

English Learner Underachievement: In Search of Essences and Meanings:
A Phenomenological Study of Educator Experiences of Underachievement
among English Learners in One Georgia Public School System

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Irina Bowen

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the educators' experiences of English learner underachievement. The overall aim was to discover and illuminate the essences of this phenomenal experience. The essences embody what is immanent and universal to the phenomenon, what makes the phenomenon the way it inherently is, and what cannot be removed from the phenomenon. This study sought to reveal the general essential features educators' experiences of English learner share. Furthermore, it was an attempt to arrive at a deeper understanding of the world of everyday human experience.

The school system where the study took place is located in southeast Georgia, United States. The group of elementary, middle, and high school educators who participated in the study consisted of eight professional women of diverse cultural backgrounds. All of them had extensive experience of working with English learners in the environment where English was the primary medium of instruction.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews and essays. Participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis. The collected data were organized and analyzed using Moustakas's modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method that utilizes the processes of the epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis.

Several textural and structural categories emerged from the analysis of the data. The textural thematic categories included: underachieving English learner performance in school, emotional and psychological barriers, language and cultural change, prior educational experience, family's socioeconomic status and parental involvement,

educational practices and teacher attitudes. The structures underlying the educators' experience of English learner underachievement were represented through evaluation, observation, communication and interaction, development of professional awareness and accountability, examination of students' backgrounds, professional collaboration, and examination of educational practices.

The totality of what the educators experienced in relation to English learner underachievement reveals that no aspect or quality of this phenomenon can be singled out to prevail in this phenomenal appearance. What makes the phenomenon of English learner underachievement intricately complex is its multi-dynamic character which emerges amidst educational, cultural, and socioeconomic inequities. English learner underachievement is ingrained in the structures of school and society.

The key findings from the study suggest that educators need to create effective learning situations to accommodate individual needs of underachieving English learners. Similarly, educators need extensive support from the school, district, and policy in ways that help them gain professional knowledge of approaches, strategies, and programs to provide quality education to all English learners.

The study has contributed to the overall understanding of the phenomenon of English learner underachievement and drawn attention to the importance of the educator voice in educational decision making.

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EXPLANATION OF KEY TERMS

It is important to note that meanings of the same word may vary to some degree from one context to another. The meanings of the terms used in this study are applicable to the current research situation and serve the purposes of this study.

Achievement Gap. The disparity in performance on standardized tests between low-income and minority students and their more affluent, white peers (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a.).

Content Areas or Subject Areas. Academic areas or disciplines taught in schools (e.g. English language arts, mathematics, history/social studies, and science).

Discourse. I use the term to refer to discussions and debates that embody verbal and written communicative interchange of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts about issues of critical importance to social, cultural and political ideologies.

Educator. Throughout the course of this study, the use of the term *educator* is consistent with the belief espoused by the National Education Association (n.d.) that “the education profession consists of one education workforce serving the needs of all students”. Therefore, in this research context the term *educator* broadly refers both to classroom teachers and education support professionals, namely, paraprofessionals who provide direct instructional support to students.

English Learner (EL). In this study, I use the term English Learner (EL) in accordance with the definition provided in the Georgia Department of Education ESOL/Title III Resource Guide. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2012a) English Learners (ELs) are “students whose primary or home language is other than English and who are eligible for services based on the results of an English

language proficiency assessment” (p. 14). It should be noted that other terms used interchangeably with EL are English Language Learner (ELL) and Limited English Proficient (LEP). For the purposes of this study, the acronyms EL, LEP, and ELL may appear concurrently with reference to the relevant literature on the topic.

English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). ESOL is generally defined as an educational program designed to meet the diverse linguistic needs of English Learners and provide them with quality English language instruction at all levels of social and academic English language proficiency. To maintain consistency of the aim and context of the present study I refer to English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) as “an educational support program provided to help ELs overcome language barriers and participate meaningfully in schools’ educational programs” (Georgia Department of Education, 2012a, p. 14).

Essences. The essences embody what is immanent and universal to the phenomenon, what makes the phenomenon the way it inherently is, and what cannot be removed from the phenomenon. The essence is imbued with commonality and universality. It is a general quality without which a thing cannot be thinkable as such; an essential invariant characteristic without which an object would not be that particular object (Husserl, 1931, 1973).

Hispanic and Latino. The ethnonyms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably by the Bureau of Census to refer to “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011, p 2). I use *Hispanic and/or Latino* to refer to Spanish-speaking language-minority students with ancestral origins in the countries of

Latin America who were born in or outside the U.S. and as such they are referred to in the research literature.

Language Minority (LM). The term is generally used to refer to a child or student whose home or native language is other than English, regardless of his or her English language proficiency level (Garcia, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009). *Language Minority* is a broad term that applies to both English proficient and limited English proficient students whose home language is other than English. *English Learner*, however, specifically refers to a student who has not developed a high level of English proficiency that enables the student to participate meaningfully in mainstream educational programs. *Language Minority* and *English Learner* are often used interchangeably or synonymously in publications despite differences.

Meanings. Meanings, in a phenomenological sense, represent the content of the phenomenal experience or acts through which human experience is always intentionally directed towards phenomena (Husserl, 1931).

1. CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Nature of the Problem

Underachievement is a loaded concept. It spurs serious concern among education stakeholders over its contentious nature and evokes asymmetric policy reactions to various instances of its manifestation. Policymakers and practitioners determinedly search for better ways of addressing the needs of underachieving students in a variety of educational contexts. By the same token, educational research efforts have been geared toward bringing conceptual clarity to the phenomenon of underachievement, determining its underlying causes, and developing strategies to alleviate its detrimental effect on educational outcomes for a diverse student population. Admittedly, an extensive literature review of underachievement reveals that there is a major problem with the lack of unified perspectives of underachievement and agreed reasons why it occurs. To date, researchers have not yet come to a general consensus over the single applied definition of underachievement. Nor have they yielded a greater clarity and direction as to how it should be measured and identified (Gorard & Smith, 2004; Plewis, 1991; Preckel, Holling, & Vock, 2006; Smith, 2007). Some authors (e.g. Anastasi, 1988; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982) have little trust in the terminology of underachievement rendering it meaningless due to “the variability of definitions”) or erroneous inference of inappropriate measurement (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982, p. 179).

Underachievement commonly encompasses a variety of phenomena. They range from the differential educational attainment of students from different groups formed by nation, region, ethnicity, gender, language, school type, and socioeconomic

status to the failure of individual students to achieve “a level equivalent to the best prediction of their future performance based on a value-added or a contextualized model” (Gorard, & Smith, 2004, p. 206).

The term *underachievement* has been widely used to refer to poor academic performance, at a national level, indicative of the achievement gap or disparity in educational outcomes between minority students and their white peers. This is due to the fact that many low-income minority students consistently score lower on standardized tests than their more affluent white peers. Given the prevalent use of the standardized testing context in academic achievement discourse, underperformance on standardized tests has been historically documented and generally attributed to underachievement of minority students (Smith, 2007).

In American educational discourse, the critical issue of underachievement and the need to address educational achievement gaps, by and large, have been viewed and discussed with reference to specific performance gauges and decision-making criteria, namely, grades and scores on standardized tests, grade retention and dropout rates, overrepresentation in special education and remedial programs, underrepresentation in gifted programs and high-level courses (Crawford, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Howard, 2010; Murphy, 2010). In the same vein, the educational discourse in the UK has been predominantly marked by heated debates and strong concerns over the issue of underachieving boys. To a lesser extent, it has illuminated and recognized the problems of underachieving ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged student populations (Smith, 2007).

Besides the fact that an apparent lack of agreement on what constitutes underachievement remains a problematic area of research, there is furthermore a caveat to be aware of. Underachievement literature has sought to generate and discuss definitions of underachievement with a gifted learner in mind (e.g. Clark, 2008; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). Notably, there is hardly a clear and distinct definition that accompanies underachievement of English learners whose home language other than English and level of English language proficiency determine their eligibility for English language services. To summarize, the main problem stems from the complexity of formulation and implementation of the term underachievement across a variety of educational contexts such as general education, gifted education, and education for English learners. The problem is further compounded by the lack of research attempts to develop a broader conceptual framework for English learner underachievement that would go beyond discussions focused on English learner depressed performance on standardized assessments.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

Given the complexity of the conceptual formulation and operationalization of underachievement across a variety of educational contexts, namely, general education, gifted education, and education for English learners; it is important to underscore a critical need for in-depth qualitative research of classroom contexts, educational practices, teacher perspectives, and student experiences. All these with one accord epitomize both a natural setting in which underachievement may manifest itself and an

authentic source of information that will illuminate the meanings of underachievement as it appears.

The rationale for this study stems from the need to address some issues underlying the phenomenon of English learner underachievement.

First, there have been conflation and overlap of *underachievement* and *low achievement* (Ekins, 2010; Smith, 2007). In literature, policy, education, and among lay people the terms tend to be used interchangeably to characterize academic performance of individuals and groups or refer to disparities in academic performance between students from diverse racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds (Gorard & Smith, 2004; Plewis, 1991). However, it has been suggested to refrain from using these terms synonymously and strive for consistency in terminology that more accurately describe phenomena (Ekins, 2010; Plewis, 1991).

In the meantime, underachievement among English learners is placed and viewed in the context of achievement gap that is defined by the U. S. Department of Education as “the difference between how well low-income and minority children perform on standardized tests as compared with their peers” (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.a.). According to the Nation’s Report Card (n.d.) which reports the data of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a congressionally mandated measure of student academic achievement in various subjects, English language learners perform significantly lower on educational assessments than their non-ELL peers. These findings contribute to the public debate among education stakeholders and policy makers on the issue of academic underachievement of English learners.

Second, in many instances research focusing on issues of underachieving English learners has sought to identify, explain, and discuss English learner underachievement trends. It should be noted that investigation of causal mechanisms and relationships has become a priority agenda for English learner underachievement research. For the purpose of investigation, researchers have considered student test scores, grades, and high school graduation rates as manifestation of underachievement. Yet, little is known whether any study has attempted to explore the essences and meanings of underachievement among English learners or come closer to describing its nature using first-hand accounts from people who have experienced it.

Third, more qualitative research in this area of concern is needed to create a “complex, holistic picture” (Creswell, 2007, p. 249) that shows a multidimensional nature of English learner underachievement. It is important to engage in a complex inquiry process in order to explore English learner underachievement with regard to educators’ experience of this phenomenon.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe educators’ experience of English learner underachievement. The overall aim was to explore and illuminate the meanings and essences emerging from their experience of this phenomenon. Furthermore, it was my attempt to arrive at a deeper understanding of the world of everyday human experience.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Over the past few years education policy has largely formulated the operational context for achievement and underachievement. Federal lawmakers launched a legislative initiative, namely, the NCLB Act (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) that increased emphasis on test-based accountability and mandated standardized tests for measuring academic achievement of all students regardless of their linguistic background and English proficiency (Crawford, 2004).

In the same vein, most researchers have addressed the issues of underachieving English learners heavily relying on a definition of academic achievement narrowed down to scores from standardized tests (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). Several researchers, however, argue that a standardized achievement test conducted in English and normed on English speakers serves as a direct measure of English language constructs rather than an effective gauge of content knowledge. They strongly believe that linguistic complexity of content-based test items impedes English learners' understanding of the language of the test, hence, severely affecting their assessment performance. Furthermore, their findings suggest that the English learner's language background may affect the construct validity and reliability of content-based assessment given the linguistic complexity of the language of the assessment (Abedi, 2009, 2010; Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004; Abedi, Leon, & Mirocha, 2003).

Nevertheless, the evidence of underachievement among English learners has been historically documented by long-term trends of their underperformance on standardized tests. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP), a national yardstick of U.S. student achievement, reveal that a large percentage of English Language Learners falls below the Basic level of achievement in various subject areas (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b.) Namely, these learners do not demonstrate partial mastery of knowledge and skills fundamental for proficient work at each grade level (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.c.).

Studies that have addressed underachievement among English learners tend to view this phenomenon in relation to various underlying issues that contribute to its existence and make it eminent in educational context. The majority of these studies focus on Hispanic and/or Latino Spanish-speaking school-age population as the largest and rapidly growing subgroup of English Language Learners (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011; Fry & Lopez, 2012; Kindler, 2002). Therefore, considerable research has been done on Hispanic and/or Latino underachievement in an attempt to find out what antecedents, factors, and contexts are correlated with poor performance.

The significance of this study lies in its aim, methodology, and the need for unique data provided by education practitioners who have first-hand experience of underachievement among English learners. First and foremost, the study aimed to explore and understand the meanings English learner underachievement has in their experience. It was my contention that far more understanding and deeper insight must be given to the phenomenon of English learner underachievement with regard to its appearance and relevance in educators' everyday classroom life. Therefore, I undertook this study in the hope that educators' experiences of English learner underachievement would offer new meanings that illuminate and underscore the significance of this social phenomenon in the context of education.

Secondly, there is a gap in the existing research with regard to educators' experiences and perceptions of underachievement among English learners or language minority students. Therefore, educational research may benefit from a phenomenological investigation of educators' experiences of English learner underachievement and meanings that emerge from their experiences. Understanding what education practitioners experience in relation to underachievement may point to broader ways of viewing this phenomenon and offer solutions for alleviating underachieving tendencies. Given that the phenomenological approach to educational research has potential to bring to the fore experiences and perceptions of educators, future research may draw upon phenomenological findings to challenge the assumptions and norms underlying the education status quo and, therefore, aim to inform educational policy.

Furthermore, there is a need to empower educators by positioning their voices in the core of this debate. There is a need for teachers' input in redressing the issue of educational underachievement in view of its embedment in classroom contexts. Lunenburg and Ornstein (2007) argue that the voice that embodies the teacher's perspective should be taken into account in educational decision making for it conveys "firsthand expressions of teacher experiences and wisdom" (p. 464). Educators' voices are paramount and critical to understanding of the meanings they ascribe to their work and professional life.

I anticipated that personal insights gained from this study might resonate with experiences and visions of those education practitioners who work with English learners and build meaningful interactions with their families. It was my hope that the study

findings would contribute to a broader understanding of the issues related to English learner underachievement and prove useful for both practitioners and researchers in their collaborative efforts to ensure quality and equity of education for English learners.

1.5 Research Interest and Background

The idea about this research project has arisen from my personal experiences of English learner underachievement and in professional communication among educators who have experienced and lived through this phenomenon. Being an ESOL educator with years of experience teaching elementary students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds has helped me become aware that education of English learners in the United States and Georgia, in particular, is replete with issues involving students, educators, parents, and other education stakeholders. Researchers and policymakers should seek to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the problems arising in English learner education by including views, voices, and experiences of those who are dealing with these problems. By the same token, English learner underachievement has been an issue of the utmost concern for the educators in the school district where I have worked for almost a decade. It is located in southeast Georgia and provides a continuum of services to culturally and linguistically diverse students identified as English learners. The educators who work with English learners have knowledge of daily challenges and struggles faced by their students. By virtue of my professional and personal concern, I was fully engaged in frequent conversations with my fellow educators who were utterly consumed by their desire to make things better for their English learners. Through our informal exchanges of views and ideas, we discussed

the need to gain insight into the essential nature of English learner underachievement and, consequently, arrived at the inevitability of this project.

1.6 Research Questions

In keeping with the phenomenological framework, this study aimed to understand and describe what educators experience in relation to underachievement among English learners.

The research questions that guided this study were:

- What do educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement and how do they describe their experiences?
- What are the essences and meanings that underlie their experience of English learner underachievement?

The essences embody what is immanent and universal to the phenomenon, what makes the phenomenon the way it inherently is, and what cannot be removed from the phenomenon. The essence is imbued with commonality and universality. It is a general quality without which a thing cannot be thinkable as such; an essential invariant characteristic without which an object would not be that particular object. Meanings, in a phenomenological sense, represent the content of the phenomenal experience or acts through which human experience is always intentionally directed towards phenomena (Husserl, 1931, 1973).

The research questions were carefully formulated to aim at the exploration of the meaning of the phenomenon being experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Given the complexity and breadth of the area of concern, the questions were formulated open-

endedly and broadly to allow for an emergent design and to yield rich descriptions of the experienced phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2003; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

1.7 Personal Statement of the Researcher

In phenomenological research, a researcher's personal relationship to the phenomenon becomes a preamble to a phenomenological investigation that sets forth evidence revealing researcher perceptions and biases he or she brings into a study. The search for the essence of the phenomenon, in its true meaning and form, aims to prompt the ones who experienced the phenomenon to go, as Husserl (1970a) declares, "back to the things themselves" (p. 252) without biases and presuppositions. To that end, the process of *epochè* or "bracketing" becomes preeminent in phenomenological investigation. It involves suspending our everyday understandings of phenomena and revisiting our immediate experience of them (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Sullivan, 2012). As a researcher, I am emotionally invested in the phenomenon of English learner underachievement. I have had a personal experience of the phenomenon, and I have sought to examine the other educators' experience of underachievement among English Learners in order to uncover all possible meanings. I admit that I do not detach myself from my experiences that make me see what I see and who I am. Total bracketing of all past knowledge about the phenomenon seems hardly possible to achieve. Rather, I am an experiencing person and render the phenomenon and myself present in my consciousness. I am aware of this presence and concentrate on the phenomenal appearances opening up my mind towards new and fresh perceptions. Recognizing and accepting my personal experiences of English learner underachievement have made me fully aware of my role in this research.

Experiencing the phenomenon and being able to see and acknowledge my views have paved the way for sensitivity and openness to the participants' experiences. I entered a new challenging phase of seeking transparency in myself and embracing an attitude of receptiveness and directness towards a new way of thinking about the phenomenon of English learner underachievement. I tried to the best of my ability to keep out of action the worldly knowledge about English learner underachievement which may stem from various social agents and policies. As an experiencing person, I approached this study with openness and reflective attitude to allow other peoples' experiences to inform and enrich my knowing of the phenomenon. Furthermore, I described my personal experience of English learner underachievement which gave me a unique vantage point of an insider and provided a heightened level of trust and openness between the participants and myself.

1.7.1 Researcher Experience of English Learner Underachievement

The growing debates over underachievement among English learners against a backdrop of school reform have prompted overt concerns among educators about the current equal educational opportunity approach that views educational equity in equalizing test scores (Crawford, 2004). Through the years of working in public education and teaching English learners from diverse cultural backgrounds, I have experienced English learner underachievement and developed understanding of how it may inform educational policy and school environments. I have always believed that it is a complex phenomenon one needs to explore from a variety of perspectives.

Underachievement has never appeared to me as a clearly outlined term. In a derivational sense, *Under*-achievement as *below* or *lesser* than achievement appears to

be of a lower position relative to a specific achievement threshold. Hence, when English learners underachieve, they demonstrate a 'below standard' level of achievement. The term *achievement* on its own is bound to contextual ambiguity regardless of its central positioning and operational significance in the public school context. High-stakes testing and school accountability mechanisms are current designators of achievement which is viewed against a backdrop of successful standardized test outcomes. Therefore, after failing a test students are crudely labeled as underachievers with no regard to the fact that they may not have yet mastered the language the test has been administered in. Or, the given assessment alone may not be a meaningful and reliable way to measure students' performance in reading, math, and other subject areas. Achievement transcends the boundaries of its attribution to school performance outcomes. No measure is reliable and powerful enough to label a child as an "underachiever" who may not be doing so well in school but is yet to become an eminent figure in a particular field of expertise. However, I am aware of the fact that some English learners do not perform as well as their native English-speaking counterparts. In my opinion, it occurs as a result of the nationwide implementation of policies that set unrealistic performance targets and, therefore, place students at risk of academic failure.

Underachievement carries a strong connotation of poor scholastic performance affected by psychological, cultural, and socioeconomic factors. The phenomenon appears to me in the form of academic performance of struggling English learners who are faced with significant barriers that impede educational access and participation in meaningful learning. They struggle to perform on par with their peers due to a number

of limitations including inadequate English language proficiency, lack of prior schooling, socioeconomic issues, and inequitable educational practices.

Diverse leaning styles do not fully shape the ethos of mainstream education. They are not accounted for by the present-day educational agenda that is overly preoccupied with student attainment of a uniform set of academic skills and competencies within the context of a specific curriculum and current educational practices. Namely, “slow learners” and “silent learners” may be treated as underachieving students with no regard for their learning preferences. Equally, a lack of student interest in particular disciplines and specific behavioral patterns of learners have become the epitome of underachievement. In general, academic performance targets are expected to be fulfilled through a series of academic activities in school. Such activities embedded within certain assessment and instructional practices may perhaps bear little relevance to the learner’s sociocultural background; hence they fail to provide an experience venue for the process of knowledge construction. Or, learners may have limited access to resources required for participation and successful completion of such activities due to their cultural and socioeconomic status. Namely, many English Learners come from low-income non-English-speaking families with limited educational background (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). Their parents cannot afford to offer them a full range of educational and extracurricular experiences to support their learning. Often, English learners from poor families start school academically unprepared and struggle to keep pace with their peers. At home, they are less exposed to educational experiences and interactions due to financial constraints and limited education of their parents. In addition, the importance of English and bilingual

proficiency cannot be underestimated in the process of gaining access to educational assets. However, unjust educational policies and a shortage of qualified educators who are well-equipped to address the needs of English learners are, perhaps, the main contributors to these educational inequities. In all this, those who fail to recognize and honor English learners' cultural values, experiences, learning styles, and attributes reify and perpetuate English learner underachievement.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

In chapter one, I laid the groundwork for pursuing my personal interest in the topic and desire to explore human experience. With support of literature, I discussed the problematic nature of the phenomenon of underachievement and revealed the complexity of its conceptualization in educational contexts. I described the professional grounds and experience from which the topic of English learner underachievement arose. Furthermore, I formulated a rationale for the study, discussed its significance for the educational research and practice, and stated my research questions. This was a yearn for clarity and a call for exploration which aimed to bring English learner underachievement into spotlight, reveal scarcity of research about experience of English learner underachievement, set the groundwork for my investigation, and commence a search for new meanings of this phenomenon.

In chapter two, I presented a detailed description of the research context. It aimed to capture the essence of English learner positioning in education and provide a contextual guide to cultural, educational, and demographic aspects of English learner underachievement in the US. Overall, the chapter allowed insight into particular English

learner issues and data relevant to the phenomenon of English learner underachievement.

In chapter three, I engaged in critical reading of the research literature and reviewed the sources relevant to the purpose of my investigation. I located and reviewed the research texts that discuss the complexity of the phenomenon and examine its application in educational practice and research. By examining various views and contexts of underachievement I aimed to determine how English learner underachievement emerged and proliferated in educational discourse. Therefore, I highlighted and discussed various topics and aspects that are related to English learner underachievement and conducive to its manifestation in research and practice. In essence, educational discourse does not define English learner underachievement in isolation but rather view it within a complex system of notions, characteristics, manifestations, and practices related to poor academic performance in school. In this regard, I focused on the literature that offers insight into aspects of poor school performance of English learners and a linguistically diverse student population. My critical review of the literature was also a detailed investigation of claims and a discussion about how these claims are relevant to my professional experience.

In chapter four, I outlined the research methodology and methods used in my study. At the outset, I examined phenomenology as a philosophy and inquiry by reviewing the Husserlian phenomenological tradition and presenting the rationale for using a phenomenological approach in research. In particular, I focused on the descriptive nature of phenomenology and its relevance for the purpose of my project. Then, I discussed the research methods and procedures used in the study for data

collection and analysis. Furthermore, I evaluated the limitations and detailed how the ethical considerations and issues of validity were addressed in this study.

In chapter five, I offered the presentation of the data that illustrated its analysis and the development of individual and composite descriptions of the research participants' experience of English learner underachievement. To accomplish that, I explicated the textures and structures of the participants' experience of this phenomenon. Including verbatim statements, I created individual textural, individual structural, and individual textural-structural descriptions for each participant. They were followed by the textural-structural synthesis of the essences and meanings of the cumulative experience of English learner underachievement.

In chapter six, I discussed how the findings from my study are distinguished from findings discussed in the literature review.

In chapter seven, I provided a brief summary of my study. Then, I explored the implications for future research and discussed the relevance of the study outcomes for educational practice and my professional experience.

2. CHAPTER II: CONTEXT

2.1 Scope and Organization

This chapter provides a detailed picture of the contextual background for the study. It was intended to set the scene for the research and capture the essence of the issues that are directly or indirectly pertinent to the phenomenon of English learner underachievement. Similarly, the context conveys relevant information that will most likely facilitate and enhance the reader's understanding of the core premises of this study. In general, the contextual information illuminates cultural, political, educational, and demographic aspects of the underachievement situation and English learner status in the US.

I presented the information about English learner situation within the macro and micro contexts of the study to reveal the national and local character of English learner underachievement. The macro context discusses English learners' inclusion in accountability systems under the U.S. federal and state legislature. The micro context reveals the immediate environment in which the study took place and characterizes the local educational setting in which education for English learners operates.

2.2 Macro Context of the Study

2.2.1 Introduction: International Underachievement of American Schools

International underachievement of American schools has been discussed with regard to their achievement in international tests (Smith, 2007). It has been widely reported that students from the United States perform at a lower level on international comparative assessments than students from other industrialized countries (Aud,

Wilkinson-Flicker, Kristapovich, Rathbun, Wang, & Zhang, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013). Mass media, policy makers, researchers, and education professionals have sought to explain the incidence of underachievement of American students at the international level. Structural and social inequity in American education has been one of the major concerns. More precisely, this concept translates into both a lack of policies geared towards the betterment of quality and opportunities in teaching profession and also inequitable access to educational resources among diverse populations of U.S. students (Darling-Hammond, 2007, 2012).

Another argument has been raised to account for international underachievement of American students. Namely, in contrast to some of the top-scoring countries, the United States is home for a large racially and ethnically diverse population. Minority students' performance on international assessments accounts for the aggregate academic performance of the U.S. student population. The evidence suggests that there are large disparities in performance outcomes between a group of high-performing Asian and white students and low-performing African American and Hispanic students. This performance variance across international assessments has never been scrutinized in terms of achievement patterns for particular minority groups. Therefore, performance results should be translated into ranking with caution and acknowledgement of cultural diversity in the United States (Dalton, 2011).

The pressure to remain the dominant power in the world arena brings about an expectation for the United States to be first in the world in educational achievement. The concern among some critics is that the international test results are myopically

interpreted in favor of agendas dominating major policy discussions. America's poor performance in comparisons with that of other industrialized nations has seemingly become a strategic pointer for policy makers who are determined to put the country ahead in the international achievement horse race. Despite the fact that American students have generally scored average and above average in major assessed areas, a common perception of America's underachievement in an international context remains consistent among education stakeholders (Boe & Shin, 2005).

It is further argued that purported achievement comparisons of different countries with different demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural make-up render the results meaningless and, in fact, rather misleading. When considering different indicators and factors, it becomes apparent that American students have been steadily improving their educational performance despite a large and rapid influx of culturally and linguistically diverse learners into schools. Furthermore, their test performance has not demonstrated statistically significant difference from that of high-achieving nations. Therefore, it is a premature decision to translate average test scores of American students into potential economic and education standing of the United States (Koretz, 2009; Lowell & Salzman, 2007).

2.2.2 English Learners in the United States and State of Georgia

2.2.2.1 Demographic characteristics. The U.S. Census Bureau reports about 380 languages other than English spoken in the United States (Shin & Kominski, 2010). In recent years, the nation has experienced rapid cultural and demographic shifts accounting for increased linguistic diversity in public schools throughout the country. Today, in America, nearly 11.8 million school-age children speak a language other than

English with almost 80 percent speaking Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a, 2011b). By the 2030s, language minority students, namely, students whose home language is other than English are projected to make up 40 percent of the school-aged population in the United States (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Against the backdrop of global competition in education U.S. public schools face the challenge of providing quality education to a diverse population with different educational needs (Terry & Irving, 2009). Notably, English learners exemplify a broad spectrum of cultures and languages that shape up the ethnic makeup of a public school in today's America. In 2012-2013, English learners comprised 8.5 percent of the total number of U.S. students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide (Ed Data Express, n.d.).

In the state of Georgia, the school-age English learner population has nearly doubled since 1999 and comprises more than 5 percent of all students enrolled in Georgia schools (Ed Data Express, n.d.; Georgia Department of Education, 2013; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). The home languages, other than English, most commonly spoken by English learners across the state are Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese. Notably, Spanish speaking students account for almost 80 percent of all English learners in Georgia (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

2.2.2.2 Initial identification of English learners. Upon enrollment in a Georgia public school, students' Primary Home Language Other Than English (PHLOTE) is determined by the home language survey or an equivalent. Their eligibility for language assistance services is further established by the English language proficiency screener

(Alston, Johnson, Lacher, & Wlazlinski, 2012). To date, some form of home language questionnaire and assessment is implemented across U.S. states for the purpose of identifying and assisting English learners (Young, Lakin, Courtney, & Martiniello, 2012). However, there may be multiple criteria used when determining the eligibility for English language support. In fact, states and districts somewhat differ in the way they define and identify English learners. Therefore, a student identified as an English learner in one state or district may not be referred to as such in another (Tanenbaum, Boyle, Soga, Carlson Le Floch, Golden, Petroccia, Toplitz, Taylor, & O'Day, 2012).

During the evaluation and eligibility process, Georgia public school systems utilize the WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test (W-APT) designed by the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium (WIDA) which includes more than 30 member states. The WIDA consortium instructs, assists, and monitors English learners and educators through research, language development standards, assessments, and teacher professional development (World Class Instructional Design and Assessment, n.d.).

2.2.2.3 Accountability for English learners. In terms of language support, school districts across the state offer several models of Language Instruction Educational Program (LIEP) for English learners. These include heritage language, dual language, and English-based program models. The latter are largely implemented in school districts using the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) approach which focuses on standard-based instruction in English as the primary means to promote English learners' academic and social language development (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.a.; NCELA, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Nationally, the majority of English learners participate in language assistance programs funded by the Title III program. The federally-funded Title III program provides federal funding to the states and districts to ensure that English learners receive access to high-quality education services necessary to meet their diverse needs. In return, Title III calls for high levels of accountability holding districts, schools, educators, and students responsible for students' progress in learning English and their attainment of English language proficiency. Therefore, for accountability purposes, federal and state laws require that English learners' English language proficiency must be assessed annually (Boyle, Taylor, Hurlburt, & Soga, 2010). In Georgia, ACCESS for ELLs (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners) is administered as a standards-based assessment tool to determine English learners' English language proficiency levels. The test scores are further used to determine an English learner's status and inform educators, students, and their parents about English language progress. By and large, ACCESS for ELLs provides data for district, state, and federal education agencies about the effectiveness of ESOL services and attainment of accountability objectives (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.b).

Under Title III, every state and district report English learners' performance results to demonstrate achievement of state-established Title III Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAO). States use their own definitions and formulas that account for AMAO performance. In general, these definitions and formulas determine the ways how states set numeric targets for English learners, calculate, and report on their progress in English language learning, attainment of English language proficiency,

and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in academic achievement in grade-level content areas (Boyle et al., 2010).

In the past two years, 2012 and 2013, school districts in Georgia, in general, have met the achievement objectives of English learners making progress towards English language proficiency and attaining English language proficiency. However, many school districts have failed to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements on the state-mandated content assessments (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.c.).

In the current wave of education reforms, Georgia has committed to establish career and college readiness through improved accountability and support systems. The new Georgia statewide accountability system, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), will determine a school's performance using a complex set of criteria rather than a single assessment score (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). To comply with the new statewide accountability framework, AMAO-3 for Title III has been amended and aligned with the CCRPI agenda. Henceforth, districts will be held accountable for achieving AMAO-3 in line with academic content benchmarks and goals set for English learners (Alston et al., 2012). In terms of English learner education, Georgia is to adopt and implement English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards and assessments carefully aligned to college- and career-ready academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

2.2.2.4 Academic trajectories. For over 40 years, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, has evaluated U.S. students' academic performance in various academic subject areas across *Basic*,

Proficient, and *Advanced* levels. Essentially, NAEP is the only assessment that permits comparisons of students' achievement outcomes across states. The NAEP data are used by policymakers, researchers, administrators, educators, and the general public (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a.).

Since 1998, NAEP has collected and reported information on English language learner (ELL) performance. The results from year 2013 and all prior years since 1998 show that English learners at grades 4 and 8 scored lower than their non-ELL peers in both reading and math. The same performance trajectories were observed with English learners at grades 8 and 12 in the NAEP science and writing assessments. This disparity in performance is evidence of the achievement gap between English learners and their non-ELL peers. The current achievement gap is not measurably different from the gaps in previous years. This performance trend has been consistent for several years with no observable significant difference in scores (NCES, n.d.b.).

On a statewide level, schools' performance is determined by the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). Under the provisions of the new statewide accountability system, English learners are held accountable for meeting specified performance targets in the Reading and Mathematics Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) for elementary and middle grade school levels, the Math II and American Literature and Composition End of Course Test (EOCT) for high school level (Alston et al., 2012). The CRCT for the elementary and middle schools and the EOCT for high school were designed to assess how well students acquire the skills and knowledge of the core academic content outlined in the state-adopted curriculum (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.d.). It should be noted that in the 2014-2015

school year the CRCT and the EOCT are to be replaced by a new standardized testing system, the Georgia Milestones, which will gauge academic achievement and ensure students are college and career ready (Beaudette, n.d.).

In Georgia, English learners participate in state mandated assessments with or without testing accommodations depending on the documented provisions and recommendations. English learners may receive a one-time deferment from the CRCT assessments, other than mathematics and science, provided that they have been enrolled in a U.S. school for the first 12 months and participated in the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment. The deferment, however, does not extend to the EOCT assessments, regardless of a number of months in a U.S. school (Georgia Department of Education, 2012b).

According to the 2012 and 2013 CCRPI reports, English learners in Georgia public elementary, middle, and high schools failed to meet state performance targets for all the CRCT and EOCT subjects. Data shows that considerable achievement gap exists between English learners and their non-ELL peers (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.e.). Alongside the lower attainment rates, less than 45 percent of English learners in Georgia graduate with a regular high school diploma (Ed Data Express, n.d.).

2.3 Micro Context of the Study

2.3.1 Local Educational Setting: Overview

The school system where the study took place is located in southeast Georgia, United States. In school years 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, there was a total of approximately ten thousand K-12 students enrolled in fifteen schools with nearly half of

the student population served in grades Kindergarten through 5. The student body was about 54 percent White, 36 percent Black, 5 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Asian, and 3 percent other races or ethnicities. Nearly 65 percent of the students were from low-income households and received free or reduced-price meals (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.f.; Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.).

The local schools follow a structure similar to that in many school systems across the states. The district's elementary schools are primary schools that include Kindergarten through 5th grade. Depending on a grade level, elementary students are usually taught by one or several teachers. The achievement goals entail the mastery of the content in the core academic subjects such as English language arts, math, science, and social studies. In addition, students receive instruction in the following ancillary subjects: technology, art, music, and physical education. Students at local middle schools with the grade span of 6 through 8 are taught by several content area teachers on a daily basis. Beyond the required core subjects, students are offered exploratory courses which allow them to pursue additional areas of interest and experience varied career opportunities. At the high school level, students are required to take courses mandatory to a core curriculum in order to earn high school credits. In addition, they are afforded flexibility to explore a variety of interests, skills, and career paths through the exploratory programs. Generally, all the courses at the middle and high school levels are taught by educators who have obtained academic credentials and professional licensure specifically in the content areas they teach; while elementary school teachers with the interdisciplinary early childhood education certificate may teach several subjects in grades kindergarten through 5th grade. Schools serving English

learners, migrant, special education and gifted students as well as children from low-income families receive state and federal funding and additional resources for organizing and maintaining programs that provide special academic services and instructional support.

2.3.2 English Learners in the Public School System under Study

2.3.2.1 English learner education. Of the total school district enrolment, almost 300 students were classified as English learners with nearly 85 percent speaking Spanish and 15 percent speaking other languages such as Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Gujarati, and Russian. The majority of these students are U.S.-born Mexican Americans coming from Spanish speaking low-income households. In school years 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, most English learners in the school district were enrolled in the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program for an average of four to eight years. Students would receive standard-based English instruction through the state-approved delivery models on a daily basis. Normally, at the elementary school level English learners are removed from the mainstream academic setting for 45-50 minutes a day to receive language assistance in a small group. At the middle and high school levels, language instruction occurs during block-scheduled class periods. In high school, English learners are offered sheltered content courses taught by ESOL qualified teachers with relevant content area certification. The curriculum in sheltered instruction follows the common core state standards along with the WIDA English language proficiency standards (Alston et al., 2012). Sheltered English instruction is utilized to make the content material accessible and

comprehensible to English learners who have not yet developed adequate proficiency in English in order to be able to participate meaningfully in the mainstream classroom.

By and large, the ESOL group setting may vary depending on the class size, students' grade levels, and their English language proficiency levels. In schools with a large number of English learners and permanent full-time ESOL teachers, students are afforded a flexible placement option. More specifically, English learners may be grouped, regrouped, and served within the same grade level to help educators better address the needs of their students and accommodate the general education schedule. In schools with smaller numbers of English learners, split-grade classes are implemented to provide language assistance to all students within the time limit and accommodate the schedule of a part-time ESOL teacher.

At the time of the study, eight full-time teachers holding appropriate content area certification and ESOL endorsement were part of the ESOL team. While most of the teachers were only proficient in the English language, as proficiency in English is the single state mandated language requirement for ESOL educators, two of them also demonstrated proficiency in languages other than English. Their essential professional functions included but were not limited to planning and providing small group language instruction for English learners; administering assessments and identifying eligibility for language assistance services; monitoring student performance and maintaining individual student records. Since the students enrolled in the ESOL program attended different schools across the district some teachers would provide itinerant language services for two or three locations.

2.3.2.2 Achievement trends for English learners. The latest available data on the performance of the English learners in the school system under study reflects the accountability standing of the English learner subgroup with regard to their achievement of the 2012 and 2013 AMAOs. Overall, the English learner subgroup met the achievement objectives at a two-year average of 71 percent of English learners making progress towards English language proficiency and at 17 percent of English learners who attained English language proficiency. However, the students failed to demonstrate academic performance and progress on selected statewide assessments (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.c.). A review of the CRCT data for 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014 school years gives a glimpse of the achievement trends among English learners in the school system under study. The student performance on the CRCT tests did not meet either the state or subgroup performance targets. The percentages of the elementary and middle school English learners who did not meet expectations on certain tests would approximately range from the lowest 11 to the highest 40 percent of the total number of the English learners who participated in the assessments. Specifically, the percentages of English learners, at both elementary and middle school levels, who did not meet expectations on the CRCT measures were larger in math, science, and social studies (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.d.; Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.).

Figure 1 illustrates the average combined performance of elementary and middle school English learners on the CRCT tests during the 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014 school years.

Figure 1

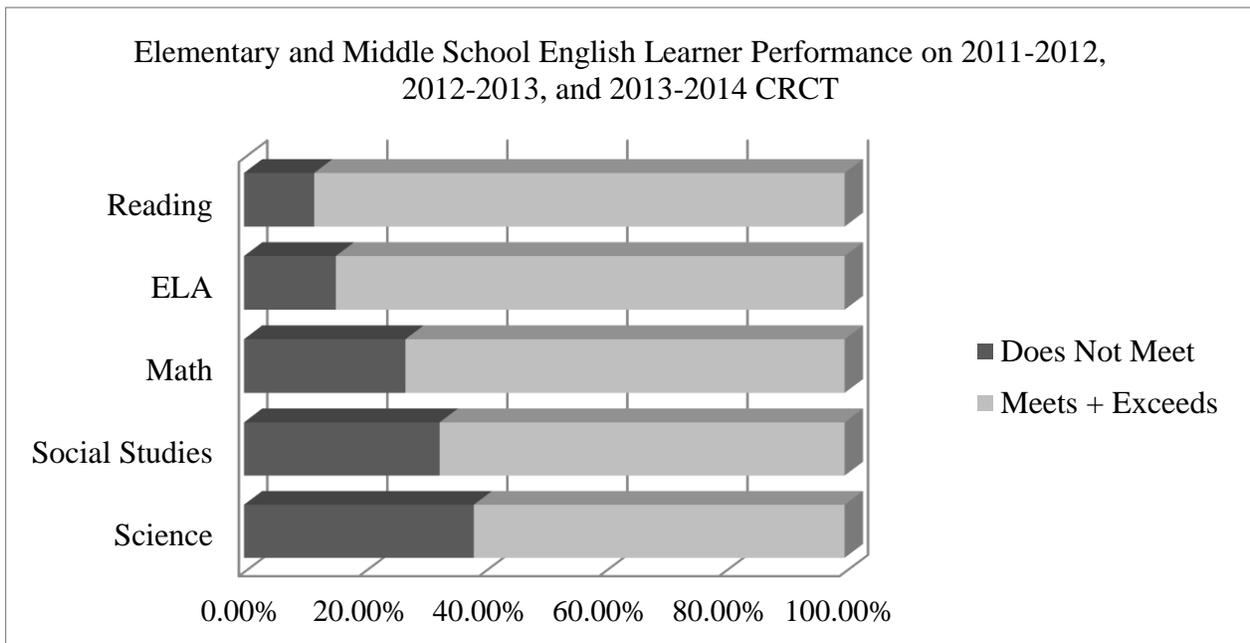


Figure 1. Data are from the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement. Report Card: K-12 Public Schools. Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/report-card>

The EOCT data were reported for selected subjects in which a large enough number of high school English learners participated to count as a subgroup. During the same school years more than 30 percent of the high school English learners did not meet expectations on 9th Grade Literature and Composition, American Literature, Mathematics-1, and Mathematics-2. More than 50 percent of the students did not meet the standard to demonstrate their proficiency in the Biology EOCT.

Figure 2 shows the average combined performance of high school English learners on the EOCT tests during the 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014 school years.

Figure 2

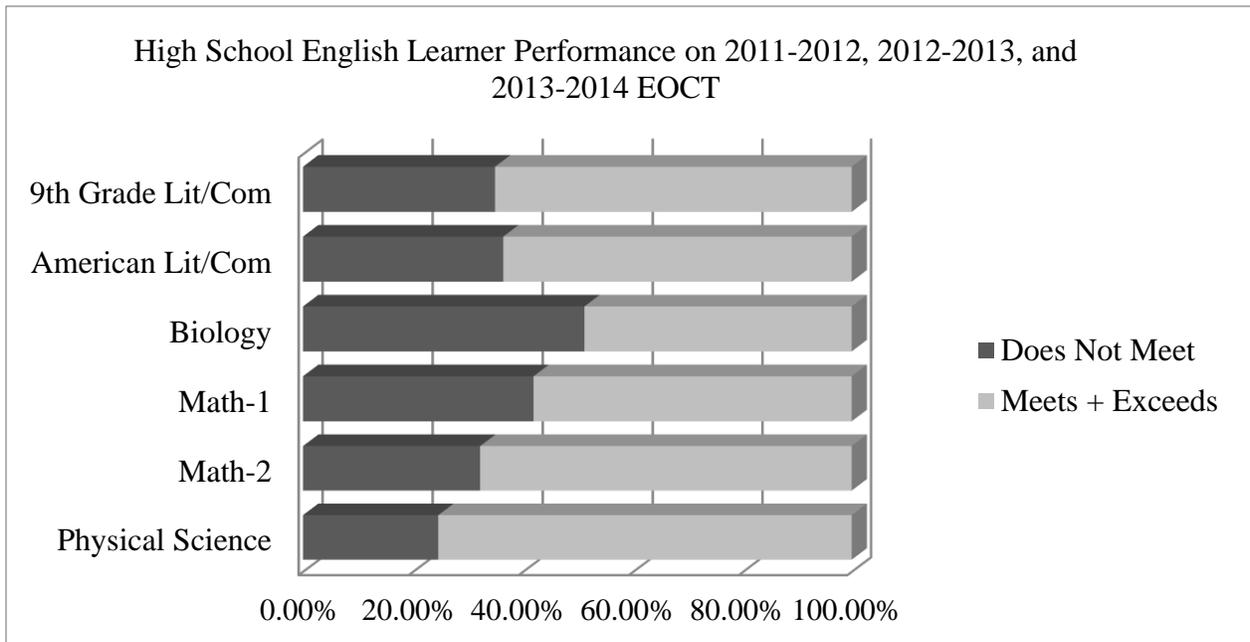


Figure 2. Data are from the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement. Report Card: K-12 Public Schools. Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/report-card>

A further review of the assessment results from previous years suggests that there were noticeable performance fluctuations over time. In some instances, English learners performed the same or slightly better than in previous years. In other instance, proficiency gains in some subjects were offset by losses in other subjects.

2.4 Concluding Comments

This chapter provided some background and contextual information relevant to understanding the nature and significance of the English learner underachievement discourse. Data derived from the national and statewide assessments and used for accountability purposes shows that English learners continue to lag behind their English background peers. Therefore, underachievement among English learners continues to pose a challenge for schools, researchers, and policy makers.

3. CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Scope and Organization

This chapter reflects the wholeness and all-inclusiveness the notion of underachievement inherently represents. In its holistic sense, underachievement means different things to different people. I aimed to locate and look at various portrayals of underachievement among English learners in order to capture and discover its meanings. English learner underachievement is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a large and intricate system of thoughts, beliefs, experiences, practices, and notions associated with educational underachievement. With this in mind, I attempted to locate themes and topics that contribute to the discussion of underachievement in research and point out critical issues related to educational underachievement among English learners. The essential intent for this chapter was to illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon and what research has to say about it. From the outset, I look for meanings and definitions of underachievement and discuss how they coexist in educational research and practice. Then, I examine the ways in which English learner underachievement is shaped, defined, and positioned in educational research and practice. In addition, I offer my account of underachievement frequently defined and applied in terms of lower academic attainment. The discussion conveyed in the final part includes findings from the studies that contributed to understanding of some issues underlying underachievement of English learners.

On the whole, the development of my critical analysis of the literature was guided by the approach to critical reading and writing set forth and discussed by Wallace and Poulson (2003). Their guidelines outline ways for a researcher to engage in critical

reading and reflection of a text in order to become a self-critical writer. By the same token, in my critical reading of the literature on underachievement, I sought to consider the relevance of the texts to the purpose of my enquiry; investigate what claims are set forth and critically discussed in research; determine how these claims are justified and substantiated; evaluate the overall convincingness and plausibility of the claims; and draw upon the knowledge gained by critically engaging with the readings. Moreover, I discussed the extent to which the knowledge underlying the claims and arguments made in the texts bears relevance to my professional experience of underachievement among English learners.

3.2 Introduction: Underachievement Discourses

Underachievement is one among other education frontiers that has captured public attention and shaped vigorous debates. It has entered educational discourses which embody the complexity of underachievement issues adduced for professional deliberations and remediation. Underachievement discourses consider and discuss any variable or attribute that plays a pivotal role in forming the wholeness of the phenomenon of underachievement. Underachievement discourses vary according to the social, political, cultural, and historical context wherein they are positioned.

3.3 Defining Underachievement: How It Is Viewed and What It Means

Underachievement and lack of consensus

While I was working at this part tentatively entitled *Defining Underachievement*, I became aware of exclusiveness and inaccuracy of the given title. Clearly, I had misjudged the complexity of the task and underestimated the scope of the problem. As

it turns out, defining underachievement has become a subject of fervent polemic with uncertain trajectories and outcomes. In the end, these all have brought about scanty understanding of what it really is and a lack of agreement on how it manifests itself.

Literature has seen several attempts to define underachievement (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982). Depending on an educational field, (e.g. gifted education) certain definitions have found wide application in various research genres. However, the loose use of the term *underachievement* has led to a conflation of constructs it has been associated with. Some authors (e.g. Ekins, 2010; Gillies, 2008; Gorard & Smith, 2004; Smith, 2007; Plewis, 1991) have raised concerns that underachievement is frequently used synonymously and interchangeably with low achievement, low academic attainment, academic under-attainment, differential attainment or performance to characterize groups of students rather than individuals. It is contended that underachievement has a more intricate schema that involves aspects of the individuality rather than generalized references to low scoring of student populations on achievement tests (Smith, 2007).

Despite conflation and confusion, underachievement has different meanings for different people and within different contexts. This was the reason why I rethought my title and added *How It Is Viewed and What It Means*.

Underachievement has become the “predominant discourse” in the educational context (Weiner, Arnot, & David, 1997, p. 620 cited in Smith, 2003, p. 283). There have been numerous concomitant attempts to articulate the essence of underachievement with reference to poor student performance and achievement gap. Obviously, such

consistent tendencies have stemmed from an ongoing concern about disparities in academic achievement across genders, ethnicities, and social classes.

At large, the term has been widely used to refer to poor performance at a national level and that of an individual (Smith, 2007). There is no universal consensus over the single applied definition of underachievement as well as the ways of measuring and identifying it (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Plewis, 1991; Preckel et al., 2006; Smith, 2003, 2007). It is of great importance that the general public, policy makers, and educators understand what conceptual dimensions underachievement comprises and how it operates across various contexts. For one thing, a clear-cut understanding of how underachievement presents itself in a particular genre facilitates the search for possible ways in which it can be addressed. For another, without awareness of what contributes to underachievement education practitioners will not be able to shape their practices in ways that may prevent or, at best, alleviate underachievement.

The phenomenon of underachievement has been extensively examined in the field of gifted education. However, its conceptual and operational delineation remains problematic (Reis, 2003). Although several definitions have been proposed, researchers and practitioners choose to agree on a common definition of underachievement that mainly operates on the notions of ability (or potential) and performance (or achievement). With this in mind, underachievement is generally referred to as academic performance measured by grades that is significantly lower than would be predicted on the basis of the student's cognitive ability determined by standardized intelligence tests. By the same token, underachievement is conceptualized as difference between the child's actual school performance and

achievement expectations based on his or her intellectual ability (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Diaz, 1998; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; McCall, Evahn, & Kratzer, 1992; Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Underachievement as ability-achievement discrepancy

The ability-achievement (or potential-performance) discrepancy model of underachievement draws criticism on account of the psychometric nature of its application. For one thing, a variability of criteria, techniques, and instruments used for identifying underachievement poses a methodological challenge to determining underachievers aptly (Smith, 2007). For another, a psychometric definition may be fraught with invalid assumptions about academic performance of minority students who tend not to do well on standardized tests (Ford, 1996; Ford & Thomas, 1997).

With focus on the aforementioned definition, researchers have drawn attention to high academic potential ability as the real capacity an underachiever possesses but fails to achieve in the event of his or her poor academic performance. The notion of potential herein has become the centerpiece of the conceptual makeup of underachievement. In the field of gifted education, failure to perform to the fullest potential with regard to specific learning objectives has become the epitome of underachievement of gifted learners. Strikingly though, there seems to be no commendable clarity as yet on how potential is defined and quantified (Smith, 2007). By the same token, defining and identifying potential are inherently problematic since there is no measure for capacity (Clark, 2008). Nor is there a shared understanding of the highest degree to which the outermost parts of fullest potential extend (Gillies, 2008). Moreover, applying a psychometric approach to underachievement in terms of

mental capacity or ability brings a sense of its intellectual comparativeness, cognitive fixedness, and limitedness in ways it is exhibited and perceived. As such, using the notion of potential in the event of failure of the person to achieve its optimum level diminishes the power of mind. The status of students with special needs, intellectual disabilities, in particular, is especially vulnerable to the implications of a fixed entity view of intelligence. This view holds that a person can achieve inasmuch as his mental capacity permits (McGrew & Evans, 2004). Notwithstanding the controversy, the term *potential*, regardless of its obvious overuse and conceptual ambiguity, retains its position as the key yardstick for determining underachieving tendencies, particularly in the fields of gifted education and special education. However, the current educational agenda seeks to capture the broader context of underachievement divorced from the supremacy of intellectual potential. Therefore, focus on superior mental ability is deemed diminishing and problematic since the current educational research is concerned with low-achieving students notwithstanding their mental ability (McCall et al., 1992).

Underachieving behaviors

In response to the definition of underachievement derived from the view based on the inherence of measurable intellectual capacities in students, Delisle and Berger (1990) took a cautious approach to defining underachievement. Considering and acknowledging the complexity of this phenomenon, they suggested that it involves the interplay of various components. More important, the authors offered ways to characterize underachievement in terms of “underachieving behaviors” that are bound to specific situations in which they occur and have a possibility to change. The

argument rests on the premise that a child who does not succeed in school subjects may demonstrate remarkable abilities and accomplishments in other areas of life. Therefore, as the authors implied, there are sound grounds for seeking a reconsideration of an attributive use of 'underachieving' with a direct reference to a student and his or her poor performance in a particular academic subject. I share this sentiment. The phrase *underachieving student* carries a negative connotation that largely portrays an unsuccessful person with a callous disregard for his or her other successes and accomplishments.

Underachievement is what we make of it. We see and interpret it on our own terms. As Delisle and Berger (1990) put it succinctly: underachievement is in the eyes of the beholder. What might seem to be underachievement to one person may not look that way to someone else.

Thorndike's concept of underachievement

Another claim that expands the notion of underachievement allows for contextual factors that may have an effect on a student's performance. Thorndike (1963) posited that defining underachievement is fraught with overreliance on student performance in ability tests with no regard for shortcomings in predicting achievement and without accounting for any additional factors essential for eliciting more accurate predictions. He argued that underachievement arises from errors and inadequacies of prediction caused by interferences of measurement error, improperly established expectations and criterion variables, uncontrollable and unpredictable events in a person's life along with any unmodifiable individual and demographic characteristics. In order to develop an accurate method for predicting achievement all the factors and characteristics should be

taken into account in combination with ability and achievement scores (Smith, 2007). With this in mind, Thorndike (1963) viewed underachievement as “achievement falling below what would be forecast from our most informed and accurate prediction, based on a team of predictor variables” (p. 19). The more informed and accurate predictions are, the smaller discrepancies occur between the predicted achievement and actual achievement. In other words, a group of students with the same attributes such as age, intelligence quotient, and home background will show a discrepancy in test scores and grades. Understanding how these differences occur and determining additional factors that influence achievement allow to make more accurate predictions of academic achievement (Thorndike, 1963).

Although Thorndike’s account of underachievement is widely cited and discussed in literature, as Smith (2007) has noted, it is seemingly less common to be applied in research studies. Smith further highlights the usefulness and sensibility of his approach which takes into account multiple factors and characteristics that may have an effect on student performance.

Multimodal view of underachievement

In his compelling discussion about underachievers, Griffin (1988) presented the complexity of underachievement from his own frame of reference. Seeking to create his own argument, Griffin turned to sources that provide useful information about underachievement. He became attracted to the multimodal approach to academic underachievement proposed by John and Helen Krouse (1981). It posits that a single name for a phenomenon does not necessarily imply that it is a single phenomenon. It may embody many things and take many different forms. Following that, Griffin added

further that underachievement as a single label for a phenomenon does not denote one single meaning we have to agree upon (Griffin, 1988). Krouse and Krouse (1981) argued that researchers and practitioners who focus on specific factors and causes of underachievement should develop a broader understanding of the phenomenon. In large part, their pursuit of a multimodal theory of academic underachievement demonstrated an attempt to explain academic underachievement taking into account a complex interplay of major factors that account for underachievement (Mandel & Marcus, 1988). The authors reviewed a number of studies and formulated three areas of affective factors that associate with underachievement. With these in mind, their view of academic underachievement is described as being “a complex interaction between deficits in academic skills, such as reading and mathematics, deficient self-control skills [e.g. self-monitoring and poor time management], and interfering affective [emotional]factors [e.g. lack of self-confidence and motivation]” (Krouse & Krouse, 1981, p. 158 cited in Griffin, 1988, p. 31). A complex interaction is a key phrase in this statement that emphasizes the interconnectedness and convergence of the factors. Griffin (1988) found the Krouses’ speculations sensible, insightful, and stimulating. He recognized their call for revamping our views of underachievement in favor of a more complex picture of the phenomenon that should not be parsed but rather taken on as a fusion of interdependent factors.

Griffin, in his turn, observed a problem of defining underachievement. He gave credit to the largely embraced ability-performance definition which provides a sense of direction. However, he declared that how we define underachievement depends on how we see it and what purpose we have for it. His statement delivers a convincing

argument about a complex and contentious nature of underachievement that is drawn into debate and marked by divergence of views.

Summary

My critical view of the existing claims defining underachievement holds that each attempt equitably and reasonably seeks to formulate the notion of underachievement in a specific research context. For instance, the ability-achievement (or potential-performance) discrepancy model of underachievement has remained seemingly ubiquitous and relevant in the research on the education of the gifted and talented given the primacy of the notion of high potential or ability associated with gifted students. In this regard, I see compelling grounds for concern and inquiry in the event of a student's academic performance that is below what would be expected based on his or her intellectual functioning measured through intelligence testing. Moreover, in a gifted setting even subjective accounts of a student's academic standing may seem objectified once a discrepancy is psychometrically established through standardized testing. Therefore, evidence of performance discrepancy may, perhaps, provide an operational venue for underachievement because the latter would not seem characteristic of a gifted individual. However, the validity of these claims may be compromised due to the lack of agreement on what is measured and how it is measured. Despite the evidence of underachievement presented and accounted for, the context of gifted and talented reveals controversy in defining constructs central to the field. Potential, giftedness, and achievement are socially constructed inasmuch as people perceive them within certain ideological frameworks. Thus, an attempt to define these constructs is fraught with difficulties, endless pursuit, and unanswered questions (Borland, 1997; Gillies, 2008).

In addition, the use of intelligence and achievement tests in measuring and establishing the value of the aforementioned constructs uncovers another facet of educational debate. Namely, there is a growing debate in the United States about test validity issues and biases and their impact on linguistically and culturally diverse students who tend to score lower than their White and Asian counterparts (e.g. Abedi, Bailey, Butler, Castellon-Wellington, Leon, & Mirocha, 2000/2005; Solano-Flores, 2008; Solorzano, 2008; Valdes & Figueroa, 1994).

Thorndike's approach to defining underachievement seems to work in a more informed fashion. In his study of over-and underachievement he recognized the limitations of an ability-achievement test duet as a predictor of achievement. Essentially, the primary focus of his research concern was how to predict achievement more accurately allowing for a variety of stable factors that inform prediction. The strength of his claim lies in a clearly defined view of a broader and more informed method of refining underachievement that would synthesize various predictor factors, ability and achievement scores. It certainly appears more natural and sensible to assume that the more informed and accurate the academic achievement forecasts are, the clearer we will be able to picture the phenomenon of underachievement. However, in my opinion, the development and application of this model in a large educational context with diverse groups of students may be rather challenging. To begin with, identifying, collecting, and analyzing predictor variables in diverse educational settings with a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural attributes can be accomplished and verified to a certain extent. Another thing is that estimates of ability and achievement may be susceptible to unexamined test biases and factors unaccounted for.

Specifically, in the context of English language education individual variation in English language acquisition and the variability of instruments used to determine English language proficiency generate varying data that may affect the predictive approach to scholastic achievement.

3.3.1 Definitions of Underachievement and My Research Aims

The purpose of this study was to reveal the essences and meanings of the educators' experience of English learner underachievement. It was not my intention to adopt any view of underachievement discussed in the literature. My goal was to explore meanings which emerge through my participants' experiences of English learner underachievement. By adopting a particular notion of underachievement I would bring in my personal bias into the study and contradict a core principal of a phenomenological approach, the process of the phenomenological epoché which requires a researcher to bracket all prejudgments, preconceived notions, and biases (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, I am not making any conceptual claims in regard to underachievement within this research situation.

3.3.2 English Learner Underachievement: What Shapes and Defines It

In the current climate of competitive achievement at the international and national levels, underachievement has acquired a connotation of poor student performance on international and national tests. Groups of students with lower performance are compared with groups of students who demonstrate the high levels of academic achievement. Scoring low on tests has become an epitome of underachievement and propelled research towards investigating academic achievement gaps. Therefore, underachievement has entered common use among educators and researchers to refer

to lower academic attainment of students grouped by ethnicity, income, and gender (Smith, 2007). Furthermore, literature shows that underachievement tends to function attributively in relation to students who are characterized as ethnic minority, English learner, culturally and linguistically diverse, economically disadvantaged, marginalized, and at-risk (e.g. Garcia, 2001; Gonzalez & Soltero, 2011; Li, 2005; Waxman, Padron, & Garcia, 2007; Young et al., 2012). Generally, research focusing on these categories of students against the backdrop of academic achievement gaps adopts the terms *underachieving* and *underachievement* to imply low students' performance on standardized tests, drop-out rates, and other attainment indicators (Genesee et al., 2005; Gillies, 2008; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006; Plewis, 1991; Smith, 2007). Achievement, on the other hand, has become a polarized foreground for underachievement ascribing thereto a negative connotation. In this regard, it was not my intention to investigate the construct of achievement presuming that the one may correlate to underachievement or set a threshold for judging situations as underachieving. I did not aim to examine and critically analyze the premises and purposes of the achievement discourse. Rather, the term *achievement* is mentioned in this study to signify its position in educational debates and acknowledge its relevance in educational research.

Typically, research focusing on English learners and language minority students discusses underachievement with reference to their poor academic performance in school. The criteria matrix for English learner underachievement tends to consist of standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and dropouts (Genesee et al., 2005; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006). They play a key role in outlining English

learner underachievement trends and set a baseline grid for research design. Low performance on standardized tests has become a touchstone for underachievement of English Learners. In the United States, high-stakes standardized testing is a central component of education reform efforts. It exemplifies a body of large scale content-based achievement assessments that play a crucial role in making high-stakes decisions for education systems and individual students. When English learners score below a proficient level of academic achievement on large scale standardized tests, it constitutes evidence of English learner academic failure (Crawford, 2004). Strangely enough, the policy disregards the research into second language acquisition that allows 5-10 years for English learners to achieve parity in academic language with their English-proficient peers (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Moore & Zainuddin, 2003). Research showed that language proficiency is an integral part of an achievement test and a vehicle to understanding test components. Clearly, it has an effect on test performance and without it assessment is less likely to yield valid results (Abedi et al., 2000/2005; Abedi et al., 2003; Abedi & Lord, 2001; Hernandez, 1994; Shaftel, Belton-Kocher, Glasnapp, & Poggio, 2006). It is essential that we understand the role of standardized testing practices in shaping English learner underachievement in the current educational discourse.

3.3.3 Underachievement in Terms of Lower Academic Attainment: My Interpretation of Conceptual Conflation

The conflation of underachievement and what is referred to as low achievement, differential attainment, academic under-attainment, and alike may have occurred

against the backdrop of increased academic performance concerns for students across a wide range of educational contexts.

In the past, the concept of underachievement was predominantly examined and applied in the field of gifted education. Against the backdrop of debates about its conceptual variability, underachievement has been largely attributed to some sort of marked discrepancy between potential or expected performance and achievement or actual performance. By this definition, underachievement has been viewed as academic performance that falls below the level of expected performance determined by some measures of potential (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Beyond the gifted discourse, in a broader sense of educational reality, the level of expected performance hinges on performance standards derived from a core curriculum and embedded in the framework of standardized testing. One could logically infer that a student who fails to reach curriculum standards and proficiency bars performs below the accepted benchmark for achievement or underachieves. Furthermore, the notion of underachievement has been generalized to larger groups of student population and has become an epitome of performance that is lower than that of other comparison groups. More specifically, in the United States, underachieving groups tend to comprise socioeconomically disadvantaged and minority students whose academic performance is measured against that of their white and Asian peers and students from more affluent backgrounds. The notion of underachievement tends to extend beyond the dimensions of individual student potential or ability and re-contextualizes against the backdrop of differences in educational outcomes between groups of students, more commonly

known as achievement gap. Perhaps, underachievement conflates with low achievement, differential attainment, and academic under-attainment as it sees a dynamic change in its meaning and application. Or, these concepts may have semantic relatedness with reference to performance that falls below or under the predefined achievement level. Whatever the case may be, conflation is a way to mark characteristics these concepts share and communicate the lack of clear conceptual distinctions between them.

3.3.4 Summary and Inference

This part of the chapter set out an agenda for a more deliberate investigation of a variety of meanings ascribed to the phenomenon of underachievement. It is evident that definitions and meanings I came across are hardly used in a uniform manner. In terms of underachievement among English learners, I assumed that if there is any precedence for it in research and educational debate, there may be accounts and views of what English learner underachievement is. To the best of my knowledge, the research literature does not clearly formulate what English learner underachievement is. It discusses underachieving tendencies of English learners in terms of their low achievement on standardized tests, poor grades, and low graduation rates (Genesee et al., 2005).

The glaring gap in the literature lies in the lack of studies that examine educators' views, experiences, and perceptions of English learner underachievement. In educational research, there is no frame of reference based on educators' thoughts, viewpoints, and meanings they ascribe to English learner underachievement. In

educational practice, however, educators may have their own perceptions and value criteria of what English learner underachievement is and how it presents itself.

3.4 Underachievement Contexts and Debates in US

In this section of the literature review I discuss and critically evaluate the major themes underlying the English learner underachievement discourse in the United States. I begin with a brief overview of an underachieving situation of ethnic and language minority students in U.S. schools and proceed with the discussion of the major aspects and arguments which largely constitute the English learner underachievement discourse.

3.4.1 Underachievement of Ethnic Minority Students

Underachievement of ethnic and language minority students has been the centerpiece of research (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006). The most common cited factors contributing to underachievement and gap in achievement among certain racial and ethnic groups have been associated with the socioeconomic status and poverty (Barton, 2003; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010; Sirin, 2005; White, 1982); racism and prejudice (Gillborn, 2005; hooks, 1989; House, 1999); cultural values and attributes of the school and community (Cummins, 1996; Garcia, 1994; Giroux, 2006); student motivation and teacher attitudes (Barton 2003; Cohen & Steele, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986); parents' educational beliefs and expectations (Okagaki & Bingham, 2005); and access to and availability of educational means (Barton, 2003).

As research put the spotlight on academic underachievement of racial and ethnic minority students, concerns for academic performance of English learners, mainly of Hispanic origin, were similarly and concomitantly espoused within this context. Studies

focusing on different groups of underachieving ethnic minority student population are strongly overlapping in their interests, goals, and, somewhat, in outcomes. The roles of poverty and educational equity in learning experiences of ethnic minority students define today's educational debates. However, newer trends of educational debate have shifted focus toward culturally responsive curriculum, effective instructional practices, and positive in-school experiences (Gonzalez & Soltero, 2011; Valencia, 2011).

I contend that quality education is a way to offset some effects of poverty on students. Local educational agencies and schools should redefine their roles as instructional coaches and become effective educational facilitators. They should create positive learning experiences that are culturally responsive to the needs of minority students and their families. Bringing families and community into the school and establishing a reciprocal engagement in children's education will put an end to educational segregation, inequality, and ethnic isolation. In addition, it is imperative to build learning communities, provide opportunities for cultural exchange, integrate bilingual instruction into the mainstream education, and leverage educational resources to safeguard students' success in school and career. Above all, the education of minority students is in need of reflective educators who understand and promote cultural diversity in learning (National Education Association, 2008; Trujillo & Alston, 2005; Verdugo, 2006).

3.4.2 Underachievement of English Learners: Underlying Issues

Underachieving English learners have become a matter of serious public and political concern due to the rapid growth of the U.S. immigrant population. U.S.-or foreign-born children who come from families where languages other than English are

spoken and who also have difficulty speaking English are fully included in accountability for English language development and academic progress. Testing, graduation, and drop-out data are a conventional and rigid designator of underachievement among English learners. Research that has addressed English learner underachievement tends to view this phenomenon in relation to various underlying issues that contribute to its existence and make it eminent in educational context. Much attention has been focused on Hispanic and/or Latino Spanish-speaking school-age population since Hispanics or Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States (Ennis et al., 2011; Humes et al., 2011; Fry & Lopez, 2012). Reports indicate that Hispanic and/or Latino students demonstrate lower academic performance and attainment than their counterparts in other ethnic/racial groups (e.g. Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011; Kao & Thomson, 2003; Kohler & Lazarin, 2007; Reardon & Galindo, 2009; Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). Although Hispanic or Latino students make up the majority of the English learner population, there are other ethnicities which are represented in English learner education. These include students of Asian origin, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students, American Indian/Alaska Natives, Whites, Black, and students of two or more races (NCES, 2010). It is important to note that the terms *English Learner*, *Language Minority*, and *Culturally and Linguistically Diverse* tend to be used synonymously and interchangeably in research and practice (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006).

Considerable research has been done with English learners, predominantly Spanish speaking, with respect to their school performance and underachievement. It aimed to determine factors and contexts that account for underachievement as well as

identify aspects associated with academic success. Research focusing on issues pertaining to English learner academic (under)achievement is structured around language, assessment, family background, and quality of schooling and instructional practices (Genesee et al., 2005; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006).

3.4.2.1 Learner issues: Language proficiency, literacy, and prior education.

In approaching the complexity of the issue several studies have focused on investigating the ways and extent to which English language proficiency and first or native language background impact academic achievement. Some researchers suggest that English learners' proficiency in English positively correlates with their overall academic attainment at school. By the same token, inadequate English proficiency is associated with underachievement in mainstream content areas.

In their study of English language proficiency and academic achievement, Butler and Castellon-Wellington (2000) examined the relationship between student performance on a content knowledge assessment and performance on a language proficiency assessment. Their main objective was to determine if English learners' levels of English proficiency correspond to the similar performance levels of the content assessment. After assessing 3rd-grade and 11th-grade students, the researchers reported that there is a significant relationship between the English language proficiency of English learners and their performance on a content assessment. However, they made it clear that presented data do not indicate the students' linguistic readiness and aptness for demonstrating in English their content knowledge. They also gave a note of caution about the need for inclusion into further research the variables which contribute to the full picture of each student's situation. The variables to consider are a student's

socioeconomic status, home language environment, length of residence in the United States, first language proficiency, and equal opportunity to learn content material.

In terms of specific content areas, Torres and Zeidler (2002) investigated the relationship between levels of English proficiency, scientific reasoning skills and English learner attainment of science content knowledge. The rationale behind their research effort was to address the lack of research evidence on the effects of English language proficiency on the acquisition of science content knowledge. U.S. high school students were assessed by means of the language proficiency, scientific reasoning skills, and statewide-standardized science assessments. Preliminarily, using a three-way factorial design and subsequently, with the elimination of the language learner variable, a two-way design the researchers evaluated the effects of English language proficiency, scientific reasoning skills, and English learner subgroup designation specified as independent variables on the scientific content knowledge-dependent variable. Their findings demonstrate a strong interaction between English language proficiency and scientific reasoning. More important, in isolation each of the variables has a strong effect on content knowledge in science.

Taken all together, the results suggest that English language proficiency is a precursor for the development of content knowledge in English. A language barrier may inhibit English learner's acquisition of content knowledge when the content instruction is delivered in English and result in underachievement. It should be specified, though, that the majority of studies use content-based standardized tests as determiners of (under)achievement outcomes. This frame of reference invites professionals and laypeople to speculate on the role of English language proficiency in mainstream

content classrooms. In order to keep English Learners from underachieving in academic areas, it is imperative to ensure the development of English language literacy skills necessary for tackling the challenges of the mainstream academic learning.

The same research trends of the importance of English language proficiency reverberate throughout the findings analyzed and synthesized by a panel of experts in various fields of educational knowledge. Using rigid criteria for selecting relevant research the experts reviewed quantitative and qualitative studies on the development of literacy in second language learners from the US. In the summary prepared and provided by August and Shanahan (2006) the panel reported major findings supported by research evidence.

In terms of English language proficiency, this research underscored the importance of oral proficiency in English that incorporates listening comprehension, metalinguistic skills, the knowledge of English vocabulary and conventions. The findings suggest that well-developed oral English proficiency is an important contributor to the successful development of English reading comprehension and writing skills for English learners. I concur with the argument that instruction that is solely in charge of teaching reading skills is not sufficient for developing literacy in English. With the use of oral language English learners brainstorm and communicate ideas and concepts to create a matrix for complex writing tasks. They use it to negotiate communicative situations and respond to problem-posing tasks.

In addition, August and Shanahan (2006) published the findings which show that oral proficiency and literacy in the English learner's native or first language promote success for literacy development in English. Research listed the advantages of the use

of the knowledge of student's primary language in the process of developing English literacy skills. Having prior linguistic background stimulates the processes of language knowledge and skill transfers. These may include a variety of language aspects and language learning strategies.

In my practice, I have observed that English learners with extensive formal knowledge of literacy skills in their native or first language tend to rely on cognate relationships between languages. Or, they approach English as their target language with a set of language skills acquired in their native or first language. Students' native language literacy facilitates the development of their English language skills. By the same token, lack of formal language education and knowledge how to read, write, and discuss complex academic concepts in their primary language may limit the students' access to the target language learning tasks and, consequently, impede academic learning. It may, therefore, be assumed that underachieving behaviors in academic areas taught in English are likely to be manifested by students with limited education in native language, rather than by those with well-developed knowledge of native language skills.

In two US-based studies, Bankston and Zhou (1995) and Garcia-Vazquez, Vazquez, Lopez, and Ward (1997) attempted to determine what role native language literacy plays in academic achievement. The results from the study by Garcia-Vazquez, Vazquez, Lopez, and Ward revealed strong relations between English proficiency and the composite achievement score. They also established a considerable correlation between native language proficiency and achievement score. The findings suggest that

native literacy skills have a positive and significant impact on achievement test performance in English.

Bankston and Zhou extended their research interests into the area of sociocultural adaptation and self-identification with the ethnic group. The findings present strong evidence that native language literacy has a positive effect on academic achievement and academic aspirations. They show that literacy skills developed in both languages contribute positively to ethnic self-identification providing access to the ethnic minority community involvement, its cultural and emotional support needed for coping with problems and adjustments in the new environment.

With reference to linguistic and cultural attributes, the findings from a comprehensive longitudinal research study by Thomas and Collier (2002) suggest that cultural support and cultural facilitation in school are associated with long-term achievement successes. When students are culturally and linguistically supported, socioeconomic status accounts for a very insignificant influence on academic achievement. They also present evidence that English learners with prior formal schooling in native language in their home country have a great chance to succeed in a U.S. school provided that they receive appropriate and effective educational support.

I find the outcomes of these studies especially valuable as they reveal the benefits native language and culture offer to overall achievement. They emphasize the positive role of linguistic pluralism which contributes to academic achievement. They suggest that education should foster and publicly support cultural identity and native language proficiency in order to ensure social inclusion, access to ethnic communities, and educational success.

With respect to English language proficiency, I feel rather compelled to emphasize the significance of academic language in large-scale standardized testing. It is important to note that English learner underachievement is positioned in relation to academic achievement and outcomes on standardized achievement assessments (Genesee et al., 2005; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006). English learners are likely to be deemed underachieving when they fail to test well on skills in content domains. Research indicates that literacy and academic language are the determinants of English learners' success on such assessments. The results from several research studies suggest that without academic language proficiency English learners fail to perform successfully on standardized content assessments (e.g. Abedi et al., 2000/2005; Abedi et al., 2003; Parker, Louie, & O'Dwyer, 2009; Shaftel et al., 2006). Therefore, there is evidence of the relationship between lack of academic language skills and underachievement in relation to test performance.

3.4.2.2 Home background. Home background is an interplay of social, cultural, and economic characteristics of a family. The socioeconomic and sociocultural marginalization of language minority students has been the major concern of numerous U.S. research studies which suggest that the economic status and the role of culture and identity are pivotal in reversing the underachievement pattern and closing achievement gap. The sociocultural view of education for linguistically and culturally diverse students considers cross-cultural effects as determinant of educational success (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Children of immigrant parents are facing a complex reality of sociocultural survival. For one thing, the new culture or the culture of the majority has its own measure of value, eminence, and tradition. Whether it becomes an

integral part of your life depends on how you choose to take it. For another, home culture has a hold on you no matter how much you have changed along throughout all generations.

In educational research, cultural aspect is used as an explanation why some language minority students underachieve while other language minority students are on par with academic expectations. Some authors (Gibson, 1988; Macias, 1993; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986) believe that students' cultural self-identification and attribution generate and exhibit particular behaviors and attitudes that either threaten their academic standing or work to its benefit. For instance, in their exploration of cultural identity and cultural attributes of schooling Gibson (1988) and Matute-Bianchi (1986) illuminated the role cultural status and cultural self-perception play in developing academic aspirations and accomplishments for language minority students. While the Asian minority students develop a set of behaviors, attitudes, and skills to deal with the academic challenges of a modern American school, the acculturation and education scenarios are more complex and contradictory in the case of the Mexican-decent students who are more likely to struggle academically. Their perception of the dominant culture as condescending and enforcing creates boundaries between strong self-identification with home culture and principles such as schooling within the dominant culture.

Another study that addressed the cultural attributes of student academic achievement included various psychosocial factors in immigrant students. Using a large sample of eighth and ninth graders from U.S. schools, Portes (1999) examined the influence of these factors on school achievement of immigrant students of several

cultural groups. It was observed that the lowest achieving students were faced with a number of problems including those of cultural attitude and identification. He suggested that the role of culture is indispensable and important in student achievement. However, its influence is contextual and integrated with other variables.

With respect to socioeconomic standing, in the United States, English learner families are more likely to live below the poverty level (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). Similarly, in Georgia, many children in immigrant households with limited English proficiency live in poverty (Hernandez, Blanchard, Denton, & Macartney, 2009). Poverty negatively affects students' school performance and a large number of language minority students are "at-risk of academic underachievement" (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 15).

Literature has analyzed the role socioeconomic status plays in causing academic underachievement (e.g. Harris, Jamison, & Trujillo, 2008; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Schmid, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2002). In fact, socioeconomic status is not limited to the hierarchy of earnings and material needs. It is an individual family affluence and solvent potential to purchase certain products and services. Parents' immigration status, family economic characteristics, mobility, attitudes, and practices are woven into the fabric of socioeconomic status and have an impact on educational outcomes for language minority students or English learners (Gonzalez, 2001). English learning and academic attainment have been the foci of the socioeconomic perspective, particularly in an effort to explain why English learners or language minority students from low socioeconomic background underachieve. A broad research database offers evidence in support of the claims that correlation exists between the socioeconomic background

and academic achievement. Some studies, however, suggest that socioeconomic background may not be an ample explanation for educational attainment of language minority students. The main strands of the socioeconomic compound such as family income, parents' occupational and educational attainments have been identified and analyzed in the literature (e.g. Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Schmid, 2001; Sirin, 2005). In addition some findings suggest that the negative effects of the socioeconomic status may be offset provided that students receive effective instruction and adequate academic support (e.g. D'Angiulli, Siegel, & Maggi, 2004; Krashen & Brown, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

A significant and consistent effect of family background on educational success was observed in a study by Warren (1996) aiming to determine whether family background, English-language ability, and migration account for White-and Mexican-group differences in teen educational outcomes. Constituents of the family background such as home income, family structure, and parents' occupational and educational attainments were taken into consideration. The evidence presented show that family background had a strong independent effect on educational achievement putting Mexican-origin children at a serious disadvantage even when English-language ability and migration account were controlled. In support, Warren referred to previous research to find consistency in relation to socioeconomic effects. He noted that while the study findings are consistent with research in the area, it is important to look at differences between groups within a larger cultural enclave.

Another study investigating the role of family socioeconomic status for students' academic achievement considered the implications immigrant characteristics have for

Asian and Latino groups in the US. Harris, Jamison, and Trujillo (2008) aimed to look beyond the effect of material resources and occupational factors on students' educational outcomes. They intended to develop understanding of cultural attribution of immigration characteristics to the educational advantage of Asian and Latino students. By assuming sequential effect dynamics, the researchers stressed the importance of a positive impact of immigration variables on educational attainment. Meanwhile, successful educational outcomes were associated with occupational advances which ultimately improve a socioeconomic position. As the researchers analyzed the socioeconomic status of the studied groups they discussed the role certain socioeconomic characteristics play in educational differences between Asians and Latinos. Particularly, Latinos or Hispanics are reported to underachieve nationwide and statewide compared to their Asian counterparts. These academic differences may be attributed to variations in socioeconomic conditions and their actual manifestations. Asian and Latino students coming from low-income homes may face variance in experiences of social and cultural assimilation. Parents of different immigrant groups exhibit different attitudes and expectations regarding educational outcomes. For some parents the pursuit of education is paramount to children's accomplishment in terms of career and social status. In some families children are expected to gain basic educational skills needed to join the workforce and earn an income. After comparing the achievement data and evaluating the magnitude of differences between the two immigrant groups in relation to their socioeconomic and immigrant characteristics the study yielded several results. High educational attainments of Asian immigrant students were fully explained by the combination of socioeconomic and immigrant

characteristics. Lower socioeconomic status mainly accounted for lower educational achievement of Latino immigrant students relative to their White counterparts. However, it did not fully explain underachieving trends of the Latino group, Mexican and Puerto Rican immigrants, in particular. The findings showed lower educational achievement among those students even when socioeconomic and immigrant characteristics were held constant. In fact, the researchers found that Asian immigrant students demonstrate higher patterns of achievement than their native Asian peers while Mexican or Puerto Rican immigrant students and their native peers demonstrate no academic variance except for Cuban immigrants who perform better than their native Latino peers. Moreover, the between-ethnicity variance in performance was not observed once socioeconomic status along with immigrant characteristics was controlled.

I have noticed that most research studies do not single out socioeconomic status as the only focus of interest. They have a tendency to use a combination of factors as variables to be studied in relation to educational achievement. For example, it was demonstrated in a correlational study conducted by Schultz (1993) who examined socioeconomic advantage, achievement motivation, and academic achievement of minority students and determined that academic achievement is significantly mediated by socioeconomic advantage and achievement motivation.

With regard to school dropout as a characteristic of underachievement, Reyes and Jason (1993) identified Hispanic students from a large urban low-income high school by the risk of dropping out. The home background features were examined in the following dimensions: parents' education and occupation, and family structure.

Against the backdrop of the socioeconomic situation, students at high risk for dropping out were found to share similar home background characteristics manifested in low income, below-average education, and single parenting. They were also similar in regard to perceptions of parental control and supervision. In terms of socioemotional experiences, high-risk students expressed dissatisfaction with their school, reported gang affiliation friendships and invites. While the study did not directly aim to investigate the effect of socioeconomic status on students' achieving or underachieving behaviors, its presence in students' socioemotional experiences and its impact on schooling were evident. These salient findings illustrate the significance and inevitability of home influences.

Velez's (1989) investigation directly addressed the dropout problem among language minority students, Hispanics in particular. He obtained data from a large randomly selected number of students of different ethnic groups. His primary goal was to trace links to dropout tendencies among high-school students by analyzing socioeconomic, sociopsychological, and educational factors. Atop the other student and school aspects necessary for understanding the behavior of dropouts, family structure and practices, social and material capital, immigration and other home background factors turned out to have a paramount impact on student attrition.

Various aspects of home background may account for underachievement among English learners. English learners are more likely to come from families with lower formal educational background (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Hewantoro, 2005). Students of non-English speaking parents with little or no prior educational background coupled with lack of material means are more likely to be poor and underachieve

academically (Bainbridge & Lasley II, 2002). Parent involvement in children's education is believed to be impaired by the fact that parents do not speak English and have no formal education to be able to support their children's academic needs (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

In her study of national data, Altschul (2012) examined the effects of several socioeconomic factors on academic achievement of Mexican American students and what role parental involvement plays in mediating these effects. The results show that socioeconomic factors had a distinct effect on student academic achievement. They further indicate that some socioeconomic factors had a stronger effect than others. For example, mothers' occupation was reported to have the first largest influence and income-the second largest influence on achievement. The level of mothers' education in contrast to that of fathers' education and occupation was also determined to predict student academic achievement. In addition, parent involvement in education played a significant role in explaining the effects of certain socioeconomic factors. In particular, the findings demonstrate that the effects of income and mothers' education were mediated by parent involvement factors, while the effects of mothers' occupation and fathers' education were unexplained by parent involvement.

Kao and Rutherford (2007) investigated the extent to which children from minority and immigrant families had limited access to social capital and what effect it had on educational achievement. Specifically, they examined the influence of parent-school involvement and intergenerational closure on achievement and how it differed by ethnicity and immigration status. Their findings show that social capital variables of parent-school involvement and intergenerational closure have a positive effect on

student achievement. However, the differential effect of social capital is evident across some racial and immigrant groups. Namely, certain types of social capital appear to be more significant for some groups than for other groups. In regard to an immigrant status, the findings further indicate that immigrant Asians and Hispanics are at a disadvantage compared to their third-generation White peers since they possess less social capital. First-generation Asian and Hispanic students have lower levels of parent-school involvement and intergenerational closure. The researchers explained it by limited English proficiency and cultural differences.

In their study of parent involvement and mathematics achievement of students from different racial and ethnic groups, Yan and Lin (2005) analyzed a number of parent involvement variables to establish relationships between various types of parent involvement and academic achievement. For all ethnic groups including Hispanic and Asian students, educational expectations as part of family norms were the strongest predictor of mathematics achievement.

In another study involving students from different ethnic groups, Lee and Bowen (2006) sought to identify the impact of parent involvement on academic achievement with regard to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and parents' education. The findings demonstrate that certain types of parent involvement such as parent involvement at school and parents' educational expectations are strongly associated with academic achievement.

Krashen and Brown (2005) analyzed the findings from previous studies and concluded that for English learners the role of the socioeconomic status is paramount in math and reading performance. They indicated that English learners from higher

socioeconomic backgrounds outperformed fluent English speakers with lower socioeconomic status. The factors that accounted for such outcomes of English learners with higher socioeconomic status included a higher level of formal education in their home countries for both students and their parents as well as access to reading resources. The study shows that previous educational experiences of both parents and students have an impact on student achievement. They provide parents with more meaningful access to their children's schoolwork and allow students to apply previously learned skills in a new educational setting. Furthermore, the researchers suggested that, notwithstanding the socioeconomic status, English learner academic achievement may be improved by ensuring that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are included in instructional settings that provide the educational aspects of higher socioeconomic status.

This and the other studies do not necessarily claim the exclusivity of the socioeconomic and sociocultural influences in educational discourses. They suggest that home background is a powerful cultural and economic force that in all its inclusiveness and complexity mediates children's educational experiences. This view appears to be similar to the notions of capital developed by Bourdieu who saw the role of cultural, economic, and social resources in formulating the educational agenda of the dominant class and perpetuating social inequalities in educational achievement (Bourdieu, 1973, 1974).

Notwithstanding the conditions students have no control of, educators look for ways of directly addressing and overcoming the detrimental effects of home background disadvantages. Current educational practices are committed to developing effective

learning environments conducive to alleviating the plight of culturally and linguistically diverse underachievers. It is of paramount importance to bridge the gap between school and home for English learners by promoting cultural and linguistic competences that enhance their academic outcomes.

3.4.2.3 Schooling. In response to the problem of English learner underachievement there has been a shift in the focus of educational research in the US toward teacher quality and effectiveness of instructional practices for English learners. Underachievement of English learners can be attributed to inequity in educational opportunities and inadequate teacher quality. Inequitable access to quality programs for English learners and adequately trained teachers, who are able to address academic, cultural, and linguistic needs of students, have an adverse impact on student academic outcomes (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005; Gandara & Rumberger, 2003). Therefore, educational research has focused on practices, strategies, and techniques of effective teaching to ensure educational equity for English learners. Researchers have sought to investigate traits, characteristics, domains, and strategies of successful classrooms and programs. Several studies (e.g. Pawan, 2008; Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Orteiza, 2004; Szpara & Ahmad, 2007; Weisman & Hansen, 2007) addressed the ways of helping English learners develop English language proficiency and content-based skills through the use of English language functions, conventions, and vocabulary of content areas. Sharing a similar academic oriented framework, these studies, however, differ in their learning objectives and instructional approaches. Namely, Schleppegrell, Achugar, and Orteiza focus on the linguistic challenge embedded in content material and the highly structured linguistic input. They

contend that English learners should be exposed to the retained complexity of the language of content and develop their language proficiency through a deliberate linguistic analysis and application of features inherent in the language of content. While the authors suggest content-based contextualization of language that integrates academic language into a student's development of literacy skills, they are not quite transparent about individual challenges English learners may experience due to their individual linguistic needs and various levels of English language proficiency. Other researchers make similar statements regarding a framework for academic language development and its significant role in bridging gaps between language proficiency and content knowledge. Moreover, their arguments are based on the premises of effective support that helps English learners succeed in content instruction.

In two separate studies Szpara and Ahmad (2007), Weisman and Hansen (2007) addressed the multidimensional challenges for English learners and proposed an effective instructional environment that facilitates complex academic learning. Szpara and Ahmad argue for implementing teaching practices that promote academic language learning through interaction, supportive environment, and accessible content. Weisman and Hansen stress the importance of contextual support and background knowledge that allow English learners to make meaningful links and enhance their understanding of concepts. In their view, academic language complexity of the content areas is offset by providing contextual support and making content comprehensible. Also, incorporating language activities into content teaching facilitates content and language integrated learning where both language skills and content knowledge are developed. In a pedagogical sense, content-based and English-only instruction is contextually justified

and academically relevant provided that a system of well-designed instructional support is developed to promote optimal learning environment for culturally and linguistically diverse students with various levels of English language proficiency.

As illustrated by the study on the content-area teacher knowledge of scaffolding types and techniques Pawan (2008) sought to explore via textual discussions and surveys teacher perception, understanding, and implementation of scaffolding practices for English learners. The findings demonstrated that teachers resorted to various types of scaffolding including linguistic, conceptual, social and cultural with conceptual scaffolding dominating the field. Both linguistic and social scaffolding types were less but equally cited and integrated into instruction. The lowest preference value was attributed to cultural scaffolding that requires focus on culturally appropriate resources bearing relevance to students' backgrounds. Evidence shows that teachers understand the importance of scaffolding. Yet, their understanding is limited to certain supportive frameworks that feature techniques, activities, and tools used for getting conceptual meaning across. The study stresses the importance of developing teacher awareness and knowledge of linguistic, social and especially cultural approaches and strategies that provide meaningful access for English learners to culturally appropriate learning.

I share the sentiments expressed by researchers who shed light on the significance of teacher understanding about the intertwined nature of the student's native language, home culture, and identity. It is critical for educators to understand that their respect for the English learner's culture reflected in attitudes and instructional approaches encourages meaningful student participation in the mainstream classroom. Several research studies were dedicated to identifying and examining programs,

program models, and intervention activities that were specifically intended and tailored to target a wide range of English learners' needs. Studies (e.g. Begeny, Ross, Greene, Mitchell, & Whitehouse, 2012; Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, Cirino, Carlson, & Pollard-Durodola, 2006) discussing intervention programs and approaches emphasized the effectiveness of those practices for English learners who required supplemental academic interventions. Their findings demonstrated that English learners at risk for academic underachievement considerably improved in targeted areas and performed better on assessments given that appropriate interventions were selected and applied. Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, Cirino, Carlson, and Pollard-Durodola (2006) examined the effectiveness of reading and language development intervention provided in supplement to core reading instruction. The intervention intensively promoted English language learning, phonemic awareness, word decoding, and vocabulary learning through explicit instruction, teacher-student interaction, and accuracy of production. The findings demonstrated a statistically favorable effect of this intervention program on English learners at risk for reading problems who made significant gains for reading comprehension and phonemic awareness. Positive results were also reported in the study of Begeny, Ross, Greene, Mitchell, and Whitehouse (2012) aiming to conduct the evaluation of the reading fluency program that incorporated a combination of effective strategies and understand its effects on English learners' academic outcomes. Based on the findings from this study, struggling English learner readers benefited from the participation in the program and demonstrated high performance on measures of reading fluency and comprehension. While the evaluation was preliminary,

the authors assumed that similar favorable effects of the program implementation are likely to take place in other educational settings with English learners.

While most studies report favorable results, evidence for positive outcomes from interventions was supposedly obtained under limited conditions. Interventions, by definition, are used to remedy academic skill deficits in specific content areas. For the most part their short-term effects on achievement in these areas are evidenced and reported whereas their sizable long-term impact on achievement cannot be safeguarded and guaranteed. In general, the duration and intensity of interventions hinge on the extent to which students respond to interventions. I have observed that educational interventions for English learners are used to support them in the content areas of reading and mathematics within the mainstream. Most intervention programs are time-limited and narrow in scope. They are used in a targeted area for a specific time marked by a positive student response. Once the effect is measured the intervention is either terminated or replaced by another means of educational support. The quality of educational interventions is usually assessed in line with student performance on tests. Research evidence shows that interventions have a greater impact in early grades than similar interventions in late grades. Furthermore, the impacts of early interventions on test scores tend to decline over time (Cascio & Staiger, 2012). English learners are likely to demonstrate improvements in the areas targeted by interventions. Perhaps, it happens due to the fact that the intensity of their delivery and an individual or small group setting allow for a more individual approach to instructional planning and teaching. However, interventions tend to have a target-oriented and procedural design

for eliminating specific academic weaknesses. They are less likely to use culturally sensitive frameworks and their effects do not warrant long-term educational success.

Student cultural and linguistic diversity across U.S. schools and classrooms reveals the need for culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and instruction. English learners have diverse educational needs and learning styles. It is important for educators to use effective instructional practices that reflect students' cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values. Educators should use a variety of resources and professional development workshops to develop the attitudes, skills, and awareness of culturally responsive pedagogy in order to foster English learners' knowledge of the English language and academic content (Nieto, 2003; Vialpando, Yedlin, Linse, Harrington, & Cannon, 2005). Without educating teachers how to teach English learners and reflect on the outcomes of their teaching practices, underachieving tendencies will continue to exert a strong impact on educational discourse.

While the large body of quantitative and qualitative research is dedicated to underachievement of English learners, its causes, triggers, and remedies; more recent research has turned attention to educators, their views, and their teaching practices. Many research publications discuss the need for developing teachers' understanding of how to educate and communicate better with English learners or culturally and linguistically diverse students. They underscore the role of teachers in their students' academic achievement and the necessity to develop effective practices of addressing their students' unique needs (Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Gandara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2002; Gandara, et al., 2005; Gandara & Rumberger, 2003; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Samson & Collins, 2012).

Research is concerned about teachers' views of challenges and needs associated with educating English learners. Based on teachers' reports, discussions, and surveys there are multiple issues and problems teachers encounter in classrooms with English learners (Gandara, et al., 2005; Reeves, 2006; Reiger & McGrail, 2006; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). In their views, one of the challenges in English Learner education is students' lack of English proficiency and basic foundational skills that further hampers the development of content area understanding. Teachers' main concerns are lack of teacher professional development and practical knowledge about how to tackle English learner underachievement; insufficient amount of instructional time spent on English learners and deficit of communication with students and parents; scarcity of quality instructional tools, appropriate teaching resources, and assessment materials; emphasis on a standardized curriculum and instruction defined by standardized testing (Cho & McDonnough, 2009; Gandara, et al., 2005; Thompson, 2004; Walker, Shafer, & Liams, 2004). Teachers believe that English learners' linguistic and cultural needs are underrepresented in schools and school districts. They also state that professional expertise of ESOL teachers is not taken into account in district decision-making and planning for the education of English learners (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Regardless, student diversity and the role of culture in teaching practices and classroom interactions are seldom discussed. Teachers seem to overlook the cultural aspect of learning for culturally and linguistically diverse students in favor of their linguistic and academic needs (Cho & McDonnough, 2009; Lee, Maerten-Rivera, Buxton, Penfield, & Secada, 2009). Therefore, culturally responsive teacher education that incorporates a diverse set of principles for developing teacher professionalism in

educating English learners may play a powerful role in reframing the notion of underachievement and eliminating common stereotypes about culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

3.5 Concluding Comments

It is my contention that far more understanding and deeper insight must be given to the phenomenon of English learner underachievement. Teacher experiences and perspectives may offer new ways of understanding underachievement of English learners and provide potential solutions for alleviating the problem. In view of that, educational research may benefit from qualitative investigations of teachers' perceptions and experiences of underachievement among diverse learners. Furthermore, the multiplicity of educational contexts and teachers' own experiences have impact on how they construct meanings of their educational practices and concepts. Hargreaves (1996) emphasizes the role of teachers' voices in educational research. Without doubt, he sees teachers' knowledge and experience as a valuable asset that gives them "rightful redress against the background of this previous and prolonged silence" (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 12). A growing body of research on teachers' professional lives and firsthand experiences (e. g. Ball & Goodson, 1985; Buchmann & Schulle, 1983; Huberman, 1993) adds to the credibility of their work and helps teachers establish their voice in educational research. However, I have not yet come across any studies that used educators' experiences to gain insights into the phenomenon of English learner underachievement.

A large body of research exists with respect to the complexities surrounding the contentious issue of underachievement. The conceptual framework of

underachievement presented in this project is largely based on the review of the existing literature about academic underachievement issues and trends. I evaluated the sources relevant to the aims of my study and available for my use.

4. CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Scope and Organization

This chapter outlines the research methodology and methods used in the study. Methodology in the broader sense embodies the “overall research strategy reflecting a theory of acquiring knowledge” and encompasses principles that govern the overall structural design of a study and account for the use of methods chosen (Crotty, 1998; Troudi, 2010, p.1). Essentially, the choice of methodology is informed by the assumptions about the human knowledge and understanding of the world the researcher brings to his or her research endeavor (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, I begin the chapter by introducing the philosophical stance central to the methodology chosen for this research project. I further describe and discuss research methods and procedures for data collection and analysis employed in the study. Finally, I discuss the study’s ethical considerations and address the issues of validity and reliability.

4.2 Phenomenology: Philosophy and Inquiry

4.2.1 Introduction

In the following section, I look at phenomenology as a philosophy and inquiry to lay the groundwork for a discussion and understanding of its underlying purpose and functionality in research. It is important to illustrate how the main tenets of a phenomenological thought informed phenomenological research and largely contributed to the exploration of human experience. It is my firm belief that understanding the principles of phenomenological knowledge leads to understanding the beliefs of those

engaged in phenomenological research and provides a clearer picture of how phenomenology is applied to research.

I have chosen phenomenology as the methodology for this study with the purpose to explore and describe educators' experiences of English learner underachievement. Phenomenology as the study of phenomena is primarily concerned with the notion of experience. The experience of a phenomenon rather than a phenomenon itself is the essence of the phenomenological practice. In phenomenological terms studying the phenomenon is attending to one's experience of this phenomenon, focusing on the description and character of the experience rather than concentrating on causal principles underlying it (Cerbone, 2006).

Phenomenological inquiry seeks to gain insight into the nature or meaning of experiences in everyday life (van Manen, 1990).

From the phenomenological standpoint, a phenomenon itself or, in its literal sense, what appears or reveals to someone is not divorced from what is real. Namely, phenomena or appearances are not considered in isolation from reality. Nor, are they being viewed as something that distorts and disguises reality. On a much broader level, a phenomenon is described in terms of how someone experiences it; and this private conscious experience of what may be deemed real to one or only apparent to another shapes the wholeness and uniqueness of phenomenological reality as seen exclusively by someone (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991). Things we experience and have knowledge of whether they exist in reality, if there is reality, arrive by way of our consciousness of them. Hence, conscious experience of phenomena is what

phenomenological interest is centered on regardless of how things are in reality (Gallagher, 2012).

4.2.2 Transcendental Phenomenology

Traced back to the early years of the 20th century, phenomenology was founded by Edmund Husserl and further elaborated in the insights of other phenomenological thinkers (e.g. Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre).

Although subsequent phenomenological thinking was essentially built upon Husserl's original vision, it somewhat evolved in divergent ways which both complimented and challenged the original phenomenological knowledge (Cerbone, 2006; Macann, 1993).

Originally, the phenomenological movement in philosophy emerged in a decisive response to philosophical and ideological positivism that is unconditionally committed to search for normative principles, logical structures, metaphysical justifications, and explanatory relations which govern objects and processes in the physical as well as spiritual world. Husserl's dissatisfaction with the hold the positivist view had on natural and social sciences stemmed from its absolute focus on scientific objectification of reality, its disregard for everything subjective, and its detachment from pure experiences of the everyday world (Cerbone, 2006; Dahlberg, 2006; Husserl, 1970b).

What makes phenomenology distinguishable from natural sciences is its intention to describe rather than analyze and give causal explanations (Merleau-Ponty, 2002).

The fundamental task for phenomenology is to study phenomena or things as they appear and clearly describe how they appear (Husserl, 1998).

The notable phrase "back to the things themselves" coined by Husserl (1970a, p. 252) marked the essence of the phenomenological discourse and laid groundwork for

the phenomenological reduction. The ways in which things directly appear to us are examined beyond the natural attitude that comprehensively attends to details and elements of our everyday life. Essentially, the natural attitude embraces the natural world around us. It evokes the sense of validity of the world's immediate givenness and its taken-for-granted existence. From the natural standpoint, our customary knowledge of the world we naturally live in is centered on our everyday experience and awareness of its constant presence. This lived world is pre-reflective, pre-given, and present in an intuitive sense. We live in the lifeworld of objects around us as we discover and experience them in their natural immediate presence (Husserl, 1931).

By adopting a phenomenological standpoint, we aim to take a different approach to understanding how the natural attitude of our daily life works. This brings forth the notion of the “phenomenological epoché” or “method of bracketing” that exhorts us to “put out of action the general thesis which belongs to the essence of the natural standpoint” (Husserl, 1931, p. 110). Namely, we are invited to suspend our presuppositions, judgments, and perceptions of the surrounding world posited in the natural attitude (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Gallagher, 2012). Through meditation and reflectivity the existing world is no longer naturally accepted as the world in our experience but rather viewed as the world that claims to exist (Husserl, 1999). We change the attitude towards the objects of our natural experience and undertake a phenomenological approach to discover mere phenomena that exist beyond the natural world. Within the phenomenological attitude, however, the natural attitude towards the world is not discredited, or denied or cast aside but rather placed in brackets (Dahlberg, 2006; Gallagher, 2012). Moreover, Husserl (1931) expressed no doubt that the “entire

natural world” is constantly present and will remain there for us as the world we continue to be conscious of (p. 110).

By practicing the phenomenological epoché we are engaged in the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, a central concept of phenomenology and a necessary precondition for a truly phenomenological inquiry. In the Husserlian phenomenological tradition, phenomenology is not merely formulated in terms of providing descriptions as opposed to generating rational explanations. More specifically, Husserl believes that descriptions are not phenomenological unless preceded by the transcendental-phenomenological reduction (Schmitt, 1959).

In performing the transcendental-phenomenological reduction and irrespective of whether the natural reality exists we are aware of our intentional experiences of external objects and our own ego that undertakes these experiences. Having developed a detached attitude towards the natural world through reflection and meditation we redirect our focus onto those experiences and our experiencing ego (Husserl, 1931). In its phenomenological sense, the reduction shifts our attention to the phenomenon itself and the way it appears in our experience with no concern or claim for causative nature of that experience (Cerbone, 2006; Gallagher, 2012). The transcendental turn of this process brings about the venue for a phenomenological investigation namely “the phenomenological residuum” or what is retained after the reduction. It consists of “pure consciousness” defined in its absolute being, “pure experiences” as acts of consciousness, and the subject of consciousness in the sense of its “pure Ego” freed from the effects of the natural attitude (Husserl, 1931, p. 112).

In its “transcendental” or “pure” sense phenomenological inquiry is concerned with ways things themselves appear in our consciousness or are given in our experiences voided of naturalistic assumptions and accessible for phenomenological reflection. Consciousness as the unity of experiences is the hallmark of phenomenology. The essential nature of consciousness and conscious experiences lies in intentionality qua “to be the consciousness of something” (Husserl, 1931, p. 242, 1970a, 1999). Intentionality is the immanent property of consciousness that embodies directedness of consciousness towards the object, hence, inherently implying interdependency between experiences and objects of these experiences. Experiences do not stand by themselves in isolation from what is experienced. Something experienced by us has meaning for us as it is experienced by virtue of our directedness towards it (Dahlberg, 2006; Gallagher, 2012; Husserl, 1931). We cannot identify and investigate experiences or acts of consciousness in isolation from the objects. We can only talk about each with reference to one another in view of their interrelatedness and inseparability (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991). Furthermore, the intentional character of consciousness may be better understood through the graphic portrayal of the essences of its interrelated structure. Consciousness is the unity of acts of consciousness or experiences performed by the ego, residing in its awareness, and directing themselves by way of the content towards the presented objects. The intentional content of the experience comprises forms of experiencing (e.g. perceiving) and the projection of the object presented in the experience. If the experience is present the object is “intentionally present” via accomplished intentionality regardless of the object’s actual existence. Intentionality plays the role of a conduit or a medium

which holds experiences within itself (Husserl, 1931, 1970a, p. 558). Allowing for the interrelatedness of experiences and its objects phenomenological investigations of consciousness should describe them as unified and inseparable (Husserl, 1999). The immanent intentionality of experience has its relative meaning in its meaning-giving sense of its directedness towards an intended object. Through reflective and cognitive phases of experience new and intuitively held meanings of an object are encountered and discovered (Husserl, 1931). The aim of a phenomenological description is, therefore, to capture the integrated character of experiences and their meanings.

4.2.3 Rationale for Using Phenomenology in Research

Social and educational research applies the phenomenological approach to explore the peoples' life worlds and gain insights into meanings formed within their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The focus of phenomenology is experiential meanings. Its purpose is to "explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld" (van Manen, 1990, p. 11). Therefore, exploring and describing these meanings constitute the main task for phenomenological inquiry with its ultimate aim of arriving at the essences of what is experienced.

The purpose of this study was to explore, describe, and gain insight into educators' first-hand experience of English learner underachievement. What educators experience in regard to English learner underachievement sets in motion the process of meaning making and paves the way for understanding the essential meanings of this phenomenon. My intention was to articulate the experience to its fullness from the educators' standpoint and elucidate the essences of English learner underachievement

in its holistic sense. Although the unique characteristics of an individual's experience were central to my phenomenological project, I aimed to uncover and understand the essences of English learner underachievement, namely, the commonalities of different lived experiences of the phenomenon that become essential and universal to particular manifestations of that phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; van Manen, 1990). With this purpose in mind, phenomenological methodology based on Husserlian phenomenology was adopted as a descriptive approach directed toward discovering and describing typical and common essences of experience. To arrive at essences of educators' experience of English learner underachievement and achieve a careful description of the essences being discovered, a transcendental phenomenological attitude should be assumed. The researcher refrains from all preconceived knowledge about English learner underachievement and intuitively opens up to meanings ascribed to this phenomenon by educators who have experienced it.

4.3 Research Design and Procedures

4.3.1 Qualitative Research

The central research questions guiding this study were:

- What do educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement and how do they describe their experiences?
- What are the essences and meanings that underlie their experience of English learner underachievement?

My research purpose was to understand what it is that educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement and discover the essential meanings that are common to their collective experience of this phenomenon. In concurrence with the

phenomenological intent of the study and the nature of the research questions, a qualitative design was chosen to explore the topic. In essence, qualitative research is exploratory and is undertaken by a researcher to fit the purpose of the study. A researcher chooses a qualitative approach in order to explore the topic, gain understanding of the phenomenon within the natural setting, actively engage in extensive data collection and complex data analysis, and provide a detailed account of the phenomenon investigated (Creswell, 2007).

Phenomenological research is typically associated with a qualitative research design for its focus on understanding the essences and meanings of human experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon. At the level of epistemology, when doing phenomenology or engaging in qualitative inquiry the researcher makes knowledge claims based on a constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2003). The latter posits that knowledge of the world is constructed and contingent on human experiences and perceptions (Crotty, 1998). In the same vein, the phenomenological approach undertaken in this study allows us to see that educators' experiences shape the ways in which meanings of phenomena are constructed.

This study relied on the collection and phenomenological analysis of qualitative data in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of English learner underachievement. It was committed to capturing the essences of educators' experience of English learner underachievement and providing a holistic picture of meanings they attach to this phenomenal experience. The role of the researcher in this endeavor became the core value in the process of exploratory emic investigation.

4.3.2 The Role of the Researcher

Phenomenology is concerned with "wholeness" of experience and focuses on the appearance of things that is freed from biases of the natural laws of everyday living. Phenomenology seeks to elicit meanings from appearance of phenomena and arrives at essences through reflective examination of phenomenal experiences. Vivid and detailed descriptions retain and convey the authentic character of experiences and phenomena (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). Describing the meaning of the lived experiences in relation to a specific phenomenon makes the phenomenon visible and open to further exploration. In order to see and portray the phenomenal experience through the lens of the participant the researcher must have a complete grasp of what was experienced and how it was experienced with every angle and dimension considered (Moustakas, 1994).

A phenomenologist commences study with the distinctively formulated framework that guides and organizes the research process. It is important to have a thorough knowledge of philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology and a clear understanding of how to proceed (Creswell, 2007). The fundamental aspect of this knowledge lies in the acumen of practicing the "phenomenological epoché" or "bracketing" that strips us off of common beliefs and suppositions about things conveyed through the natural stance (Husserl, 1931, p. 110). By practicing the epoché the researcher ought to set aside all the presuppositions of the natural attitude of our everyday life and decide how his or her personal experiences may be brought into the study. Engaging in the phenomenological epoché is necessary prior to and throughout the whole process of data collection and analysis. By way of the epoché the researcher becomes open to

the participant's presentations and further, through the process of phenomenological analysis the researcher arrives at a deeper level of understanding of the phenomenon as it is experienced by the participant (Moustakas, 1994).

My role as a phenomenological researcher was to enter into the inner world of the participants and look into their experiences without violating the right to privacy of their own thoughts and views of reality (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). My goal was to discover and understand what meanings underlie the participants' experiences of English learner underachievement. It was my intention to provide the most accurate and trustworthy account possible of the phenomenon experienced and described by the educators. I took the insider's view and looked into the process of meaning making through the emic lens. My personal assumptions and beliefs about English learner underachievement were formulated and spelled out at the outset. I was aware that my "own background shapes [my] interpretation ..." (Creswell, 2003, p. 8) bringing certain biases to the study. However, by exploring experiences of the others I was able to reflect on my personal assumptions. Furthermore, I recognized my own experience of English learner underachievement and understood that complete bracketing of my knowledge of this phenomenon may not be achieved. However, I did my best to keep them out of action; I rendered them transparent in my description and made every effort to direct myself to the participants' experiences. By doing so, I attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings ascribed by the participants to their experiences of the phenomenon and ensure accuracy of their descriptions.

4.3.3 Participants

In qualitative studies as Patton (2002) suggests “there are no rules for sample size” (p. 244). The size of a sample depends on the overall purpose of the study, the phenomenon under investigation, and the availability of resources including time. When determining the sample size, a researcher should consider the significance of the study and the utility of objectives sought. In pursuit of in-depth information a smaller sample of information rich participants may prove to be more useful (Patton, 2002). Given the rigorousness of data collection and analysis in the phenomenological study it is best suited to a sample of few participants (Giorgi, 2008a). Creswell (2007), Dukes (1984), and Giorgi (2008a) recommend between 3 and 10 participants for a phenomenological investigation. Focusing on a smaller sample allows the researcher to investigate phenomena in greater depth, accuracy, and attention to detail. However, a more important aspect in the process of sampling is what sample technique should be used to fit the questions and purpose of the study (Patton, 2002). In phenomenology the criterion-based purposive approach to sampling is often used to identify information rich participants who share a distinctive characteristic (Creswell, 2007; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). Information rich participants can provide ample information about the phenomenon and largely contribute to the aims of the inquiry (Patton, 2002).

This study relied on a sample of eight information-rich individuals whom I had chosen using the purposive sampling strategy which enabled me to focus on the quality of the information obtained from the participants (Cohen et al., 2007; Perry, 2005). The rationale behind my choice of strategy was the intent to identify informants who represented an illustrative case of relevant experiences I sought to explore in regard to

the phenomenon of English learner underachievement. With the purpose of the study in mind, I aimed at the individuals who experienced English learner underachievement first-hand and had a great potential for providing the desired depth of qualitative information about the phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Therefore, my attention was drawn to those education practitioners who were at large involved in the process of addressing the educational needs of English learners. In particular, I approached the educators whose educational practices and contexts I had knowledge of and with whom I had developed trusted, collaborative relationships. In this research context, the term *educator* is reserved for both teachers and paraprofessional educators employed by the public school system. Once the institutional consent to conduct the study was granted (Appendix A), I made initial face-to-face contact with prospective participants and informed them about the purpose of my study verbally and in writing (Appendix B). Participation in this research project was completely voluntary and could be terminated by the participant at any time. When the participants expressed willingness to take part in the study, I provided them with the informed consent agreement which was signed prior to the data collection (Appendix C). To ensure that the participants' identities were protected I changed and/or omitted the names of the place and people. The participants were given an option to remain anonymous by choosing self-selected pseudonyms to emphasize the individuality of each. They willingly and unreservedly agreed to do so.

The group of elementary, middle, and high school educators who participated in this study consisted of eight professional women of diverse cultural backgrounds. All of them were working in the environment where English was the primary medium of

instruction. The participants' age ranged from about 27 to about 65 years and the length of their classroom experience varied between approximately 4 and 25 years. Four educators worked for the district-wide ESOL program providing a full range of English language support services to English learners. Four educators provided educational support and instruction in the context of the general education curriculum. All the educators were actively involved in the education practices that provide pathways for English learners to high achievement and excellence in academic learning. All of them had extensive experience of working with English learners at various levels of their professional assignment. Throughout their careers they shared critical knowledge and expertise, built meaningful and culturally sensitive practices, engaged in professional reflection and dialogue, and advocated for their English learners.

Table 1 illustrates the summary of the characteristics of the educators participating in the study.

Table 1

The Summary of the Characteristics of the Study Participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Length of Experience	Teaching Areas	K-12 Levels
Karen	27 approx.	4 years approx.	Math and Science	Elementary School
Christina	35 approx.	14 years approx.	Reading, Science, Social Studies, Math, Special Education, ESOL	Elementary and Middle School
Sally	65 approx.	25 years approx.	English Language Arts, ESOL	High School
Diana	50 approx.	12 years approx.	Educational Intervention, ESOL	Elementary, Middle, High School
Laura	35 approx.	15 years approx.	Music, ESOL	Elementary, Middle, High School
Vivienne	45 approx.	20 years approx.	English Language Arts, Writing, Math, Social Studies, Science	Elementary School
Esmeralda	45 approx.	17 years approx.	English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies,	Elementary School
Sonia	40 approx.	15 years approx.	English Language Arts, Social Studies, ESOL	Elementary, Middle, High School

4.3.4 Data Collection

4.3.4.1 Rational for using in-depth interviewing. A phenomenological inquiry is focused on human experiences of phenomena. In order to understand how people experience the phenomena the researcher aims to investigate the full measure and depth of these experiences. To accomplish that, the researcher is trying to obtain a holistic image of the participants' experiential world through their experiential accounts. In-depth interviewing, in this respect, offers access to people's experiential accounts and provides a pathway to better understanding of how people make meanings of their

experiences (Josselson, 2013; Seidman, 1998). In-depth interviewing seeks deep understanding owned by the research participants who are real-life actors in a particular event and the researcher strives for achieving the same level of understanding as the participants. The search for deeper understandings is oriented beyond commonsensical assumptions about phenomena and towards hidden meanings which are yet to be uncovered. Arriving at deeper understanding allows the researcher to observe various perspectives and grasp multiple meanings of a particular phenomenon. It also provides clarity to understanding how the researcher's personal assumptions and practices are shaped and positioned within the inquiry (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). Another advantage to interviewing is feedback received on the spot that enables the researcher to seek clarification within the very same verbal exchange and context. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews make it possible for observing the participants' body language that signifies the emotional dimensions of their experiences (Morgan, 2011). At the personality level, interviewing affirms the significance of the individual and the value of experience. It is "most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language" and a "powerful way" to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena through life experiences of those who live them (Seidman, 1998, p. 7).

4.3.4.2 The process of interviewing. In this this study I used in-depth interviews as a primary method for collecting non-numerical qualitative idiographic data that were further transcribed and analyzed. The interviews took on "the form and feel of talk between friends: loose, interactive, and open ended" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 171). Notwithstanding the fact that I provided the overall logistics of the interview and facilitated its course, the power my participants held over the interviewing process must

not be disregarded or diminished for the reason that they fully participated in the research process as co-researchers against the backdrop of the shared purpose and interest. It was rather a partnership based on mutual trust, shared responsibility, and equal contribution to this research enterprise.

I followed the interview schedule where I provided the information about the background of the study and explained the ethical aspects of data collection process (Appendix D). The interview was developed around some ideas that had arisen from conversations and discussions held among educators with regard to the issue of English learner underachievement. The structure of the interview included some general questions in regard to experiences of English learner underachievement and specific questions in regard to particular aspects of English underachievement that needed further elaboration. While progressing through the interview, I asked open-ended questions that were “specific in intent” but allowed for “probing, follow-up, and clarification” (McMillan, 2004, p. 68). Open-ended questions set the venue for exploration while giving the participants space and flexibility to steer their own course (Seidman, 1998). General questions were developed systematically and were asked to allow for or elicit the participants’ unstructured responses. Specific questions were formulated during the interviewing process on the basis of incoming statements and responses communicated by the participants (Appendix D).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted after work hours in locations selected and designated by the participants: a classroom, a coffee shop, or a restaurant. The environment was informal and comfortable. The interviews lasted about 90 minutes and included personal life facts, names, and other identifiers that were altered or omitted in

the report in order to conform to the study's ethical norms. With the participants' permission I used a professional digital voice recorder and took brief handwritten notes to retain data used for generating questions and seeking additional information. The participants did not demonstrate any signs of unease while their statements were being recorded. The recorded data were transcribed for further analysis upon completion of the interviews.

I built a genuine rapport with the participants based on mutual trust, shared practices, and professional exchanges. Seidman (1998) warns, however, that a desire to establish rapport with the participants may transform the interviewing relationship into a full unified "We" bond where the identity and source of meaning will be difficult to identify (p. 80). At this point, it is important to maintain that the researcher does not lean on her own understanding of the phenomenon and adopts an open attitude towards the participants' accounts (Giorgi, 2008a). The epoché process is critical to the interviewer's research behavior whereby "past associations, understandings, facts, biases, are set aside and do not color or direct the interview" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116). Therefore, I made every effort to ensure that my personal beliefs and conceptualizations would not interfere with the participants' views and accounts. This was achieved by carefully articulating questions and statements that refrained from my personal understanding of English learner underachievement and sought to gain insight into the participants' experience of this phenomenon.

4.3.4.3 Essay. Written documents are one of the forms of qualitative data collection (Patton, 2002). The essay was used as a separate activity to allow the participants to create a written account at their own pace and discretion. The essay

was presented in a freestyle writing and depicted the educators' experiences, thoughts, and feelings about English learner underachievement. There were no format and length requirements. I did not specify any particular guidelines for the writing. The participants received a brief statement of purpose, assignment description, and the topic (Appendix E). There were no specific requests about the order in which the interview and essay should appear. All eight participants submitted their essays at their convenience, before or after the interview. The information from the essays was analyzed and used alongside the interview data. It provided an additional landscape for creating rich and accurate descriptions of English learner underachievement and eliciting the essential meanings of this phenomenon within the holistic situation.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I communicated with the research participants using various forms of communication including emails, phone calls, conversations, and texting. It was a necessary activity which allowed to seek clarification and obtain feedback.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The role of research ethics is viewed in terms of ensuring the ethical treatment of human research participants (Gay et al., 2006). At the outset, the researcher needs to consider possible ethical issues that may arise during the study and take steps to protect participants from harm. It is critical that the researcher's actions conform to ethical principles throughout the entire research process (Gall et al., 2003).

During the study, specific ethical considerations were made and certain ethical guidelines were followed. Prior to the research I submitted to the ethics committee a certificate of ethical research approval to ensure compliance with the University of

Exeter ethical guidelines (Appendix F). I, furthermore, followed the local school district's research protocol and underwent the review process for obtaining institutional consent to conduct the study. The submitted document contained a detailed description of the ethical procedures formulated and carried out to ensure that the participants are not exposed to any harm, pressure, or risk (Appendix A). Before the researcher-participant interaction took place the participants were fully informed about the significance of the study and its data collection procedures. They received an explanation of the steps to be taken to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality of their statements (Appendix B). Each participant gave informed consent by signing the University of Exeter consent form (Appendix C) and chose a pseudonym.

It should be noted that ethical issues were unlikely to arise with regard to the nature and purpose of this study. Participation was entirely voluntary and the participants reserved their right to terminate participation due to relocation, illness, death, or other reasons. No ethical disputes occurred or concerns were voiced during the research process.

4.5 Data Analysis

To arrive at the essences of the experience is the focus of a phenomenological investigation. The ultimate goal for the phenomenologist is to obtain the essences of peoples' shared experiences. The essences are the essential, invariant, and vital meanings which are elicited from different human experiences of the same phenomenon. They are identified through rigorous and careful analysis of experiences of the phenomenon which are compared and accurately described (Patton, 2002). In order to proceed with the phenomenological analysis it is essential to develop

understanding of the dimensions that signify the phenomenological approach to inquiry. Moustakas (1994) discusses the phenomenological analysis with reference to the following steps in the phenomenological research process: the epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis.

The Epoché

Practicing the epoché is the first step towards returning to the things themselves and seeing them as they appear without the burden of preconceptions and judgments. Bracketing presuppositions and putting out of action his or her own ways of conceptualizing reality allows the researcher to develop receptiveness to an authentic experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). All the past knowledge about the phenomenon obtained from various sources and personal experiences has to be excluded and put aside (Giorgi, 2007; Giorgi, 2008b).

Phenomenological Reduction

In essence, to adopt the phenomenological attitude means to practice the epoché and reduction. By employing the phenomenological reduction, the researcher refrains from claims about the existence of the phenomenon from the natural standpoint. The phenomenon presents itself in consciousness, whether it is real or not, and its presence is only witnessed without being confirmed as existent. "It is a reduction from existence to presence" (Giorgi, 2007, p. 64; Giorgi, 2008b). The researcher accepts the phenomenal presences and intuitively looks for essential meanings of the phenomenon.

The task of phenomenological reduction requires a deliberate way of looking at, noticing, and describing the individual's experience while focusing on central recurring

themes which epitomize the meanings of that experience. The process of reduction does not reduce the value of the experience or delimit its scope. It opens up a possibility of discovering unlimited horizons of the experience and enables the researcher, through reflection and curiosity, to understand the texturally essential meanings of the experience. The textural description is developed to illuminate the textural qualities of what is being experienced in relation to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, the researcher intuitively discerns the aspects that are essential to the appearances of the phenomenon through an imaginative series of variations.

Imaginative Variation

The procedure of imaginative variation allows the researcher to vary the idea of the phenomenon and imagine its variations within the conceivability of its original form. Through imagining and varying the aspects of the phenomenon it is determined which are essential to its appearance and cannot be eliminated. These aspects are carefully and straightforwardly described. In contrast, the aspects are considered to be non-essential if their variation yields no substantial changes in the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2007). From different vantage points, imaginative variation looks at possible perspectives of the phenomenon and through fantasy considers structural qualities underlying the experience. The aim is to uncover the structures or dynamics of what is being experienced and integrate them into essences. The structural description is constructed to explicate the invisible dynamics that evoke the textures of the phenomenal experience without destroying the integrity of the experienced phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Synthesis

The last step is a process of integrating the textural and structural descriptions into a unified description to allow for the synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenal experience (Moustakas, 1994). The textural-structural synthesis portrays the common essential qualities without which the phenomenon loses its identity. They are represented at a time and place from the perspective of a researcher who has developed an intuitive-reflective understanding of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

With regard to the phenomenological analysis, Moustakas (1994) developed modifications of the van Kaam's and the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen methods of data analysis. The latter is more frequently and practically employed in phenomenological research (Cresswell, 2007). Both methods can be traced and summed up in the following outline of procedures which include: horizontalization of data, textural description of the experience, structural description of the experience, and construction of essences of the phenomenon. For the purposes of this research, I followed the modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis.

The interviews generated a large pool of audio recorded data which I personally transcribed to get better acquainted with the participants' statements and create a written record of their stories. During the process of transcribing, I used the interview notes and written comments to add annotations to the transcripts in order to provide relevant details about the paralinguistic cues and nuances of behavior that signified the emotional message conveyed by the participants. All the transcripts were assigned

codes in the form of the pseudonyms selected by the participants prior to the data collection.

Following the modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis based on the processes of the epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis, I organized and analyzed the study's data taking a specific series of steps outlined as follows:

Step 1. Researcher's Experience and the Epoché

At the outset, I obtained and recorded a full description of my own first-hand experience of English learner underachievement. This was accomplished to serve three major purposes. For one thing, it provided the venue for self-exploration and self-reflection in regard to my own experience of English learner underachievement. For another, it was a meaningful and constructive activity that enabled me to carry out the phenomenological analysis of my experience through the step-by-step process which was later applied to the explication of data obtained from the participants' experiential accounts. More important, reflecting on my personal experiences and examining my personal beliefs were critical in the process of recognizing and bracketing the meanings I ascribed to English learner underachievement. I acknowledged that my experience of English learner underachievement cannot be discarded or ignored. Neither should it be renounced but rather recognized and accepted. I made every effort to abstain from any existential claims regarding English learner underachievement and revealed my knowledge of this phenomenon by describing its tenets in an attempt to minimize their detrimental impact on the process of analysis. The overall attitude I assumed was to set aside my understanding of English learner underachievement and open up to the

participants' experiences of this phenomenon. The researcher withholds assent to the existential claim and endorses an experiential standpoint that the phenomenon is lived and experienced rather than presents itself as an affirmation of its existence in reality (Giorgi, 2008a, 2008b). The epoché, although "rarely perfectly achieved", is a continual process involving attention, effort, and attitude that enhance the researcher's ability and state of openness to receive things as they appear (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90).

Step II. Horizontalization and Phenomenological Reduction

During the continual process of horizontalization it is crucial to identify and consider all the horizons of experience. Each horizon adds meaning and enhances understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization requires a deliberate and meticulous study of the text in order to see a more accurate and holistic portrayal of the phenomenal experience. It is recommended to read and listen to the entire interview transcript several times to develop a sense of the whole (Giorgi, 2008a; Hycner, 1985). Using the two sources of data, the interview and the essay, I generated a combined transcript that presented a full description of each participant's experience. Every participant's transcript was considered and treated with equal importance and value. During the process of in-depth reading I focused on salient and dynamic information that was relevant to the experience of the phenomenon under investigation. At this stage of data horizontalization it is imperative to be receptive to all the statements and regard each statement as equally significant (Moustakas, 1994). The next step involved reducing the text to essential characteristics of the phenomenon and condensing lengthy descriptions into more compact units. This was accomplished by identifying the non-repetitive statements which constituted the meaning units or

invariant horizons of the experience. Caution is suggested when exercising redundancy elimination since repeated statements may indicate emphasis and suggest a different connotation (Hycner, 1985). The invariant horizons stand out as the distinctive characteristics of the experience. In the phenomenological framework, participants' significant statements are explored with the purpose to discover and describe the essential structures of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Through in-depth reading and reflection the meaning units were formulated on the basis of the participant's original text. I integrated the original wording into the meaning units to avoid losing connectivity with the first-hand account. In view of the commonalities identified across the invariant meanings the larger thematic units were further constructed using imaginative variation. Determining the connections between the meanings is the way to organize them around the central theme that conveys their essence (Hycner, 1985). The process of thematizing was performed at the stage of the individual transcript analysis and later at the point of the composite analysis when themes common to all the participants' accounts were developed. At the individual level, the emergent themes represented the aggregated meanings that provided a portrayal of the specific individual experience. At the level of the composite analysis, the themes were rearranged and restructured to capture the wholeness of the collective phenomenal experience.

Step III. Textural Description and Phenomenological Reduction

During this stage the invariant meanings were integrated into a textural description of each participant's experience of English learner underachievement. Each individual textural description was carefully constructed on the basis of the participant's

verbatim account which conveys the authentic and vivid image of the person's experience (Appendix G).

While performing the initial steps in the phenomenological reduction and engaging with the participants' experiential accounts I intuitively probed for statements and descriptions that are essential to the experiences of English learner underachievement in order to create meaning units and piece together the textures of the participants' experiences.

Step IV. Structural Description and Imaginative Variation

After developing the textural description, I imaginatively considered an array of possible divergent perspectives from which the experience of English learner underachievement would emerge as eminent and self-sufficient without losing its selfhood and retaining its identity originated from the participant's account. Through imaginative variation the underlying dynamic structures of the experience were explicated accounting for how and under what conditions things experienced by each participant in relation to English learner underachievement were experienced. The essential structures were integrated into an individual structural description of each participant's experience.

Step IV. Textural-Structural Descriptions and Synthesis

From all the textural and structural descriptions, an individual textural-structural description of each participant's experience was developed. At this final stage, I integrated the textural and structural descriptions of all the participants into one composite textural-structural description which provides a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the participants' experience of English learner underachievement.

This account portrays the qualities of the phenomenon of English learner underachievement experienced by the participants as a group.

4.6 Validation of Findings

In a phenomenological inquiry, the validity and confirmability of findings depend on the clarity of the researcher's insight in relation to the phenomenon and how well it is communicated to the audience. Specifically, the reader assuming the viewpoint of the researcher can also recognize the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1975; Polkinghorne, 1983). In other words, from the phenomenological standpoint, the criterion for validity is formulated in terms of convincing evidence that indicates a strong relationship of dependability between the researcher's ability to provide accurate descriptions and the reader's ability to recognize in them a pathway to the insights into the experiential world of the participants. Therefore, the quality and trustworthiness of a phenomenological investigation lie in the researcher's competency to articulate the core essences of a phenomenological inquiry and provide the evidentiary support for the validation of the findings. Pollio, Henley, & Thompson (1997) offer two evaluative aspects of evidentiary support. The first aspect of the evidentiary support refers to the rigor and aptness of the procedural steps and methods undertaken by the researcher to demonstrate methodological credibility. Another aspect of the evidentiary support indicates the experiential value of the researcher's descriptions and interpretations. The researcher must ensure that the descriptions of the participants' lived experiences are accurate and plausible to establish a connection between the data and the researcher's account through which the findings can be traced and verified by the reader. Likewise, in terms of validity, Polkinghorne (1989) speaks of the

phenomenological research that has a solid foundation of evidence and identifies several guiding principles essential to establishing trustworthiness and quality. Altogether, these principles enable the reader to evaluate whether the researcher's structural description accurately portrays the phenomenal features that are evident in participants' accounts.

From the outset, guided by Polkinghorne's principles I carefully proceeded with data collection and analysis. To limit the researcher's influence on the contents of the participants' descriptions I made every effort to engage in the epoché process at the initial stage of data collection. Under the aegis of the epoché, I spelled out explicitly my knowledge of English learner underachievement and with receptive openness took interest in what others had to say about their experiences in relation to this phenomenon. Furthermore, to the best of my ability I tried to maintain the role of a facilitator during the interviewing process and empower the participants by allowing them control of what was said. Open-ended questions allowed more flexibility and room for the participants to explore and share their experiences. General questions carefully formulated prior to the interview provided the venue for the participants' to share any knowledge of English learner underachievement. Specific questions were formulated on the basis of the information gained from their responses and sought elaboration on the participants' ideas and views.

In regard to the accuracy of the transcription, I made every effort to preserve it by personally transcribing all the interviews and submitting the transcripts to the participants for member checking, also known as respondent validation. Member checking is one of the essential strategies for establishing the research credibility. It

occurs during various stages of the research process including data collection, data analysis, and interpretation (Colaizzi, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although member checking may be done in many ways, I utilized it with the specific intention to allow the participant feedback in verifying the adequacy of collected raw data. It was accomplished during the phases of data collection and transcription with two purposes in mind. While interviewing I continually obtained clarifications through probing to verify the participants' authentic representations and statements. The transcripts served as the venue for an extended discourse where the participants had an opportunity to expand on the information previously communicated. However, in this study member checking was restricted to addressing and verifying the raw information contained in the transcripts (Appendix H). It did not extend to the researcher's structural descriptions and her overall phenomenological analysis. The data analysis from the phenomenological perspective is performed with the phenomenological attitude, expertise, and in specific procedural steps which may not be familiar to the participants who talk about their experiences from the perspective of their daily life (Giorgi, 2008b). Therefore, verification of the researcher's understanding and accounts of the structures of the experiences cannot be accomplished without solid phenomenological knowledge and properly applied phenomenological procedures.

In addition to adhering to the essential principles and guidelines a phenomenological inquiry, I provided a comprehensive description of the procedural framework and steps undertaken to collect and analyze phenomenological data. This provides evidentiary support and demonstrates methodological credibility.

The next principle in Polkinghorne's (1989) discussion applies to the aptness and diversity of the researcher's conclusions derived from her in-depth engagement with the data of experience. This principle bespeaks the true commitment of phenomenology and reveals the researcher's purposes. Through intuition and reflection wherein various angles and perspectives are explored, phenomenology arrives at the unified account of essences of the phenomenon or experience (Moustakas, 1994). In the process of imaginative variation, I imaginatively varied the phenomenon of English learner underachievement considering a variety of aspects and examining it from different angles in order to distinguish the essence underlying all the variations. In the end, the essences of the phenomenon constitute the structural description which presents the original sense and spirit of the phenomenon keeping it vivid and alive (Moustakas, 1994). In this regard, Polkinghorne seeks the accuracy of the researcher's portrayal which should retain closeness and connection to the original textures of the experience. In my data report, I included verbatim statements and also attached the full textural descriptions (Appendix G) to illuminate the phenomenal characteristics described in participants' experiences and to provide the venue for establishing connectivity between the general description and the specific contents.

While qualitative researchers are not typically concerned with generalizability or applicability of their findings to other contexts (Creswell, 2003; Gay et al., 2006); it is argued by some that there is a strong and inherently distinctive case for generalizability in phenomenological research. Thomas & Pollio (2002) discuss the crucial role the reader plays in extending the generalizability of phenomenological findings. In their view, generalizability depends on whether a phenomenological description providing

insight into phenomenal experiences resonates with the reader who may be considered to extend the generalizability of its findings. Giorgi (2008b) contends that generalizability in phenomenological inquiry is inherently present due to the nature of the phenomenological intent namely to arrive at an essence of an experienced phenomenon whereas the notion of an essence assumes generalizability. He explains that with the use of proper phenomenological procedures and by means of essential reduction through free imaginative variation one can arrive at the essences that are inherently general and, thus, generalizable across the phenomenal experiences.

In this study, generalizability of the findings is assumed on the premise that the textures of the participants' experiences in relation to English learner underachievement provide access to their pre-reflective life-world and facilitate the search for essences inherently general to this phenomenon. It is my belief that the essential description of English learner underachievement captures a holistic picture of the phenomenal essences that are eidetically or vividly universal and not limited to the experience of a particular individual or group. Therefore, the discovered essences may be extended from a smaller group of educators to the population of educators at large.

Furthermore, transferability as an aspect of research showing that the findings are applicable to other contexts invites readers to connect these findings to their own experiences. It was achieved through the detailed information about the study, its setting and population, and the descriptions of what the participants have experienced in relation to the phenomenon of English learner underachievement. These results may be transferable to another educational context or situation which involves other educators who have experienced the phenomenon in question.

Finally, I made every effort to ensure rigor and coherence at every stage of the research process. A systematic framework was established and followed to maintain consistency between the research purpose and the methodological approach adopted in this study. The multiple sources of data such as interviews, essays, and field notes generated an ample amount of experiential data and provided basis for evidentiary support of the findings. It is my belief that transparency in the research process ensures access to the data and provides the reader with insight into peoples' phenomenal experiences.

4.7 Limitations

This study has limitations which should be viewed and discussed with phenomenology in mind. A phenomenological focus is human experience. The limitation of descriptive phenomenology is warranted by its purpose to study and describe the experience of the life-world following its own course and principles. It explores individual experiences of the phenomenon and formulates more general insights into the collective phenomenal experience to illuminate its commonalities or essences. Through phenomenological reduction and by means of free imaginative variation we arrive at the general essences. A phenomenological description of the essences provides insight into general understanding of the phenomenal experience which assumes generalizability across experiences of a similar phenomenon.

In this study, the essences of the educators' experience of English learner underachievement represent its general meanings which are likely to resonate with other educators who work with English learners and have had experiences of the same kind. Therefore, the limitation of this study is bound by generalizability of its findings

which may be generalized to a larger number of other educators who will extend their understanding of the phenomenon of the same kind.

Another limitation is the issue of transferability of the findings to a different educational context. Transferability is an aspect of research showing that the findings are applicable to other contexts. This study has been conducted among the eight educators in one school district. However, this research explores human experience of the phenomenon which may appear in other educational contexts with English learners. Despite the limited geographical extent, the findings from this study invite educators and other professionals who have experienced English learner underachievement to establish the findings' applicability to their educational contexts.

Through a phenomenological analysis, we arrive at understanding of what is essential to human experience. In educational research, phenomenological findings communicate what is essential to experience of social and educational phenomena. However, due to the qualitative nature of a phenomenological study and a relatively small number of participants it involves, its findings may be considered less reliable for policy makers who usually turn to studies with a larger sample size and experimental design. In addition, commissioned educational research seeks specified data and information. Phenomenological research reveals deeper issues and voices opinions that may not be agreeable with current educational agenda. Therefore, the extent to which the findings of this study can be used is limited to specific agenda of education stakeholders.

Another limitation lies in the possibility that complete bracketing cannot be achieved (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). A researcher assuming a phenomenological attitude

is required to acknowledge and suspend his or her own presuppositions regarding the phenomenon under study and its existence. In order to see the phenomenon in essence, the researcher must open up and direct himself or herself to the experiences of other people. The challenge is that the researcher has his or her worldly knowledge of the phenomenon which may interfere with the phenomenological process. An attempt to reflect on personal experiences of the phenomenon and explicitly state all the assumptions about the phenomenon may not guarantee a fully unbiased attitude (Giorgi, 2008b). However, the researcher who is willing to recognize his or her own biases and who is determined to focus solely on the participants' experiences will open up to new possibilities and embrace new meanings of the phenomenal experience. It is important that the researcher make every effort to withhold from claims regarding the phenomenon throughout the research. In addition, the researcher should include the participants' verbatim statements and present the evidence of his or her own knowledge of the phenomenon to allow for transparency.

4.8 Challenges and Considerations

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of educators in relation to underachievement among English learners. By adopting the phenomenological approach, I proceeded through a series of carefully designed steps which were aimed at explicating the structures of the experience of English learner underachievement and describe the essences of these structures. My wholehearted commitment to phenomenological research arose from my genuine interest in people's lives and experiences which bring to the fore the essential dimensions and values of things as they appear to us. I am drawn to multiple examples of experience of English learner

underachievement which are individually significant to me as they belong to particular persons' life-worlds. However, reaching for the empirical uniqueness of the phenomenal experience was not my goal. My ultimate search for the knowledge of this phenomenon was undertaken by way of understanding its wholeness. This could only be achieved by discovering what intuitive essences the phenomenal experience holds in its immediate and pre-reflective form. In that regard, the general phenomenological account describes the characteristics that are truly essential for the phenomenon and without which the phenomenon as such would not be what it is.

In choosing phenomenology, I took up the challenge of achieving phenomenological clarity in my personal knowledge of English learner underachievement and, more important, in the lives of the educators who have truly experienced this phenomenon. It was not an easy task to live up to the phenomenological rigor. For one thing, the use of the phenomenological methodology requires a solid theoretical grounding and a strong rationale for its relevance for the research purpose. For another, phenomenological research generates a large quantity of data which must be considered beyond a straightforward empirical manner and carefully analyzed to develop a textural-structural description of the phenomenal essences. Last but not least, it was a systematic, determined, and laborious effort throughout the whole research process to refrain from bringing in my subjectivity and keep my personal experience of English learner underachievement from being a potential overbearing factor. Notwithstanding the challenges, phenomenological research with its intuition of essences is indispensable in making the hidden and

invisible characteristics evident to others. It offers insight into deep structures of human experience and articulates it in an essential way.

5. CHAPTER V: PRESENTATION OF DATA

5.1 Scope and Organization

My research purpose was to explore and describe the educators' experience of English learner underachievement. I sought to gain insight into the qualities of their experience and uncover its essences and meanings. My research was guided by the following questions:

- What do educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement and how do they describe their experiences?
- What are the essences and meanings that underlie their experience of English learner underachievement?

5.1.1 The Four Steps

I followed the modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis based on the processes of the epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). A series of steps taken in order to organize and analyze the data is described as follows:

Step I. Researcher's Experience and the Epoché

Acknowledging and bracketing assumptions is the first step of the phenomenological investigation. Therefore, I described my own experience of English learner underachievement and examined my own beliefs in relation to this phenomenon to the best of my ability.

Step II. Horizontalization and Phenomenological Reduction

This step involved reducing to what was essentially meaningful to the appearance of the phenomenon. The meaning units were thematically categorized as

the connections between the meanings of all the participants' experience of English learner underachievement were established in order to grasp the wholeness of the combined phenomenal experience.

Step III. Textural Description and Phenomenological Reduction

The invariant horizons or meanings were integrated into a textural description of each participant's experience of English learner underachievement (Appendix G).

Step IV. Structural Description and Imaginative Variation

Through imagination, free fantasy, and from various vantage points all the structural aspects of the phenomenon were considered as possible and revealed. They were integrated into an individual structural description of each participant's experience.

Step IV. Textural-Structural Descriptions and Synthesis

From the textural and structural descriptions of all the participants, one composite textural-structural description arose as a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the participants' experience of English learner underachievement. This combined account portrays the qualities of the phenomenon of English learner underachievement experienced by the participants as a group.

5.1.2 Overall Structure

This chapter offers the presentation of the data which reflects the structure used in data analysis and organization.

I begin the chapter by illustrating the textures of the participants' experience of English learner underachievement and offering their verbatim examples to convey vividness and thematic relevance of the textural qualities of their experience (Tables 2-7). A full textural description for each participant provides a verbatim account of what

has been experienced by each participant in relation to English learner underachievement (Appendix G).

Then, I present the individual structural descriptions which were constructed from the structures of the participants' experience of English learner underachievement (Table 8).

The individual structural descriptions are followed by the individual textural-structural descriptions constructed from the textures and structures of the experience for each participant.

The final composite textural-structural description of English learner underachievement provides a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the participants' cumulative experience of this phenomenon.

In the following descriptions, I use the words *the educators* to refer to the participants of this study.

5. 2 The “What”: Textures of the Educators’ Experience of English Learner Underachievement

In its totality, the educators' experience of English learner underachievement can be represented by the following textural thematic categories: 1) underachieving English learner performance in school; 2) emotional and psychological barriers; 3) language and cultural change; 4) prior educational experience; 5) family's socioeconomic status and parental involvement; and 6) educational practices and teacher attitudes. These categories capture the “what” of the educators' lived experience of English learner underachievement and account for its qualities.

5. 2. 1 Underachieving English Learner Performance in School

To the educators, English learner underachievement is manifest through a series of criteria which describe the nature of students' academic performance. It comes to their attention that underachieving English learners are not academically successful and struggle to perform up to the academic expectations in one or more academic areas. Performance "below the grade level" is a key aspect of underachievement the participants underscore in their descriptions. The educators observe that underachieving students tend to move through the grade levels with no sufficient growth in certain academic domains. They believe that due to certain social and personal constrains, students struggle to attain the highest levels of academic accomplishment they have an intrinsic proclivity for; thus they do not realize their potential in the classroom.

Table 2 provides examples of the educators' textural statements with regard to underachieving English learner performance in school.

Table 2

Participants' Textural Statements: Underachieving English Learner Performance in School

Textural Thematic Category	Examples of the Participant Verbatim Statements
Underachieving English Learner Performance in School	<p>“...is not being able to function successfully in the academic setting” (Laura)</p> <p>“...a student’s academic performance is below the level for his or her current grade level” (Karen)</p> <p>“...they don’t have that knowledge to establish what they need for the grade level area” (Christina).</p> <p>“...they don’t show growth and are not meeting the bar” (Laura).</p> <p>“...inability to perform at a grade level” (Diana)</p> <p>“...NOT having a steady progression or moving upward” (Sally)</p> <p>“...a student not working to his or her fullest potential in the classroom due to several reasons...”(Sonia)</p> <p>“...the ESOL kids...can give me more as far as their capability goes but they don’t due to different reasons. They just don’t perform up to what they are capable of doing” (Vivienne).</p> <p>“They are not reaching their potential. They can do more than they show and put out in terms of what they can do” (Esmeralda).</p>

5. 2. 2 Emotional and Psychological Barriers

The experience of English learner underachievement for the educators is that of understanding and empathy for their students’ unique and vulnerable situation. They see how being and “feeling unsuccessful” excessively burden their students and wear them down emotionally. Their underachieving English learners experience stress and discouragement when they have come to the realization that they fall behind in

classroom performance and achievement tests. It affects their self-esteem and creates an unfavorable learning situation. The educators believe that due to certain social expectations some underachieving English learners may feel unmotivated with no desire to increase effort and improve their academic performance. That may further exacerbate the underachieving condition ultimately resulting in high school dropout.

Table 3 provides examples of the educators' textual statements about emotional and psychological barriers of underachieving English learners.

Table 3

Participants' Textural Statements: Emotional and Psychological Barriers

Textural Thematic Category	Examples of the Participant Verbatim Statements
Emotional and Psychological Barriers	<p>“They don’t feel successful in the classroom because they cannot advance at the same pace as other students...” (Diana).</p> <p>“Some of that is frustration. ...they feel the stress of trying to keep up” (Vivienne).</p> <p>“Discouragement of achievement on these tests...tends to stress out the ESOL kids and ...affects the self-esteem for them” (Vivienne).</p> <p>“They know that society expects them to NOT achieve. ...it might be a thing that wouldn’t motivate them too” (Laura).</p> <p>“Their desire is not there... They seem to do just the minimum and work in accomplishing very little to nothing. They’re not hungry for more” (Sally).</p> <p>“The thing is there is that intrinsic motivation again” (Esmeralda).</p> <p>“...they don’t have that drive to push themselves. They don’t have the motivation...” (Christina).</p> <p>“...they tend to be frustrated with school. ...they tend to get more discouraged by the time they get to middle school. They have no desire to go beyond to go any further” (Diana).</p> <p>“...they haven’t been successful so maybe they get in their mind why to continue. All the time you are not on grade level and not achieving anything. That’s got to be very demotivating” (Sonia).</p>

5. 2. 3 Language and Cultural Change

In the eyes of the educators, English learner underachievement is very much along the lines of challenges associated with lack of language proficiency and cultural changes. English learners who do not have sufficient English language proficiency are

not able to meet rigorous academic standards and perform successfully in English-speaking academic contexts. The educators underscore the relevance of academic language proficiency for success in the classroom. Students seemingly fluent in English may not have developed the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge utilized across a wide range of academic topics and contexts. Therefore, they fail to tackle challenging and complex academic tasks. In addition to the language barrier, newcomer English learners have an array of cultural experiences that are new and different from their home country's culture. The educators are aware of several instances when English learners underachieve while making a transition into a new culture and adjusting to that culture's educational demands.

Table 4 provides examples of the educators' textual statements regarding language and cultural change for underachieving English learners.

Table 4

Participants' Textural Statements: Language and Cultural Change

Textural Thematic Category	Examples of the Participant Verbatim Statements
Language and Cultural Change	<p>“The transition from their home country to the US is a very challenging one...It’s a big cultural change and a social adjustment that turn into a scary experience for some” (Sally).</p> <p>“Language barrier is the main one for some underachieving ELLs because they don’t understand the language” (Laura).</p> <p>“A short-term underachievement occurs because of a language barrier” (Diana).</p> <p>“...they don't seem to have the academic language. That affected their reading and their understanding of the reading” (Sonia).</p> <p>“...if students cannot understand the academic language, then their performance on assessments will show that they are underachieving” (Karen).</p> <p>“...they probably increased their social and communicative language with their friends but they still don’t have the content language they need to be academically successful” (Christina).</p> <p>“...they are not used to the rigor of the American school system and cannot keep up with the load of student work given” (Sally).</p>

5. 2. 4 Prior Educational Experience

The educators in this study speak with confidence of the impact prior education has on English learners’ achievement in an American school. When students coming from a foreign country have not developed content area knowledge and skills in their home language they are unable to make connections and transfer knowledge from one context to another. Therefore, they may underachieve in a new academic context while

dealing with the barriers such as lack of prior content knowledge and lack of first language literacy skills.

Table 5 provides examples of the educators’ textural statements about underachieving English learners’ prior educational experience.

Table 5

Participants’ Textural Statements: Prior Educational Experience

Textural Thematic Category	Examples of the Participant Verbatim Statements
Prior Educational Experience	<p>“...if they don’t have a strong literacy background of reading and writing in their first language, ...it is harder for them to learn the second language because they don’t have anything to compare it to” (Christina).</p> <p>“When an English learner enters an American school without any previous skills they struggle from the first day of school” (Diana).</p> <p>“Sometimes students come to us from another country missing key skills in reading and math, so there is not really a transfer of knowledge from their first language to English” (Sonia).</p> <p>“If students haven’t learned well the skills at the different phases of language learning, they don’t have any patterns to go by; hence, there will have a terrible time learning reading and writing in a new language” (Sally).</p> <p>“If they didn’t have a good and solid background in their original language, ...that doesn’t build a strong foundation and literacy in English” (Laura).</p>

5. 2. 5 Family’s Socioeconomic Status and Parental Involvement

The educators acknowledge with unanimity that English learner underachievement lies within the realm of family and its social standing.

Underachieving English learners while facing challenges of learning content in the

mainstream English classroom are not provided with ample educational support at home. The lack of parental support is usually revealed through parents' inability to assist their children with academic tasks due to parents' limited education and their low English proficiency. Poverty and lack of material resources limit students' access to extracurricular educational activities and deprive them an opportunity to close knowledge gaps and succeed. The educators are adamant as to the necessity of parental involvement. They speak of parents' overall appreciation of school education for their children. However, they agree that underachieving English learners have a limited understanding of educational opportunity due to the lacking emphasis of education in their homes where financial responsibilities and caretaking obligations are prioritized above school.

Table 6 provides examples of the educators' textual statements with regard to parental involvement and the socioeconomic status of underachieving English learners' families.

Table 6

Participants' Textural Statements: Family's Socioeconomic Status and Parental

Involvement

Textural Thematic Category	Examples of the Participant Verbatim Statements
<p>Family's Socioeconomic Status and Parental Involvement</p>	<p>“Social status, poverty, and lack of material resources have an impact on underachievement. The students don't have the help at home that is needed because no English is spoken at home and the fact that the parent has limited education” (Esmeralda).</p> <p>“Some of that is they just don't have support. Well, when the students can't speak English and their parents don't speak it, they're not getting any work and practice at home at all” (Vivienne).</p> <p>“...when students leave me from the classroom and go home, there's no extra support or extra practice. And I see that across the board with all my underachievers” (Karen).</p> <p>“Many parents cannot read in English and, therefore, cannot help their children with reading at home” (Laura).</p> <p>“...this happens most often due to the lack of support at home... Some families do not put education as a priority. Work and making money usually comes first” (Christina).</p> <p>“...they often lack the skills necessary to help their children with even the basics of learning” (Laura).</p> <p>“Education is important when you're younger. But as you get a little bit older the goal is more to get a job and help support your family...” (Sonia).</p> <p>“The family in poverty does not have reading materials in the house like other families do and they probably don't read as much to their children because of the long hours of work just to make ends meet” (Sally).</p>

5. 2. 6 Educational Practices and Teacher Attitudes

Working in the field of education day in and day out, the educators in this study experience underachievement of their English learners within educational practices that formulate the context of a today's school. They see underachievement as a result of certain practices that fail to address underachieving English learners' needs and impede their learning. The educators recognize the impact teaching practices and attitudes have on underachieving students. They observe that teachers lack understanding of the complexity of an English learner situation. They do not know how to approach students who do not speak English and struggle to provide for them effective instructional support as well as all necessary classroom accommodations. Some teachers may not have an encouraging attitude to motivate their underachieving English learners to do their best. The educators are aware that teachers feel overwhelmed and helpless. They are not provided with the resources and knowledge to address English learners' needs in an effective and timely manner. In addition, the educators are concerned with high-stakes testing practices which are fraught with fairness and bias issues. Being normed on English-speaking student population they do not take into consideration English learners' language proficiency and become a discouraging trigger to student low self-esteem. As perceived by the educators in this study, that all creates conditions that lead to underachievement among English learners.

Table 7 provides examples of the educators' textual statements about educational practices and teacher attitudes with regard to underachieving English learners.

Table 7

Participants' Textural Statements: Educational Practices and Teacher Attitudes

Textural Thematic Category	Examples of the Participant Verbatim Statements
Educational Practices and Teacher Attitudes	<p>“I think that where underachievement comes from: lack of instructional support and teacher attitudes” (Laura).</p> <p>“I think there is a lack of urgency to improve underachievement. Teachers need to know how to reach out to those underachievers” (Karen).</p> <p>“...we are creating gaps in these kids because they're not getting the assistance that they might need when they first come” (Esmeralda).</p> <p>“They also don't know how to help them especially in the older grades when a child doesn't speak any English and they are trying to teach complex text like literature” (Sonia).</p> <p>“...it can be lack of motivation on the teacher's part and lack of effective instructional support. If the teacher doesn't have expectations, if the teacher doesn't believe that they can get there with the student, then they're not going to” (Christina).</p> <p>“They pop in into standardized tests which cover the content of the subject and don't take into consideration the inability of students to even understand the wording of the question due to their lack of English language proficiency” (Sally).</p> <p>“Giving a test that is for English speaking students doesn't test the ESOL students in a fair and adequate way that is valid” (Vivienne).</p>

5. 3 The “How”: Structures of the Educators' Experience of English Learner

Underachievement

The structures of the educators' experience of English learner underachievement are portrayed in their individual structural descriptions. These structures represent the “how” of their experiences of English learner underachievement and account for the

conditions that enabled their experiences to occur. Each description is followed by a textural-structural outline that provides a synopsis view of each educator’s experience of English learner underachievement.

Table 8 illustrates the thematic representation of the structures of the educators’ experience of English learner underachievement.

Table 8

Structures of the Participants’ Experience of English Learner Underachievement

Structures:
❖ Evaluation (as reflection on and awareness of other persons’ experiences)
❖ Observation (as attention to other persons’ experiences)
❖ Communication and interaction (as social practice and linguistic activity)
❖ Development of professional awareness and accountability (as self-awareness in professional practice)
❖ Examination of students’ backgrounds (as attention to and awareness of other persons’ sociocultural and educational experiences)
❖ Professional collaboration (as relationships to others and awareness of self in relationships)
❖ Examination of educational practices (as attention to and awareness of other persons and their professional practice and experience)

The structures embody the dynamics negotiated through actions or activities the educators carry out in their professional lives. They provide the backdrop for the educators’ experiences of English learner underachievement and constitute the underlying mechanism of this phenomenon. Evaluation is conveyed through a process of assessing educational situations, conditions, and outcomes. Observation includes an

instance or instances of noticing trends in educational reality. Communication and interaction are carried out through acts of educators' cooperation with students and their parents and exchange of relevant information. Development of professional awareness and accountability entails a process through which educators enhance their understanding of the problem, create a sense of urgency among other stakeholders, and put forward an agenda for change. Examination of students' backgrounds is evident through various ways of learning about their students' educational, cultural, and social backgrounds from academic reports, records, parents and teachers' accounts. Professional collaboration and examination of educational practices imply that educators have established collaborative relationships with other education professionals to address the issue of underachievement and evaluate current practices in English learner education for equity and effectiveness.

5. 3. 1 The Structures of Karen's Experience

Development of professional awareness and accountability

The structural essence of Karen's experience of English learner underachievement derives from her coming into teaching and realizing that akin to different levels of learning there are diverse needs of learners educators must support and meet. The structure of development of professional awareness and accountability comes into light as the process of identifying English learners who underachieve and building a supportive climate for their learning. It has become a matter of professional concern for Karen. She has demonstrated a sense of urgency for improving the academic conditions of underachieving English learners and facilitated a positive learning environment. However, despite her commitment to increase educational

efficiency and overcome underachieving tendencies she still sees several instances of academic struggle among English learners. It overwhelms her, concerns her, and fills her with frustration directed to her own situatedness and at times even helplessness in this issue. “I’ve done everything I can and then they’re still struggling.” But, Karen’s sense of responsibility is a force that uplifts her professional spirit and solidifies her good intention for fostering student success. “It is your job as a teacher to do everything that you can to help all students to be successful.”

Evaluation and observation

What makes Karen clearly see and describe underachievement is the evidence she has obtained using her keen sense of observation, means of systematic evaluation and formal assessment. Her ability to evaluate and reflect on the outcomes has helped her formulate the criteria for identifying and defining underachievement among English learners. Namely, “the lack of successful performance on grade level” of English learners given that effective instructional support has been provided is indicative of their underachievement. Thus, the structures of evaluation and observation reveal another dimension of Karen’s experience of underachievement. Through evaluation and observation, Karen has determined that some English learners struggle with understanding and use of academic English. These students from upper elementary grades born and raised in the United States have trouble comprehending academic language of the content areas despite their social English proficiency and their successful communication with English speaking peers. Karen has attributed English learners’ underachieving performance to their lack of knowledge of academic language. There is a point of a distinction she makes with reference to language issues separating

academic language from the language barrier. To Karen, the language barrier encapsulates both social and academic limitations in language communication. She has had newcomer students who by virtue of the fact that they were born and educated in a non-English speaking country have encountered a language barrier that largely limits the students' access to the content and gives rise to their academic underachievement.

Examination of students' backgrounds; communication and interaction

Examination of students' backgrounds and acts of communication and interaction play a large part in constituting Karen's experience. These are the structures that have generated Karen's perception of what underachievement may spring from. They have allowed her to see common patterns in her students' academic and family life. Family has become a large source of Karen's perceptions and ideas about underlying issues behind underachievement among her English learners. Through one-to-one talks, phone calls, meetings, examination of relevant documentation, and other activities with her students and their parents, Karen has come to know about their socioeconomic and educational standing. She clearly sees a connection between the family situation and the students' performance at school. She explains that parents with limited general education and knowledge of English are not able to help their children with academically rigorous content. "...they just are not able to understand it themselves, so they can't help their child." Besides, parents' shift in focus towards the family mainstay and sustenance urges children to attain basic education and join the labor force at the earliest possible time. The implication is that children are aware of their parents' expectations, and Karen sees it as a limitation to their academic success. "If there is a

lack of importance for education then that attitude is going to roll into the school. I don't feel that those students are going to put as much effort as other students..."

Professional collaboration and examination of educational practices

The process of collaborating with educators and examining educational practices enables Karen to detect the pitfalls of the educational system that contribute to underachievement of her English learners. Unpreparedness of teachers for educational challenges and their lack of urgency in addressing the case of underachieving students promptly and effectively exacerbate the situation. "If you don't understand the importance and know how to help them, how are the students going to be successful?" Also, Karen is concerned that shortage of effective resources and sources of help for both students and their parents has a negative impact and leads to underachievement. Karen has experienced underachievement in such a way that reveals an entanglement of factors and issues which, even if there is in English learners a desire to learn, constrain access to learning and ultimately cause underachievement.

5. 3. 1. 1 Textural-structural outline. What makes Karen's experience of English learner underachievement significant to the search for its central meanings is her emotional contribution and response to this phenomenal appearance. Karen has not just encountered a lack of successful academic performance of her students referring to it as underachievement but rather developed a clear understanding of how the phenomenon of underachievement presents itself in her life-world through representations and profiles. Also, Karen has developed commitment to advocacy for underachieving students creating a sense of urgency for a change of educational conditions.

The essence of Karen's experience is that underachievement arises through an interconnected network of personal, cultural, societal, and educational issues which are the nexus of the phenomenon as a whole or in toto. Her meanings attributed to the phenomenon have been integrated into the themes which include lack of academic language and language barrier, parents' educational background, their value for education, and lack of parental support, financial and educational resources, and also lack of professional knowledge and urgency in education. The structures that account for the activities and situations in which Karen's experiences have occurred are development of professional awareness and accountability, process of evaluation and observation, acts of communication, interaction, and examination of students' backgrounds, professional collaboration and examination of educational practices. The search for meaningful directions and effective ways of addressing English learner underachievement has enhanced Karen's experience and provided the backdrop for the meanings. For Karen, experiencing underachievement is coming face to face with a totality of conditions which pose challenges and obstacles to fostering connections to successful student learning and reduce the likelihood of positive educational outcomes for English learners. In essence, it is its multidimensional nature that brings underachievement to the fore of the educational discourse.

5. 3. 2 The Structures of Christina's Experience

Development of professional awareness and accountability

Christina's thoughts and opinions are drawn from her personal experience in working with English learners for several years. She has always expressed a vivid interest in finding effective ways to help English learners succeed academically despite

unfavorable odds and obstacles they may face in school. Underachievement among English learners is a serious problem and the matter of primary importance for Christina who assumes responsibility and sense of urgency in her professional practice. The structure of development of professional awareness and accountability is evident in her experiential narrative. “Struggle” is the word she uses to denote the effort she puts forth and action she takes on to deal with underachievement.

Evaluation and observation

Christina has taught many English learners and observed a number of instances in which they struggle academically. The areas of academic struggle generally include English language learning and content where terminology is used. The structures of evaluation and observation open the way for Christina to recognize underachieving patterns. In her classroom, her underachieving students tend to show lower levels of response to the language instruction adapted to their individual learning needs. They “are not retaining the language” she has “instructed them in.” In other words, they fail to demonstrate knowledge or skill being taught at their own level and their own pace. In other content classrooms, underachievement is manifested in academic performance of English learners who are “doing poorly in academic classes” and do not meet the rigorous grade-level expectations that provide specific learning standards for all students. Specifically, students fail to demonstrate mastery of content. In this regard, Christina is concerned and critical about a state-mandated test that measures mastery of specific content and is administered once a year. “Unfair” is a response to educational inequity that a current testing situation evokes in her. She conveys that the linguistic complexity of the test does not match up to different levels of English

proficiency students possess. English learners' proficiency in English is generally inadequate and lacks technical vocabulary essential for comprehending the full extent of complex text and content.

Examination of students' backgrounds

Knowing her students' families who have lived in the US for several years with their children native born, Christina has concluded that the lack of content or academic language as a major roadblock to successful comprehension of content is due to low levels of English proficiency among parents and their inability to help their children with academic skills. It is obvious that newcomer students to U.S. schools are not usually high level English learners, hence, unable to apply adequately their English skills to content tasks. Exacerbating the situation further is the fact that they may have had limited or interrupted formal education prior to arriving in the United States. Examining cultural and social backgrounds of her students allows Christina to perceive that these students do not have sufficient content knowledge to transfer to a new academic context. A "skill of a transfer" is what they do not have as they find themselves in a new learning situation. Therefore, they start underachieving due to both language and lack of prior knowledge to build upon, and they may scramble in the future to catch up on content areas.

Communication and interaction

Through the structure of linguistic activity of communication and interaction Christina comes to an understanding of her English learners' families and their reality. While some students suffer the consequences of their low schooling experiences, some parents may face challenges due to their low educational background. In facilitating

communication and interaction with her students and their families, Christina becomes aware of challenges her English learners' families deal with. One of the challenges is that they may not know how to set and hold high academic expectations for their children. However, Christina contends that it is not to indicate that they are not aware of the value of education. Yet, some parents with limited educational background may set minimal goals for their children and "not push them hard enough" to attain higher educational goals. There are also some low-income families that prioritize work over education to ensure additional income. Therefore, children in these families may start working at a school age and drop out of school with no prospect for further education. Christina views it as having a negative impact on student motivation in ways that impede learning and contribute to underachievement.

She has also noticed that along with obstacles such as parental limited English proficiency and low parental educational attainment families face there is also shortage of financial and material resources that prevent parents from ensuring quality access to educational means and services. She has established interconnectedness between financial constraints and lower parental expectations. Low-income families are limited in their overall financial ability; "they don't have as many resources to draw upon" to address the educational needs of their children and to plan for their future career success. Therefore, parents' expectations for their children's educational attainment are present insofar as there is a need for mastery of basic education skills that will enable some of the youth to enter the workforce at an early age. In Christina's view, there is a strong relationship between underachievement among English learners and their parents' disadvantaged socio-economic status.

Professional collaboration and examination of educational practices

Additional structures that allow Christina to spot and reflect on underachievement are her professional collaboration with teachers and examination of their educational practices. Christina has observed various problems that may negatively impact students' performance. Nevertheless, she stresses upon the significance of genuine teacher involvement with students and the effect their practices have on learners' academic outcomes. Teachers' lack of sensitivity to the backgrounds of their English learners and their "lack of effective instructional support" that fails to address their students' individual needs contribute to educational underachievement. Detrimental to the case are also teachers' lack of strong belief in their students' successes and lower expectations they may hold in regard to their future academic outcomes. "Not being a cheerleader" for English learners and letting them "fall behind and between the cracks" is what makes Christina feel a strong concern for her students' positioning in current teaching practices.

Underachievement among English learners may be an aspect of their schooling as they struggle with content classes. Christina believes that it is associated with low English language proficiency, economic, personal, family-and school-related issues. These issues need to be considered and addressed in order to ensure the academic success for all English learners.

5. 3. 2. 1 Textural-structural outline. The essence of Christina's experience of underachievement among English learners lies in a continual process of seeking ways to improve the educational outcomes for English learners and ensure that they are provided with an equitable education at school to meet their linguistic and academic

needs. The central message she conveys is that underachievement is characterized by a student's poor academic standing which is more indicative of serious personal and social challenges in his or her life rather than the student's lack of potential for educational achievement. Christina's concern for underachieving English learners arises from their disenfranchised positioning in the realms of the classroom, school and society. She underscores the social nature of underachievement which is ingrained in deeper societal issues of inequity and biased attitudes. She has placed stress upon interrelationship between the society and an individual. A disregard for individual needs of English learners in the classroom appears as a mirroring effect of an unfair educational policy.

Christina has grasped the wholeness of the phenomenon and at the same time identified the dynamic networks of interactions that have created cumulative effects in relation to the emergence of underachievement. The textural themes interwoven into the fabric of her experience of English learner underachievement are presented through descriptions of students' prior education and first language background, low level of English proficiency and lack of academic (content) language, lack of student motivation and their below grade level academic performance, lack of support at home and views on importance of education, parents' education and their socio-economic status as well as lack of effective instructional support, teacher motivation, and professionalism. All these dimensions of Christina's experience have become apparent from the events and actions that embody the underlying structures of her experience. These stem from her professional involvement in evaluation and observation, examination of cultural and social backgrounds of her students, communication and interaction with her students

and their families, professional collaboration with teachers and examination of their educational practices, and development of her professional awareness and accountability.

The totality of Christina's experience of English learner underachievement is determined by the overpowering effect this phenomenon has on her professional practice and her understanding of the English learner educational positioning. Through her professional engagement in meaningful communication and reflective practices she has come across a number of factors that account for how underachievement manifests itself in her educational reality. Understanding and addressing the complexity of English learner underachievement are at the core of Christina's experience. In essence, her understanding of this phenomenon is deeply ingrained in her readiness, agility, and keenness to gain insights into social, cultural, and educational inequalities facing underachieving English learners.

5. 3. 3 The Structures of Sally's Experience

Sally has experienced underachievement among her English learners firsthand. As a result, she has developed a sense of empathy and urgency in an effort to provide insight on the intricacies of English learners' learning and increase awareness among educators about their diverse needs. Sally's experience of English learner underachievement is permeated with the structures that lay the groundwork for her thoughts and emotions. These structures are conveyed through Sally's practices and actions which transpire through establishing professional collaboration with teachers, examining their educational practices, performing evaluation and observation, examining her students' backgrounds, communicating and interacting with her students

and their families, and raising awareness about the significance of the underachievement issues.

Professional collaboration and examination of educational practices

It is that through collaborative relationships and the examination of educational practices, Sally has come to the realization that certain attitudes, practices, and beliefs of educators underpin the perpetuation of underachievement among English learners. She stresses upon their lack of understanding “what a long process learning a new language is” and their bias towards uniformity in teaching English learners “the same way they’re teaching everyone else”. Educators at times forget that students come from different cultures and backgrounds. Failure to show empathy, build a facilitative learning environment, “adapt and think from the student’s perspective” produce underachieving behaviors and diminish English learners’ sense of comfort. Looking at each underachieving student individually and “facilitating an open communication with families” are essential to finding effective ways of preventing underachieving behaviors. Putting forth effort into finding answers is the key to improving the situation. However, they are “not the same for every student” since every underachievement case is different.

Evaluation and observation

Sally has a clear view of challenges and struggles that secondary education faces. Having worked with high school students, she has observed that academic performance of some of them becomes stagnant for varying reasons. Students are “not having a steady progression or moving upward.” However, she singles out motivation as a main obstacle that stunts students’ academic growth and a reason why they

struggle in school. Namely, students who lack motivation do not show desire to learn and attain higher educational goals. “Their desire is not there in the first chance they have.” In fact, she describes underachievement as a lack of academic progress stalled by interfering circumstances. Despite the fact that motivation is what she believes underachievement is “hinging on”, Sally has noticed that motivation itself may be an effect bound by cause. She recalls instances in which some of her newcomer English learners from other countries would develop underachieving behaviors through a “no-care attitude” towards school caused by cultural differences and language barriers as well as “peer pressure” and ineffective classroom practices. She has had English learners who would feel emotionally insecure in the new culture and overtly overwhelmed by the academic rigor of a U.S. school. They become confused and discouraged because of their inability to use academic English in content tasks and assessments. These are coupled and exacerbated by teachers’ lack of knowledge about complexities of English learners’ needs, undifferentiated classroom structure, and inefficiencies in teaching practices. In addition, some of Sally’s newcomer English learners want to blend into a culture of an American high school by adopting misguided characteristics of disinterest and impassivity some of their American peers might display.

Examination of students’ backgrounds

Another aspect of an underachieving situation arises from the fact whether or not a foreign student entering a U.S. school is “fortunate enough to have [prior] education.” Sally is determined that “background makes a big difference in those who underachieve.” She specifically talks about students with a high level of motivation who

nevertheless struggle to show academic growth. Her investigation into their backgrounds reveals that those students have arrived with limited educational background adversely shaped by interrupted formal schooling or low educational standards in their home country. She has learned from her teaching experience that English learners with little prior schooling find it challenging to demonstrate adequate skills even in the content (e.g. math number problems) that requires little use of language. In contrast, Sally has determined that newcomer English learners with solid educational background successfully transfer their knowledge and skills to new tasks. Although those students may suffer temporary underachievement in certain linguistically complex content areas, they are soon able to overcome it and attain educational success. Sally has sensed that there is dependency of skill learning on prior educational experience. “A lack of educational background” and interrupted patterns of education produce knowledge gaps which widen as new challenges arise across new academic environment. These gaps make English learners more vulnerable for academic underachievement.

Communication and interaction

Through many years of working in education and teaching English learners, Sally has encountered a few cases in which English learners who were born in the United States have continually underachieved in linguistically enriched tasks and assessments such as reading and writing. She contends that for those students with years of American schooling language barrier cannot be used as a common attribute of underachievement. She is prone to believe that along with the lack of motivation in some students, there are also family expectations and conditions. Students who come

from poor families where parents have low English proficiency and do “not have the same access to educational and material resources” to support and supplement educational activities of their children tend to demonstrate lower academic performance. Especially, it is evident with children whose parents’ expectations are limited to a high school graduation with no prospect for further education and career growth. This experience has arisen from Sally’s communication routines she has created to interact effectively with her students and their parents.

Development of professional awareness and accountability

Underachievement among English learners is an issue of a personal concern for Sally. She takes personal responsibility for practices that make underachievement emerge and linger. “Disappointing” is how she describes its overall effect on everybody. Sally is aware of pitfalls in education that contribute to its occurrence in school. She is anxious about educators’ unresponsive attitudes and lack of understanding underachieving English learners are susceptible to. She sees herself in the role of a moderator or facilitator of professional communication among educators that would help generate deeper insights into specific educational needs of underachieving English learners and develop empathy towards their experiences. “Teachers must adapt and think from the student's perspective...” Sally strongly believes that with gaining knowledge and understanding about the English learner world educators and other stakeholders together will be able to find ways of addressing underachievement.

5. 3. 3. 1 Textural-structural outline. Sally’s experience of English learner underachievement is expressed through her continuous challenge to views and beliefs the stakeholders and society hold for underachieving English learners. The essence of

her experience is her understanding of the contentious and complex nature of the phenomenon which is least likely to yield magic answers or imply quick solutions. Ultimately, it is a matter of fairness across the board. Sally yearns for a professional and unbiased judgment that educators and stakeholders should use in regard to underachieving learners in a non-arbitrary manner.

Sally calls attention to underachievement among English learners given the lack of understanding among educators of its complex nature. Her statements “who is the judge” and “there is no magic answer” imply that a contentious and complex view of underachievement and its implications prevails in the society. She firmly believes that the notion of underachievement among English learners should not be generalized across contexts and uniformly applied to all underachieving students. Nor should the reasons for underachieving tendencies be arbitrarily identified and dealt with.

An individual student, with an individual case and reasons for underachievement is a cornerstone of her discourse. She is determined that “for every student, underachievement has its own reasons.” There may be motivational issues coupled with socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic challenges. Or, there may be lack of understanding among education stakeholders of English learner issues as well as unfair educational practices that exacerbate an underachieving situation. The textures are interwoven into the fabric of Sally’s experience of English learner underachievement. They present her experience as a whole with reference to the themes she has identified: cultural change, language barrier, peer pressure, and inadequate technical vocabulary knowledge, lack of a steady academic progression, motivation, work ethic, and willingness to succeed, effects of student educational background, family

expectations, limited access to educational and material resources, and parents' inability to help due to low English proficiency along with the lack of teacher professionalism, empathy, and understanding. These are the core qualities of Sally's experience that have been elicited in the process of establishing collaborative relationships with teachers, examining their educational practices, performing evaluation and observation, inquiring about her students' backgrounds, communicating and interacting with her students and their families.

Sally has encountered a clear evidence of educational and social disadvantages that underachieving English learners are more likely to experience and be vulnerable to. She has not only observed the socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges underachieving students face altogether but also identified their experiences of educational disadvantage that stems from educators' reluctance to surrender from their inflexible positions and take a critical stance with respect to the complex and sensitive nature of English learner underachievement.

Sally, with her long experience of teaching English learners, has gained meaningful insights into how individual factors and reasons with no single quick-fix solution in sight contribute to underachievement. No matter how "disappointing" and frustrating it may be for educators and the public; no matter what connotations it carries for an individual and the society; from all stakeholders, English learner underachievement requires an in-depth understanding of its nature, efficient policy, and a long term commitment.

5. 3. 4 The Structures of Diana's Experience

Development of professional awareness and accountability

The largest part of Diana's professional life is spent on searching for effective approaches and incorporating best practices to ensure equitable education for students from minority groups. She shows emotional involvement in discussions about underachievement among English learners and expresses her deep concern over academic struggles they face amid increased educational standards and accountability pressure. Her concern arises from feeling responsible and accountable for her students and her professional practices. Thus, the structure of development of professional awareness and accountability underlies her experience and enables her to see that educational needs of some English learners are not being met to ensure their future success. She asserts that a more sensitive and academically supportive environment is required to improve the conditions for diverse learners.

Diana's experiences of educating English learners have contributed to her awareness of underachievement. Her discourse about underachieving English learners is largely built upon her teaching middle and high school students with whom she has worked in a small group setting for many years. Specifically, she talks about common manifestations of underachievement in the upper grades in contrast to the early elementary grades such as kindergarten where all children nearly start off at the same point on the learning continuum.

Evaluation and observation

Diana's experiences are permeated with the structures expressed through evaluating and observing various students' behaviors and performance trends. By

observing and evaluating, Diana has experienced and viewed underachievement among English learners as their “inability to perform at a grade level” or in terms of student academic performance that falls below grade level achievement standards. In her, it evokes a keen sense of trepidation and concern over the overall seriousness of the issue. She senses that “falling below” does not convey a positive message for a student herself and for other stakeholders in education.

Examination of students’ backgrounds

It also makes Diana wonder whether that “falling below” will cease to exist or find some permanent residency in a student. Namely, as she has come to know about their cultural backgrounds from their education records or other relevant documentation, she has observed that English learners coming from a foreign country may or may not be well equipped with skills and knowledge promoted by a rigorous curriculum. Learning a new language adds to the challenges they face in a new country. Here is where Diana distinguishes between the two situations. For students with prior adequate education it may be “a language barrier” that contributes to “short term underachievement” in linguistically rich content areas such as reading and writing. However, with diligence, a strong work ethic, and learned English skills at hand, it soon dissipates. On the contrary, it may become a long term threat to the academic wellness of some students who can be “a grade or two behind” performing in an American school “as what they were performing in their own country.” Poorly equipped with relevant content knowledge, they enter a U.S. school and may fail to receive all the necessary support from the school and their parents.

Communication and interaction

For Diana, parents are a leading force in determining whether underachievement persists or turns to a successful academic experience with further education and career prospects. “Parental involvement is key here.” For parents, their children’s education “should be a number one priority.” Through communication and interaction with the families, Diana realizes that the grimness of underachievement arises from parents’ lack of positive educational modeling and their low expectations for their children. Diana’s message is clear: when parents choose for whatever reason not to learn a new language they set an example for their children in the way that describes what they expect of them and how high they set the educational bar. “Opportunity and willingness” express Diana’s hope for the educational betterment of parents and, at the same time, show her discontent with their reluctance to take advantage of every opportunity that comes their way. Her knowledge of this situation has come from witnessing half empty classrooms which intended to be the venue for teaching free English language classes to English learner parents. She is very alarmed by the fact that even with certain availability of educational resources parents do “not enough prioritize” and support their children’s education. She does not suggest that all parents of underachieving English learners put low priority on their children’s learning. However, if it takes place, the implication is that struggling English learners facing academic challenges lack a family support which is one of the driving forces behind successful educational experiences. They ultimately become “discouraged” with their underachieving status, lose focus on learning, and may “drop out of school altogether.”

Professional collaboration and examination of educational practices

Regarding her professional relationships with teachers in this educational reality, Diana has collaborated with them and become very understanding of their current accountability pressures. However, through examination of teaching practices and teacher attitudes, she has revealed that not all the teachers develop sensitivity to the educational needs of English learners. Not all of them do the best they can to provide equitable conditions for their successful learning. That is what Diana views as one of the reasons for English learner underachievement.

Diana also warns that underachievement is not an easy task to tackle. Neither can it be a loosely and sloppily identified notion. There should always be multiple sources of valid data including teachers' input to state an underachievement case.

For Diana, underachieving instances will always be present "with us" in school because there is much to consider. "I'm not totally sure if we can eliminate it. We will always have underachievers" is not a statement expressing her dismay but rather signifying her critical assent to the reality she deals with. She believes that things for English learners can be improved provided that underachievement is correctly identified through multiple data points and timely addressed by means of effective learning support.

5. 3. 4. 1 Textural-structural outline. The essences and meanings of Diana's experience of English learner underachievement arise from a deep sense of obligation she has towards underachieving students and a large concern she shows for their underachieving condition perpetuated by several overpowering factors rooted in a family, culture, and school. The essence of Diana's experience of English learner

underachievement lies in her own ways of perceiving, thinking, and feeling about this phenomenon in regard to its conceptual entirety, complexity, and problematic status. For Diana, underachievement is a timeless phenomenon that exists along with its precursors and conditions that may be hard to be tackled or disregarded. She espouses a belief that underachievement will always exist as a phenomenon due to the unwavering presence of certain social conditions that cannot be improved. However, she is optimistic about finding ways to improve the learning outcomes of underachieving English learners and address learning gaps in a preemptive manner, at very early stages of their academic struggles.

The structures of Diana's experience have revealed the acts of experiencing in which she has elicited eminent meanings of a given experience. The structures include development of professional awareness and accountability, acts of evaluation, observation, and examination of students' background, communication and interaction with students and families, professional collaboration with teachers, and examination of educational practices. These structures account for experiencing English learner underachievement signifying its meanings. Diana's textured description of her experience of English learner underachievement is presented in the following textural themes: student inability to perform at a grade level and language barrier, lack of content education and proficiency in first language literacy skills, lack of organization, motivation, and effort, low levels of parents' English proficiency, lower parental involvement and expectations as well as lack of teachers' effort, effective practices, and resources.

Diana's experience of English learner underachievement is a synthesis of academic evidence supported by social inequities, cultural, and personal challenges and driven by Diana's emotional and intellectual engagement with the underachievement issue.

5. 3. 5 The Structures of Laura's Experience

What has made Laura experience underachievement the way she has is her engagement with its nature and dynamics. This engagement has been expressed through reflective activities identified as structures of her experience such as evaluation and observation, communication and interaction, examination of students' backgrounds, professional collaboration and examination of educational practices, development of self-accountability and awareness.

Evaluation and observation

Laura's experience of underachievement among English learners is permeated with a sense of befuddlement and concern about the educational situation of English learners in a regular classroom. Especially unsettling this situation appears with the students who are underachieving academically. It comes to Laura's attention that underachieving English learners have a certain way of positioning themselves in academic success. "Feeling unsuccessful" is one of the unfavorable situations in which underachieving students find themselves owing to both the way the society "expects them to NOT achieve" and "teacher attitudes" that fail to foster effective instructional support and positive learning environment. Laura has observed attitudes and practices which assume that English learners from specific cultural groups do not identify educational success as a priority, nor do they see it as the way to maximize their

chances for a better career. It may be exacerbated by ways some parents view their children's future as the means to obtain guaranteed minimum income. In addition, "language barrier" creates a detrimental environment in which access to academic content is compromised by students' inability to comprehend and use academic language. Through systematic and reflective processes of evaluation and observation, it has become evident to her that students with the language barrier are justifiably unable to comprehend the grade level academic content. Understanding and using the language is key to a successful performance in the academic context. Moreover, Laura refers to many homes where English is not spoken and, hence, no homework support is available. With this in mind, "feeling unsuccessful" emerges from being helpless in the classroom and at home with no effective educational support and being held to lower expectations of the society. Laura clearly sees it as a facet of underachievement and a precursor to lower motivation or even lack of it.

Development of professional awareness and accountability

For Laura, underachievement among her students is a heartbreaking issue. It "shows everywhere" and has become evident in various instances. In essence, she describes it as unsuccessful academic performance in the classroom. Besides, "success" in her words is identified with what a student is able to achieve in the academic setting. A "set bar" is set forth to represent realistic expectations each student should meet to show academic attainment. If a student does not demonstrate growth along the continuum of learning and does not meet expectations s/he is at a greater risk of academic underachievement. Laura is deeply involved with her students' learning experiences. She empathizes with their feelings and become emotionally

invested in her search for ways that would transform unsuccessful learning outcomes for her underachieving English learners to their positive and fulfilling learning experiences.

Against the backdrop of the development of her professional awareness and accountability, it conjures up a sense of concern in Laura when her English learners have a tendency to underachieve. She has come to grips with how vulnerable their position is in education amidst the obstacles they face in their everyday lives.

Communication and interaction

Having communicated and interacted with her students' families, Laura is aware that the majority of the parents have low English language proficiency and "often lack the skills necessary to help their children with even the basics of learning." This factor has an unfavorable impact on the development of academic language and, therefore, impedes learning. Laura understands that English learner parents may not have enough confidence to approach their children's schooling due to their limited educational experiences and low English language proficiency. They may also lack knowledge of specific support strategies that would facilitate a positive learning environment for their children without reliance on English language skills. Laura is aware of predicaments and obstacles English learner parents face. However, she wishes to see parents taking a more proactive approach to their children's education and looking for ways to make a positive difference in their learning.

Examination of students' backgrounds

Inquiring into her students' background reveals that along with the lack of English language proficiency Laura's students have limited knowledge of their native language,

mainly some conversational skills. It may be evident from the students' education records that show what specific academic skills the students have gained in their home country. She infers that students without "a good and solid background in their original language" are less likely to have a solid basis for fast and effortless learning of new linguistic skills. Transfer of preexisting linguistic knowledge, in her opinion, plays a crucial role in learning a new language. It provides a backdrop for acquiring English language skills and developing vocabulary in the content areas. Without mastering content vocabulary English learners have very limited access to content knowledge and fall behind in achievement across grade levels. Therefore, Laura sees interrelatedness between limited prior educational experiences and current underachieving manifestations.

Professional collaboration and examination of educational practices

With all these obstacles underway, there should be understanding among educators and administrators of the underlying issues specific to English learners' education. Laura works collaboratively with educators and critically examines their practices in which she sees a serious lack of insight regarding the urgency of effective support for English learners. In this regard, Laura recalls instances in which some teachers "don't try in their classroom" to put in extra time and provide effective support for English learners even knowing that there is urgency for it. She sadly finds that having no sense of urgency is one of the reasons why some students underachieve. Laura, however, understands that teachers' lack of knowledge about their English learners' cultural and linguistic diversity becomes an obstacle in the development of sensitivity towards their students' educational needs. It also affects their comfort levels

with instructional strategies and techniques for teaching English learners. She speaks of understanding and responsiveness educators should develop in order to alleviate the detrimental conditions associated with underachievement. With this in mind, she refers to professional development opportunities for educators and teacher collaboration as powerful tools for ensuring efficient English learner education at school and at home.

5. 3. 5. 1 Textural-structural outline. Laura's experience of English learner underachievement is characterized by the core themes which combine and convey the qualities, instances, and profiles of this experience. The essence of her experience lies in its multidimensional nature represented through the intricacies of the experiential profiles. She has experienced underachievement in various instances and forms which may be relative to several aspects of her students' academic and social lives. She is emotionally expressive in her portrayals of her experience of underachievement. Her words expressing concern and care are potent at evoking an emotional response.

In her experience, underachievement of English learners is feeling and being unsuccessful in school. Essentially, the problem of being unsuccessful is relative to not meeting academic expectations. The other themes that enfold and illuminate underachievement are language barrier or low English proficiency of students and their parents, students' lack of content vocabulary, educational skill, and solid background in first language, parents' inability to help at home, teachers' attitudes, their lack of understanding of English learner issues, and insufficient instructional support. The situations and conditions that have evoked images, ideas, and feelings of underachievement have transpired through her professional involvement in the processes of evaluation and observation, communication and interaction with families,

examination of students' backgrounds, professional collaboration with teachers and examination of educational practices, development of professional awareness and accountability.

In Laura's experience, the essence of English learner underachievement lies in its intricate system of interrelated events and factors deeply rooted in the very nature of the society and its social inequalities. The vulnerable position of underachieving English learners is a smaller image projected onto a bigger screen of societal issues. With the feeling of accountability for the outcomes of her professional practice, Laura's experience of English learner underachievement has assumed a strong student advocacy and sensitivity to their educational needs.

5. 3. 6 The Structures of Vivienne's Experience

For nearly two decades, Vivienne has been educating students from different ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. She has witnessed underachievement among English learners at various stages of her teaching career and come to grips with challenges and obstacles these students face in their daily life. To Vivienne, there is no unified view that clarifies the nature of underachievement or defines ways of addressing the issue. "Subjective" and "relative" are the terms she uses to describe underachievement and identify its instances. Namely, "different people have different views of underachievement depending on expectations and experiences."

Several structures lay out the groundwork for her experience of English learner underachievement. The dynamics of this experience are evoked and expressed through developing professional awareness and accountability, evaluating and observing her students in the classroom, examining educational practices and

collaborating with teachers, communicating with her students and their families as well as examining her students' backgrounds.

Development of professional awareness and accountability

In the process of enhancing her professional awareness and accountability Vivienne has developed a sense of pressing importance to decrease underachievement tendencies among English learners and effectively communicate this goal to other stakeholders involved in English learner education. "To change the way of thinking about...underachievement" is Vivienne's call for a change in attitudes and approaches. A strong concern about the lack of educational equity and access for English learners reverberates throughout her account.

Evaluation and observation

In Vivienne's world, English learner underachievement is presented as "an inability to perform up to the standard". A careful examination of her discourse, however, shows that an "inability" refers to a lack of possibility due to constraints rather than a lack of pure mental prowess. Furthermore, she implies what the "standard" accounts for. By her definition, it refers to goals and objectives she sets that specify the learning outcomes for each student. Through evaluation practices and her observation she has singled out underachieving student performance that falls below the standard that exemplifies a set of academic expectations on the teacher's terms.

Vivienne has learned through observation that the overpowering effect of "discouragement" and "frustration" in English learners is hard to overlook and underrate. It is a strong claim that these emotions arising from unsuccessful outcomes with testing and lack of English proficiency necessary to engage in meaningful academic activities

become an intrinsic part of English learner underachievement. While observing her students in the educational setting, she has become aware of psychological trepidations and emotions going alongside underachievement. “There are all kinds of emotions.” Underachieving students may feel “the stress of trying to keep up.” With no support, “they most likely feel hopeless and discouraged.” This emotional tremor exacerbates the underachieving situation.

By the same token, the language barrier as evidence of academic struggle and influence on a student’s emotional state cannot be easily redressed. English learners underachieve due to insufficient English language proficiency which in Vivienne’s words is slow to develop unless “modeling at home in English” is provided.

Examination of educational practices

Looking at the phenomenon from a different angle, Vivienne has seen another side of underachievement of English learners attributed to the residual effects of “inadequate testing” practices and a uniform approach to interpreting testing data. By examining educational practices, Vivienne has come to understand distinctly that the way formal education sees “standard” (as state-defined criteria of achievement) brings about unfair assessment practices which lead to faulty perceptions of English learners’ performance and labeling students as “underachievers”. In other words, tests designed to assess knowledge and skill of all students without exception generate data obtained with no regard for English learners’ educational backgrounds and their proficiency in English. “You can’t assess the content because they can’t understand what you are assessing.” It is a main concern for Vivienne since she has regularly observed when the content knowledge of students with low or intermediate levels of English is

evaluated by means of questions formulated in English for English speaking students. Therefore, a change of approach to evaluating knowledge and skill of English learners is a moral imperative for the education system in order to ensure unbiased and effective education for all.

Examination of students' backgrounds; communication and interaction

Vivienne has interacted with her students' families and obtained family background knowledge which has made her believe that family involvement and educational support are important determinants of English learners' success in school. This claim is based on Vivienne's experiences with the students whose families with limited educational background "cannot speak English at all" and unable to help their children develop the skills critical to educational success. "...they don't know how to help at home." Therefore, she posits that lack of academic support at home is one of the attributes of English learner underachievement. She by no means implies that families have low expectations for their children. Families "expect their children to do well" in school. However, Vivienne views parents' stronger education as a precursor for a stronger belief and value they add to their children's education.

Vivienne's discourse about underachievement is mainly built around barriers springing from personal, emotional, and family issues. Especially uncomfortable she feels about assessment practices that epitomize rigor and relevance of the current educational system. Nevertheless, rigor and relevance via assessment do not necessarily translate into educational equity and accessibility for all students. Vivienne's message is clear that English learner underachievement comes from a strong effect standardized testing has on people's perceptions. It may be addressed

through reflective practices and changing “what we are doing until we figure it out how to help [English learners] be successful.” Success, in this case, is facilitated by effective ways that would tackle the many barriers there are to education of English learners.

5. 3. 6. 1 Textural-structural outline. Through engagement with a range of professional activities and establishing relationships with students, parents, and educators, Vivienne’s experience of English learner underachievement has occurred in ways that have mapped onto her ideas, thoughts, and feelings she has about underachievement. In the process of evaluation and observation of student academic behavior and performance, she has come to know and feel how underachievement presents itself. By examining educational practices and her students’ backgrounds as well as communicating and interacting with her students and their families, Vivienne has formulated understanding of mechanisms and conditions underlying underachievement. The essential meaning of English learner underachievement for Vivienne dwells within “inability” or a lack of opportunity to reach academic success created by personal, social, and emotional barriers. Such barriers are exacerbated by the presence of issues of standards, assessments, and equity in schools.

The essence of the phenomenon is that English learners’ academic performance can neither withstand the expectations for learning outcomes put forth by teachers, nor can it be a true reflection of student potential due to multiple constraints and obstacles. Those constraints and obstacles hinder academic success insofar as they are brought about by personal, educational, and socioeconomic limitations. The latter have been formed into thematic representations and explored in the context of family and school. Cultural and language barriers, family’s low proficiency in English and lack of help at

home, low parental education and limited resources, inadequate testing conditions, educational practices, and teacher attitudes, discouragement and stress at school have become the epitome of underachievement among English learners and their positioning in school.

5. 3. 7 The Structures of Esmeralda's Experience

The problem of English learner underachievement as experienced by Esmeralda lies in what she sees as “not living and performing up to your capability” or “not reaching” potential in terms of what students can do but do not actually do due to lack of desire or motivation coming from the socio-economic and cultural context of the family. Against the backdrop of her teaching in the upper elementary grades, Esmeralda has a clear view of issues surfacing in English learner education. Her experience of English learner underachievement is manifested through activities and actions that embody the structures of this experience.

Evaluation and observation

During the process of evaluation and observation, she has experienced lower academic performance of English learners at various times and various academic settings. Essentially, it has come to her attention that students who struggle academically differ in the very nature of their “struggling”. Not all struggling English learners are underachieving. Some struggling students may be “academically challenged” in ways that hinder their access to academic content. Esmeralda has worked with students whose low English language proficiency prevents them from comprehending and retaining the content. “You got to know language first...language filters off in everything else.” With this in mind, it would be deemed unfair in this

circumstance to refer to underachievement. However, Esmeralda has also noted that in some cases of seemingly lengthy academic struggling due to the initial impact of language barrier students within ample time have failed to demonstrate growth in language proficiency. Esmeralda has attributed this to underachievement in such a way as to clarify that English learners with lower English language proficiency, who are able to perform well, underachieve when they do not show adequate growth in English language skills along with other academic areas due to their lack of motivation. Also, lack of motivation “to want to go to the next level” characterizes underachieving English learners with higher levels of English language proficiency who seem to be “stuck” in their academic underperformance. Therefore, through her experiences she has formulated her idea of underachievement which signifies that a lack of growth and adequate academic performance of English learners who, in fact, are able to succeed is indicative of their underachievement in school.

Examination of students' backgrounds; communication and interaction

With reference to ways that hinder English learners' desire and motivation for succeeding in school, Esmeralda has considered the cultural and socio-economic context of the family. She has used communication and interaction as the ways to connect with the families and discuss issues pertaining to her students' lives. Examination of her students' cultural and social backgrounds makes her believe that culture plays a decisive role in establishing value of education. Her students' families have expectations that traditionally guide their and their children's education and career choices. She feels that on one hand, the parents are aware of the fact that education is valued in the society they live in, and they do not diminish its importance. On the other

hand, the influence of the family and their mode of life are dominating over the educational choice. Esmeralda has looked into the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the family and found interrelated activities and attitudes that have suggested that other things than education are more prioritized. Some people “value family over education culturally.” She has noticed that the majority of her students’ parents have “limited education” and work low-wage, low-skilled jobs “living paycheck to paycheck.” “So, they're not thinking about education...they are thinking about survival.” They may migrate for seasonal employment or change jobs and schools ensuring no stability for their children’s education. Since these families have low-income status and very limited financial means their children are expected to join the labor market as soon as possible to provide help for the family. As Esmeralda inferred, parental influences on children’s educational aspirations are significant because children from families with lower expectations tend to have lower motivation to learn English and succeed in academics; hence, they may underachieve in school. What contributes to low student motivation and underachievement, in Esmeralda’s view, is the fact that her students’ parents have low English language proficiency and are not engaged in any educational activities to improve the situation given that English language learning opportunities are offered at no cost to them. Esmeralda sees that as having negative consequences for her students. For one, they do not see their parents’ aspiration for learning and self-improvement and may consequently adopt the same attitude. Moreover, the parents cannot get fully involved in their children’s learning and provide additional academic support when necessary due to their lack of English language proficiency. In Esmeralda’s perception, lower parents’ educational aspirations and expectations for

their children foster lower student motivation towards academic activities and ultimately trigger underachieving behaviors.

Professional collaboration and examination of educational practices

Underachieving behaviors may also be stimulated by the school. By means of developing professional collaboration with teachers and examining their educational practices, Esmeralda has discovered the aspects of schooling that may have adverse effects in the situation. Esmeralda's statement "school may have an impact" conveys in its entirety an idea about educators, administrators, and their practices. She has seen a few instances in which some newcomer English learners, being challenged academically because of their lack of English proficiency, are not provided with effective and prompt instructional support and, thus, become "left behind". "We are creating gaps in these kids because they're not getting the assistance that they might need when they first come." Consequently, they are at risk of being discouraged, losing interest in academic success, and manifesting underachieving behaviors.

Development of professional awareness and accountability

Esmeralda knows from her own experience that the issue of English learner underachievement requires attention and response not only from educators and parents but also needs an input and support from districts and society in providing effective programs and tools to ensure quality and equity in education. The structure of development of professional awareness and accountability enables her to view underachievement as a matter of urgency and concern for all stakeholders in education.

5. 3. 7. 1 Textural-structural outline. Esmeralda's experience of English learner underachievement is permeated with the structures that have conjured up the meaningful imagery of the phenomenon. While observing and evaluating her students' academic and social behavior patterns, communicating with them and their families, examining their cultural and social backgrounds, establishing collaborative relationships with her fellow teachers and examining their educational practices, increasing her awareness and accountability, Esmeralda has gained insight into the ways in which underachievement presents itself. The central underlying meaning of her experience is that underachievement is manifested as students' inability to progress in various academic domains due to the motivational orientations faltered by a number of conditions such as parents' limited education and English language proficiency, family expectations, their educational values, and consistency they profess, lack of help for their children at home and limited access to material resources, also, ineffective school services and teachers' instructional practices. She comes to the realization that English learner underachievement need not be simply ascribed to an academic struggle caused by a temporary effect of the low English language proficiency. In her experience of teaching English learners, students' continuing struggle in school becomes the catalyst for questioning and discussions among educators. Nevertheless, for Esmeralda, it is not a matter of identifying and gaining evidence of academic struggle. She has a rather collective impression of what accounts for underachievement, in all its entirety, with all the conditions and precursors in consideration. Therefore, the essential message her experience conveys is that English learner underachievement becomes apparent in the persistent lack of student academic success and desire to succeed diminished by a

complex combination of socio-cultural disadvantages and also school-related issues. Esmeralda's role in this immediate context as she perceives it is to reach out to underachieving students and seek ways to encourage their learning albeit the detrimental effect of certain factors.

5. 3. 8 The Structures of Sonia's Experience

Sonia's experiences of English learner underachievement go hand in hand with her continuous and fervent engagement in solving issues pertaining to the education of English learners. As an educator of more than 15 years, she has worked with students who are English learners in various contexts within the ESOL and general education classrooms. Currently, she is providing instruction for students of different English proficiency levels to support language and vocabulary in addition to teaching content area skills.

The structures that have paved the way for her experience account for her thoughts and feelings in relation to English learner underachievement. These structures feature activities that include development of professional awareness and accountability, evaluation and observation, examination of students' backgrounds, communication and interaction, professional collaboration and examination of educational practices.

Development of professional awareness and accountability

Throughout her experience of educating English learners, Sonia has developed strong commitments to providing quality education to her students and has taken actions to address the challenges she faces with students who tend to underachieve in various academic contexts. The structure of development of professional awareness

and accountability scaffolding her experience of English learner underachievement has instigated her to reexamine her practices over and over again and arduously look for effective ways to redress an underachieving situation in school. At times, she shares her feelings of frustration and helplessness that her search for answers evokes in her. In her classroom, Sonia has U.S.-born English learners and also those who have recently arrived in the United States from other countries. That has prompted her to gain an understanding of conditions that may foster English learner underachievement and to develop the main characteristics of an underachieving student.

Evaluation and observation

Essentially, Sonia speaks about several defining aspects and manifestations of underachievement among English learners. She has conferred these aspects on the grounds of the student learning outcomes demonstrated in the classroom performance and basic skill standardized assessment. In the process of evaluation, Sonia has observed that students who underachieve are functioning “below grade level in reading and in math” by “not doing their best” in academic tasks and consistently demonstrating lack of basic skills in content areas. “Consistently” is the key word in this experience because it emphasizes the unchanging state of student underperformance over a certain period of time. What puzzles Sonia is the fact that some English learners who have been educated in the U.S. school system since pre-K have not yet developed literacy or math skills necessary for maintaining grade-level achievements. Despite her intensive instructional support these students’ performance has either “plateaued” and does not show strong growth dynamics or has simply declined. Especially vigorously Sonia discusses her students’ underachievement in the upper grades of the elementary

school and she is concerned with its lingering effects in the middle school. Sonia has dealt with some elementary and middle school English learners who primarily fall “more than two grades” behind their peers in reading. They cannot not comprehend the grade-level nonfiction story due to their lack of knowledge of academic vocabulary, thus, fail to show adequate skill performance on reading tasks. “They don't seem to have the academic language...so when they are reading it, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense.” The lack of academic vocabulary Sonia ascribes to the inefficient organization of instructional priorities. In her opinion, teachers have focused too long on other skills and knowledge at the expense of informational text and academic vocabulary.

Examination of students' backgrounds; communication and interaction

When looking into the conditions and aspects of English learners' lives and education, Sonia recognizes possible contributors to their underachievement. Having a profound knowledge of cultural and economic backgrounds of her students, Sonia has referred to values and attitudes professed by some parents which, in their turn, may have an adverse impact on educational performance and behaviors of some students. Some families see “working as more important than getting an education.” “They really want them to be able to work and bring money into the household.” In this regard, she has noticed that children from families that place less emphasis on education in favor of jobs that support and pays the household tend to be less motivated to achieve higher educational goals. That happens, in Sonia's opinion, because students' aspirations are limited to finding work and making money to support the family; some people are culturally predisposed to take care of the family and provide financial sustenance in order to minimize the negative impacts of poverty.

Being in close contact and regular communication with her students' parents and knowing their family situations, Sonia believes that underachievement may be the result of parents' inability to help their children with academic work. They are well aware of their lack of education and knowledge of English that impedes their meaningful participation in their children's afterschool educational support. "They can't help their child because they don't know the content themselves. A lot of them dropped out of school." On the other hand, their destitute economic standing limits ways of obtaining other educational resources (e.g. hire a tutor) besides those offered free by the school system. In addition, the fact that in low-income households parents are busy "working all the time just to make...ends meet" has made Sonia assume that children in such families have less structure and consistency that may result in underachieving behaviors.

Age and grade may also have something to do with underachieving tendencies. Sonia has experienced greater likelihood of underachievement of English learners in upper elementary and middle school grades since, in her perception, students at this age may be affected by low motivation and negative attitudes towards school.

Another factor that is underscored in Sonia's discourse are educational backgrounds of English learners who have received education in their home countries. Through education records and reports Sonia has examined the educational backgrounds of her students. She has had a few newcomer students who have struggled to transition into a new educational system not only due to low English proficiency but primarily due to their lack of skills and prior content knowledge that can be applied to a new context. "You can't transfer something you haven't been taught in

your own language.” With this in mind, Sonia has come to believe that prior educational background is a predictor of educational success or lack of it is a precursor for academic underachievement.

Professional collaboration and examination of educational practices

Sonia places great importance on school and teachers in finding effective ways to address underachievement. She believes that creating a meaningful and culturally responsive learning environment can largely improve educational outcomes for English learners. Sonia has intensively collaborated with teachers and identified limitations in their approaches to English learner education. She sees a school as a venue for “a ‘sink or swim’ format with the underachievers drowning.” Educators are “busy” and they find it “very time-consuming to provide needed accommodations” for struggling English learners. Or, they simply “don’t know how to help them.” She suggests that educators should continually undergo professional development and gain insights into how effective strategies can be put into practice to help underachieving English learners. She also underscores the role of school and county in providing all the means of support for educators, parents, and students whose concerted input is critical to ensure educational success.

5. 3. 8. 1 Textural-structural outline. English learner underachievement has been experienced by Sonia through various forms of her personal and professional engagement. Her emotional commitment to providing a high quality English learner education has driven her strenuous effort to find the ways in which she could effectively address the educational needs of her students and improve their educational conditions. The feelings of professional awareness, responsibility, and accountability have helped

Sonia gain insight into the situations and problems related to underachievement of her students. Alongside her instructional approaches to teaching English learners, she has relied on several professional practices that have laid the groundwork for her experience of underachievement among her students. These have included various means and instances of evaluation and observation, examination of her students' backgrounds, communication and interaction with her students' families as well as collaboration with other teachers and examination of their educational practices. The meanings she has ascribed to her experience of English learner underachievement have been clustered into the themes that capture the dynamics of her phenomenal experience. They are explicated as follows: performance below grade level and not working to fullest potential, lack of parental support and not knowing how to help at home, parents' low education and poverty, lesser cultural value of education and limited educational background in home country, lack of motivation and academic language, lack of accommodations in the classroom and limited access to an ESOL program, lack of teacher professional development and effective instructional strategies.

In essence, Sonia's experience of English learner underachievement is replete with multifaceted meanings which characterize the essential nature of the phenomenon. The central underlying meaning of her phenomenal experience holds that English learner underachievement embodies an unsuccessful academic experience at school and home characterized or triggered by a range of social, economic, educational, cultural, and personal conditions. Underachieving students "are not working to their potential" although they are "capable of achieving skills." However, these conditions

limit their “access to knowledge and skills” and prevent them from demonstrating their capability of learning.

Sonia’s experience of the phenomenon illuminates the positioning of underachieving English learners amidst social settings which have an adverse effect on their educational attainment. Inundated with the diversity and variability of underachievement images and patterns, Sonia is aware of the fact that her experience is bound to have an impact on her practices strengthening her resolve to continue her efforts in improving the underachieving condition.

5. 4 English Learner Underachievement: Synthesis of the Essences and Meanings

The educators have encountered various underachievement instances and situations which have surfaced their perceptions, knowledge, ideas, and concerns in relation to the phenomenon. The general features their experiences share; the invariant, common aspects and qualities that make English learner underachievement recognizable and clear, the way it appears regardless of circumstances, represent the essences of the phenomenon.

5. 4. 1 English Learner Underachievement: A Powerful and Complex Phenomenon

The educators’ lived experience of English learner underachievement is that of being professionally and emotionally involved with the phenomenon rendering significance to all its qualities, instances, causes, and manifestations. While trying arduously to deal with English learner underachievement in the classroom, the educators in this study have experienced a wide range of powerful emotions linked to their strong concern about their underachieving students and their positioning in the present educational discourse.

Underachievement has an overpowering effect on teachers' lives. They are consumed by its omnipotent character which "breaks" their hearts at times and makes them aware that they are persistently "struggling" to overcome its detrimental effects. You may reach the point where you feel disempowered and hopeless in your professional ability to improve the situation. The educators share this sentiment where "I've done everything I can and then they're still struggling" becomes the epitome of English learner underachievement reality.

You ought to experience underachievement to know how "disappointing" and "frustrating" it is to everybody. The educators fully recognize the magnitude of the problem and call upon the forces of individual and societal wisdom to look beyond educational platitudes in regard to ways of judging and addressing English learner underachievement. In particular, judging and deciding what English learner underachievement looks like and feels like "depends on who is the judge." "If the public are the judge," then it is perceived within the traditional grading system. "If administrators are the judge," then it becomes the matter of the school's academic ranking with concern about English learners "bringing down the numbers." "If ESOL teachers are the judge," then it becomes their call for reevaluating commonplace views and shifting priorities towards the regard for small wins and progresses. Even a child mindful of his or her career and academic future who seeks the highest level of academic attainment is "his own judge." Indeed the educators agree that "we all judge underachievement differently." It is "relative", and "different people have different views of underachievement depending on expectations and experiences."

There is a strong trend commonly shared among the educators in this study to perceive English learner underachievement as a complex multidimensional phenomenon that is imbued with characteristics and experiences that capture the architecture of an irreducible and inseparable whole. As the “multifaceted concept” English learner underachievement embodies different aspects of its givenness in experience. The educators have experienced underachievement in ways that generated various meanings and themes to show this phenomenon as a whole or in toto. They cannot be considered apart or scrutinized in isolation. The wholeness of this lived experience is what preserves the integrity and identity of the phenomenon.

5. 4. 2 English Learner Underachievement: A Struggle to Make the Grade

The educators in this study have intensively and extensively worked and communicated with English learners in a variety of educational settings. They have been engaged in professional activities that have evoked certain perceptions of underachievement and constituted the dynamics of their experience. These structures account for the experience of English learner underachievement making it what it is with all its dimensions and qualities.

Evaluation and assessment have been the essential part of the educators’ practice and a focal point of their experience of English learner underachievement. They have used various means and forms of evaluation and assessment to track the academic progress of their students. There has been a certain trend among the educators to trust their own senses and experience when it comes to determining fidelity and surety in testing and assessing. The educators have continually evaluated their English learners’ performance in the classroom in a variety of contexts to create a

picture of underachievement and grasp issues pertaining to its appearance. They have observed that underachieving English learners are “not being able to function successfully in the academic setting.” Their students struggle to “perform at grade level” and they do not possess “that knowledge to establish what they need for the grade level area.” The educators have differentiated instruction and provided instructional scaffolding to their students to facilitate and optimize their learning. However, with all the accommodations and support put in place they have come to see little or no “steady progression or moving upward.” English learners who underachieve struggle to “retain knowledge.” It may occur both in a content area and language instruction. They “pretty well stay where they were when they came into class” and are not “making the grade.” The educators feel that their students do not work “to their capability” or their “fullest potential in the classroom.” Capability and potential are spoken of in terms of what students “can do.” English learners do not reach their potential in terms of their unrealized capability or capacity for knowledge development. It implies that every student has latent characteristics that provide an intrinsic possibility or propensity for learning and acquiring skills. English learners underachieve when that possibility for knowledge development is constrained or impeded by certain socioeconomic, cultural, or individual experiences they live through. Therefore, underachievement translates into the students’ failure to perform “up to what they are capable of doing.” Being and “feeling unsuccessful” in school is part of underachievement and an underachieving English learner experiences lack of academic success which represents a struggle to rise to “the highest level that this particular student can attain.”

5. 4. 3 English Learner Underachievement: Motivational Issues and Discouraging Experiences

“Feeling unsuccessful” in school subsumes a student’s experience of emotions evoked by academic failure and helplessness. A strong sense of observation and reasoning have led the educators to drawing an image of underachieving English learners, particularly in their tween and teen years, which has surfaced an essential character English learner underachievement has assumed. The psychological and emotional side of underachievement has evidenced itself in certain students’ behaviors as they have been experienced and perceived by the educators. Lack of motivation in some students and “lack of desire”, frustration and “discouragement” are the attributes that describe English learner underachievement and have manifested themselves in the educators’ experiences of their students’ attitudes, behaviors, and feelings. The experience of underachievement is that of an emotional strain and a psychological dissonance that “would beat me down.” It is a phenomenon that is publicly disapproved and shamed bringing down the morale of students who struggle from underachieving behaviors. The commonplace views in the society have produced oversimplified images of English learner underachievement which represent the public’s lower expectations for English learners in school performance as well as for their families’ educational support. As a result, English learner underachievement is thriving on the stereotypes and “hinging on” motivation. Beliefs about self, learning goals, career prospects, and self-efficiency are paramount to educational outcomes. English learners “know that society expects them to NOT achieve. These lower expectations “might be a thing that wouldn’t motivate them.” Through their family attitudes and expectations,

English learners are aware of their socioeconomic limits within the society. Therefore, they are likely to “do just the minimum and work in accomplishing very little to nothing.” The lack of “passion for the learning” and “drive to push themselves” characterizes underachieving English learners as their hope for educational success fades away along with families’ aspirations about their children’s future prospects. Underachieving students “don’t have the motivation,” and “their desire is not there” because their parents “don’t see education as a higher goal and see the importance of it.” A view of the society and family that sets limits on educational and occupational opportunities for some English learners “contributes to underachievement.”

Working over a period of several years, the educators have observed and studied cases of underachievement with the same students across various grade levels. Underachievement may linger “over the period of years, not just one term, not one year” making it harder to be relieved and overcome. It becomes a nuisance, a source of frustration, and a cause for school dropouts. The educators have noticed a lingering effect of “feeling unsuccessful” and “not achieving anything” on their students’ emotional mindset. They find themselves in a hopeless situation as they “have been going at it for a long time, and they feel like they’re not going to make it.” Students are “giving up all hope at that point”, drop out of school, and join the low-skill labor force with “no desire to go beyond, to go any further.” Therefore, a high school dropout is woven into the fabric of English learner underachievement, and it amplifies its texture.

In the experience of English learner underachievement feelings of helplessness and hopelessness arise from students’ agitation over their continuous series of academic failures and struggles. “Feeling unsuccessful” fills their inner world with

emotional turbulence and churns up in the educators' minds the intense feelings of doubt and uncertainty whether equitable educational opportunities and practices are ensured for English learners.

5. 4. 4 English Learner Underachievement: Inadequate Language Proficiency and Cultural Issues

Experiencing English learner underachievement has become a journey of encounters and incidences that have surfaced the issues of language and culture deeply embedded in the fabric of this phenomenon. Language seems to have a role of an obfuscating and obstructing element which makes academic content inaccessible and, therefore, an academic goal unattained. In this regard, the educators have experienced deeper issues of a linguistic character pertaining to underachievement among their English learners. In the event of newcomer English learners, a lack of proficiency in English may mask the skill they are capable of begetting underachievement behaviors and attitudes. By means of evaluating and assessing their performance in content areas, the educators become aware that these students' low English proficiency is an obstacle to academic success and their meaningful involvement in academic learning. Their inability to communicate and read in English does certainly "hinder their performance and progress in any subject since reading is all across the board." Underachievement in academic areas occurs because English learners "don't understand what's being asked...the context of things." Additionally, arriving at a new culture is associated with "a big cultural change and a social adjustment that turn into a scary experience for some." Newcomer English learners are often "in the dark about customs, social practices, idioms used in the English language,

and how to communicate their basic needs and desires.” Any of these circumstances or challenges may have an impact on “how the students will learn, at what pace they will acquire English, and how successful they will be in their academic studies.”

The educators have observed that if for some students with low language English proficiency a language barrier and cultural change are a temporary struggle and they “may be underachieving just for a small while” until they “pick up the curriculum” and learn enough English to handle grade level material; for other English learners, inability to “understand the content being taught due to a tremendous amount of technical terms and a struggle to “keep up with the load of student work given” become a discouraging motive which underlies the lingering underachievement situation.

The educators have evaluated and analyzed the ways in which their underachieving English learners approach grade level learning. They generally lack academic language and specialized terminology of particular content areas “to be able to do any of the content work” and “to explain or express their thoughts on paper.” In essence, English learner underachievement rests on academic vocabulary deficiencies that are hindering students’ access to comprehension of academic content and to higher levels of literacy skills.

5. 4. 5 English Learner Underachievement: Limited Prior Schooling and Low Native-Language Literacy

The educators in this study have interacted with their students and communicated with their families to seek understanding how the students’ past defines their present. Specifically, enquiring into cultural and social backgrounds of their underachieving English learners has helped the educators gain insight into the

relationship between the students' prior education and their current educational situation. As they have noted, "educational background makes a big difference in those who underachieve." English learners without "a strong literacy background of reading and writing in their first language" and with "no prior background knowledge to base things on" find it harder to learn the target language because "they don't have anything to compare it to." Students arriving at a U.S. school with "missing key skills in reading and math" usually experience lack of "a transfer of knowledge from their first language to English" and "have a terrible time learning reading and writing in a new language." These English learners tend to "struggle from the first day of school" and they "don't feel successful in the classroom because they cannot advance at the same pace as other students" of the same age and grade. This may lead to underachievement and the students tend to "drop out of school within a few years." Essentially, English learner underachievement feeds on prior educational gaps and stems from a failure to "build a strong foundation and literacy" in the student's first language.

5. 4. 6 English Learner Underachievement: Limited Opportunities at Home

The character of English learner underachievement has been perceived by the educators in such a way that seeks a deeper insight into family influences.

Underachievement devolves on family: its involvement, expectations, and socioeconomic position. The educators have experienced parental influences and observed characteristics of families whose children tend to underachieve. They have communicated with the students and parents and noticed the ways families go about education. The educators have become aware of a strong hold families have on their

students and sensed a connection between family characteristics and children's underachieving behaviors.

The experience of English learner underachievement is looking deeper into families' socioeconomic and cultural characteristics. Underachievement lingers on parents' inability to speak English and provide adequate academic assistance during the after school hours. Many parents have low proficiency in English, and they "often lack the skills necessary to help their children with even the basics of learning." Parents' "limited education" hinders their ability or willingness to provide their children with quality support for content learning especially beyond the point of primary schooling. Also, lack of access to additional educational resources or knowledge about "how to obtain available resources" creates a roadblock for parental involvement. Due to limited material means, parents are "trying to survive" working jobs and are usually "not at home to enforce learning." "Working all the time just to make...ends meet," some parents find it difficult to be fully involved in their children's education which is like "a Domino effect." Having no educational support at home "is affecting your [English learner] performance at school." Therefore, with "no extra support or extra practice" at home some English learners fall behind in school most likely feeling "hopeless and discouraged that nothing at home can help them."

The educators have observed that English learners tend to underachieve if they come from families with low income and limited views of the role of education. Culturally and socioeconomically, education may not be seen as a top priority for some families. Parents "do want what is best for their children" and they have expectations for them to do well in school but they "stress upon the value of education to a certain

point.” In other words, “education is important when you’re younger.” As you grow up and enter the upper grades, the goal is to find a job and help your family financially; “...in the long run you can be supporting your parents when you get older.”

Experiencing English learner underachievement is gaining insight into socioeconomic and cultural vulnerabilities many English learner families are exposed to. The cumulative effects of social injustices on families and their perceptions of wellbeing essentially downplay the role of education in their children’s future and exacerbate the underachievement situation.

5. 4. 7 English Learner Underachievement: Inequity of Educational Practices and Approaches

As they have related to English learner underachievement, the educators in this study have experienced some degree of indignation and discontent regarding some particular educational practices and certain teachers’ attitudes towards educating English learners. Through their sense of professional awareness and accountability, the educators have perceived certain educational practices as unaccommodating and unfair which debilitate the education of English learners and entrap them in academic underachievement. Inequity in teaching and testing practices permeates the very fabric of the school leading to underachievement instances and underachieving behaviors. For one, a heavy reliance on the state mandated testing and its outcomes puts incessant pressure on educators and English learners to ensure that test scores grow steadily and consistently. Teachers are held accountable for the test score growth of their English learners regardless of their English proficiency. This situation creates stress among teachers, and “the students most likely become discouraged and feel as

if they're not progressing, when actually, they are." This "affects the self-esteem for them. This affects learning." Unfair testing practices generate and accelerate underachieving behaviors whether those are revealed through emotional distress in students or their academic performance. They are deemed unfair because they are "mostly being tailored to the American culture" and "they're not taking into account all the different backgrounds that the students come from and what they may have going for or against them." They add to the image of underachievement by carrying the wrong message and producing the wrong labels.

Another aspect of schooling that appears to set ground for English learner underachievement lies in teachers' practices and their attitudes. The educators have spent ample time in building professional relationships with their colleagues and examining their teaching practices. It has come to their notice that there is lack of understanding among teachers about the intricacy of English learner educational needs. Very often, they "don't understand what a long process learning a new language is and they try to teach English learners the same way they're teaching everyone else." With the current accountability pressures and numbers of students in the classroom, teachers find it very "time-consuming" and "even sometimes impossible" to "provide needed accommodations" for their English learners and tailor instruction to meet their individual learning needs. For some teachers, rather than unwillingness to support English learners, it is a matter of increased workload and class size which lessen the degree of individualized attention to students' needs. For others, it is a lack of "empathy" and readiness "to want to be educated about English learners and be perceptive of their needs." In either case, it is a depressing backdrop for

underachievement because without quality assistance educators are “creating gaps” in their students’ learning and leave them on their own “to find coping mechanism to get by.” An overall picture of English learner underachievement includes the perception that education professionals are wanting in practical knowledge of “how to reach out to those underachievers” and “how to provide a better instruction for these students.”

5. 5 Concluding Comments

The educators’ experience of English learner underachievement is a complex interplay of thoughts and feelings they have and conscious actions they perform as they engage with this phenomenon. At the heart of this shared experience are the essences and meanings derived from each participant’s first-person awareness of English learner underachievement. Individual descriptions of the textures and structures of the educators’ phenomenal experiences captured the richness and complexity of these experiences. Each educator’s account offers an individual portrayal of meanings she ascribes to her conscious experience of English learner underachievement. These meanings were considered equally important and carefully analyzed to provide a more general insight of the educators’ collective experience. In its descriptive approach, phenomenology uses meanings elicited from an array of individual unique experiences to create a description of what persons have in common as they experience the phenomenon.

The totality of what the educators in this study have experienced in relation to English learner underachievement reveals that no aspect or quality of this phenomenon can be singled out to prevail in this phenomenal appearance. What makes the phenomenon of English learner underachievement intricately complex is its multi-

dynamic character which emerges amidst educational, cultural, and socioeconomic inequities. English learner underachievement is ingrained in the structures of school and society. It feeds on social and personal aspects of life and has a large impact on English learners' well-being. The educators' experience of English learner underachievement has evoked feelings, ideas, and thoughts that yearn for changing "the way of thinking" and improving the educational conditions for English learners to ensure equity and quality. The educators are unanimous in assuming that underachievement cannot be eliminated. It may be "with us even if we don't like it or don't want it to be around. We will always have underachievers." Nevertheless, they believe that there are ways of alleviating it, and finding these ways is the primary goal for educators. They have to "put effort into finding answers with English learner underachievement and they're not easy answers. They're not the same for every student, and for every student underachievement has its own reasons." The educators agree that underachievement should not be viewed as a uniform occurrence. There is a strong sense of understanding and acknowledgement of individuality in each underachieving English learner's situation which has its own underlying conditions. They are unanimous in the view that teachers need to create effective learning situations that accommodate individual needs of underachieving English learners. By the same token, educators need extensive support from school districts in ways that help them gain professional knowledge of approaches, strategies, and programs to provide quality education to all English learners and to reach out to underachieving students.

6. CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

6. 1 Discussion of Study Findings

This chapter summarizes the key findings of this study and distinguishes them from the findings analyzed in the literature review. The research questions guiding this study were answered through the meanings and essences of the educators' experience discovered during the phenomenological analysis. For the first question *What do educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement and how do they describe their experiences?* several textural thematic categories were discovered and portrayed in the educators' textural descriptions. The textural descriptions provide verbatim accounts of what has been experienced by the educators in relation to English learner underachievement.

For the second question *What are the essences and meanings that underlie their experience of English learner underachievement?* the structures of the educators' experience of English learner underachievement portrayed in their structural descriptions depict the underlying dynamics of their experience and account for the conditions that evoked their phenomenal experience. Furthermore, the textures and structures of the educators' experience of English learner underachievement were integrated into universal essences of English learner underachievement.

In order to position my study's findings in relation to the key findings from the literature review, I aimed to revisit the essential meanings of the educators' experience of English learner underachievement and discern whether they corroborate the findings discussed in the literature or diverge from them.

6. 1. 1 The Complexity

The educators in this study were unanimous in their desire to describe their experiences of English learner underachievement and share their deep concerns about the overpowering role of social, cultural, and economic issue in shaping underachieving behaviors. As a group they felt that their experience of English learner underachievement is rather complex, and it yields the horizons which account for the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon. In essence, English learner underachievement occurs as a totality of experience saturated with the dynamics of feelings, ideas, and actions of those who experience it.

Concerns have been raised that literature shows no agreement on a single definition of underachievement and ways of identifying it. More frequently, underachievement is conflated with low academic attainment or low achievement and used with reference to poor academic performance among groups of students (Ekins, 2010; Gillies, 2008; Gorard & Smith, 2004; Preckel et al., 2006; Smith, 2007). The educators, however, feel that English learner underachievement is not a distinguishing characteristic of a group. They discuss English learner underachievement with reference to individuals rather than a group. This approach is different from the one used by the mainstream research literature that is concerned with underachieving groups and their academic standing characterized by performance on tests at national and international levels.

Research focusing on achievement gaps and underachieving student groups uses the notion of underachievement to refer to poor standardized test performance, high school graduation, and dropout rates (Genesee et al., 2005; Gillies, 2008;

Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006; Plewis, 1991; Smith, 2007). The educators in this study adopt a multidimensional view of English learner underachievement. They acknowledge that underachievement is not absolute. The breadth and complexity of this social phenomenon hinge on various social dynamics and structures. They believe that the ways in which people view underachievement depend on their experiences and perceptions. This position is consistent with the beliefs voiced by some authors who contend that underachievement is not manifested in one form but takes many different forms depending on who perceives it. Therefore, insights into the broader meaning of the phenomenon are needed to capture its social significance (Delisle & Berger, 1990; Griffin, 1988; Krouse & Krouse, 1981).

6. 1. 2 The Learner

The educators in this study have observed English learner underachievement as struggling to perform and function effectively in the academic setting. They refer to several aspects of not making the grade including lack of steady progression and adequate skills to meet specific academic expectations. There is also mention of potential in terms of what students can do but fail to do. Potential is used in gifted and talented education discourse as an intellectual prowess and a yardstick for being academically successful. Students with high potential are said to underachieve if their performance falls below predictions of achievement based on their intellectual ability (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Diaz, 1998; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Reis & McCoach, 2000). However, some authors (e.g. Clark, 2008; Gillies, 2008; Smith, 2007) see the notion of potential problematic and fraught with ambiguity. The educators speak of potential as an inherent quality that provides every learner with a possibility for learning. They feel

that their students do not work to their capability or their fullest potential in the classroom. Capability and potential are spoken of in terms of what students can do. English learners do not reach their potential in terms of their unrealized capability or capacity for knowledge development. It implies that every student has latent characteristics that provide an intrinsic possibility or propensity for learning and acquiring skills. English learners underachieve when that possibility for knowledge development is constrained or impeded by certain socioeconomic, cultural, or individual experiences they live through. Therefore, underachievement translates into the students' failure to perform up to what they are capable of doing. Being and feeling unsuccessful in school is part of underachievement, and underachieving English learners experience lack of academic success which represents a struggle to rise to the highest level these students can attain.

A psychological aspect of English learner underachievement comes into view as the educators talk about emotional and motivational dynamics of educational experiences for some underachieving English learners, particularly in their pre-teen and teen years. They have observed a psychoemotional dimension of underachievement in school which resides on English learners' lack of motivation along with the feelings of discouragement and frustration triggered by limited educational expectations and other barriers that restrict the opportunities for their educational success.

In literature concerned with underachievement among English learners in U.S. schools, there is hardly any documented attempt to find out to what extent English learners' emotional issues and lack of motivation become a characteristic feature of their academic underachievement. The study findings point out to another aspect of

underachievement among English learners that has not been brought to focus by the literature. However, in second-language acquisition research, there has been an extensive debate about the role certain affective factors or issues including motivation play in second language learning. The affective factors or variables such as motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, attitude, and other factors are claimed to have a negative or positive effect on second language learning (Gardner, 1980, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Krashen, 1981, 1985). When learners are frustrated, nervous, anxious, stressed, bored, unmotivated or dealing with other negative emotions, they become less successful in second language learning. When learners feel more positive, confident, less stressed, and highly motivated, they are likely to experience success in second language learning. Despite the widespread attention this topic received in second language acquisition literature (e.g. Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Ortega, 2009), it is not linked to English learner related educational research which is concerned with underachievement among English learners in content area classrooms.

In terms of second language proficiency, recent research showed a strong link between levels of English language proficiency and students' performance in content areas. For example, in their study, Torres and Zeidler (2002) investigated the relationship between levels of English proficiency, scientific reasoning skills and English learner acquisition of science content knowledge. Their findings showed that English language proficiency and scientific reasoning independently had on a strong effect of content knowledge in science. With the intent to determine whether English learners' levels of English proficiency are comparable to levels of their performance on content

assessments, Butler and Castellon-Wellington (2000) found that there was a significant relationship between the learners' English language proficiency and their content performance. The study conducted by Abedi, Leon, and Mirocha (2003) established a strong link between English language proficiency and English learners' performance on standardized content-based assessments. The results showed that students with lower levels of English language proficiency, when faced with linguistically complex test items, performed significantly lower in all subject areas than their native English counterparts.

The findings suggest that higher proficiency levels in English contribute to higher academic outcomes. Lower levels of English language proficiency are attributed to lower performance of English learners on achievement assessments and considered a barrier to their successful academic performance.

The same conclusions have been drawn from the educators' experiences. They have perceived lower levels of English language proficiency or inadequate knowledge of English as an aspect of English learner underachievement. In their experience, a language barrier hinders student learning in content-area classes taught in English. Also, English learner limited academic language proficiency precludes meaningful access to content knowledge and exacerbates the underachieving situation. Despite the concurrence on this issue, research primarily uses content-based standardized tests to determine the relevant links, while the educators in this study resort to a wider range of evaluation methods and observational techniques as an integral part of the everyday classroom.

There is agreement between the study findings and the literature about a strong relationship between English learners' prior educational experiences and their academic

performance in a U.S. school. The educators have experienced situations when their underachieving students are not able to resort to knowledge transfer skills due to their lack of native language literacy skills and limited prior schooling in content areas. For the educators, lack of prior educational experiences is a significant defining feature of English learner underachievement. Similarly, students with limited or no formal education in their native language and lack of basic native language literacy skills struggle with English learning and, therefore, English-based content knowledge.

In the same vein, the discussed literature cites evidence of the influence native language literacy and content knowledge have on students' academic achievement and English language development. Garcia-Vazquez, Vazquez, Lopez, and Ward (1997) revealed strong correlations between English proficiency, native language proficiency and the achievement score. The results indicated that native language proficiency and literacy have a significant impact on performance in achievement assessments in English. Other evidence indicating that native language literacy has a positive effect on academic achievement was obtained from the study conducted by Bankston and Zhou (1995). Their findings also revealed that literacy proficiency in both languages facilitated positive ethnic and cultural self-identification. Furthermore, recent findings from August and Shanahan (2006) confirm a facilitative role of oral proficiency and native language literacy in the learner's development of literacy skills in English.

In addition, culture change stressors are believed to shape underachieving behaviors. The educators have observed that some underachieving English learners encounter difficulties in the new cultural context and struggle to adjust to its standards. There is also a common view among the educators that societal expectations and

cultural self-identification contribute to the experience of English learner underachievement. For some underachieving English learners it is an inferiority complex or how they identify and position themselves within the system of societal expectations. They are aware that the society, school, and home have limited expectations for their social and professional engagement and, therefore, they are likely to put forth less effort into trying to do well in school. The educators' experience somewhat echoes the discussion by some scholars (e.g. Gibson, 1988; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Portes, 1999) who suggest that specific cultural conditions, perceptions, and expectations account for school performance of certain groups of immigrant or diverse students.

The significance of the educators' experience of a cultural dimension of English learner underachievement should not be understated. Given the longitudinal and immediate character of their experience, it should be acknowledged that their perceptions of the cultural dimension of underachievement may count as credible evidence to other educators since they emerge over time from the authentic context of a daily classroom life and are rooted in the deep knowledge of the lives of particular students.

6. 1. 3 The Family

Family is a cultural stronghold. The educators talk about a significant role it plays in the lives of their students. Limited educational and material opportunities for their English learners' families have become an integral part of what the educators in this study have experienced in relation to underachievement. The educators believe that English learner underachievement feeds on the restricted social and material conditions

under which families live and engage in their children's education. Families with low income cannot afford to provide resources and experiences that would extend educational opportunities for their children. These limitations of educational experiences and materials become a roadblock to academic progress and educational achievement.

Literature has offered various factors of family background that may account for underachievement among English learners and language minority students. These factors are not limited to a family's income and often used in combination when examined in relation to educational achievement. For instance, Warren (1996) considered family income, structure, and parents' education as having an effect on educational achievement of Mexican-origin children. By examining the role family socioeconomic status and immigrant characteristics play in educational attainment of Asian and Latino students, Harris, Jamison, and Trujillo (2008) found that these aspects, to a varying extent, explain students' educational achievement. Krashen and Brown (2005) indicated that family socioeconomic and educational backgrounds account for English learners' performance and have an impact on student achievement. The findings from Altschul's (2012) study also indicated that certain socioeconomic factors were predictive of Mexican American student academic achievement. This and other studies (e.g. Kao and Rutherford, 2007; Lee and Bowen, 2006; Yan and Lin, 2005) reported that parent involvement play a significant role in language minority student achievement.

Research findings indicate that students who underachieve or drop out of school are likely to come from households with lower levels of socioeconomic standing, formal

education, parental involvement as well as lower educational expectations parents have for their children (Capps et al., 2005; Gonzalez, 2001; Reyes & Jason, 1993; Velez, 1989).

Similar ideas and beliefs are echoed in the educators' accounts. However, they have not just singled out potential socioeconomic factors but rather talked about a situation of socioeconomic limitations that go against families and significantly restrict the opportunities for their children to succeed in school. For the educators, English learner underachievement is rooted in students' limited access to meaningful and competent parental involvement and assistance with their educational needs. Parents' willingness to be fully involved in their children's education is impaired by their limited schooling, low English language proficiency, and lack of material means.

Underachievement is also situated in limited family expectations for their children in terms of further education prospects; a higher value is placed on family's financial wellbeing. Therefore, basic school education is appreciated inasmuch as an opportunity to get a job and start supporting a family. The socioeconomic strand takes an important place in the educators' accounts. It has evoked their emotional responses, and they seem to feel helpless in remedying this social condition. The educators have always sought parental support in the hope that parents may see beyond the limitations and do more to engage with their children's educational experience. However, they are aware that the suppressing effect of parents' lower socioeconomic position creates an environment of limited conditions which govern their choices.

6. 1. 4 The School

Some authors suggest that quality educational practices may reduce a negative impact of the socioeconomic factors on English learners' educational achievement (e.g. D'Angiulli et al., 2004; Krashen & Brown, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Educational research dedicated to the study and improvement of educational practices for English learners has looked into practices that bring bias values to English learner schooling and examined ways to integrate quality and equity into English learner education. One of the concerns both the educators and some scholars struggle with is a dominant position standardized testing holds in data-based decision making and educational accountability for English learners. A number of factors and biases which affect the standardized test validity and accuracy of test results are critically discussed in literature (Abedi, 2010; Hernandez, 1994; Liu, Thurlow, Erickson, Spicuzza, & Heinze, 1997). Standardized achievement tests developed for the mainstream student population are not sensitive to the needs of English language learners. Given the high levels of linguistic complexity and cultural bias present in tests, they are rendered invalid measures of English learner knowledge (Solano-Flores, 2008; Solorzano, 2008). Research findings indicate that levels of English language proficiency are associated with English learner performance on content-based assessments. English learners with inadequate English language proficiency perform considerably lower than their native English peers in all subject areas (Abedi et al., 2000/2005; Abedi et al., 2003; Abedi & Lord, 2001). The importance of language in English learner test performance is underscored and the impact of language of test items on content performance is noted (Abedi & Lord, 2001; Shaftel et al., 2006).

The educators in this study share the same sentiments. The way they have experienced underachievement transpires in their analysis of standardized testing practices and biases. Students with inadequate English language proficiency are tested in a language they have not mastered yet and their efforts are unlikely to yield satisfactory results. The outcomes are twofold. Standardized testing creates a lot of stress for both teachers and English learners. On the one hand, the obsession and fear of being held accountable for test results compel teachers to teach to the test while overlooking English learners' real educational needs. On the other hand, feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and inferior by their test failures may discourage students from doing well and even attending school. The educators see it as the worst scenario for underachievement which is less likely to be reversed and more likely to reach its apogee-high school dropout.

Along with the testing practices the educators have examined teachers' practices and their attitudes towards English learner education. Underachievement among their English learners, as they see it, persists in ineffective classroom practices and teachers' lack of knowledge of how to address English learners' needs. Teachers' lack of understanding of what processes are involved in learning a second language and how to accommodate English learners to ensure their success in the classroom worsens the existing underachievement problem. Their experiences are consistent with the views of some scholars (e.g. Gandara et al., 2005; Gandara & Rumberger, 2003) that English learners' lack of access to quality instruction and highly trained teaching professionals with understanding of their students' linguistic, academic, and cultural needs negatively affects their academic performance.

Consistent with the research (Reeves, 2006; Walker et al., 2004), the educators have observed that some teachers exhibit mixed attitudes towards English learners, especially those with low English proficiency, and uncertainty about how to approach their education in the mainstream classroom. Due to lack of knowledge of second language learning process and experience in working with English learners, teachers feel less confident and, at times, reluctant at differentiating learning experiences to meet their students' needs.

The educators are concerned that along with the lack of professional development and knowledge how to address English learners' language needs and academic gaps, teachers are faced with lack of instructional time, educational resources, quality assessment tools, and culturally competent practices. Therefore, the problem of English learner underachievement lingers on.

The same concerns are discussed in the literature examining teachers' views. The main challenges facing teachers are: language barriers, English learner lack of prior content knowledge, lack of appropriate tools and instructional materials, the need for professional training in English language development and various kinds of teaching strategies, the need for more instructional time, and inadequate support from the school, district, and policy. (Cho & McDonnough, 2009; Gandara, et al., 2005). In addition, teachers are concerned about insufficient attention to student diversity, lack of professional knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy, and heavy emphasis on statewide assessments (Lee et al., 2009).

The educators in this study feel urgency to address underachievement. They seek ways to improve schooling conditions for English Learners and develop successful

classrooms practices that are responsive to their cultural, linguistic, and academic needs.

6. 2 Contributions

This study has methodological, pedagogical, and social value for educational research. It has contributed to the overall understanding of the phenomenon of English learner underachievement and drawn attention to the importance of the educator voice in educational decision making.

The methodological contribution of the study lies in the phenomenological approach used with the aim to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and meanings of educators' experiences of English learner underachievement. To the best of my knowledge, no study using a phenomenological methodology has been undertaken in an attempt to examine and describe what educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement.

Furthermore, the study has emphasized the value of educators' experiences and meanings they ascribe to their professional life and established the social significance of bringing up the educator voice to the height of the ongoing debate over English learner education and its pedagogical implications for research and practice.

7. CHAPTER VII: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND OUTCOMES

7. 1 Summary of the Study

This study took a phenomenological approach to explore and describe what eight educators of different age and cultural background experienced in relation to English learner underachievement. It sought to reveal and allow insight into meanings and essences of their experience of this phenomenon. The research questions guiding this study were: What do educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement and how do they describe their experiences? What are the essences and meanings that underlie their experience of English learner underachievement?

Several textural and structural categories emerged from the analysis of the data. The textural thematic categories included: underachieving English learner performance in school, emotional and psychological barriers, language and cultural change, prior educational experience, family's socioeconomic status and parental involvement, educational practices and teacher attitudes. The structures underlying the educators' experience of English learner underachievement were: evaluation, observation, communication and interaction, development of professional awareness and accountability, examination of students' backgrounds, professional collaboration, and examination of educational practices.

7. 2 Implications and Outcomes

The findings from this phenomenological study add to our understanding of what educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement. They have revealed that what and how educators experience English learner underachievement do

not yield a simplified portrayal of the phenomenon viewed through concrete definitions. Rather, experiencing English learner underachievement comes in complex profiles and qualities which retain integrity and genuineness of the experiential picture.

The educators in this research have described their experiences in such a way that allowed deeper insight into the essential nature of English learner underachievement. The meanings and essences of their experience portray the phenomenon in its entirety. Underachievement among English learners has been used as a notion based on the causality relation. Both literature and research discuss underachievement of English learners in terms of their performance on high-stakes tests and effects of certain factors on such performance. Research has investigated factors, in isolation and in combination, that are closely associated with underachievement of English learners. The effect of such factors is estimated using the measures and protocol of standardized tests.

In this study, the essences of the educators' experience of English learner underachievement capture the all-inclusiveness and complexity of the phenomenon. The textures and structures of the experience facilitate greater understanding of what it is like to experience English learner underachievement. There is no focus on exclusivity of particular aspects of underachievement. Nor, did the educators comply with the mainstream assumptions that drive the educational policy today. Using the findings from the study, the reader can revisit the traditional and narrow view of what defines English learner underachievement and extend the notion to the multifaceted limitation model ingrained in the structure of the social order.

7. 2. 1 Future Educational Research

Phenomenological research assumes that phenomenal experience cannot be exhausted. More qualitative research with educators who have experienced underachievement among English learners is needed to gain deeper insight into the aspects of underachievement and conditions for its emergence. There is need for knowledge what education practitioners experience when they encounter underachievement in the lived world of their classrooms. This knowledge will add to understanding of how educators deal with underachievement tendencies and what they do to improve the condition for underachieving English learners. This knowledge may also yield deeper insights into possible causes and underlying conditions for English learner underachievement. In this regard, policy and decision makers will benefit from using practical knowledge elicited from educators' first hand experiences to guide their future educational policies and create equitable educational conditions for English learners in order to achieve better educational outcomes. Moreover, qualitative research giving credence to educators' experiences would place an emphasis on educator voices and their role in the construction of the educational reality, thus, offering considerable possibilities for solving real life problems.

In consideration of future research endeavors, I would explore more possibilities for experiential evidence. The future phenomenological project may consider investigating the experiences of educators working at a specific level of K-12 education, primary or secondary. Long interviews and written descriptions would produce experiential accounts that illuminate essences of underachievement among a particular group of English learners who are in a similar age category and academic condition.

This may illuminate specific meanings, reveal additional understandings, and create a clearer picture of the phenomenon that captures what underachievement is like among only elementary school students or only secondary school students as experienced by educators from these levels respectively.

7. 2. 2 Implications for Educational Practice

In the current educational system, educators are involved in a wide variety of tasks and practices that require knowledge, values, attitudes, approaches, and reflection skills to render teaching effective and reflective. In essence, effective teaching practices arise from daily experiences of teachers and that knowledge they elicit from daily encounters with various educational phenomena. It seems to be rather logical to assume that educators' experiences would be the best source of knowledge and educational wisdom that should guide decision making processes at the policy, school, and classroom levels. With this in mind, being the center of this research study, the educators' experience is the primary and most authentic source of the firsthand knowledge about English learner underachievement.

The findings from this study may resonate with education practitioners and their classroom experiences. They may have implications for their own investigations into successful teaching practices and finding more effective ways of approaching English learners in order to prevent or alleviate underachievement. For instance, the needs of newcomer English learners with low English proficiency may be effectively addressed by developing and implementing newcomer programs. Such programs may focus on scaffolded English language learning along with content learning through the use of

English and students' native language with the aim to provide a smooth and more successful transition of students into the mainstream classroom.

The findings may also throw light on circumstances and conditions underlying underachievement which stretch beyond the bounds of a classroom. For instance, knowledge about parents' inability to provide academic support at home may prompt educators and school district administration to seek additional funds and manpower to organize after school tutoring for English learners with the aim of closing the gap in academic support between school and home.

At the instructional level, educators may be attracted by the vividness and truthfulness of the experiential accounts that share the educators' personal views and perceptions of one particular phenomenon. For practical purposes, educators may use an experiential writing activity to encourage their students to share their experiences on a particular topic or critical issue.

7. 2. 3 Implications for the Researcher's Professional Practice

In studying the educators' experiences of English learner underachievement this research has offered an opportunity for my reflection and the groundings for the reexamination of certain aspects of my teaching and professional engagement. It has also provided me with viable knowledge of research practice, its tools, and motivation to undertake investigation into topics of my interest and issues of critical importance.

As an ESOL educator I encounter certain aspects of my participants' experience of English learner underachievement and seek effective ways of addressing the challenges my English learners face in their daily academic lives. However, the outcomes of this research have served as a wake-up call to strengthen my intention and

professional skill to reach out to my fellow teachers, my students, and my students' parents.

One of the outcomes to underscore is a challenging positioning of English learners in content classrooms and educators' struggle to find effective ways of addressing their individual learning needs. This compels a shift in my moving towards a more intensive and more efficient assistance for regular classroom educators working with English learners. Apart from support and assistance, it is a moral imperative to invest my time and my intention into raising multicultural awareness among educators and help them develop practical knowledge of working successfully and equitably with English learners in all contexts and at all levels of English proficiency.

Another consideration is that families need access to more resources and experiential knowledge that would overcome their low English proficiency and help them enjoy a full parental involvement in their children's education. This may be accomplished by ensuring constant communication with parents, providing them with strategies on the fly that compensate for their limited knowledge of English but help their children to learn, and by offering parents educational resources that do not necessarily require additional spending.

Finally, I feel compelled to look back into my classroom practices and develop a greater sense of urgency for some changes in my ways of making the school experience more successful for my English learners.

7. 3 Personal Reflections

It has been a long road...Through failures, frustrations, and doubts I have travelled a long way to find a great sense of accomplishment for what I have achieved. One thing is true: you never know what tomorrow may bring. So, I learned not to overstate my projections and accepted realistic goals which guided me throughout the course of my research.

It has been an endeavoring experience. He who says research is easy, is not quite telling you the truth. It takes dedication, willpower, and time to acquire knowledge and gain insight. I have never believed it would absorb all my thoughts and demand all my effort. There have been some sleepless nights with racing thoughts being so intrusive and overpowering. But, in the end, the work you have accomplished gives you a feeling of personal gratification and a good night's sleep. You feel confident, empowered, and invigorated.

This journey has taught me the way of wisdom and phenomenological attitude. Phenomenology invites us to set aside our everyday way of thinking and open our minds to see the life-world for what it is and how it appears to our consciousness. I believe in the value and uniqueness of human experience. It provides us with a deeper insight into the phenomena of our everyday life. Meanings people make are embodied in their personal experiences. Meanings that are shared across peoples' experiences become commonalities. These convey overall essences of the phenomenal experience.

In my study, the educators have experienced and described English learner underachievement in such a way that has led me to a better understanding of the

phenomenon. Through their meanings and phenomenological attitude, I have sought intuitive insight into the essences of their experience of English learner underachievement. For me, it was a process of my exploration and my meaning making in a sense of experiencing phenomenological research and opening up new horizons of knowledge. This experience has changed my philosophy of life and teaching. I can clearly perceive the uniqueness of my students' experiences and meanings they ascribe to their learning. This knowledge has made me a better researcher and a more perceptive teacher.

I am grateful for what I have experienced all throughout my research journey and my professional growth as a researcher. The road to my discovery has been fraught with challenges and ambiguity. But, the hope of finding the oasis of knowledge and the desire of walking the extra mile to quench my thirst for discovery have kept me moving forward to my goal giving me the bliss of achieving my professional and personal fulfillment. I will make every effort to preserve this knowledge, expand it, and use it in my future endeavors for the benefit of my students and my fellow educators.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Institutional Consent to Conduct Study

DATE:

ATTN: _____

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral student in TESOL at the Graduate School of Education, College of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of Exeter, UK. I am writing for the purpose of gaining your consent to conduct a research study in _____. The research participants will be teachers and paraprofessionals. My study is entitled *English Learner Underachievement: In Search of Essences and Meanings: A Phenomenological Study of Educator Experiences of Underachievement among English Learners in One Georgia Public School System*. The purpose of this study is to explore what educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement and describe the meanings and essences emerging from their phenomenal experience.

If consent is granted, the participants will be invited to participate in two events: an interview and essay writing. These will occur in an informal setting during after school hours and at locations chosen by the participants. Prior to the data collection I will obtain informed consent from the participants. The participants will be assured of confidentiality and anonymity from the outset. The research data and materials will be securely accessed and stored. The research data will be seen only by me, the researcher, and my research supervisors at the University of Exeter. To maintain and protect privacy I will not use the real names of the participants and the name of the research study site. Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure that no output will provide information which might allow any participant or institution to be identified. Participation in this research project is voluntary and may be terminated at any time. The participants will not be exposed to any harm, pressure or risks. My intention is to make partaking in this research as comfortable and convenient as possible.

Thank you very much in advance for your support. Please refer to the next page for additional information.

I hereby grant consent to conduct the aforementioned study in _____.

Signature

Date

Name and Title

If consent is granted, please submit a signed letter printed on the institution letterhead affirming your consent to the aforementioned study.

Background Information

This research study seeks to explore educators' experiences of English learner underachievement and describe the essences of their phenomenal experience. Against the backdrop of a widespread concern regarding minority achievement gaps in the United States, the field of educational research observes a lack of qualitative studies that have aimed to explore what educators experience in relation to underachievement among culturally and linguistically diverse students. To the best of my knowledge, no phenomenological study has been conducted in an attempt to examine and describe educators' experience of English learner underachievement. Educational research is likely to benefit from a study that offers insight into meanings educators ascribe to their experience of English learner underachievement. For one thing, understanding what educators experience in relation to this phenomenon may reveal new meanings and suggest solutions to help alleviate English learner underachievement. For another, a study with focus on educators' lived experiences will promote professional empowerment and encourage reflective practices in education. In addition, this research experience will contribute to educators' collaborative efforts to seek out effective ways of how to address English learners' needs. Furthermore, being involved in practitioner research will enrich my personal growth and maximize my professional development in TESOL.

Should you have any questions about this research, please contact me at _____ or via email at _____.

Sincerely,
Irina Bowen

Appendix B

Information Letter to Prospective Participants

DATE:

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral student in TESOL at the Graduate School of Education, College of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of Exeter. I am currently in the process of conducting the research for my thesis entitled *English Learner Underachievement: In Search of Essences and Meanings: A Phenomenological Study of Educator Experiences of Underachievement Among English Learners in One Georgia Public School System*.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand what educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement. More specifically, I aim to describe the meanings and essences of their phenomenal experience. Against the backdrop of a widespread concern regarding minority achievement gaps in the United States, the field of educational research observes a lack of qualitative studies that have aimed to explore what educators experience in relation to underachievement among culturally and linguistically diverse students. Understanding how educators experience and make sense of this phenomenon may point toward new meanings and suggest solutions to help alleviate underachievement. Therefore, educational research is likely to benefit from a study that offers an insight into educators' experience of this phenomenon.

I would immensely appreciate if you would agree to partake in this research endeavor and give your personal insight into the issue. I would like to invite you to participate in two events: essay writing and an interview. An essay will depict your experiences, thoughts, and feelings about English learner underachievement. It will be presented in a freestyle writing. There are no format and length requirements or guidelines for your writing. It provides an opportunity for you to share and reflect on your experiences at your own pace and convenience. An interview will allow you and me to engage in a face-to-face interaction and communication on the subject of English learner underachievement. The interview will be carried out in an informal setting at locations and times chosen by you and will last an hour and a half, more or less. Prior to the interview I will ask your permission to audio record your responses. Your interview responses and essay writing will be completely confidential and securely stored. To maintain and protect your privacy your real name and the name of the research site i.e. the name of your school and the district will not be disclosed in this research. Your participation in this research project is voluntary and you may terminate it at any time. You will not be exposed to any harm, pressure or risks. My intention is to make your partaking in this research as comfortable and convenient as possible.

I have enclosed a copy of the informed consent form you will be requested to sign prior to your participation. Thank you very much in advance for your participation and support.

Should you have any questions about this research, please contact me at _____ or via email at _____.

Sincerely,
Irina Bowen



GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Title of Research Project:

CONSENT FORM

I have been fully informed about the aims and purposes of the project.

I understand that:

there is no compulsion for me to participate in this research project and, if I do choose to participate, I may at any stage withdraw my participation and may also request that my data be destroyed

I have the right to refuse permission for the publication of any information about me

any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications or academic conference or seminar presentations

if applicable, the information, which I give, may be shared between any of the other researcher(s) participating in this project in an anonymised form

all information I give will be treated as confidential

the researcher(s) will make every effort to preserve my anonymity

(Signature of participant)

(Date)

(Printed name of participant)

One copy of this form will be kept by the participant; a second copy will be kept by the researcher(s)

Contact phone number of researcher(s):

If you have any concerns about the project that you would like to discuss, please contact:

OR

* when research takes place in a school, the right to withdraw from the research does NOT usually mean that pupils or students may withdraw from lessons in which the research takes place

Data Protection Act: The University of Exeter is a data collector and is registered with the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner as required to do under the Data Protection Act 1998. The information you provide will be used for research purposes and will be processed in accordance with the University's registration and current data protection legislation. Data will be confidential to the researcher(s) and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties without further agreement by the participant. Reports based on the data will be in anonymised form.

Appendix D

Interview Schedule

Introduction

I would like to obtain your permission to audio tape your responses in order to maintain accuracy of the information provided. All the recorded interview responses will be completely confidential and securely stored. Recorded data will be downloaded from recording devices at the earliest possible opportunity, and then deleted immediately from those devices. Electronic data will be stored in my password protected account on the University of Exeter U-drive.

Prior to the interview you must sign an informed consent form which states that: (1) all information you give will be treated as confidential; (2) the researcher will make every effort to preserve your anonymity; (3) there is no compulsion for you to participate in this research project and, if you do choose to participate, you may at any stage withdraw your participation; (4) you have the right to refuse permission for the publication of any information about yourself; (5) any information which you give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications and (6) if applicable, the information, which you give, may be shared between any of the other researcher(s) participating in this project in an anonymized form.

The interview will last about ninety minutes, more or less. During this time, I have a few topics I would like you to share your insight on.

Interview

Thank you very much for taking interest in my research endeavor. I would like to speak to you regarding your experiences of the phenomenon of underachievement among English learners. This study is entitled *English Learner Underachievement: In Search of Essences and Meanings: A Phenomenological Study of Educator Experiences of Underachievement among English Learners in One Georgia Public School System*. The purpose of the study is to explore what educators experience in relation to English learner underachievement and illuminate new meanings emerging from their phenomenal experience. I seek to gain a deeper understanding of meanings educators ascribe to English learner underachievement and describe the essences of this phenomenon. I am interested in all the aspects of your experience. I would greatly appreciate if you would share anything you may find relevant to the topic of our conversation.

Interviewee Background

Background questions about educator's position, descriptions of work responsibilities, length of overall teaching experience, length of teaching experience within this school district, relations to the English learner context, and alike.

Examples of General Questions

- What have you experienced in relation to English learner underachievement?

- How can you characterize your experience of English learner underachievement?

- Please describe in depth your experience of underachievement among your English learners.
- In what ways does English learner underachievement appear to you?
- How would you describe your experience of English learner underachievement?
- What is underachievement for you? What have you experienced in terms of underachievement of English learners in your classroom?

Examples of Specific Questions

- How do you feel about underachieving students?
- How do you feel when people talk about underachievement of English learners?
- You stated that English learner are underachieving for a variety of reasons. Can you provide me with more detail on the reasons why it is happening?
- You have mentioned about students who underachieve in middle and high school. Tell me more about underachieving students in upper grades.
- Are there any other areas or situations where you experience underachievement?
- So, you have mentioned lack of organization and lack of adequate attitude towards education of both parents and students. Could you elaborate, please?
- You mentioned about inability of parents in terms of their low English language proficiency to help their kids. How is it relevant to the issue of underachievement?
- Could you be more specific on how underachievement presents itself?
- ...lack of material resources and poverty. What bearing do they have on the case of underachievement? Can you provide more detail please?
- How do you know that it is underachievement? How do you recognize underachievement among English learners?
- Earlier you said that teachers do not have sufficient professional development and enough resources to handle underachievement. What do you think the district can do to address the issues of underachievement?
- So, what can teachers do to alleviate underachievement? Can you expand on this topic, please?

Appendix E

Essay Prompt

Topic: English Learner Underachievement

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe what teachers/educators experience in regard to underachievement among English Learners. Write in your own words about your personal experience of English learner underachievement and what it means to you. Share your ideas and feelings about this phenomenon. I will appreciate and cherish everything captured in your story. There are no format and length requirements or guidelines for your writing. THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

What have you experienced in relation to underachievement among English learners?

MSc, PhD, EdD & DEdPsych theses.



Graduate School of Education

Certificate of ethical research approval

MSc, PhD, EdD & DEdPsych theses

To activate this certificate you need to first sign it yourself, and then have it signed by your supervisor and finally by the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee.

For further information on ethical educational research access the guidelines on the BERA web site: <http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications> and view the School's Policy online.

READ THIS FORM CAREFULLY AND THEN COMPLETE IT ON YOUR COMPUTER (the form will expand to contain the text you enter). **DO NOT COMPLETE BY HAND**

Your name: IRINA BOWEN

Your student no: 600016930

Return address for this certificate: 250 JIM BOWEN ROAD, REIDSVILLE, GA 30453 USA

Degree/Programme of Study: EDD TESOL

Project Supervisor(s): SALAH TROUDI, SHIRLEY LARKIN

Your email address: ib235@exeter.ac.uk

Tel: +1 912 293 1644

I hereby certify that I will abide by the details given overleaf and that I undertake in my thesis to respect the dignity and privacy of those participating in this research.

I confirm that if my research should change radically, I will complete a further form.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Irina Bowen", written over a horizontal line.

Date: JULY 9, 2013

Certificate of ethical research approval

TITLE OF YOUR PROJECT:

English Learner Underachievement: In Search of Essences and Meanings:
A Phenomenological Study of Educator Experiences of Underachievement Among English Learners
in One Georgia Public School System

1. Brief description of your research project:

This phenomenological study is intended to explore educators' experiences of English learner underachievement and illuminate new meanings emerging from their first-hand knowledge of this phenomenon. The researcher seeks to understand and describe these experiences from the participant's own point of view.

2. Give details of the participants in this research (giving ages of any children and/or young people involved):

State of Georgia certified teachers and paraprofessionals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds working in ESOL, migrant education, general education intervention programs, and mainstream classrooms.

Give details (with special reference to any children or those with special needs) regarding the ethical issues of:

3. informed consent: Where children in schools are involved this includes both headteachers and parents). Copy(ies) of your consent form(s) you will be using must accompany this document. a blank consent form can be downloaded from the GSE student access on-line documents: Each consent form MUST be personalised with your contact details.

Informed consent will be obtained from the participants prior to the study by using the University of Exeter consent form.

4. anonymity and confidentiality

The participants are assured of confidentiality and anonymity from the outset. To maintain and protect privacy the researcher will not use the real names of the participants and the name of the research study site. Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure that no output will provide information which might allow any participant or institution to be identified.

5. Give details of the methods to be used for data collection and analysis and how you would ensure they do not cause any harm, detriment or unreasonable stress:

The participants will be given a clear formulation of the research topic. The researcher will explain the purpose of the study and inform the participants about the data collection and analysis procedures. In-depth semi-structured interviews and essays will be used to collect qualitative data. Individual interviews with open-ended questions will be carried out face-to-face between the researcher and participants in an informal setting at locations and times chosen by the participants. The essay provides an opportunity for the participants to share and reflect on their experiences at their own pace, convenience, and writing style. The researcher will hold relationships with the participants based on trust and ensure that an atmosphere of comfort and mutual understanding is

established to the fullest degree. This will allow obtaining truthful accounts of the participants' experiences shared during interviews and in essays.

6. Give details of any other ethical issues which may arise from this project - e.g. secure storage of videos/recorded interviews/photos/completed questionnaires, or

Any research data and materials will be securely accessed and stored. Any hard copy data and signed consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Any audio data will be downloaded from recording devices at the earliest possible opportunity, and then deleted immediately from those devices. Electronic data will be stored in my password protected account on the University of Exeter U-drive.

7. special arrangements made for participants with special needs etc. NONE

8. Give details of any exceptional factors, which may raise ethical issues (e.g. potential political or ideological conflicts which may pose danger or harm to participants):

Participant attrition: a participant may no longer be able to participate due to relocation, illness, death, or other reasons. Ethical issues and questions are unlikely to arise.

This form should now be printed out, signed by you on the first page and sent to your supervisor to sign. Your supervisor will forward this document to the School's Research Support Office for the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee to countersign. A unique approval reference will be added and this certificate will be returned to you to be included at the back of your dissertation/thesis.

N.B. You should not start the fieldwork part of the project until you have the signature of your supervisor

This project has been approved for the period:

until: 19 July 2017

By (above mentioned supervisor's signature):

Salah D. ...

.....Date: 15/8/2013

N.B. To Supervisor: Please ensure that ethical issues are addressed annually in your report and if any changes in the research occur a further form is completed.

GSE unique approval reference:.....

D | 12 | 13 | 39.....

Signed:.....

N. P. ...

Date:.....

12/8/13

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee

Appendix G

Individual Textural Descriptions of English Learner Underachievement

English Learner Underachievement: Karen's Experience

To me, English learner underachievement occurs when a student's academic performance is below the level for his or her current grade level. For example, if a 4th grader is reading on a 3rd grade level, then that student would be an underachiever. I would say half of my English learners would be what I would consider underachievers. Even with all the accommodations I put in place, even with the extra support they get they still aren't reading and comprehending and performing math skills on grade level. It's just hard for me to figure out exactly what they need in order to be successful because I've done everything I can and then they're still struggling.

Underachievement is the lack of successful performance on grade level. That can be in any grade. When my underachieving students pop in my head I ask myself, "What do they all have in common?" They can't perform on grade level independently. Well, now, with me sitting there they can. That's not a problem. But it's me holding their hand to make sure that they are reading the questions and make sure that they're not making this or that mistake. But as far as independent work underachievement comes from not being successful academically and not making the grade.

The test students take in the fall, winter, and spring gives you the number or the score. That number corresponds to the grade level that they should be performing on. When looking at their scores I expect to see an increase each semester. If I see a decrease each semester, then there's a problem. Students are provided with accommodations and our tests throughout the year are not standardized. They are modified and fit the students' needs. With the standardized tests, that's not the case. Standardized tests aren't throughout the school year. You have one test at the end of the school year and it's just not a good indication of the students' performance.

So, if you are not achieving at the grade level and not performing up to the expectations, you are an underachiever performing below where you should be. Now, growth is great. I want to see growth. But, if that growth is not still to that point that's an underachiever, in my opinion. I'm not saying that growth is not worth anything because it is but until you meet that mark, you are underachieving.

While working with my English learners I've seen common patterns in behavior and academic performance. The English learners I have worked with have a passion and motivation to learn. They continue to try their best, no matter how many times they fail. They truly want to please their teacher. So what makes it so hard for them to perform on grade level, if the passion is there? I believe that there're specific environmental and academic factors attributed to this underachievement. They go hand in hand in this issue.

I believe that a primary cause of English learner underachievement is the lack of academic language. By the 4th grade, which is the age group I've worked with, most English learners can carry on clear conversations with their teachers and peers. They've been taught how to use conversational English in a way to help them relate to their English speaking peers. The issue comes with their academic language. When it comes to reading the academic language even in math word problems they can't

understand “What is this question asking me? What do I need to do in order to solve this problem?” They don’t have a strong background in this language and teachers don’t have adequate training in how to teach this language.

In contrast, newcomer students from other countries struggle with the social language. They can’t really communicate with their peers because they don’t understand the social language. I think that in this case the language barrier really does have to do everything with underachievement for those students because if they can’t read English and understand what it’s saying then it will certainly hinder their performance and progress in any subject since reading is all across the board.

Reading and comprehending grade level texts seem to be big issues that I usually see with my students. All textbooks and assessments are written using the academic language appropriate for a specific grade level. Therefore if students cannot understand the academic language, then their performance on assessments will show that they are underachieving. I feel like that is the main reason for their underachievement in the class.

This lack of academic language transfers into the home. The families of English learners don’t provide exposure to academic language, mainly because they don’t know how to or they don’t have the resources to do so. I do believe that the parents of English learners do want what is best for their children, and they even want better for them than what they had, but the knowledge of how to do that is not present. They don’t really know how to help their children. And so, when students leave me from the classroom and go home, there’s no extra support or extra practice. And I see that across the board with all my underachievers. I believe that there is a lack of teacher training and parent training when it comes to how to properly prepare English learners for academic success. The lines of communication are weak because most teachers do not know how to clearly communicate with parents of English learners in a way that they will understand how to help their children.

I think parents’ educational background plays a part in it. When I was growing up, if I didn’t understand something my parents would have the educational background to help me understand it. And, I think that is what every underachieving student is missing. They don’t have any parental support because their parents didn’t finish high school. A lot of our parents did not go to high school. They have an eighth grade educational background. Having that lack of educational knowledge is not going to help students at all.

The parents that I’ve been exposed to want better for their children than what they have. And, so, of course, they stress upon the value of education to a certain point. I wouldn’t say that they are all pushing their children towards college because they don’t really know what it is. So, I think to a point, they push it but I don’t think they look past a high school degree. That’s one of the things I’ve noticed: college is not really they think about. I think that when the values of education are different, students are going to have a different idea of how important education is and what education means to them. So, they’re going to take that attitude into the school and it’s going to affect how they feel about learning. If there’s a lack of importance for education then that attitude is going to roll into the school. I don’t feel that those students are going to put as much effort as other students and it will affect their school performance.

A lot of times when students leave school, that's it. They don't think about school until the next morning. But if students are exposed to reading materials, books or online, they can boost their educational knowledge and a lot of times it is just not there. I don't think that parents don't want any help for their children but their financial resources are just not there. They are not able to provide those. The passion to learn is there, but the tools to learn are missing. Providing programs such as afterschool tutoring or summer school would be a great way to help English learners catch up with their peers and prepare them for the next grade. Even providing programs for parents would be beneficial as well. I know from experience that if parents of English learners are aware that there are programs available to help their children succeed in school, then they will be the first ones in line to sign their children up.

I think there is a lack of urgency to improve underachievement. Teachers need to know how to reach out to those underachievers. They need to know how to provide a better instruction for these students. But I don't think that teachers are provided with the resources and the knowledge themselves to know how to deal with English learners. I don't think there is enough support like professional development that helps teachers determine, "What do I need to do for my underachieving students?" I think you've got to have this team of people working for the students. You've got to have the students on board. You've got to have the parents on board and the teachers on board, just really having a team effort, not fixing it but improving underachievement. Whether or not underachievement among English learners diminishes is dependent upon the time and resources school systems are willing to provide.

English Learner Underachievement: Christina's Experience

I'm struggling with underachievement right now with my ELL students. I've always have. And, it's not just one person. There're several. Generally, when ELL students underachieve, they're not achieving at the grade level of the content in math, science, social studies, and reading. We, as teachers, are told what the children are supposed to know, a certain level that they're supposed to meet as far as their standards go. And, that's put into a grade level. Underachievement would be that they don't have that knowledge to establish what they need for the grade level area. We have currently a test designed at the state level, not at the local level, not at the teachers' level necessarily, and certainly not at the students' level saying what they should know in each content area. It's not coming from someone in the classroom to my knowledge. It is unfair, because they're not taking into account all the different backgrounds that the students come from and what they may have going for or against them. They're trying to put everyone at an equal level. As far as my English language learners go, you know, some students have been here all their lives but at home a different language is spoken and, yes, they probably increased their social and communicative language with their friends but they still don't have the content language they need to be academically successful. Then there could be a student that is brand new, a newcomer, that doesn't have the second language to help him understand the academic language taught in the classroom. And, then you give a state standardized test not taking any of that into consideration with the expectation to be equal to the other students in the classroom. Well, I said some ELL students are not able to work at grade level. They might be able to, but maybe they don't have that drive to push themselves. They don't have the desire

to achieve the average for their grade level. They don't have the motivation whether it's because their families don't see education as a higher goal and see the importance of it. And, that contributes to underachievement of ELL children. If their family is not pushing them, then they don't have motivation behind them from their family and then are not going to motivate themselves. So, lack of motivation is one thing that could cause or define underachievement.

I believe this happens most often due to the lack of support at home for students to learn the new language. Some families do not put education as a priority. Work and making money usually comes first. Therefore, the parents are usually not at home to enforce learning.

Also if parents are educated...Just in my experience with the students that I had, if their parents are educated their children seem to perform and develop more quickly versus the students that I had whose parents may not have finished school or may not have had any college. Parents that have more education see a higher goal that their children could reach. Not to say that the ones that are not educated don't see the goal to be reached but they don't have as many resources or knowledge to draw upon to help push their children to that next level. I have a family that is not very educated, in other words, I don't think they have any college level. In their native country they were ridiculed for being less educated than others. That's one of the reasons that they moved here. So, they see the goal for their children and they're trying to get them there. And, here in the United States they are not in a high paying job either. They have all those strikes against them. So, they can only push their child so far. But, now, they're relying on our school resources to try to help their child get better. For the most part, I think, parents want the best for their children, but they often lack the skills necessary to help their children with even the basics of learning.

What I have also noticed is that there is some skill of a transfer. From my experience with the ELL students, if they don't have a strong literacy background of reading and writing in their first language, it seems like it is harder for them to learn the second language because they don't have anything to compare it to. If they haven't experienced any of the content prior to what we're teaching them at an older age and they haven't received any content at a younger age, then they have no prior background knowledge to base things on. Well, there are two scenarios. If they're not developed in their first language, then they're going to have trouble establishing it in the second language. If they do have a good foundation in their first language but technical terms are not coming to them in the second language, then it's going to be hard for them to understand the language to be able to do any of the content work.

In my classroom, if I have instructed in some sort of language content, say, this week and by the end of the week or the next week ELLs are not retaining this knowledge or they cannot present any of the language I have provided them with, any of the content words that I have given them, then they will underachieve. If they're not retaining the language that I have instructed them in, then they're not going to be successful in the regular content. To succeed academically, they got to get them together. Typically if they don't know the language they're not going to perform at the grade level.

ELLs are underachieving, I think, for a variety of reasons. I believe some of that comes from their prior background and their native language: whether or not they had consistent education or if they had any interruption in their educational program; their

socio-economic status: whether or not their parents are educated in their native tongue or in English. So, all these different things play a factor in their language development and their achievement in the content areas. And then it can be the teachers not being a cheerleader for the student. Or, it can be lack of motivation on the teacher's part and lack of effective instructional support. If the teacher doesn't have expectations, if the teacher doesn't believe that they can get there with the student, then they're not going to. They don't want to bother then.

There is a variety of teachers too. You're going to have some teachers who would say, "Oh, they are ESOL. They're not going to achieve at the grade level. They're behind in their language development. They're not going to get this." And, they kind of let them fall behind and between the cracks. You do have some teachers that are going to be concerned with that and not want their students to fall between the cracks and trying to make adjustments and modifications, and trying to come up with ways to instruct their students in their content area and ways to assess them to see, "Did they learn what I taught?" And, then you're going to have teachers that think that they should push the ELL students further, in a good way, encourage them more. I gave three different categories. One that just leaves them alone in the class and lets them fall through the cracks. One that tries a little bit to get them to do just average but then they're not going to push harder. And then you have some teachers that see potential of ELLs. And they're going to encourage them to develop the language and develop the content language in their class and take it further with high expectations. They see their potential.

That's the way to deal with underachievement. I consider underachievement as doing poorly in academic classes along with a low level of English proficiency. Teachers should be doing whatever they can to assist that student in being successful at something. They have to really have small successes in order to get to the higher expectations. If you're not helping them get there and if you're not finding the best tools, they are not going to get there. They've got to make some sort of connection with those students and they have to show some value in them learning the language before they learn the content area.

There should be good suggestions and resources to help motivate children, help motivate families, and help motivate teachers. Or, not just motivate teachers but help them understand what they can be doing to modify and accommodate English learners in their classrooms.

English Learner Underachievement: Sally's Experience

Everyone should get an understanding of English learner underachievement. Every educational professional should develop knowledge of the English learners' world and the complexity of their learning needs. Educators need to have their viewpoints on English learner education changed in order to prepare those students better for achieving successful learning outcomes. Underachievement is a multifaceted concept. The definition depends on who is the judge. If the public are the judge, then we go by A, B, C, or D. If administrators are the judge, then we are concerned about English learners bringing down the numbers in schools. If ESOL teachers are the judge, then we say, "We are making progress! You just don't see it!" A child who cares about his future is his own judge. He asks himself whether or not he is rising to the highest level

he can attain. And that's different for each child. We all judge underachievement differently. We are dealing with the situation that takes years to overcome underachievement. Indeed, there is no magic answer to make the public happy. I have encountered enough underachievement among English learners to know how disappointing it is for everybody. I see it in students as NOT having a steady progression or moving upward. Those English learners who underachieve pretty well stay where they were when they came into class: saying a few words to explain thoughts and never desiring to learn how to sound like an English speaking person. I have noticed that some of high school students do not move up in certain areas and they stay on the same levels from year to year. There are many reasons for academic underachievement. These are a few I have personally observed.

Motivation is what underachievement is hinging on. I've always thought that English learners come with a very strong desire to learn. As the years went on I found out that they don't all come with that. Some of them are not willing to work, neither do they have a good work ethic. Their desire is not there in the first chance they have. They seem to do just the minimum and work in accomplishing very little to nothing. They're not hungry for more. As the direct result, they don't progress academically and fail to develop effective study habits even though they are surrounded with help. It's difficult to address this problem because they must find within themselves willingness to succeed and put forth effort in their learning. For educators, motivation is always the hard one to answer. How are you going to grab their heart and make them the best they can be? Another feature of underachievement is peer pressure. Some of the English learners come here wanting to be cool just like American students. Because of that it takes them away from their academic goals. They want to be accepted by the society and that becomes more important for them than academic learning. They're trying to be something else than academic achievers in order to fit in and be part of a cool image. Emotionally, the whole idea of popping up in a new culture is very traumatic especially for a shy person or a loner. These students don't dare to ask and follow up in something they don't understand because they're too embarrassed to talk to someone who they think wouldn't understand them. The transition from their home country to the US is a very challenging one, the one that some don't even desire to make. It's a big cultural change and a social adjustment that turn into a scary experience for some. These newcomers are often in the dark about customs, social practices, idioms used in the English language, and how to communicate their basic needs and desires. Any of these challenges can affect how the students will learn, at what pace they will acquire English, and how successful they will be in their academic studies.

Newcomer English learners don't understand the content being taught due to a tremendous amount of technical terms. They pop in into standardized tests which cover the content of the subject and don't take into consideration the inability of students to even understand the wording of the question due to their lack of English language proficiency. Very quickly they can get discouraged because they are not used to the rigor of the American school system and cannot keep up with the load of student work given.

Along with the cultural change and language barrier, educational background makes a big difference in those who underachieve and if they're fortunate enough to have education before they come to an American school. I think that the patterns of learning

are the same in many ways. In particular, the patterns of language learning are very much alike from one language to the other. If students haven't learned well the skills at the different phases of language learning, they don't have any patterns to go by, hence there will have a terrible time learning reading and writing in a new language.

Usually we use the language barrier as the reason for underachievement in many cases. However, for English learners who were born in the US there is more than just the language barrier. There are also family expectations. Children can feel what their families are expecting from them and how much they care about education. Many families don't have the same access to educational and material resources. The family in poverty does not have reading materials in the house like other families do and they probably don't read as much to their children because of the long hours of work just to make ends meet. Very often families of English learners are not proficient in English. Socially, they cannot go home and speak English because their families do not understand it. And the more practice you get the better you get at it. Thus, it may also be the cause for underachievement.

Very often teachers don't understand what a long process learning a new language is and they try to teach English learners the same way they're teaching everyone else. If these students don't understand what is being communicated in the classroom, they will easily be bored or get involved in distracting activities in order to keep themselves entertained. In order to prevent underachieving behaviors, teachers need to want to be educated about English learners and be perceptive of their needs so that they can meet these learners at levels where they can progress and feel they are progressing.

Empathy is always good with any student. We must adapt and think from the student's perspective a little bit. We need to make sure students understand the process and feel comfortable with themselves. Facilitating an open communication with families is the key to addressing underachievement and reminding a child of what needs to be done to be successful in their own culture.

There is no excuse for underachievement among English learners because we want them to achieve at the same level as English speaking students do. Until they get there, they're not going to make the grade. However, we need to remember that a student coming from a different culture is not going to achieve immediately despite other peoples' expectations. It is not going to happen overnight in all the content areas unless he has a very strong academic background. I believe that just because a child has a hard time learning, he is not less valuable. Educators have to put effort into finding answers with English learner underachievement and they're not easy answers. They're not the same for every student and for every student, underachievement has its own reasons.

English Learner Underachievement: Diana's Experience

People think about underachievement and talk about it. They discuss it and want an input on how to help the students. I have encountered underachievement among English learners and would like to give my view of it. In my own mind, underachievement is inability to perform at a grade level according to the state mandated requirements that is the standards that specify what children need to know by the time they exit each grade. So, if students are failing to perform at a grade level according to what a state wants them to perform, then I think they're underachievers.

From my experience working with the children I separate the younger ones at the elementary age from the ones at the middle school age. I've noticed that English learners at younger ages that enter school without much exposure as far as learning the English language are able to experience our whole curriculum and achieve greater success in the classroom. When middle school English learners come from a foreign country with no English skills, they may be at the sixth grade level in their country but it may not be the same representation of the sixth grade level here, in the United States. Certain definitions and skills from the U.S. school may not have been taught in their country at a higher level. So, when they come they're already struggling and they're also struggling to learn the English language. If their performance that has been sent with their transcripts from their old school is not at the grade level, when they get here their performance is already below the grade level and it's extremely hard for them to catch up to the grade level. It's always like they could possibly be a grade or two behind performing in an American school as what they were performing in their own country. I think it is underachievement. Their reason I think it is underachievement is because, I would say, they're also underachieving in their own language. When you pull their transcripts and look at their grades they're also behind in their own native language. And if they're struggling in their own language then they sometimes struggle in our language because they're not proficient in their own language or literacy skills. There may be two possible scenarios for English learners who come to the U.S. school. When an English learner enters an American school without any previous skills they struggle from the first day of school. They don't know English and it leads to poor reading skills. They don't feel successful in the classroom because they cannot advance at the same pace as other students that are the same age and grade placement. This leads to underachievement and the student will tend to drop out of school within a few years.

If English learners are skilled and proficient in their own language content they're able to perform and acquire the English skills a lot quicker and a lot faster. They're transferring knowledge. It will take them, I want to say, a year no more than two years and they can perform just as well and even better than English learners who were born here, in the United States. Whenever they come to the United States they may be underachieving just for a small while but they will pick up the curriculum very quickly and they will soon be at a grade level. It is short term underachievement for some students that occurs because of a language barrier.

I don't think that long term underachievement is due to the language barrier. That is where I distinguish between the two. Long-term underachievement is when a student struggles for not one year or not two years but constantly. I've had some students that I might've worked with in a low grade, maybe elementary grades and they were not performing at a grade level. And, when I went to the middle school I also had those students when they were in the elementary school. I would help them again in the middle school and they were still underachieving. If someone has been here longer and they are still not performing at a grade level, I would say they're underachieving long term.

What I have noticed is that middle school students, if they're not performing at a grade level and they feel that they're underachievers, they tend to be frustrated with school. They tend to get less tolerant of the studies. They have been aided for a long time. So,

they tend to get more discouraged by the time they get to middle school. And what I see happening is when they get to high school sometimes they drop out altogether because they have been going at it for a long time and it is like at the age to where “You know what? I have done it this long!” They want to get a job and they are giving up all hope at that point. I have noticed that they would drop out of high school. I think it is part of underachievement. They feel like they're not going to make it and they wonder, “Why continue this? Why go on?” And, they will drop out. They have no desire to go beyond to go any further.

The school is a very serious thing. It takes a lot of work, hard work and it takes a lot of hours. What I have seen is that some underachieving English learners are disorganized and not taking school seriously. They don't have passion for the learning. I don't feel like they have the same drive as some of the high achievers. And it is the same thing usually year after year. This is underachievement over the period of years not just one term, not one year.

I think a lot of it has to do with parents and what they want for their child and the future of their child. Parental involvement is key here. Their parents may not have the same drive for their child. They don't expect much. It should be a positive attitude about education. Education for their children should be a number one priority. I don't think it's a financial roadblock. It is more of an attitude. The reason I am saying it is that because with the program that we have here we have bought computer programs that would teach the students reading and English skills. And, we would allow the students to sign them out, take them home for a while, and bring them back to the school. We would also invite parents to take English classes taught by certified teachers to help them so that they could help their children with school work. And even if they need something outside the school, parents need to be willing to seek out the sources because there are some available. They have to be willing to seek out these sources to help their children with their academics. What I have also noticed is that children come here and they learn the language. But some parents, I noticed, have not acquired the English language even though they have been here a long time and English classes have been offered. For whatever reason, they have not chosen to learn the language along with the child. That's why they are not able to help their children because of the language. Well, when it comes to this I think the parent has to want to use that extra time. It has to be willingness on the parent's part. It is both ways, opportunity and willingness. They have to find a way to better themselves.

As for teachers, I know they're concerned from day one because they want all the students to meet the standards that are being deemed upon them by the state. But most of all, they're concerned with whatever kind of help they can get. What is the best help? What is the best way to help the students to perform and get them to a grade level? There are ways to make things better.

A teacher in the classroom has so many kids. They have to cover so much material for such a short period of time and on a certain day. Those students are getting lost. But, in a small group they can perform better. English learners need to be pulled out of the classroom if they're performing at a lower level. They should have someone who can help them one on one and at a slower pace and then try to catch them up to classroom level. I've been doing this with my students for more than five years. And it seemed to be a good way to help these students.

In a regular classroom, I also think there have to be some accommodations and modifications for a certain length of time, especially for students who are new here and for those who are struggling. Non-English speaking students who haven't grown up in this country and didn't start at the elementary school are not going to be able to read and understand 100 questions on a test as quick as a native English-speaking student. Maybe, give these students 50 questions and more time to answer all those questions. Give them, maybe, two choices so that they have a 50-50 chance of getting the correct answer. Some teachers had taken that to heart and done that. And some had not. Another way we could help with underachieving students is to provide afterschool tutoring programs. I think afterschool tutoring programs is an excellent way to help these children. When a student goes home with homework and the student may want to do this homework but they are not sure what to do because they don't understand the English language and their parents cannot speak or read English as well. I think that underachievement may be with us even if we don't like it or don't want it to be around. I'm not totally sure if we can eliminate it. We will always have underachievers. However, in my own opinion, we should use more than one criterion to decide which English learners underachieve. I don't think it is always fair the way that we review the data. I don't think it should be based solely on just a state mandated test. I think it should be based on the child's yearly classroom performance. It should be also based on what a teacher or instructor has to say about what a child is capable of doing. If that child has spent time with a teacher, I think that teacher should have some input on what they think that child can do and how he can perform. The teacher should also be able to back it up with data.

English Learner Underachievement: Laura's Experience

ELL underachievement breaks my heart at times. It's evident in reading comprehension and fluency, application of new vocabulary, writing skills, math... It shows everywhere! To me, underachievement for ELLs is not being able to function successfully in the academic setting. And when I say "success", I define that as the highest level that this particular student can attain.

Part of underachievement is feeling unsuccessful. These students are not getting help at home. They are getting a little bit of help at school from us, that little time we have with them. The teachers may or may not be giving them extra support and they're not doing well. That would beat me down. That would not give me motivation to be successful. They know that society expects them to NOT achieve. I don't know how it makes them feel but it might be a thing that wouldn't motivate them too. Dad works in construction. That's probably what they would do. Some of the parents hardly survive and they pass it onto their kids, "Ok, we survive and you got to get a job." It's not, "Get the education" because they didn't get it. But there are some parents who do stress it because they want their kids to have a better life. For them it's not just about surviving. I think it makes a big impact.

Language barrier is the main one for some underachieving ELLs because they don't understand the language. They don't understand what's being asked. They don't understand the context of things. They don't understand given phonics, sounds and things like that.

Many ELLs live in homes where their first language is spoken only. Many ELLs lack basic and especially content vocabulary mainly because English is not spoken at home. Parents don't know English. Even when students are given vocabulary lists to take home to study, their parents are not able to offer help by quizzing them or explaining the vocabulary to them. Vocabulary development is crucial for students. Without it, many areas of academics are affected. For example, low reading comprehension is partly due to ELLs' lack of vocabulary. If you don't know what the words mean, then you can't understand what has been read. As a result, students struggle with writing because they have low reading levels and don't have the vocabulary needed to explain or express their thoughts on paper. How can they write about something when they can't even fully explain it through spoken words?

Many parents cannot read in English and therefore cannot help their children with reading at home. They want to help them most of the time but they don't know the language and they don't know how to help them. For the most part, ELLs do not have the academic support at home needed for enhancing basic reading skills.

The majority of my students are motivated learners with parents who value the education their children are getting. They want the best for their children, as do most parents, but they often lack the skills necessary to help their children with even the basics of learning. These parents don't have the resources or are not aware of how to obtain available resources that could help their children. This is where we, teachers, can step in and strengthen learning in the home.

Also, the students' native language, I think, is the biggest part of the cause. If they didn't have a good and solid background in their original language, in their first language; if they have a family where they talk much anyway even in their own language but the parents don't read to them in their own language, that doesn't build a strong foundation and literacy. If you can support their native language, I think it will support the second language. If they are strong in their native language they're going to be able to apply this stuff to that language, the new language.

When people talk about underachievement of ELLs, it kind of motivates me, I say, "I got to dig really deeper. What can I do to help these students more in the classroom?" It also sometimes makes me a little angry because I feel like classroom teachers are looking to me to be like a savior. "You teach them, you teach them, you teach them." I can't teach all the content. I can't do all that. I can give them some tools. I mean, I can build students up some and help them with vocabulary and learning the language but I'm not a quick fix. And I kind of get upset too because teachers don't try in their classroom. I think it's just a time issue. It takes extra time to come up with materials. When I explain to them some of the things they might do, it's almost like, "We don't have time for that!" They feel they don't have time to do all that. So, I try to make it easy as I can, "Hey, just do this! Just cut those pictures out. Get some words. Let them label instead of writing sentences about the story." Some of them may take my suggestions. Some of them don't. The students are with that teacher most of the day and support is not necessarily there. I think that where underachievement comes from: lack of instructional support and teacher attitudes.

Teachers are also overwhelmed with all they have to do and I do understand that. But, they meet as a grade level usually once a week. If several teachers have ELLs why don't they divvy up? "Hey, you do some extra materials for math this week. You do

some extra things for reading.” And they just share them. Not that all ELLs are on the same level but you can always tweak something. So it won’t be a burden on one teacher.

I think training teachers should be mandatory and not just a quick PowerPoint in the afternoon. “Here are some real things you need to do with these kids.” Give them more tools and not a ton of tools because it’s overwhelming. But let’s just get the ones that we know are really effective. Also, districtwide...The district should be more aware of the ELL issues. I don’t think that the people in the board office really understand them. When a child is not meeting grade level expectations, you got to look at the whole child. Standardized testing doesn’t. It’s assuming that everybody is the same and has the same capabilities but they don’t. It’s been made like it’s not ok for everybody to be different. But, there are different factors in every child’s life. One child has a really supportive family. They value education. This next child-they don’t. Mom is working at night. There is nobody there. They will never be the same because it’s different, different environment, different life.

I like assessments that measure progress because I want to see how they progress. To me, they show, “I don’t care if he was here or here. Did he move up? Did he progress?” I like that.

There is a set bar, realistic bar and some students are not meeting that bar, then it is underachievement. But again going back to what growth the child shows. It is underachievement when they don’t show growth and are not meeting the bar. I think to measure performance on an individual basis would help that feeling unsuccessful and would help that to dissipate some because they may never reach this. That’s reality. That’s life. Everybody is not the same.

English Learner Underachievement: Vivienne’s Experience

I think underachievement is relative, and different people have different views of underachievement depending on expectations and experiences. Underachievement among ESOL students to me means that they are not achieving at the level I think they should be due to several factors: inadequate testing for these students, home language and lack of help at home, discouragement and stress at school.

I don’t believe all ESOL students are underachievers. I believe the way we assess these students isn’t the correct way and therefore, they are labeled as “underachievers”. I also believe that underachievement among English learners happens due to time expectations they have to become fluent in English as well as all subjects we teach in English. Standardized testing is not something that should be used with these students to assess progress until they have mastered the English language. Cultural barriers also limit progress on standardized testing due to mostly being tailored to the American culture. Giving a test that is for English speaking students doesn’t test the ESOL students in a fair and adequate way that is valid. Some other measure should be given for these kids to show their progress based on language acquired during the time they’ve been in school.

Due to the testing, the students most likely become discouraged and feel as if they’re not progressing, when actually, they are. Discouragement of achievement on these tests compared to English speaking students tends to stress out the ESOL kids, as well and affects the self-esteem for them. This affects learning.

There're certain standards we have to maintain. Some of the students are performing under the standard. I feel that several of the ESOL kids I have can give me more as far as their capability goes but they don't due to different reasons. They just don't perform up to what they are capable of doing. Well, occasionally I see writing or scores on a test or I hear an oral response or several responses that tell me that they're very bright and that they can perform a lot better than they normally or most of the time do in the classroom. They're below the benchmark. They just don't perform to high expectations and there are different reasons that I see.

I see in some of them language. Depending on how much English they know when they come in which normally isn't very much at all because their families don't speak it. Their performance is below and it's a language barrier that causes the problem. Well, in class when we are talking about different things I can see a puzzled look on their faces sometimes. And I have to try to explain using hand signals or writing or pointing until they get the English language, until they learn it and acquire it.

Some of that is frustration. I feel like they feel the stress of trying to keep up. And of course, if you don't understand what people are saying and you can't read everything that is in front of you and cannot comprehend it, you will be frustrated. So, I see frustration on their faces. When kids don't know English, it's very stressful for the kids. They're scared. They're stressed. They can shut down. They can have anxiety attacks. You know, there're all kinds of emotions. They may cling to one particular teacher they feel good with. They may be terrified of the teacher. So, they won't speak in that class. No doubt, it's psychological and emotional. Emotional and psychological barriers are huge because they're stressed out trying to keep up.

Some of that is they just don't have support. Their parents can't speak English. Well, when the students can't speak English and their parents don't speak it, they're not getting any work and practice at home at all. They're not going to get any modeling at home in English. All they got is the school, 6 hours of instruction that we have by the time we go to lunch, specials, and everything else. It makes it more difficult for the child. The home life of the ESOL student is that of his or her native language in most cases, therefore, not helping acquire English the rest of the day, outside of school. Parents don't speak English most of the time which limits the resources they tend to reach out for to help the child. As they don't know how to help at home and cannot speak English at all that limits understanding and helping the child in every way.

Students realize that nothing at home can help them, so they most likely feel hopeless and discouraged as far as this aspect as well.

I've seen some of the parents and they don't have the education but they expect their children to do well. Some are just really trying to survive. They may have five or six kids and they just want their children to do well. But they don't have the time or the language to communicate with the teacher and help them at home. I think all of them want their children to do well but, I think, the higher the education of a parent is, the better the child is going to do. They're going to realize the more they help the child, the more the child learns. The more they can assist and help the teacher with the child, the better the child is going to do. They know the value of education. They've been through it and it's not easy. You got a work with perseverance and get help when you need it. You can't just sit back.

We wouldn't have so many underachieving students if they knew the language better. You know, you can't assess the content because they can't understand what you're assessing. The methods of testing has to change. Testing cannot be as rigorous at all or biased to English speakers. They need their own test, if they speak very limited English. If they could have a certain test developed for ESOL students in whatever language they speak for content; or, if there were a translator sitting with them to help them assess the content, I guarantee they would perform higher.

Barriers are preventing ESOL students from being able to meet a certain standard.

Until they can get language acquisition, we can't expect that. But for schools and teachers that have a lot of ESOL kids, I think, they have to change the way of thinking, first of all, about underachievement, how to look at it and what we need to do to help them be successful and how we need to help them be successful because of all the barriers and an emotional part of it and all the stress they feel from it.

Growth is what we need to look at. Yes, definitely, growth not meeting a standardized test level but how much they have grown from August to January, January to even March and March to May. Guidelines to measure growth should be set in place and a portfolio method should be used to see growth. And if we're not seeing improvement, we need to change what we are doing until we figure out how to help them be successful: attitude, different strategies, things that make learning fun to them. If they're still not growing then there's something wrong. They are underachieving. We have to look at all possible problems. It's very complicated. Extremely!

I do believe most ESOL students come to America wanting to learn and excel to make something of themselves. They have an opportunity in America that they do not in whatever country they are from. There are many barriers they have to overcome to achieve, especially when American classrooms are teaching in a fast pace that the ESOL student cannot even understand. If more ESOL classrooms could be funded and held accountable for student progress in a slower, encouraging, family-oriented and helpful way, less underachievement would be occurring for these students.

English Learner Underachievement: Esmeralda's Experience

I think that underachievement is when students aren't working to their capability. They can do more than they show and put out in terms of what they can do. They don't have a desire or maybe lack of desire, "Do I want to do that?" They just want to do the minimum but yet they have much more potential to go further. It's what they can see or view of what they can do. I see that they can do more. I see a little spark in them. And they can push themselves a little bit further but they don't. They don't put forth a lot of extra hard work that could give them more in terms of going to the next level..."Oh, I got a B. I just have to work a little harder!"

English language learners with low language proficiency may not be underachievers because it's just a lack of language. Low language proficiency is not underachievement. How can we fail them for not knowing the language? It's not fair to the child. If they just came here, how can they be an underachiever? You know, they have to have ample time to be able to learn something, I guess. You got to know language first. You know, language filters off in everything else. If you know the language you can do other things. You can attack these other things. But if you don't

show growth in language then it could be underachievement. It's a lack of growth of what it needs to be in order to achieve.

Underachieving English learners with higher language proficiency seem to be kind of stuck. There has to be intrinsic motivation in there to want to go to the next level. If they are satisfied with where they are at, then that's where they're going to stay.

They're not going to move to the next level. It's the motivation. You know, it's like some people who comes into the United States and they can't speak English. If they want to, they will become proficient very quickly. So, they are motivated. They are intrinsically motivated. If they don't have intrinsic motivation and if they are okay with where they are, that's as far as they're going.

Underachievement among English learners is a result of culture. It comes from the expectations of their parents. If a family values education, then so will the children. If the parents push the importance of education or the advancement of it and what it could do for them then the children will perform to a level that will show it. For example, if a student values education then he or she will complete homework. I've had some English learners that, in my opinion, don't really care about completing homework. First of all, the parents are not speaking English. Second, how can the parents help the child complete something in English if they can only speak Spanish? They can't. So, the children are left on their own to complete homework assignments or maybe even projects. The students don't have the help at home that is needed because no English is spoken at home and the fact that the parent has limited education.

Do their parents want them to be proficient in English? What do they want for their child? Do they want them to be able to speak English? Do they want them to go to school? What do they want for the child? Well, it all depends on their background and the generation before and their expectations for the future generations. What happens is when some parents get a job and they work and realize that education gets them out of this rut, they are saying to their kids, "No, you're going to do this! You gonna go to college." It's their mentality from home. Some English learner parents have lower aspirations for their children. If they're coming from farming, that's okay with them because farming is the most they're going to do. That's their level of satisfaction. And so, they gonna come here and say, "It's okay to be a migrant worker. That's okay to do that. Why should I do anything more?" It depends on where they come from. The thing is there is intrinsic motivation. If they have it, they say, "That's not enough for me. I want something different. I want to do this instead."

I do know that some students' parents are migrant workers. As a result, the family moves around a lot due to work in onion fields, for example. The children are forced to move to be with the family since family is valued. I understand this. But in the meantime, the children are learning that there's no consistency in education. For migrant workers and their children, it's the work that is important not the education. They cannot see how education can help with the advancement of their children's future.

The other thing is the value of the family. In some cultures, like Mexican, they value family over education traditionally. Family is all what matters. Education doesn't matter. They just love each other.

Social status, poverty, and lack of material resources have an impact on underachievement. If they are in poverty, it's like continuing the cycle. It's all they

know. It's what they have learned. It's what they have been taught. If they are poor, they are living paycheck to paycheck. So, they're not thinking about education or speaking English. They're thinking about survival which is living day to day. It's not gonna be the job. It's gonna be a migrant job. And here goes the expectations again. Then school may have an impact. Some English learners go in with the gap to begin with. Say, a person comes into the third grade and he doesn't know a lot of English, a newcomer. What happens is that teachers are moving much faster than the kids can move. And we are creating gaps in these kids because they're not getting the assistance that they might need when they first come. It's like reading. If you cannot read, forget about doing a math problem because you cannot read the math problem. They've got to have that core access to help. If the child is left behind, it's not what the child did. The school created it. If English learners are not provided services, if they're not getting the services to help them, that's disservice to those children and not underachievement. That's an educational process's issue.

Newcomers need to have accessibility to smaller groups and more one on one instruction. Native language instruction may help with content learning. They will be getting some content in their native language to help them advance in academics and learn English at the same time. The English learner knowing content in their native language can translate it into English. Teachers can differentiate and make modifications in the classroom. Teachers need to be able to differentiate but they need the support. They can't be just put upon. They need the support. Districts need to recognize that teachers need support and they cannot do everything. They need to establish new programs and bilingual support. If everybody thought preventative just think what could be accomplished.

Then, parents need to be accountable to their children to help them. You come here, you got to take an English class because when your child gets home tonight you need be able to help him. If children know that their parents are learning English, they gain the motivation to want more from education and hence put forth effort to achieve their goals.

Underachievement depends on how you look at it. English learners may underachieve in academic subjects but show great achievement in sports and music. If students are struggling, they may not be necessarily underachievers. They may be academically challenged. You know, learning doesn't come easy for them and they really have to put a lot of effort into studying. They might need tutoring, or they might need extra help so that they can pass the test, or pass the grade, or pass the class. Somebody who is struggling cannot be an underachiever to me. An underachiever is somebody who can do and doesn't do it. Underachievement is not living and performing up to your capability - can do and doesn't. They are not reaching their potential.

English Learner Underachievement: Sonia's Experience

I believe several factors can lead to underachievement in English Learners. Some factors that I have experienced include the educational background in home country, age, access to an ESOL program, nutrition and sleep, lack of motivation, accommodations in the classroom, experiences, and lack of parental support due to the parent working, not a priority, or just can't help.

I view English learner underachievement as a student not working to his or her fullest potential in the classroom, by not completing assignments or doing his or her best. Students are not working to their potential, but they are capable of achieving skills. Due to certain limitations such as poverty, limited access to resources, limited education of parents, their inability to help at home, low English proficiency, ineffective teaching, and, also, lack of motivation and the fact that education is not priority, children are limited in their access to knowledge and skills although they are quite capable of learning. They can perform and achieve but there are all these things against them. Also, I see it as the student who is scoring below the 50 percentile on standardized tests in reading and math consistently. I've noticed that most of my ESOL students are below grade level in reading and in math. I've noticed that the majority are weak in math facts. And as far as reading, they're usually more than two grades below grade level in reading. I think that goes back to home having someone to read to you when you are younger in English and asking questions what they child is reading about. I think that's one of the reasons why they are underachieving because they didn't have that.

I know that ESOL students cannot get that parents support at home a lot of times. Their parents feel like they can't help them in the older grades. In the younger grades the parents seem to be more involved and are trying more to help because the materials are easier. But once they reach probably the third, fourth, and fifth grades that parents say, "Okay, this is too difficult." They can't really help them. I have one student in the fourth grade who wasn't really studying at home. I looked back at her grades and it was mainly vocabulary. It was not that she was not capable. Once I studied with her and she retok the test, she was capable. That goes back to that lack of parents' support at home and the parents not knowing how to help their child. And, when you offer classes to help the parents so that they can help the child, they don't attend because it goes back into whereas they have a heavy work schedule. Often the ESOL student has only one parent who is working and not at home, or the parent who is at home, but he or she doesn't know how to instill a routine or keep order in the home. Children are sometimes left at home to supervise younger brothers and sisters. This year I have a student coming to school sleepy in second grade. I've found out he is staying up late at night and the parent stated that he doesn't listen when she tells him to go to bed. I have another student who's missed 30 days of school because the parent is working and no one is at home to supervise. Both students are underachievers in all areas.

The student is often left to depend on a brother or sister or no one for help. Parents can't help their children because they don't know the content themselves. They are uneducated or quit school at a very early age to go to work. And a lot of our students are from parents around this generation. Also, a lot of our students are born here, in the United States and educated here since pre-K. They're still so behind in reading and I guess I have to contribute it back to not having support at home because they are getting it at school.

Poverty plays a role in that too because if you're working all the time just to make your ends meet, there's no way that you can be really involved in your child's education which, again, is like a Domino effect: because you're not getting that support at home is affecting your performance at school. And, the reason they are in poverty is because parents are not educated well enough to get a job that makes money. It all goes back to underachievement.

Another contributor to underachievement is the value cultures place on education. Once students start to reach middle school, their attendance starts to drop, and they are unmotivated in the classroom. I see this more often with boys than girls. In Hispanic cultures, I see working as more important than getting an education. Education is important when you're younger. But as you get a little bit older the goal is more to get a job and help support your family because in the long run you can be supporting your parents when you get older.

Underachieving ESOL students are not on grade level for their age or grade and they may also lack motivation. If they are not motivated to learn, then they are not doing their best and they are not achieving what they need to achieve. I think part of motivation is that they haven't been successful so maybe they get in their mind why to continue. All the time you are not on grade level and not achieving anything. That's got to be very demotivating. Or, also it could go back to the culture. If their parents are not pushing them, "I want you to do your best. I want you to graduate high school and I want you to go on to college," then that's probably affecting their motivation. Motivation is more of an individual thing. I've seen a lot of ESOL students who are very motivated. But, when they get into the middle school and they are still in the ESOL there does seem more of a lack of motivation because they are older now and they realize that they are still in the program. They are embarrassed to be in the program and they are losing their specials time. So, the motivation is really going down. Of all the contributors to underachievement of English Learners in the classroom, I think the most important is motivation. An unmotivated child is bound for failure, and there's not much you can do about that. As a teacher of many years, I've seen it many times and generally those students underachieve and drop out.

The student's age can be a factor in underachievement when transferring to a new country. I see my older students struggle more because of the complex material presented to them while they are being immersed in English. But the whole point is that school is going on and you are expected to perform. And a lot of times students don't have that time. Sometimes students come to us from another country missing key skills in reading and math, so there is not really a transfer of knowledge from their first language to English. Or, they move around creating gaps in skills. Because they have these gaps, they have difficulties with the higher applications since they lack the basics. I have two students right now and they seem to be lacking math skills completely. Some of the tests we gave them showed that they don't have math skills that we are doing at the grade level, in the fourth and fifth grades. With the reading, you can't tell right now because it's the language barrier. I think this evidence points to their previous education. That's what it boils down to. You can't transfer something you haven't been taught in your own language. How successful you were in your country determines how successful you are going to be here in America.

Some of my ESOL students who have been here since pre-K are clearly having problem with reading. It's not that they are not understanding English. It's their academic language. Most of our students don't have problems with a regular fiction story reading but the push now is on informational reading. They don't seem to have the academic language, even simple academic words you would think they should know by the fourth and fifth grades. That affects their reading and their understanding of the reading. There's not enough emphasis put on it. Whatever informational text we are

reading we might learn some words related to that but we don't really focus on understanding those academic words. And that is a push by the society. They feel like schools do need to spend time on teaching academic words.

Another issue that contributes to underachievement of ESOL students is that teachers are busy and it's very time-consuming to provide needed accommodations for the students and even sometimes impossible. They also don't know how to help them especially in the older grades when a child doesn't speak any English and they are trying to teach complex text like literature. (Our schools do not provide a bilingual education, so it becomes a "sink or swim" format with the underachievers drowning.)

The ESOL student is often left to find coping mechanism to "get by" and the teacher is trying to "modify" grade to accommodate the fact the student is not ready for the material. With a student like that you should start small. There should be at least a couple of hours or two sessions in the ESOL classroom working on recognizing vocabulary, reading at a lower level with a lot of pictures and lots of graphics. And in the content area classroom, the teacher would need to use a lot of graphics just to expose them to the content and not expect as much of them.

They came out with that big word "differentiate" but nobody really came along in the classroom and taught us how to differentiate. They gave us all the skills and theories... but we really need more practice. Most definitely teachers need some professional development for those underachievers and strategies to help teach those kids. If you have an underachiever you would like to be able to spend more time with that kid. At the elementary level I would definitely allow more time for reading and math. They are both important to make science and social studies accessible to the student. There also need to be more resources. You need to have a parapro coming into the room to help with those underachieving kids. The school needs to hire a literacy coach who could really look at these kids who are having problems and come up with ways and strategies that could help them. At the district level, they should be investigating the students who are underachieving and finding out what is in common among underachievers. They could be consorting with the experts to find out what is the best way to address these underachievers and looking for programs that would help them. Since our ESOL students aren't getting that extra help at home, it would be nice to have that afterschool program where they could get help with their homework and make sure they understand it.

I think the teacher's role working with the child is very important and understanding that the child is an underachiever. You have to look at what you see, how they are performing in the classroom and you also have to look at how they perform on tests. And even if they perform well in the classroom but they are not performing well on the test, then they are missing something. We need to look at the whole picture.

Appendix H

Verification of Transcript

Title of the Project: *English Learner Underachievement: In Search of Essences and Meanings: A Phenomenological Study of Educator Experiences of Underachievement among English Learners in One Georgia Public School System.*

I hereby verify that the information contained in this transcript is accurate and complete.

(Signature of participant)

(Date)

(Printed name of participant)

One copy of this form will be kept by the participant; a second copy will be kept by the researcher.

If you have any concerns about the project that you would like to discuss, please contact the researcher.

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