he enjoys. It's part of himself that he says he "really hate[s]."

In the following passage, Jerome tries to explain to me this part of himself. There is a mental block to a concerted effort because first there must be the knowledge that one is "good enough." There is no point to a concerted effort, to pushing yourself past the rough patches, unless it's clear you are good enough. He wants to push himself to do things that he doesn't want to do, so he can do the things that he wants to do. It's a desire for kind of self-determination that he seems unable to tap into. He is held back by the notion that some have it and some don't, the notion that there is a demarcation, a threshold, something that separates the lions from the lambs —it's that idea that stops him. The idea is problematic for him both when he believes he has superior abilities—then he thinks he doesn't need to build skills; and when he worries he doesn't have superior abilities—then there's no reason to try. It is this notion in the end that chokes Jerome's motivation.

Jerome: I don't want to keep it like having, like doing something I like then dropping it and then I just want to like keep on pushing through stuff, even though like, I know I don't want to do it. I'm just going to keep on pushing and then like actually keep on doing stuff that I want to do. So yes. I'm going to have to change that part about me and then yeah, I think that's it because I really hate that part about me, I want to change it but it's going to be hard-

Marcotte: What part are you talking about?

Jerome: I always do stuff and then I drop it later on. Like I'm like, I would- I'm like, I'm writing a book right now, but like, it's been like a year since I wrote anything in it [or thought something about it?]. So I kind of dropped it and I really want to work back on it but like I just don't want to cause like, I don't know why but I really hate that about me. So yeah, I really want to change that because I won't- I won't get anything done if I have that mindset, I want to change that. So yeah.

Marcotte: Why do you think you don't want to work on the book? Um, what do you feel when you think about working on it?

Jerome: I think I am- I think, I always feel like- it's like, no point in me writing cause like, it feels like mentally, it feels like I'm not good enough. Like I'm not a good enough writer to do it. So I feel like I should just stop writing and do something else.

Marcotte: What do you mean, "Good enough"?

Jerome: Like when I always see like something I'm passionate about, like always get like some type of depression from it, like at least a little bit afterwards and then like I always like feel bad, about writing. Cause like it took me like- it shou-. This is a book I've been meaning to write for like years now. Like I always had the mindset when I was like, since I would say since I was six or no- seventh or eighth grade. So I had, I know like almost, almost- a good part of it that I want to write about but writing it is like a men- not a mental strain. I would say like something in like the back of my head saying like, 'Oh you can't, you shouldn't do this because you know that you're not good enough to do it. So you should just stop right here and like do something else with your time or like, not even do it at all.' So that usually like gets to me like at- like after a few words, I stop writing so

> then I just stop doing it, and go on to something else. So I think that's usually the thing that gets to me. So yeah. (Jerome, interview 3)

Jerome explains a painful cycle of doing something he enjoys, like writing, only to find himself later depressed by a sense that he knows he is not good enough to spend his time doing it, as if only those who are good enough to do it (whatever "it" may be) should do it. It's a kind of conservative elitism that maintains the status quo and lets in from the under-classes only those who are good enough. Because he doesn't see his ability in developmental terms, he feels the pressure of not being good enough as if his ability could be predetermined. The voice he hears is one that shames him for wasting time, one that echoes with his brother urging him not to put his "eggs all in one basket." In an entrance framework, a concerted effort will not change a lamb into a lion. First, you need to be a lion.

Jerome is articulate about the bind he finds himself in. He believes that the bind is a part of himself, something within himself that he hates—a personality construct, his self-theory to use Dweck's term. But, Jerome's mindset is not his own. It was forged in the crucible of the classroom, in countless interactions with teachers and classmates, within the larger crucible of a capitalistic society that justifies material inequalities with the notion that abilities and merit are also distributed unequally, naturally. You can hear the contours of it—this way of thinking about ability in the narratives of all the participants, that some are naturally smarter than others, faster, quicker, more talented; from the outside, their path to the top-positions, is a matter of natural accomplishment, almost pre-ordained, or pre-ordain-able. Those without enough need not enter.

When I asked Jerome how he was doing at the end of the semester, he told me he thinks he is doing good. He doesn't have a clear read, though, on his teacher. I sense he's done his best

to avoid getting a clear read. His lack of effort may have given his teacher permission to write him off. It's easy to do. When the student devalues what you are doing in the classroom and barely pays attention—I'll speak for myself—it is hard to bother chasing after that student. While participants like Jerome, Byrnn, and Gemaia got caught in some version of the "it's easy" trap and were unable to keep up with the pace and expectations of remedial classes their first semester at college, other participants were able to construct different ability narratives that were more conducive to taking advantage of the available educational opportunity structures.

Piper's Story: "I Was Like W'hatever, if I'm Already Here Then, Why Not?'"

While Piper expected her remedial math placement, her English remedial placement was a surprise. Like Jerome, she blew off the placement test, made no effort to prepare, and rushed to get out of the testing room as quickly as she could. But unlike Jerome, she had an easier time coming to productive terms of engagement, as there were more productive terms available to her than there were for Jerome. She was able to see a benefit to engaging in her remedial course work, even though she did not want to have to take the classes.

Piper recounts the moment she learned of her remedial English placement in an exchange with an aunt who asked about her first semester roster. Piper's comments are notable in that it shows the notion in the air that remedial classes are not the smart classes and remedial placement needs to be accounted for. She says,

> Well, at first I didn't know what it was and my aunt, like, who's married to my uncle on my mom's side. Um, she was like, 'Well, what are- why are you in those classes? Why aren't you in one-oh-one already? Why are you in oh-nine-eight?' Cause she- she's so smart. She is a head nurse at Hanaman, I think. She's like so smart. She's been through a lot of school and she remembers everything. So I'm telling her, I'm like, 'Well, I'm in these classes. And she was like, "Why? Why are you there?' And then I was like, 'What's the problem?' And she was like, 'Well, those aren't- you aren't in like the smart class here.' So like, I was like, 'Whoa, I don't know why I'm there.' Like I guess like I need to refresh both. I guess I like did terrible on my placement test. Probably, cause I barely paid attention to it. So, and I didn't think it was like, I didn't really think it was a big deal because if I, if I need it and then I need it, and if I got to take it, then I'll take it. If it's easy for me, then it's an easy A in the class, and then I can just get it over with, which is how it's going right now. So, and I'm, and I'm fine with that, and it's helping me brush up on everything. And even like stupid stuff, like I always mess up "to" and "too" when I'm writing in the sentence.

Piper's aunt believes remedial placement is something with problematic implications, and prompts Piper to defend her placement, as if needing a brush-up or needing help transitioning to college expectations is somewhat shameful.

Piper is stunned, at first, by her English remedial placement in terms that recall those used by Kelly; they both seemed pulled-up, stopped in their tracks. However, she pushes back against her aunt's characterization of the classes. The terms of smart and the implied dumb are closer to those Jerome uses. There are other, more acceptable terms, that she can apply. Most notably — unlike Jerome – she had been out of school for a little while, so the idea of "a brushup" makes sense to her situation. It's a productive construction that Jerome doesn't have access to. For Piper, in the above exchange, her remedial placement means either she has a temporary deficit that she needs to remedy, or "refresh" ("if I need it, I need it); or she messed up on her placement test (if I have to take it, I'll take it"), in which case she doesn't really need the class, but so what, it'll be "an easy A."

Piper recalls when the semester first started, she had planned on approaching the class in terms of basic class, basic effort (similar to Jerome). She says this at the end of the semester, when sharing her thoughts about some of her classmates, the ones who hadn't put in a concerted effort and also ended up disappearing before the end of the semester. I asked her what she thought happened. Even though my questioning seemed to prompt her in a different direction, her thinking focused on the non-credit nature of her English 098, which she factored in before she realized the same teacher taught both classes and one was a college-level reading class.

> Marcotte: Do you think they felt like the stuff in the class really wouldn't help them in the future and therefore it wasn't worth learning? Or do you think that they, um, didn't know how to learn it, or…?

> Piper: I think it was because like, you know, how, what was it? It was like it wasn't towards your GPA or like you didn't get credits from taking the class, you just needed to take it to get to 101. So I think that was like part of it. Like didn't think about taking it serious enough and kind of just like whatever, if I fail, then I fail. [Right.] Even though it obviously matters because you're not going to get to your next class, [right] which they can't do without taking it and without passing it. So I guess it was just, like not caring cause it wasn't like a credit course, I guess. I don't know. One of them was, one of them wasn't, so but just- Yeah. I think even for me, like when I first started I was like, 'Whatever,' like, 'If I do bad then I do bad,' cause I'm not getting credit for it. I just need to pass it with like the bare minimum. I was like whatever, 'If I'm already here then, why not?'
>
> Marcotte: Right. So why not? Why not fin-, finish that—Why not?
>
> Piper: Why not do good or why not try my best? Because like, if I'm not in a mindset- for my head, it was like two classes, but it was one class and the same teacher. So it's not like I left and got up and went anywhere. So me like putting my all into it, even if it was just for that one class and I was taking and the one that counted and the one that didn't, so like I still kind of need to do the work for both classes because it wasn't really separated. (Piper, interview 3)

Piper had reasoned the reading and writing work were intwined, and since English 108, Academic Reading, would effect her GPA, she might as well put in effort. She knew she was going to need to keep her GPA up; she reasoned, why not start trying now. She also saw value in what she was learning, saw something useful in paying attention to "stupid stuff" like proper usage. Piper might have considered her remedial placement in the same terms as Jerome, doing as little work as possible. But, she is drawn into the class; she wants to put in a concerted effort now that she is in college, and the corequisite link facilitated that construction for her.

When Piper was in high school, Blue Ribbon Charter school, she felt jealous or hurt when others seemed motivated to do their work in a way that she wasn't. Piper saw their

motivation as a sign that they had been given something she didn't have, something that made them care about their work and even about themselves more than she cared about herself or her work. And she reasoned that they cared about themselves and their work because their 'selves' and their work were worth caring about—somehow naturally better. If she was prettier or smarter, then she too would be motivated and would care. Their ease or naturalness with the teacher, their consistent academic efforts, were signs that they were pretty enough or smart enough to take themselves and their efforts seriously, to actually care enough to try and become something, since those traits are not distributed equally, in an entrance framework, Piper worried that she didn't have enough to try to become something.

> Piper: I've never been bad at English or science or anything like that. I just was, I was just being lazy, so I'd just be like, whatever, I have no desire to do it at all. And I hated myself for that. I really was like, "Why am I this way? Why don't I care enough to push myself?" But like, there's other girls in my class who will do their homework that day and I'd be like, "Oh, I'm so jealous of them for doing that," for like having the motivation to do it. But I was just so unmotivated and I did not care.

> Marcotte: Did you think it wouldn't make a difference? I wonder if you can try to figure out why you weren't motivated, like you are making a connection now between effort and outcome that you didn't make before. Any idea why?

> Piper: I think I thought I was stupid. Like I thought like no matter how hard I try, I will not get anything. Like, and I thought this about myself up until a year ago, like when I was like super sad, I'm like, I will never get anywhere. This is just my life. This is how I'm going to be forever. I'm never going to change.[…]

> So why do I do it? Why do I do this to myself? It's not fair to do this to myself and then be so jealous of other people when I can do this same exact thing that they're doing. I can do what everyone else is doing and I just put myself down just because I thought like, 'I'm too ugly, I'm too stupid, I'm too this.'

She asks why she does this to herself—holds herself to an ideal and beats herself up with the ways she falls short. Piper tells me she had to push herself to enroll in CCC by first declaring she "did not care anymore" what other people thought, the imagined shaming she had done to herself almost on their behalf. She wasn't too ugly or too stupid to try to make something of herself; it wouldn't be fair if that were true.

Now that Piper is in college, she has a different mindset. Now she knows she can do the work, she needs to push herself actually do it; she has concluded she has enough to try, that what is needed now is a concerted effort. In high school, she knew she could get by with excuses and tears, and even if she failed, she could still go to school. Then she didn't understand that she was capable of doing as well as anyone else. When I ask her what she would do if she failed an assignment, something that she worried about doing, she focused on making sure she managed her time, so she could do a good job.

> That's where my mind- and my mindset has been. Just getting help when I need it and trying as hard as I can. [Right] Because I, I know I can do it. It's just that I have the option not to, that I would like be like, 'Ah, well, I'll just wait till tomorrow' and just wait till tomorrow to study or do any, do any homework or whatever and then just push it off. But now I like, I go home, I do my homework or like if even if it's the weekend, I like to do my homework before I do anything on the weekend just so I don't even have to think about it. And yeah, I try to get everything done. Like I- as soon as I can just to not mess up cause I don't want to mess up. (Piper, interview)

Her developmental reading and writing link over the summer gave her a chance to practice this new mindset in a setting where she could do well and get the teacher's attention the way the students she envied in high school did.

The first two times I asked her about the accuracy of her remedial placement, she focused on how she messed up on the placement test and said her remedial placement was her fault. By the time she was a couple of weeks into her second semester, her answer to the same question shifted. She doesn't mention her performance on the placement test. Instead, she tells me that she "needed it" because she took time off after high school. Her developmental classes built up her confidence. The closeness she felt with her remedial English teacher sustained her in her college-level classes.

> Piper: Honestly, like altogether I really liked my professor and she was really, um, involved and like not a lot of people are like that. Now that I've taken more classes, I can see that people are just like whatever. Like it's on you—
>
> Marcotte: By "people" you mean other teachers?
>
> Piper: Yeah. Like they don't care. Like she cared a lot about like her students and now like my other teachers, some of them were just like whatever. Like if you don't, if you don't have your work done on time or like if there's a problem, like they don't try and fix it, [they] keep going.

> In our forth interview, Piper looked back over two semesters to her summer remedial class. She saw value in the class as a transition despite its non-credit standing.
>
> So when I came back, I was like, my brain was wiped. When I, when I finally got, I got, and I had that English 98 or whatever it was, I don't know. But, um, that class was like, cake for me. It was easy. Like, like, um, 101 I struggled with a little bit because it was online, but 102, 102, uh... yeah, I think, I think like, me going through that and having that as much as I didn't want to take that course because it's like a non-credit course or whatever, it really benefited me, like, figuring out, like learning, relearning, all the stuff that I learned. (Piper)

Piper's interpretation of her remedial placement evolved over time. At first, she saw it in terms of her performance on the placement test; she saw her remedial placement as her fault

because, taking the placement test, she was “just was like, well, I don’t want to be here. I’m going to just rush through.” In the end, she comes to an attribution of need telling me she believed the placement test put her “exactly were [she] needed to be.” I.

Princess’s Story: "I'm Looking at It Better Than I Was Looking at It Last Year"

Princess saw CCC at first as a neighborhood college, an extension of the K-12 public school system that she had been a part of since kindergarten. She didn’t want to go away to college like some of her friends and cousins because of the cost but also because she had come to the conclusion that she was not fast learner. Her plan, was to be the standard, to do as little schooling as she needed to get the nursing job she wanted since she was younger. Princess, however, has since revised both her self- and her field-theory. By field-theory, I mean her theory of the field of interaction, her understanding of the available educational opportunity structures. Coming to productive terms with her remedial placement required changes to both.

Although Princess’s story begins with a level 1 placement, she was, at the time of our first interview, enrolled in an ALP link (level 4) with the same instructor who taught her English 098-099 link (level 2) the previous semester, a little change to the normal remedial progression that her teacher had gotten Departmental approval to make. Princess was glad she was where she was; she was glad that her teacher sat down with her at the end of the prior semester. She was also glad that she listened to her teacher She’s doing better this semester because, as she says, she gets it. It hasn’t been easy, she added, but she is “looking at it better.” She now sees her remedial placement in a developmental framework, but she started in an entrance framework.

Like Byrnn, Princess seemed to approach the placement test as if it was an entrance test, that the test itself might let her know "what [she's] getting into,” an ordeal she has to face on her

own or she is not worthy, or not on the right level. She tells me she didn't want to ask anyone about the placement test because she wanted to be “surprised”:

> I wanted to ask somebody about it to give me an insight what was going on, but I didn't want them to tell me like everything that was going on. I wanted to be surprised because, because I want to know what I'm into- what I'm getting into. I want to- you know, I’m going to college. I need to be on a different mindset. I needed to be at a different level. So I'm just, just go ahead and do it and that's what I did. (Princess interview 1)

When she saw that she had to write 300 words, she was like, “What?! I never did this before.” Her first reaction to her level 1 placement was: “This can’t be possible. I didn’t score this.” She thought to herself, “I’m not going to do it again.” Her level one placement was difficult for her to take. She had to overcome a cascade of self-doubt and frustration. But somehow she pushed herself to try again.

> But it's like, you gotta push yourself to get into an English class or get yourself into a math class. But it do really get to you as a person. Mentally. Me, it got to me emotionally to the point where I cried and I'm like, ‘Why me?’ But it hit you. And hard, like, I don't know how other people take it. I know a lot of people brush it off, but me, it- it got to me emotionally. (Princess, interview 1)

When she received a level two placement after her second attempt, she thought to herself: “I’m just going to start here and see what I need help in. I will be grateful in the long run. If I need the extra help, I’ll take it.” Her acceptance of this help, though, was not immediate. Even though she was happy to get actual classes, she was not actively engaged in her coursework and persisted in the class by doing the bare minimum. She described herself that semester as being “here but not really here.” She told me that she didn’t want to have to worry about her remedial English classes. She just wanted to go straight home after class. At that time, she explained to me

in a later interview, she was putting off her academic work as long as possible. She didn't want to stay after class for tutoring because, like many other participants, she used to think needing help "was a bad thing."

At the end of her first semester, her English professor sat down with her and asked her if she had done this kind of academic writing in high school. When Princess answered "no," her professor told her that that meant Princess's prior schooling had failed her. Princess told me later that if she hadn't listened to her teacher, she might have been one of the many CCC students she knew from high school who dropped out after getting their FASFA refund. Her teacher's message helped her see the need for a concerted effort. Her teacher's explanation of her remedial placement gave her a new way of thinking about her struggles. She used this explanation to explain to me why just being in English class was "kinda hard" for her. She appreciated her teacher's message that she was capable but unprepared. She said she "didn't take it as a bad thing"; instead, she understood it to mean that she's "gotta try harder" because "things are moving at a good pace." Her teacher helped her see that she can be successful at CCC, but that she would "need to focus."

When we first interviewed, Princess was starting her ALP link. She was no longer resisting the work the way she had her first semester when she was in a level 2 reading and writing link. She had a lighter schedule, too, which helped; she had found it difficult to take three classes, two English classes and AH 101, an introduction to allied health careers, while working full time as a CNA. Having the same English teacher over this period seemed to help her concentrate on her growth. The concerted effort she had started putting in was paying off. She said,

> I think it accurately placed me because I'm getting through it. I'm doing better. And I can see that. Because I still have all of my essays from last semester [when Princess took 098099] and I looked at it as, 'You went from the teacher grading every sentence' to 'Oh, it's just a little- there's just little errors. You need to work on this, but you are improving.' And I look at it is, 'Oh well. I did a lot,' but I needed help a lot from then to the point where, 'Oh, you're getting better and you're getting B's and getting C's.' (Princess, interview 1)

In our second interview, Princess tells me that she is thankful for the placement test. She did not want to take remedial classes. But she also did not understand her remedial needs. A little more than half-way through her second semester at CCC, I asked Princess again about the accuracy of her placement. She reflected that the placement test…

> definitely put me where I needed to be because I didn't want to take –, if we didn't have a test and we just have to take say English 101, I will be so confused. So that placement test, it was actually a good thing because now I had them two classes last semester and I'm in English 101 and 098 [this semester] and I got the concept of 'Oh, work on subject verb agreement,' and stuff like that because now I understand it makes my writing better. (Princess, interview 2)

She imagines that a lot of people would be drop out without the placement test because they would put themselves into 102, if they could. She told me, "Without the placement test, people would be all over the place. 'What, you writing 10 pages? I am not ready for it.'" She realizes that she would have "forced" herself to drop out.

For our third interview, Princess had just talked to her English teacher who told her that she was doing better and was ready for English 102. Now that Princess has gotten used to putting in a concerted effort, she finds college work harder than she expected and imagines a lot of students like her come to CCC thinking, "Oh, I'm going to knock this out; it's a piece of cake." She thinks this is why she sees so many people that she knows from high school who started

CCC but then dropped out after receiving their refund checks. Princess sees this as a fairly shortsighted behavior and doesn't understand why they would go through all the trouble of applying only to drop out. Princess doesn't want to let this happen to her. She's taking more time with her writing, getting others to read it, taking advice. She says if you are going to be successful in college, you have to "expand your brain" and "you have to open your mind more."

Princess's plan was to get her degree or a good paying certificate as soon as possible. She was focused on getting through her classes without worrying about them. She hadn't realized that her classes were preparing her for a future. She had approached her schooling, like other participants, in an entrance framework throughout school, just trying to get through to the next level. She hadn't had a teacher before who cared about how she did at the next level, who helped her see herself in developmental terms.

Princess has since revised her notion of who belongs in college. In many ways she had thought the same as Jerome—that to do well in college, to really be college material, you need to be a fast paced learner; you need to be smarter than average. These learners are those who Princess imagines get things "automatically." She used to think that college was really for them. But in our third interview, I asked Princess whether some people are college material or not, she told me that that is a "so-and-so question." She believes that there are those who do catch on quickly but then there are those who, like her, might need to go more slowly, but who were also perfectly capable of succeeding. This second kind of person, though, she says should not be scared of college because they can get help if they need it, especially here at CCC. For her, it's important to take her time. She says, "A lot of people like to rush," but that's not her because she wants to make sure she's learning and not just passing classes. She says, "I want to make sure

everything I learned is stuck in my head and I want to know it very well." Because she cares about people, she doesn't want to get in the field and still have to "look things up in books." She's heard from others that some people get a job and don't know what they're doing. She doesn't want this to happen to her.

She recognizes better now, too, that not everybody is a fast paced learner. But this doesn't mean a concerted effort can't get you where you want to be. She used to think that if she didn't get something right away, like the fast paced learners, then she felt that she would never get it, and this understanding depressed her motivation to learn. It made her initially settle for "the standard." Princess now sees another approach, an incremental or developmental approach. Her ambitions have risen. She had planned on just getting her Associates. Now she is thinking about her Masters.

The Neighborhood College

Research question 4 asks, "How are such understandings inflected by social messages of fixed or natural abilities along dimensions of race, class, and gender?" To answer this question, I looked for these dimensions as participants made reference their own ability and to their sense of belonging at CCC. I found that study participants interpreted their remedial placement within the context of CCC's social identity as a neighborhood college. It's a social construct Princess introduces me to that combines notions about class and race, and comes with its own warning. It plays a role in how students approach the placement test, in how they interpret their results, and in whether they can adjust quickly enough to integrate into academic culture.

In the passage below, Princess recalls a conversation with a friend's cousin who was then enrolled in CCC's nursing program. It is her response to my question, "Have you heard people

say, ‘Community college is not real college?’” It captures the working class view of community colleges in general—the notion that one works full time, or close to full time, when one goes to community, but it also captures a warning against seeing CCC specifically in terms of a neighborhood college.

> Not really. ‘Cause I know a lot of people say that CCC is competitive, even though it was like a neighborhood college, a lot of people will say it's competitive. Like, um, my friend’s cousin was talking to me and my friend one day and she was like, ‘I'm in a nursing program. And it was to the point where I can't even work full time anymore. I just got to work weekends because of how intense the nursing program is.’ And she was like, ‘Even though it is a neighborhood college, they do put you to work; it is very intense.’ And you don't want you thinking like, just because it's in Philly and it's a neighborhood college, just know that they're going to put you to work and help get you where you need to be. And then also another person that I talked to, I was on a bus and they are in the nursing program.…(Princess, first interview)

This informal exchange of information positions CCC as not just a community college, but “a neighborhood college.” It is a metaphor that extends a contrast made between neighborhood high schools and charter schools. This contrast encapsulates decades or more of reforms in the city’s public school system. Since charter schools were the city’s answer to its failing neighborhood school system, charter schools are seen as good, offering a higher quality of education. The neighborhood schools provide the contrast; there, the education is of a lower quality because the teachers and the students are both seen as “not serious.”

It’s an idea in the air that an informal information system pushes against. Connor, too, recounts a similar exchange, in which the notion—that CCC is not a “serious” place—is contested.

> I don't know much about other people's story, but a, the interesting thing is I work with the lady who used to be a vet, a veteran of the army, I think. Yeah. And then

> when I talk to her, she's like, yeah, she glad she told me she also study, uh, uh, an associates degree here. And then now she transferred to I think it's temple and she say, yeah, that's the best choice to make because a, it was cheap and uh, uh, there are like great teachers over here too, because like, uh, one of the reason I think I'd, a lot of people doesn't want to come, don't want to come over here. And they'd be like, yeah, you know, not serious. Like the teacher and stuff. [right] So if you never been there and just, listen to someone who just tell you the stuff, you know, uh, it just like other places. (Connor)

This construct seems to be in play, giving Piper permission to fly through her placement test. When I ask her to think about her lackadaisical approach, she reflected on the experience in terms that recall those used by other participants to reference "neighborhood schools."

> For me? [Yeah] I went in and uh, there's whoever at the desk and they just told me to get to a computer and they like, it wasn't really like no directions. It was kind of like "'Here log in' type of thing. And I took, I think there's, there's math, right? I think there's a math part and I completely guessed through all those. Like I suck at math. So I was like, whatever, I'm completely going through these. But then there's like the reading part and that took me longer than the math part that obviously since I was, had to pay more attention, […] it was like, I don't know, it was kind of weird for me because like I'm in the mindset of like, 'I'm not in like a serious environment,' I guess you could say, because I'm just coming in to take a test. So my mindset wasn't like you don't have to prepare for anything, just go in and like try your best, which I did but not for like, I didn't really care that much obviously because I'm in a class now that's like I guess high school level writing. (Piper)

Students who went to "neighborhood schools" and who see CCC in terms of "a neighborhood school" have a hard time adjusting to the actual expectations of college. In the following passage, John paints a vivid picture of students, like him, who are blown out of the water by the transition from their neighborhood school to their neighborhood college. He captures the numerous factors in conflict for the working class student, who has been primed for

independence after 18, not for the kind of extended childhood experienced by most middle-class college-going students (Lareau, 2011).

> It's like a lot of youth go the transition where we don't really know what we want to do or how we want to do it or how was even going to get done. And lot of times we don't have that support system to pushes us. Say, 'Oh Hey, you got it, stand up. You got it. Keep on fighting. Just keep on pushing. Push through whatever you need help, I got you,' because a lot of times our parents don't even know what they're teaching nowadays and they're like, what is that? I can't help you with that. I thought I was going to be something easier or, and it's like,'Okay, now we have to go.' And now we're trying to also work, but also trying to be independent for ourselves and also trying to have time for ourselves and it's like, 'Okay, I'm in college now, it's different.' I have to do this and this is d- done by this date. And it's not like high school where you can say 'Alright, I ain't doing that yet.' And then before grade school, when I could just make up everything and the teachers be like, 'Okay, well I accept it.' NO. In college if you don't do everything one time, you won't get it. It's going to be considered late and that's a grade drop right there. [Right.] (John)

John also captures here some of the discontent many participants expressed about their prior teachers and their low expectations. In the past John and Paige, for example, might have been relieved when their teacher's gaze overlooked them, when they got away with little effort, but there is recognition now that such moments left them without the habits they need to keep up with the pace and expectations of college.

Gemaia repeated John's experience. She expected to be able to work and go to school full time and have time to experience being a young adult. During our first interview, Gemaia told me she sensed four classes might be too much for her, but she had also been encouraged to keep up that pace.

> Gemaia: Definitely, I think it's kinda like half and half. there were two people at my job that actually, um, come here and go to community and they say that, um, pretty much like me, they weren't from out of state, but it's something that they can have like one or two classes for now and go to work and still have a

> functioning life. Cause it was easy at, um, easy, accessible and it's still good, good learning and resources and be able to make your own schedule.
>
> Marcotte: Right. Okay. Um, so that's kinda cool that you work with two people who go to community. Um, so do they, do you guys ever talk about community college? When you're working together?
>
> Gemaia: Yeah we actually do. We just talk about like classes, like, I asked them if I should drop some of my classes cause I feel like four is too much now, especially since I am working full time. [yeah it can be, especially if you are working full time] I know. [Yeah.] One guy at my- two two guys, they go here, and one of them […] has a lot of classes and the other one, he works two jobs and takes one or two classes and I'm thinking of dropping down next semester. But he told me not to drop my classes and keep the four because once I go down to two, I wouldn't want to come back up cause I'm, [I would get] used to like not having the extra work, which he made a pretty good point about.

By our second interview, the pace and expectations had caught up to her. She was sustained in her ALP class for about half the semester because it gave her a start on her English 101 homework, and personalized one-on-one attention with her professor. But, her other classes raced on without her. She thought she could do the work; it would be easy for her, it was just too much. Like John, she was taking four classes right out of high school and working full time and expecting to manage independent living at the same time. She told me she imagined she could work and go to school full-time, and but she was too tired and drained after work to do her school work. She felt mislead, too, by a presentation at her high school, like she was supposed to be able to do it all. Her experience in high school had primed her to believe that she could easily breeze through. She had come from out of state, been to better schools, and had done a lot of reading when she was younger; she realized that she didn't have to try very hard to finish her high school career in her Philadelphia high school, which might fit best under the label

“neighborhood school.” The following passage is from an interview that is painful for me to revisit. I share it because I think it illuminates the phenomenon Princess called “forced to drop out.”

Our interview was over the phone. I was following my interview schedule. She hadn’t been to campus in over a week, and I asked her my standard question about first career thoughts. The idea that CCC was easy and accessible she expressed in our first interview morphed into a sense that CCC made things more complicated than they have to be.….

> Marcotte: what did you want to be when you were young? What's your first memory of, uh, the, of a career or job that you wanted to do?
>
> Gemaia: I don't know. I don't really know what I want to do anymore so. Everything's just been like, a lot more complicated, and they make it be, just so they can get you [in] schools, trap you, and make a lot of money.
>
> Gemaia: They make college seem like it's something that it's not. When the guy came to even give us a presentation about CCC, he never said that nursing was a, not just a two year program, but it was an extra year on top of that. They tell you that community colleges are two years. School, the people, they don't explain any further, kids going to community college thinking that, ‘Oh, it's just going to be two years. No, it's really not. You have, I just found out about the nursing program that I had to, I have to take, what was it? Three... Take the prerequisite class, that was fine because I needed to, um, I scored low on that. But I didn't know that there was a range of classes I had to take before I could even apply to the program. And that will take an extra year on top of that. So it's really not -- I don't even know why they call it a two year college because, really, I would be realistically there for three years if I follow through. And all of the programs are like that.
>
> Marcotte: Right. Um, well, where did you hear it was a two year school? You, you said someone came to--

> Gemaia: Everyone says it's a two year school. It's the, it's just supposed to, you get your associates with a two-year degree. (Interview 2)

Kelly, like Gemaia and John, imagined she would be able to take a full course load and work full time. When I asked her about her decision to take 5 classes, she told me that she thought it was what she was supposed to do—the expectation in the air.

> I came up with a friend and my friend was taking five and I decided I was gonna take five cause I wanted to get out of CCC within two years. [Right.] That was kind of the goal. I was, felt like that was the expectation. I would go to CCC for two years, then I would go to Penn. But I'm realizing now that life doesn't really work on the schedule that's fixed like that. [Right.] And it's not like, because I'm thinking three [classes a semester], I will be here for like five years. It just, I have to, you know, actually like put- college is a lot harder. I had like kind of a high school schedule walking into college. [Um hmm.] Like I'm here every day. [Right.] Which is a really intense as an adult cause you still have to work and things like that. So I, that's why. (Kelly)

Her transition to college was difficult in light of her expectations. It is harder than she expected, harder than high school where she didn't "actually" have to put in effort; she also imagines, "as an adult" she also has to work and "things like that." She struggled to come to terms with her misconceptions and face her remedial needs. While both were socially constructed, Kelly feels the shame of them in individual terms. She may accept that she has skills to brush up on or that her preconceptions of college were off, but if her teacher looks down at her because of those misconceptions and needs, the implied message—that she is somehow slow or not quick enough—is painful for her to bear and impeds her learning.

> I want to, I'm not very math and me, we don't get along too well, not great at math. So I need a teacher that will really explain it. She's kinda one of the teachers. They've, at least in her opinion, from what I understand from her is that kind of, it's like the math that she's teaching is beneath her and we should already know it, which is fine. She can believe that. But then I can't learn that way.

> [Right.] You can't, you can't. I can learn something if you tell me how to do it. And I practice it and I will get it. But if you teach it once really, really, really fast and then you jump into the next subject really fast and I don't understand it and if you ask her, she kind of gets a little upset about it. It makes it really hard for me to learn. (Kelly, interview 2)

Kelly has overloaded herself with classes and work, so she really doesn't have time to study—to go home and review what was taught; but she also doesn't know that her teacher expects her to go home and review the material from the class and make sure she can do it on her own. This kind of concerted effort in studying was unfamiliar at least initially to many students in this study. Getting by without studying was possible for many throughout high school. For some in the study, it was a point of pride before it became a source of discontent.

The notion in the air is community college is easy—even a matter of natural accomplishment. The "neighborhood college" is seen as as an extension of Philadelphia's public school system, with connotations that present a particular trap for students from neighborhood schools, who are disproportionally working class students of color, given the white exodus from the district school system over the last 50 years.

Summary

This chapter presented my findings after a two-stage phenomenological analysis of interviews with 19 current remedially placed community college students. These findings are arranged in four sections, with subheadins that correspond with the primary themes that emerged as I worked to answer each of my research questions. In sum, I find that, although the majority of CCC's students receive at least one remedial placement, there is a notion in the air that remedial classes are "not the smart classes" and they should be avoided. This means there are real student needs that are stigmatized by the remedial label. Many students had been out of school for a few years. Many, too, are fresh from surrounding high schools—charter schools and neighborhood schools—and unprepared for the concerted accomplishment culture of college given the natural accomplishment cultures of their high schools and homes. My findings suggest that it matters how students interpret their remedial placement and those interpretations shape whether remediation helps or hinders community college students. This is to say, as Dawn articulated for me at the beginning of this chapter, it matters how the student looks at it.

Some participants saw their remedial placement in an entrance framework, feeling that it said something about their ability to benefit from instruction at the college-level and leading them to question whether they belonged. Others saw their remedial placement in a developmental framework, sensing that their remedial placement provided them with a helpful transition into college work. These frameworks are based on different notions of what is needed to succeed at CCC—being a fast-paced learner or having the push for a concerted effort. In the first case, some have the capacity for the higher level thinking required in college, the domain of an elite; in the second case, all have the capacity; they just need to push to develop themselves.

In an entrance framework that says some not all, one is worried whether one has enough capacity. The motivation to push is undermined by the sense it may be futile, as indeed it must be for some.

As I looked for antecedents, I found that the entrance framework was preceded by the idea that standardized tests, like the placement test, measured one's innate or natural ability and not one's schooling experience. Further, I found participants theorized about their own abilities —made up their self-theories—in terms of profitability and perceived work relevance in ways that limited their preparation for college. They also developed field-theories—notions about community college—in terms of a trade school, which complicated their remedial placement. Indeed, student interpretation of remedial placement was made up of both self-theory and field-theory.

In considering how interpretation affected student engagement, I found that participants needed to revise both their self-theories and their field-theories to come to productive terms of engagement with their remedial coursework. In telling the stories of Jerome, Piper, and Princess, I traced how students related to their remedial placement overtime and the factors that facilitated students adopting a developmental approach to their remedial coursework even if they initially resisted engagement with their remedial coursework. Both Jerome and Piper offer examples of capable students who could have, maybe, placed in 101 if they approached the placement test differently. These are the students the quantitative research might consider misplaced, the students seen as harmed by these structures, held back unnecessarily—the capable student who didn't heed the warnings to take the test seriously. Princess offers an example of a student who is capable, but un-prepared, a student who really does need help building up her writing skills and

adapting to the pace and expectations of college. She is ensnared because of her dialect but also because she doesn't push herself to write 300 words; she freezes up once she sees the expectations. Her story offers a way of framing remediation that I argue in the next chapter offers the most productive terms of engagement. Jerome's resistance, Piper's engagement, and Princess's eventual engagement, offer us the lived experiences of remedially placed community college students who can help show us the way to a new community college based on a different mobility model, one that motivates all of us, not just the lions.

The final section in this chapter presented the theme that emerged as I considered the effects of race and class. Indeed the effects of class were discussed in the earlier sections. In this final section, however, I presented the setting for the study—a neighborhood college—and the voices of students whose expectations set them up for failure. This theme, along with those from preceding sections are further explored in light of the existing literature in Chapter 5. Therein, I also discuss the implications of these findings for enrollment services, student support services, and developmental pedagogy.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the reasons why remedial opportunity structures help the academic success of some students while hindering the aspirations of others. Through an engaged inquiry framework, I sought to empathetically understand student experience of placement testing, remedial assignment, and remedial classes to understand what motivates some remedial students to persist in their college studies. This chapter includes a discussion of major findings as related to the literature on self-theories and motivation, the effects of social class on academic engagement and college preparation, and representations of social mobility. Also included is a discussion on connections to this study and implications for policy and practice in enrollment services, advising and counseling, and developmental pedagogy. A discussion of the limitations of the study, areas for future research, and a brief summary conclude the chapter.

In light of the existing literature, the findings from this study suggest what motivates students to engage in academic culture after a remedial assignment incorporates six themes: (a) interpretation of remedial assignment—in both the individual and the institutional sense—falls along one of two diverging frameworks—a framework of entrance and a framework of development; (b) each framework embodies different notions of who belongs in college and what abilities are needed; (b) each framework has clear social class based antecedents; (c) while the prospect of remediation was daunting, the actual experience of remediation was valued in hindsight; (d) the structure of remedial classes and teacher involvement affect student adoption of one framework over the other; and (d) student interpretation of their remedial placement is

inflected along lines of class and race, given the complex make up of the study site—an urban community college, set in a city with an unresolved history of racially segregated schools.

While their career aspirations, prior experiences, and reasons for coming to CCC may include variation for each individual participant, the six common themes resonated in the lived experiences of all 19 community college students interviewed for this study. Taken together, these themes develop a human story, about ability and belonging, in a setting where "the right to the city" is contested. Each theme is described in detail in the following sections.

Theme 1. Framework of Entrance or a Framework of Development

Following the lead of the symbolic interactionalists—who argue that the sometimes hidden world of socially constructed meanings better accounts for human action than traditional behaviorism (Blumer, 1986; Dweck & London, 2004; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001), my analysis worked to uncover how the remedial opportunity structures appeared to students, what implicit messages of ability and belonging they received, and how their sense of the way things work affected their agency within those structures. To do this, I looked for both the implicit and explicit theories of ability and belonging that emerged in my case by case analysis of the longitudinal interview data.

My findings support but also extend the meaning systems approach to motivation taken in research focused on implicit theories of ability and educational outcomes (Hatt, 2012; Sternburg, 1990). Specifically, I found the application of Dweck's ability frameworks—entity versus incremental—helpful in giving meaning to each participant's individual case (a notion I discuss more below). Some participants seemed engaged in their course work, focused on effort, and actually trying; they saw their remedial placement as a learning step or a transition into

college life. Other participants seemed to resist engagement and focused on getting through their remedial courses rather than improving their writing skills or overcoming their struggles with math.

Dweck's research on incremental versus entity frameworks was useful in making sense of Jerome's motivation in his course work, for example. In many ways, I thought as I first analyzed our interviews, he presents as a classic entity theorist. Notions of fixed traits, central to the entity theorist, peppered his three transcripts. But these notions showed up in nearly all of the participants self-references and shifted in terms of "enough." By the end of my first stage analysis, a significant social dimension in the student meaning-making emerged. One considered whether one had enough to be motivated, enough to bother trying. Students drew conclusions about their own abilities in comparison to others. Their motivation and aspirations plummeted when they sensed they did not have enough or when they felt they had more than enough, given the ability grouping they found themselves in. Their own interpretation of their abilities were drawn in comparisons to others, including from years of standardized testing (such as the PSSAs) that had sorted them into relative categories.

Dweck's concepts of entity versus incremental did not express the social dynamic that this phenomenological study highlighted. I found that students were developing their self-theories in relation to others and their understanding of how the world works. The primacy of socially constructed meaning was clear in how participants considered their abilities in terms of their commodifiability, in terms of their chances of entrance into the better jobs and the higher positions for which they have come to community college and too which they aspire. Their orientation to their learning was shaped by their assessment of the larger social value of their

abilities and where they might find a place for themselves. It was also shaped by the sense that abilities were not distributed equally, and one might come to find themselves on the short end. It supports the notion that the meaning systems people adopt about their abilities, shaped in a larger socio economic context, have more to do with with one's cognitive development then logical thinking and its development (Dweck, 2000; Hatt, 2012; Sternburg,1990). These meanings shape what a student pays attention to and their assessment of the social value of knowing it. It also supports the notion that making our classrooms the sites of class conflict undermines learning for many students, who prefer to harmonize than fight for the top positions (Lieberman, 2013; Love, 2019).

In short, distinguishing these orientations as incremental and entity initially gave shape to my data. As my case by case analysis widened, however, the social dimension to these ability frameworks emerged. When I took in the college's placement webpages as the last case in my two-stage analysis, it was clear I needed to extend these frameworks in my integrative coding in a way that captured the social context at work. I did so by taking the social and cultural capital theory developed by researchers like Lareau (2011) and Lareau and Horvat (1999) into my analysis, and by considering the setting as site of submerged social class struggle (Karabel, 1968).

I extended Dweck's frameworks, using the terms I use, to tie the meaning systems encapsulated in entity and incremental to the setting and the specific context of placement testing in an urban community college. In this way, an entity framework, based on the idea that abilities are more or less gifted at birth and everyone gets a fixed or bounded amount, becomes an entrance framework, based on the notion that college requires a certain capacity, a level of ability

of which not everyone is capable. An incremental framework, based on a notion of ability developed through purposeful engagement slowly over time, becomes a developmental framework, based on the notion that all have the capacity to benefit from college level work because all (by being human) can build up to it with the loving guidance of caring teachers.

By extending the existing frameworks in the literature on meanings-systems and student motivation beyond personality constructs, I connect my findings to previous research that explores student motivation within educational opportunity structures as related to the dominant achievement ideology, habitus, and social reproduction (Macleod, 2018; Rosenbaum). And I hope to call attention to the way an entrance framework (with it's basis in fixed traits and abilities) can undermine a student's integration into academic culture of the community college where a remedial assignment leaves the question of one's belonging unanswered.

The question of stigma is raised in the quantitative literature, but is left under-theorized given the limits of the methodology. Clearly, though, the large number of students who do not enroll after remedial placement calls stakeholders attention to the structural barrier (Bailey, Jeong, and Cho, 2008). Extending Dweck's frameworks in this way highlights the mechanisms that create stigma around remedial assignment. The othering of remedial need revealed in my discourse analysis of the college's placement web-pages demonstrates, as Fairclough predicts, the underlying elitist ideologies embedded in the institutional structures. The bias toward the capable and prepared student (the traditional college student) became clear in the social acts carried out by the placement discourse. The placement webpages are focused on making sure the capable student is not held back nor the incapable mislead. These are worthy goals, but I argue they are made at the expense of the capable but un- or under- prepared student (the non-

traditional student). Casting remediation as something to avoid buttresses the entrance framework, the notion that some are, naturally, better, more capable than others—only some have what it takes to really make it, to actually matter, to bother trying.

As Mary Holiday discusses in *The Politics of Remediation (2002)*, the majority of college students, since the beginning of the 20th century, have needed some form of remediation, either tutoring or extra classes. Yet the notion in the air is that such needs are new—that there is suddenly a new body of students who are uniquely un- or under- prepared. It seems a necessary feature of community college research to comment on the uniqueness of the problem, a box this study ticks as well. Her discussion considers the political consequences of stigma: policy makers are less concerned with the problem of inequitable college preparation when the student body in question is largely black and brown. I'm focused on how the creation of stigma around behind-ness or unpreparedness, undermines student motivation and hinders their engagement with remedial structures that could, in the long run, help students, especially if they were invited to see their placement in helpful terms.

Theme 2. Who Belongs in College and What Abilities Are Needed

The achievement ideology based on Turner's contest mobility posits first that all in the contest have at least the minimum ability required. All are capable. We can imagine a setting in which all of the students in college have already gone through entrance testing and have already shown that they have “enough." In a setting like that, the achievement ideology based on contest mobility makes sense—and a placement test makes sense. The question, though, of whether one has enough to enter the contest, however, is not resolved by the enrollment processes at

community college. This contingency resonates in the participant interviews as well as in the institutional webpages.

The complexities of enough unfold when we consider the concept in terms of all and some. Do all have enough or do only some have enough? In both the participant interviews and the institutional websites that community college students with remedial assignments do not begin with that certainty of belonging, the knowledge that they have been deemed capable. After the students complete the placement test, a remedial assignment makes that first proposition—that they had enough to enter the contest—contingent, left open, and the insecurity of this position runs through the participants interviews.

Until the "college for all" ethos of late and the rise of community college, college was purely an elite institution. There was, and still is, a sense that not everyone is college material or has enough capability to succeed. This exclusive framework, where only some are capable, has class based ramifications. In working class households, there is a notion that one needs to be smart, a fast paced learner, or above average, to go to college—good standardized test scores if not good grades. In middle class and white households, it is normal to go to college; you can be of average intelligence and still expect to go and succeed. Given the material constraints of poor and working class households, and the risk assessment involved, only those who are quicker, sharper, and smarter see their chances at the top slots as worth it. A remedial assignment, for the working class student in this framework, is more consequential. Researchers looking at links between PSSA scores and college-going decisions applied regression discontinuity analysis and found effects between how students interpret their PSSAs and their college-going decisions. Assuming that actual abilities above and below the cut off scores are not that different from each

other, differences in the college-going decisions can be attributed to the labeling effect (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2012; Papay, Murnane, & Willett, 2011). The meaning making students did around their remedial placement reflected similar risk analysis. This study and the quantitative ones described above raise questions about the socio-cultural construction of ability and student motivation from different methodologies. Do standardized tests like the PSSAs and Accuplacer give students of different class backgrounds the same ability message? Does the same information have different affects on students' motivation, sense of agency, and life choices? Indeed what role do such tests have in buttressing harmful notions of fixed traits and the sense that some of us really are just naturally better than others?

The notion that only some have the ability to succeed in college creates a risk assessment of greater weight for the working class student, whose considerations are more constrained by time and money. How working class students interpret ability messages, such as remedial placement, may be key to understanding the college attrition problem in general for this population. Such an understanding is perhaps even more important in the context of an urban community college, which—by default—ends up serving working class students from racial and ethnic groups that have historically been cordoned off from such opportunity structures by a social imaginary steeped in the narrative of fixed abilities and assumed social roles (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo & Pollock, 2017). This study confirms, and gives human voice to, the findings from quantitative studies that have demonstrated the weight of standardized test scores, with their labeling force of legitimacy, in the college considerations of working class students. For such students, the placement test is an entrance test in a figured world in which only some really have the ability to benefit from college-level instruction.

An entrance framework, based on a some not all conceit, also creates a social dynamic that makes effort in the classroom problematic. Putting in effort in a school setting in this framework means that you believe that you have enough capability to succeed at college, in a setting where the dominant notion is that only some belong in college. To come to that conclusion in an entrance framework of some, not all, signals to your classmates that you perceive your capabilities are greater, naturally. A good deal of research into social class and habitus demonstrates that many working class students with academic ability have a tendency to withdraw from academic work to harmonize with those students who seem to have (been constructed to have) less ability. They may position themselves in opposition to the achievement ideology for social connection and harmony (Macleod, 2018; Lieberman, 2013). An entrance framework, with its core premise that some have more capacity than others, changes the meaning of effort in ways that are particularly harmful to working class students, and perhaps even more harmful to working class blacks, who in this study at least, seemed to be the least familiar with an academic culture of concerted accomplishment given their experiences in middle and high school. A better understanding of how a some versus all framework affects student motivation in academic endeavors is warranted. It gives us a another way to think about the paradoxes in the achievement ideology research and presents a framework for looking at the bullying that seems to be regular occurrence at neighborhood schools like the ones John, Princess, Emily, and other participants told me about.

Theme 3. Social Class Antecedents

The themes that emerged as I looked for antecedents to each framework confirm and extend existing literature that considers the role of social and cultural capital in the social

reproduction in education. Dweck does not consider the effects of social class in her analysis, but a connection between Lareau's home cultures (2011) with their divergent notions of ability—natural growth culture and concerted cultivation culture—arises in my analysis of participant interviews. The implicit theories of abilities within each habitus shape students self-theories. I wonder how many of the students conclude that they are not good at something or could never be good enough at something to make a life from it, come from home cultures of natural accomplishment, where one needs to be good enough, talented enough, to bother trying to pursue a dream or follow a less predictable career path. A series of k-12 ability messages confirm the sense that such things are predictable. These ability messages may be little more than "the legitimization and rationalization of the existing social relations of production" (Bowles and Gintis, p. 218).

In setting up her discussion of findings, Hatt (2010) summarizes the meaning systems approach that has grown since researchers like Piaget, Sternburg, and others recognized the primacy of socio-cultural meaning systems over objective, biological fact in the development of ability (Hatt, 2012; Dweck, 2010). Her analysis of young school children in a rural kindergarten class reveals the "figured world"—the socially constructed notions of what a "good student" is and does—that shape the student's ability development. The terms in which "smartness" are socially constructed gives rise to differentiated outcomes as these terms interact with the meanings from the different cultural worlds at home. Her study suggests that student learning behavior is mediated by these meaning systems in ways that reproduce social inequalities. This study, like hers, found competing meaning systems that shaped student thought and action. The way they thought about abilities—in particular academic ability

Many of the participants in the study fall within Lareau's (2011) description of working class backgrounds with natural accomplishment cultures. Some of the participants had more familiarity with college and other concerted accomplishment institutions, like William's experience playing sports. Some had intermediaries, like Ana's mother and Kelly's parents, who stepped in and made an important distinction between test scores and capability. But for many, a working-class background obscured the participant's development of a positive academic self-theory because they had drawn conclusions about their own capabilities within a classroom setting comparing themselves to other students, and being compared to other students from other home cultures. Students from a working-class background do not have the same orientation to the classroom as their middle-class counterparts (Lareau, 2001; Calarco, 2011). My emphasis here is in the way the working class student interprets this difference—as natural, not an outcome of differences in home cultures. Participants, like Piper and Princess, drew conclusions about their own ability and their place in the world by comparing themselves to other students from different home cultures, and wondered if they had enough to bother trying for a better future.

Building up to the college level is within every human's capabilities. I told Princess's story largely to support this notion. She had come to the conclusion—comparing herself to faster readers in her English classes and quicker learners in her math class—that she wasn't really college material. But she also wasn't studying at home during high school or middle school years. She didn't consider the social, economic, historical or political dimensions that constructed her academic abilities. She didn't consider her problem with fractions as caused by a missing foundation in times tables, something I gleaned listening to her. Her implicit theory of her own ability or intelligence—like that of every (white, male) statistician that worked on

developing the institutional testing that legitimizes social reproduction in education—was biological. Her sense of her own abilities grew out of the material reality of her day to day lived experiences; she had made choices her whole life, largely unnoticed, about what capabilities she has and where she belongs by interpreting the innumerable messages in the air around her and taking them as veridical. She had heard the achievement ideology. She adhered to it and had adhered to it even when she had lower aspirations, when she just wanted to be standard or average. She was taking her place, as she understood it, because that's what we do as social beings in a *some*, not *all*, construct.

Application of social and cultural capital theory within an interpretive framework also helps to make sense of student interpretation of remedial placement when looking at participants like John and Jailyn whose expectations of a trade-related curriculum made their interpretation of remedial placements, especially in writing, more problematic. The student meaning making around their own abilities and which abilities were worth developing often reflected the notion that it's some abilities are more valuable and sought-after than others. Some have certain abilities and others don't. Some people need writing and some don't. This commodification of abilities further takes Dweck's construct of self theories away from personality constructs and positions them as socially constructed. Locating these constructs in a sociological framework is important. Applying Dweck's ideas in terms of personality or individual psychology facilitates the notion that a student can be blamed for his or her own mindset. This blaming of students for their own resistance is a recapitulation of the culture of poverty theorizing that blamed the poor for their own circumstances.

I found that a trade or career focus often shaped a student's attitude toward the writing expectations in college. I found that students were not rejecting the idea that writing would be in their futures so much as they were expressing indirectly their anxieties about writing and the sense that some just aren't good at it. For these participants, writing ease was associated with natural intelligence or giftedness. Student adoption of a developmental framework often came after real engagement with their writing teacher. Coming to recognize that writing skill and ease could grow with practice led them to a feeling of accomplishment and a recognition of their own growth. One of my longest term participants, Charlene, resisted the idea that writing was relevant to her career aspirations at the start of our interviews; but, when I asked her about this in a later interview, she confessed to me that she was anxious about the writing that she might have to do and insecure about her ability to do it. Once she recognized that she could keep up with the writing expectations in college because she was building up her comfort and ease, her anxieties about writing and her oppositional attitude toward writing fell away. She told me that she was even starting to like writing again, something she hadn't enjoyed since she was young. Charlene, you might recall from chapter 4, gave up her enthusiasm for writing after hearing it would not provide a good financial future. She, however, continued to feel the weight of her behind-ness. She told me in our last interview that she had to try really hard not to just shut down when she sees her writing next to the writing of other better prepared students. She has to remind herself that she is doing the best she can. She told me, too, that she is not like the other students, who can take four classes at a time. She's taking a semester off right now to take care of her mental health.

Theme 4. Hindsight if Not Foresight

The participants who took advantage of the remedial opportunity structures available to them may have at first been discouraged; but, in hindsight, all of the students who persisted into their college level work came to see their remedial placement in terms of need, help, or transition. While the existing quantitative literature presents the discouraging effect of remedial referral as obvious or sub-theoretical, this study—in light of others that take a socio-cultural lens—suggest that this is a limiting first principle. Also embedded in the literature reviews of these quantitative studies is the finding that students who choose remediation benefit from it (Weissman, Bulakowski, & Jumisko, 1997; Martorell & McFarlin, 2010).

In the existing literature, student perceptions—or misperceptions—of remedial placement are presented as static entities. How these conceptions affect the student's subsequent orientation to their course work is unexplored. I sought to understand in this study how the students' view of remediation is related to their motivation or the effort they put into their coursework. While researchers like Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2008) theorize about either "the prospect or the experience of remediation" driving attrition, this study calls attention to the experience of placement and it's role in shaping student engagement with the academic culture of community college. It suggests that understanding how the student interprets their remedial placement matters.

While students who persist in their remediation through to their college level placement come to see their placement in positive terms, those terms are not part of the discourse of placement on the college's webpages, for instance. The pre-college classes are never positioned as helpful transitions into college level literacy skills.

Theme 5. High Teacher Involvement and a College Co-Requisite Structures

My analysis of student engagement with remedial structures over time confirms the notion in the existing literature that nontraditional students can persist in college settings with the help of highly involved teachers (Cox, 2009; Perun, 2015). The closeness that participants like Piper and Princess felt with their developmental teachers was critical to their adoption of productive terms of engagement and persistence over time. The best remedial structure was a combination of highly involved teachers and a meaningful college level co-requiste. The ALP structure (English 101 with a developmental co-requiste) seemed to combine these two points.

Highly involved teachers. Teachers who were able to get everyone involved facilitated the development of a positive classroom engagement, where everyone developed their skills. But professors who did not encourage and insist on the engagement of all created a different dynamic in their classroom. Students who were engaged and participated set the tempo of the class. Students who did not do these things seemed to be slowing down the class. The slower, less involved students became frustrated and felt that the teacher was not giving them the time and support that they needed. The teacher would become frustrated because some students were not catching on as quickly as the others. When the teacher assumed motivation and engagement was the students' choice, they implicitly reinforced the notion that some were good at the subject and others weren't. Teachers in participant stories also seemed unaware that students were not going home after class and improving upon what they learned in class.

Many participants in this study reported to me that they could get through their neighborhood schools without any concerted effort beyond class-time. They expected to continue to be able to do this and did not understand that their professors expected them to put in this

concerted effort at home. When professors made assumptions about the students lack of participation, setting the terms as that of the individual student's choice, they also implicitly sent the message that only some of the students in the class are ultimately capable anyway. This study, in sum, confirms other qualitative studies that find the positioning of the professor, and the implicit messages of ability and belonging projected, can shape the integration of the non-traditional student into the academic culture of higher education (Cox, 2009; Perun, 2015). Jerome, for example, is allowed by his teacher to continue his skim along the outside approach to coursework he learned in high school. Some professors do not see it as their responsibility to make sure all of their students are doing the work and learning what they need to be learning. Princess's story offers us a counterpart to Jerome's professor. Her professor directly engaged her in terms that helped her reorientate herself to the classroom. She did not maintain the traditional boundaries of the "excellent professor" (Cox, 2009; Perun, 2015). Instead, she acted as an intermediary and helped Princess see that she was capable, but needed to focus, pay attention, and put in a concerted effort—something her high school failed to help her see the need for. Princess told me that she never had a teacher before who cared about how she did at the next level enough to push her to make sure she was actually learning.

Piper's teacher was also critical to her productive terms of engagement. Piper felt a closeness and acceptance with her teacher that she never felt in her high school, which she described as a blue-ribbon school with an unfortunate culture of favoritism that made her and her friend group feel insignificant. It was my sense that this closeness further affirmed her growing sense that she really could make something of her self now that she was at community college, that she did have enough. It also became clear in my analysis of Piper's transcripts that that

adoption of a developmental framework was further facilitated by the structure of the remedial classes themselves.

College level co-requisites. Piper's productive engagement in her coursework begins with her recognition that her college level co-requisite would affect her GPA. It made it easier for her to feel that she was preparing herself and her work habits for when she was in college-level classes. I sense that it is easier for her to come to productive terms of engagement because there are more open to her. She had been out of school for more than a year as had other participants, so seeing her classes in terms as a brush up or transition to college life made sense to her. These productive terms of engagement are not highlighted on the school's webpages however, although such terms fit the situation of many students. Indeed, there are no productive terms of engagement in the placement discourse on the school's webpage.

Students who placed into the ALP links had easier terms to come to when making sense of their remedial placement. Even though an English 098 placement can cause alarm in a student, that alarm is usually washed away once the student understands the co-requisite structure of the remedial class. As James explained to me, he understood his ALP class as the institution saying to him, "You need more support but you are not lower." Students in the ALP program more readily saw their remedial placement in terms of help while a remedial placement in a prerequisite structure were more often referred to in terms of being held back. This is not to say that an English 101 class along side of an English 098 class removed the stigma of the English 098 class immediately. Many students did not understand why they had two English classes. Kelly's reaction to her English 098 placement (her story opens chapter 4) tells me that a labeling

effect is retained until the student actually engages with the remedial opportunity structure, and sees that the Professor is positioned as an ally and not a scold (or Miss Vera).

The ALP structure also worked well because it facilitated a close relationship with the teacher which mirrors a more intimate seminar setting, and the class acted as a kind of study hall that started the students on their course work. Procrastination was a big problem for students falling into the easy trap. It is my sense that Jerome would have been less likely to suffer from his procrastination if his remediation came in the form of a co-requisite to English 101 and not in the form of a prerequisite.

The ALP construction was also important in making students from working class backgrounds feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in a classroom setting. Working class students like Lilibeth indicated that they appreciated the class specifically in those terms. She was disappointed at first by her English 098 placement. It made her feel insecure about her writing ability. Once she got to class and understood that the remedial class actually gave her more help and a more comfortable setting in which to learn, she saw that placement fully in developmental terms. Her low placement on the math portion of the placement test, however, continued to nag at her throughout the semester. She wondered whether she really was not good at math or whether she just messed up on the placement test. It was harder for her to come to clear terms regarding her math placement and its prerequisite structure was part of the problem. These findings confirm the growing body of research regarding co-requisite remedial structures and suggests that the current trend in this direction is promising.

Theme 6. The Neighborhood College

My analysis of the college's webpage, in tandem with my analysis of the longitudinal interview data, elucidates the socio-cultural nature of these frameworks and the mechanisms that set many un- and under-prepared students up for failure. The notion in the air, that community is a two year degree may be true for the capable and prepared student—the student who fits the traditional image of a college student. The two-year degree is hardly true for the actual student who goes to community college, who, on average, receives at least one remedial placement. Yet, the need for remediation is stigmatized. This same two-year curriculum is held up as what is expected at a neighborhood school for working class students; yet, their situations and their preparation make it all but impossible for them to succeed.

The working class participants in this study were unfamiliar with academic settings that required concerted effort, including studying, reviewing, and previewing. They had been to high schools and did well enough with little effort. When they got to community college, they were largely expecting to do the same. A number of participants voiced some version of this idea. Franklin, for example, thought is was "cray-z" to have four chapters of math homework on his first day of class his second semester in. His first semester was the first time he had ever had to put in any effort at all to keep up with class. Greg, too, had been able to make it through his neighborhood high-school with little concerted effort. He was, at first, taken off guard and found himself handing in unfinished and sloppy work. It took him a little bit of time to recover and get used to the concerted accomplishment culture of college, but he was able to do it. I sense that his home life, his closeness with his mother and father, helped him make the adjustment. It also helped that he was still in high school and focused on school and not work.

The working class students were more likely to attempt to work full time and go to school full time. Some participants like Piper, James, Jerome, Lilibeth, and William were able to focus on school full time, but many other participants at least started out trying to work full time and go to school full-time. They felt, to some degree, that they would be able to work and go to school and finish in two-years. They also thought that that was what they were expected to do, an expectation that caused participants to drop classes and then drop out.

My findings confirm the sense in the existing literature, that students interpret their failure as their own, blame few other than themselves (Deil-Amen and Rosebaum, 2002). But, some participants also sensed obstacles deliberately put in their way and expressed a sense of bitterness at being mislead. All of these voices should call our attention to how the selling of community college can set un- and under-prepared students up for failure and undermine institutional trust. We will need to build more trust with our students, who come to CCC hopeful, only to find the same dynamic of contingency they experienced as "the hunger games" of their high schools (Love, 2019).

Implications for Policy

Remedial Structures

The ALP construction seemed most helpful to students. Working class students like Lilibeth, appreciated the closeness with her English teacher and the seminar structure. She recognized that many students like her are afraid of speaking their minds in the classroom, afraid that their classmates will judge them somehow based on their ideas. The small seminar structure of the ALP class (here I am describing an English 101 English 098 link) let her know that she

was not alone. Other participants echoed similar notions. They were comfortable sharing their ideas in this setting in a way that they were not comfortable in other academic settings.

The ALP structure of a college-level corequisite and a pre-college support class helped working class students transition into college life. It provided them with the security in knowing that they belonged but it also gave them the extra support they are owed. The closeness with the teacher and their fellow classmates helped them gain confidence and adjust to the culture of concerted cultivation. Given that many of these students were unfamiliar with concerted effort in the classroom, the extra time after class with the teacher was helpful in getting the students started. They recognized what they needed to do in a setting where they could get the loving, helpful support that they are owed. Many of these same students expressed a real sense of accomplishment when they realized that if they actually tried to do the work, they could do it and do well. This push was also often preceded by as real leap of faith, as Charlene put it, when she pushed herself in a way she never had before. Closeness with the teacher and classmates and the additional time to start on the school work in school seemed to be great aids to productive terms of engagement.

It seems to me that this structure could simply be replicated throughout the disciplines, with faculty time in the same classroom with a smaller set of students—those most owed the support of a loving and caring professor works to demystify academic culture and start students on their work. I teach four classes, and am required to do 6 hours of office hours. But no one comes to my office hours because that is considered a bad thing… to go to the office. But if I had those hours scheduled before and after my four classes, this would allow for the first part of class to be focused on the lesson and the second part, the support part, focused on engaging the lesson

and beginning the homework due the next class. Not all students are like James, who has no trouble going to a teacher's office hours and asking questions. He recognizes that not everyone is like him—he isn't even like how he used to be, which was afraid of being seen as unsure and ignorant.

On-Boarding

Orientating students to the expectations of community college and helping them meet those expectations needs to begin much sooner and continue much longer than it currently does. Students come to CCC with misconceptions about community colleges that harm their preparation for the placement test and undermine their motivation when they get here. Socialized to certain understandings, participants in this study, in particular from black working class backgrounds, approached CCC as if it was a trade school. This means that they had not prepared themselves for the evaluative norms of a liberal arts college that they found when they got here, beginning with the placement test. Furthermore, they did not see the relevance of the liberal arts project to their aspirations. Students perceptions of the usefulness of writing in the future were shaped by their social class-based notions of what their work life would entail. Researchers like Bowles, Gintis, and Mayer (1975) demonstrate how schools socialize students according to the social status of the parents and justify inequalities through the legitimizing process of standardized testing. They and others have demonstrated how this socialization is part of the process of social reproduction. Working class students who are not prepared for the different evaluative norms of the liberal arts side of the college, are at a disadvantage, not because they don't have the capacity, but because they have not developed the capacity. Consequently, remedial structures impede vocational and black students disproportionally. The value of the

liberal arts side of community college gets drowned out in the messaging around careers and income potential. This has real implications for student's preparation for community college.

High school counselors and community college recruiters who understand these misconceptions can help the working class student see the value in practicing their writing in terms of developing their higher level thinking, emphatic and creative abilities, and building their confidence in their ability to think through and communicate difficult decisions. The community college recruiter, in particular, can help the future student recognize the inherent value in the focus on critical thinking, cultural understanding, and citizenship that make up the rational for the liberal arts project in general education classes. In communicating the value of such a curriculum, the community college recruiter can help the future student prepare for those expectations and understand why some programs may require more than two full years. And why, for example, a program like medical billing and coding might expect the student to be able to write a short essay on a given topic.

More effective on-boarding policies would also include making sure the prospective student approached the placement test with a concerted effort. One way to do this would be to change current enrollment practices, particularly the one day enrollment event. Reforms at the community college over the last ten years have been about making enrollment as easy as possible. The assumption is students lives are complicated and the college wants to make enrollment as easy as possible for these busy students. While this has good intentions in the mix, it has had unintended consequences in that many students—especially those least familiar with college expectations—are lassoed into taking a test for which they did not prepare.

Current policy of doing everything in the same day seems to be helpful to the traditional and prepared student, but particularly harmful to the un- and under-prepared student. Such a student is least likely to expect the rigor of the placement test and most susceptible to the effects of the remedial label. Moreover, the one-day enrollment even makes it easier for the students to think of the placement test as nothing more than just a step in the enrollment process. This study suggests that a different approach might be called for. Instead of having students take the placement test that day, students can all be directly enrolled in college preparation classes and first year experience seminars, with the assumption that a transition into academic culture of college is helpful for all. This would have the effect of normalizing the need for college preparation. Putting everyone into college prep classes as an initial enrollment would give everyone the sense of belonging—everyone would be in the college's prep program. If students felt that they did not need the college preparation, they could return to the campus and take the college's entrance test. Passing the entrance test, before or after completing the college prep program will help remove the contingency of belonging that is manifested by the current structures.

Here, I am envisioning a college preparation program that embraces a community development model, one in which students improve their reading and writing skills while they debate issues of local importance to their communities and learn about local democracy and civic institutions. Such an education would start with the idea that an education is a public good, that we all benefit when we are all educated. The current focus on education as a private good has numerous repercussions. One is that we do not have the same investment in the education of all students in a framework that makes education a private good. In that framework, one's education

is to benefit one's self. Students who engage on these terms find themselves at odds with their classmates and struggling with perceptions of others.

Implications for Practice

Understanding connections between beliefs about ability and beliefs about educational opportunity structures has practical relevance for community college professors, counselors, and advisors as well as for their high school counterparts. First, a deeper understanding of these connections may help professors understand the underlying logic behind student approaches to remedial coursework. Beliefs about ability and belonging—like all beliefs—are socially constructed; that is, students learn their view of their academic ability and what potential they have to succeed in college they have through social interaction with parents, teachers and other students (Howard, 2003) and those views can shift through interactions within different institutional contexts (Murphy & Dweck, 2010). This means a greater awareness of the implicit theories of ability that shape student interaction with their remedial course may help the next professor who has a student like Jerome. Researchers have noted that teachers interpret the effects of missing social and cultural capital as indications of (actual) student ability, creating what has been referred to as "the self-fulfilling prophecy of ghetto education" (Rist, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996). My findings suggest that students make similar attributions, about themselves and about their classmates. The working-class student, like Piper, who started middle-school behind her middle-class counterparts, interprets her difficulties as a sign of her underlying abilities and an indication of her future prospects. Professors who understand the social class antecedents to each of these frameworks may help students take up productive terms of engagement. Princess's English teacher, for example, offered Princess

another way of looking at her remedial work that helped her see her academic struggles as caused by her experiences, not her innate capabilities.

In the rhetoric of meritocracy, one's place in society is largely contested through educational opportunity structures (Labaree, 1997). Each message of ability the student receives within such structures is also a message about where that student belongs in society (Rosenbaum, 1987). Dubbed the Mathew effect in reading research, the initial gap in skills and knowledge grows wider as the student withdraws from the threatening domain of school; disadvantage produces greater disadvantage—that is, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer (Rigney, 2010). Faculty and high school teachers who understand how students learn their views of ability may be better equipped to help their students orientate themselves productively to their school work; and, better equipped to reflect critically on their own perceptions and practices (Dweck, 2007; 2002).

Second, a deeper understanding of how students interpret ability messages may also help counselors and advisors guide student aspirations and enrollment decisions. A common theme in the existing research is the notion of fragile student academic identities. School personnel—from teachers to counselors to enrollment staff—are leery of discouraging students, who are seen as having fragile academic identities. The concern that this fear of discouraging students may inadvertently hamper their future chances of success by leaving them un-prepared for the rigors of college (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Rosenbaum, 2011). But Dweck's research demonstrates that the fear of discouraging students may—again inadvertently—construct these fragile academic identities in the first place (Dweck, 2007; 2002). Counselors and advisors who understand that this fragility is based on fixed notions of ability may be better equipped to

redress their own misconceptions and encourage the student to take the long view and adopt a diligent, incremental approach to becoming the future self the student imagines.

The existing research also characterizes this fragility as particularly harmful during academic transitions, such as between primary school and secondary school and between high school and college, during which students may experience academic difficulties unlike any they've experienced before. Students who view ability as a fixed entity tend to make more global attributions for setbacks during difficult transitions; students with a more malleable or incremental view of ability, however, can see setbacks during a transition as a natural part of learning. High school counselors and college advisors and faculty may help support students through these transitions by encouraging them to attribute the difficulty they are experiencing as a natural outcome of a new learning environment rather than as a sign of their innate limitations (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007).

Further, as other community colleges consider Florida's reforms, advisors will need to encourage under-prepared students to seek out remediation. Indeed, advisors currently working in Florida's community colleges are concerned that students who really do need remediation will be unwilling to accept their advice (Hu, Tandberg, Nix, Collins & Hankerson, 2014). Existing research suggests that these concerns are justified. Researchers have demonstrated that entity theorists are less likely to seek out needed support, opting to protect their egos in the short term at the expense of their long-term goals (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin & Wan, 1999). A better understanding of how beliefs about ability shape students help seeking behavior may empower advisors to effectively encourage under-prepared students to enroll in needed remedial courses.

Implications for Research

By positioning remediation as something to avoid, institutions create a stigma around a student's apparent (socially constructed) lack of preparation that is felt and interpreted in individual terms, a social pain that students work to avoid. Participants shared stories of when they had felt that needing help, or being behind, meant something bad and they did not want to be seen in those terms. Research conducted at the University of Hong Kong using Dweck's frameworks, found that self-theories predicted who would seek out help when they needed it, and who would not (positioned as maladaptive). But the ontological lens of that study and others that place the mindset, or meanings system, in the psychology of the student lays the shame for this behavior in the "fragile egos" of the un- and under- prepared, without considering the shamefulness of behindness as a social construction.

In looking for causes of the fixed mindset, Dweck considers the role of praise or messages of fixed traits from authoritarian parents, without considering the embedded social class constructs behind either cause and the connections between the two. The study in Hong Kong is used as evidence to demonstrate the universality of these mindsets, but the setting of a democratic capitalist country in the shaping of the behavior that follows from these mindsets is unexplored. Lower classes are shamed for their fixed mindsets, while the upper classes security in knowing that they have enough gives them permission to be daring, to roll the dice, to play the game and enter the contest, to really try—as Piper puts it, and consider the behavior of their less secure fellow humans as maladaptive (the product of their self-doubt, as Niki Haley put it recently in an interview, and laziness). Redressing the problem is more than a matter of providing students with clearer information or being more honest with them about their abilities

and their life chances (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephens, 2011) as if those things are actually knowable in any sense outside of the framework that maintains the current inequities.

Students who sense that they might not have enough to risk entering into the higher positions, in an entrance framework, work to maintain or preserve whatever social capital they have, hoping to persist as long as they can without being singled out. They are focused on just getting from point A to point B to point C, as Kelly put it, hoping to make it to X, Y, or even Z; the fear that they might not have what it takes, since there is that category in the entrance discourse, shapes student behavior as social passing. They sense that they maybe don't have enough, don't want to be seen in those terms, and do what they can to pass—operating in a kind of resource protection mode, where the student maintains as much social capital as they imagine they can before they are found out. Casting this phenomenon in psychological terms of a "fragile ego" sends us in the wrong direction. A socio-cultural framework, taken here and by other researchers looking at implicit theories of intelligence and their effects, I think, takes us in the right direction.

A clash between student expectations and college expectations causes many students to force themselves to drop out, as Princess puts it for me. The existing literature paints a similar picture. Researchers looking at student perception of community college processes also found that many students were surprised to find that the expectations were as high as they were. Students in this study were not well prepared by their neighborhood schools for the kind of concerted effort that was expected at community. This notion seems to underline why so many students like John, Kelly, Princess, Gemaia—all from neighborhood schools imagine that they are going to work full time and go to college full time. This misconception about community

college makes the transition to college difficult for students from working class backgrounds, in which ideas are less supported and held up for debate and consideration. Questioning authority and challenging standard notions is part of the liberal arts project of college that working class students from cultures of natural accomplishment are less prepared for.

Rosebaum, Rosebaum, and Stephens (2011) argue that the problem with community college reform over the last quarter century is caused by what they refer to as BA blinders—or Bachelor of Arts blinders. Their complaint is that reformers have been trying to make all the students into traditional college students, not recognizing that the "great energy" they have put into making weak students stronger in remedial classes has not worked for the majority of the students. Their redress is to take off the blinders and to secure students success with more "guard rails." Their argument is, in essence, that these weak students do not have the capacity for kind of thinking and self-determination implied in the liberal arts project. The implicit theories of ability in the sponsorship model they advocate for maintain the notion that social mobility is for a selected few, sponsored by those who recognize potential. Might the implicit theories of ability —the delineation of some humans as the hands and some as the heads, the reinforcement of elitist notions of who really belongs in college—at the heart of the sponsorship model and the contest model need more scrutiny?

The redress isn't being more honest about abilities—as if there are many students who, from the beginning, should not be lead to believe that they have enough capacity for college—rather, the redress is to insist that all have the capacity for democratic exchange of ideas, both in oral and written, and insist on that readiness, not as preparation for college, but preparation for full participation in a democracy (Love, 2019). Further research into community development

models as the basis for reform is called for. The assumptions of ability and belonging that underline both the contest mobility model (the notion of ability as a private good) and the sponsorship mobility model (the notion of elite developing the talented from the lower classes)—have left our most vulnerable students with impossible terms of engagement.

Limitations

The limitations of the qualitative methods used here have been well established. They include questions about rigor and researcher bias, and cautions about claims of causality. I have attempted to account for those limitations in my research design by establishing my intentions in line with my research values. Questions of rigor are addressed in my strategies for validation. Researcher bias is addressed in my positionally and my adoption of an engaged inquiry framewok. And, my interpretation of student thought and action highlights meaning systems—the figured world—rather than causality.

But even the best laid research plans run into unanticipated situations. In this case, this study began before the COVID-19 pandemic started and continued as the worst of it past. Also in the background, bubbling up in our interviews, were the protests around the George Floyd protests. These events no doubt shaped student meaning making and my own as I worked to transcribe, then analyze interviews conducted before, during, and after them. These events may have also contributed to the small amount of attrition from the study. Such attrition may slightly distort some conclusions I drew about factors that facilitated engagement.

Conclusion

A meaning systems approach, taken in this phenomenological study, helps makes sense of the ambiguous findings within the quantitative research focused on the question of remediation and academic outcomes. Such an approach offers insight into the subjective and intersubjective realities in play behind the numbers in studies like that of Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2008), who call stakeholders attention to patterns of attrition within levels of remediation. The question whether remediation helps some and hinders others here is less a question about "accurate placement," as it is most often addressed in a post-positivist epistemology, than a question of student interpretation of remedial assignment. The socio-cultural focus on meanings systems taken in this study examines not only how the student looks at their own remedial assignment but also how the institution looks at it, and the meanings in the air. Such an approach to understanding student motivation recognizes "the virtual structures" (Sewell, 1992) of "the figured world" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001) — the world already full of meaning often taken as veridical and fixed. It is these meanings that shape behavior in ways that might seem illogical or maladaptive to those outside that world. It helps us see that fixing student misconceptions of remedial placement and college expectations is not just a matter of getting the messaging correct or aligning standards. Rather we need to scrutinize the implicit theories of ability that legitimize social stratification and better understand their role in the social reproduction that occurs in the figured world of the neighborhood college.

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APPENDICES

A. Interview Schedule

First interview (beginning of the first semester)

1. Tell me about your decision to come to CCC. How did the idea come about? What did your family and friends say when you told them what you wanted to do? Were there other options you considered? How do you think your story compares to that of other CCC students?
2. Tell me about taking the placement test. What do you remember from that experience? Was the test what you expected? What had you heard about the placement test before taking it? Had you ever taken a test like that before? What do you think the test measures? How do you think your experience compares to that of others?
3. Why do you think there is a placement test? What purpose does it serve? Do you think there might be a better way to achieve that purpose? What do you think would happen if there was no placement test?
4. How did you learn about your placement? What was your first thought when you realized you were placed as you were? Were you placed as you expected? How do you feel about your placement now?
5. Tell me about your developmental class(es). How are they going so far? What must a student do to be successful in them? What do you think your prospects are? How do your views compare to your classmates? Do you know anyone else who is also taking a developmental class? How does your experience compare to theirs?

Second interview (middle of the semester)

1. Tell me how your developmental classes are going. What has class been like? How do you feel about your prospects now? Do you think you were properly placed? How much time and effort do you put into your developmental class work? Do you feel like you belong?
2. Tell me about your prior school experiences. What do you think is the difference between someone who likes school and someone who doesn't? Was there a time when you didn't like school; was there a time when you did like school? How does your experience with school compare to that of others?
3. What did you want to be when you were young? How did people react when you told them? How did you interpret that reaction? How did you decide on your current career goal? What do you do when people doubt you?

4. Tell me what your family and friends think about CCC. What do you tell them about CCC? Do you feel encouraged by your family and friends as you pursue your CCC goals? How do your college experiences, so far, compare with theirs?
5. What have been your greatest challenges so far? Is your college work easier or harder than you thought it would be? What do you do when you find yourself struggling?

Third interview (end of first semester)

1. Looking back over the semester, how do you feel about your placement now? What has been your experience in the class? What is your most positive memory of class? Your least positive memory?
2. What do you think makes someone ready for college? Do you think there is a difference between community college ready and college ready? What do you think is the difference between community college and traditional college?
3. Would you rather be in a class that challenged you or one you thought you could do well in without much effort? Why do you think that is? Have you been pushed out of your comfort zone at all here at CCC?
4. Where do you think academic ability comes from? Do you think some people are just college material while others aren't? How unique do you think your views are?
5. Where do you think you will be in five years from now? Ten years? Will you have to change or grow to get there?

Fourth interview (beginning of second semester)

1. So tell me how are college-level classes different than developmental classes? Can you give me an example to illustrate that?
2. What are your prospects in your college-level courses? How do they compare to that of others? Do you feel your developmental class has prepared you for college-level work?
3. Do you feel like you belong here at CCC? Has it been what you expected?
4. Have your plans for the future changed at all based on your experience so far at CCC?
5. Has being a CCC student changed you in any way? Do you think people change much or are who they are no matter what?

General follow up prompts

- Ask participants for concrete examples and experiences to support their generalizations. Can you give me an example? Tell me about a time you felt that way. Do you know someone who is like that? Paint that picture for me…. What was that like—take me there….

- Ask participants to do boundary work and compare their opinions and experiences to those of others. How common do you think your beliefs/experiences are? What do you think other people think about that? How similar is your story, do you think, to that of others?
- Ask about expectations. Was that what you expected? Where did you get that idea? What had you heard about it?
- Ask for further thoughts about placement and remediation that I had not thought to ask: Is there anything you'd like to share about your experiences with placement, remedial classes, and CCC in general that I hadn't thought to ask?
- Ask participants specific questions based on what they had told me in a previous interview. You told me last time we talked about this; can you tell me more? What did you mean when you said that during our last interview?
- Ask participants to reflect on my tentative findings along the way. So I've noticed that some students say this about placement; what do you think about that? Does that ring true to your own experiences?

B. Informed Consent Form

Title of research: A Phenomenology of placement: Student perception of remedial opportunity structures, academic ability and belonging in higher education

Investigator and Department: Dr. Will Asher (faculty advisor), College of Education/Urban Education (Temple University) and Madeline Marcotte (student investigator), College of Education/Urban Education (Temple University) and Department of English (City Community College)

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

We have invited you to take part in this research study because you have taken the placement test at the City Community College and we are interested in your experience and your perspective. The purpose of this study is to understand different students' views of placement and how those views might affect whether they enroll after taking the placement test and their motivation in their assigned classes.

What should I know about this research?

- Someone will explain this research to you.
- Whether you take part is entirely up to you.
- You may choose not to take part in this study.
- You can agree to take part now but later change your mind, even after data have been collected.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.
- Your instructor(s) will not have access to nor will be present for your interview, if you agree to be interviewed. Nor will any of your instructors be aware of your participation therefore your participation will NOT effect your grade.

Who can I talk to about this research?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, you are encouraged to contact the student investigator, Madeline Marcotte, at any point during the study. I can be easily reached either by email at mmarcotte@CCC.edu or by phone at 610-761-2099. Mail correspondence can be sent to Madeline Marcotte, Department of English, 1700 Spring Garden, Philadelphia, PA, 19143.

This research has been approved by the City Community College's (CCC) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and by the Temple University (TU) Institutional Review Board. Questions may also be directed to these institutions at:

CCC IRB: (267) 299-5892 or craeford@CCC.edu

TU IRB: (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at: irb@temple.edu with any of the following:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints if they are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

Developmental courses in community colleges are a common strategy to help students gain skills necessary for academic success at the college level. Research shows that students often are confused about placement processes and respond differently to being placed in remediation, or college prep courses. Some students improve their chances for success after remediation; others, however, seem discouraged by remedial placement and drop out, even though they could succeed.

The current study is being done to understand your unique experiences as one student who is part of a richly diverse group of community college students have taken the placement test and who may or may not have enrolled afterward. Your personal experiences taking the placement test and enrolling in accordance to your placement results will join with those of other students to help us understand how students perceive their placement and what might be done to improve both placement processes and student understanding of placement processes.

How long will I be in this research?

We expect that you will be in this research for about one and a half regular academic semesters (approximately 20 weeks). Your participation will primarily involve agreeing to be interviewed no more than four times: after taking the placement test, half way through the first semester, at the end of the first semester, and once more about a month into the second semester. We expect the first and

third interview you agree to, to last approximately 60 minutes, with the ones in-between being of shorter duration.

What happens if I agree to be in this research?

To participate, you must be age 18 years of age or older and completed the placement test.

If you agree to the research, I will tape record each interview to make sure that I capture your experiences accurately. Your future or current professor(s) will not be present at this interview. No instructors/professors will have access to your recorded interview(s) or content.

In all the data analyses and reporting, I will use a pseudonym to protect your confidentiality. In addition, to the best extent possible, all data from interviews will be combined in ways that prevent the identification of individual participants. Additionally, your interview will be transcribed (converted from a verbal recording to a written document). You will be invited to review the written account of the interview for accuracy. You will also be invited to reflect on the researcher's findings.

What other choices do I have besides taking part in this research?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Is there any way being in this research could be bad for me?

There are no anticipated risks in this study. None of your instructors will be aware of your participation in the study and there will be no impact on any of your class grades.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

To the extent allowed by law, we limit the viewing of your personal information to people who must review it. This includes members of the research team—namely, the student investigator (Madeline Marcotte Rolston) and the members of her dissertation committee; all members of this research team have completed a C.I.T.I. certification training on ethics and confidentiality.

We cannot promise complete and absolute secrecy. The IRB, Temple University, Temple University Health System, Inc. and its affiliates, and other representatives of these organizations may inspect and copy your information. In addition, representatives of City Community College may request to review data collected during this study.

The results of this study may be published; however, you will not be identified by name and will be given a pseudonym, and extreme care will be taken to ensure you cannot personally be identified from the data collected.

What will I be paid for taking part in this research?

Students who agree to the series of interviews will receive a $10 Visa Gift Card for each interview, to be purchased by the student investigator, Madeline Marcotte, and not City Community College.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I voluntarily consent to take part in this study.

Your Signature_____
Date_____

Your Name (printed)
_____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least five years beyond the end of the study.

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[1]I use “remediation” to refer to the generic educational structures involved in offering some curricular fix for the mismatch between what is deemed college-level at any given institution and what the student’s placement test says the student can currently do. I use “developmental" only to refer to a certain approach to redressing the perceived gap. That approach considers both the cognitive and affective growth of the adult learner and contrasts the skill and drill model of traditional remediation.

[2] Xu (2016) employs a “fuzzy RD” analysis and finds similar effect for race but not for age; in Xu’s analysis, multiple-levels of developmental courses negatively effects younger students more. Differences in context (VA vs. CA) and statistical analysis (cross-tabulations vs. RD) exist; but Xu deletes non-compliers from his analysis, suggesting a confounding factor may be student efficacy; older students may be more likely to self-select out of remediation.