JUAN OF MANY: AN INTERPRETIVE BIOGRAPHY OF AN
ENGLISH LEARNER AND HIS EDUCATIONAL
JOURNEY OF ILLITERACY

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ABSTRACT

Research findings state that ELs (English Learners) are an ever growing population of learners in the American education system that continue struggle in school (Verdugo, 2006). This study is an interpretive biography of Juan, an EL student, and his journey in Southern American schooling. Chronicling his first days of elementary school and following him into high school, the research looks closely at Juan’s state of illiteracy, both the successes and barriers he encountered. As Juan’s tale unfolds in a narrative style, a stream of consciousness story-telling approach is used wherein the researcher looked not only at Juan’s life, but takes a holistic research approach to Juan’s education and schooling. Looking into various sociocultural aspects that influenced his past, the researcher interviewed Juan’s parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and Juan himself. Data were collected over a six month span of time. Data from interviews and educational documents in Juan’s past detail what teachers did when educating Juan. The research at times critically examines the politics of Southern culture, the small town mentality of immigration, and a school board influenced by that very same southern culture that seems to produce white flight. Touching on sensitive topics such as lingering racisms in the South, immigration, and illiteracy, this small scale study and its findings on Juan’s issues in school, may point to large scale problems in U.S. education.
DEDICATION

Thank you to my parents who have always seen my purple bananas as a sign of intelligence, to Momma Jo for teaching me how to tell a story, to Dee Goldston for keeping me on track, and to my sweet husband who delightfully keeps me off track. And of course, gracias a la estrella.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Whitesboro teachers, staff, and administration- thank you for allowing me to be a part of your school for so long. You knowingly participated in a study that would showcase certain flaws, in the name of research, educational growth, and change. In the last few years I have seen you all reinvent your EL program and have not shunned progress but have welcomed it. May other schools learn from such openness and flexibility.

To my students- thank you for the privilege of allowing me to participate in your lives each day at school. Looking into my classroom through the years, you all have been a shining example of what racial, ethnic, and social acceptance truly looks like in action. Your love for one another, and cross cultural friendships are not dutiful, but they inspire us all because they are natural and effortless.
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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

It was my third year as a middle school English teacher in a small, Southern town in Alabama that I first came to know of a young English Learner (EL) student named Juan. On the first day of class, I quickly picked up on his notably immature disposition, not in a brash or unnerving way that expresses itself in dirty middle-school jokes or disruptive behavior, but in a rather refreshing way. His expression was eager, bright-eyed, and chipper—a look I would love to see on every face of each of my students, but a manner that is (unfortunately) no longer acceptable among boys as they enter their teenage years. Somehow, in my first few moments of knowing him, Juan struck me as a kid that had never and would never succumb to the unspoken social decree to be cool and act tough. Though I had not known him personally the year before, I remember his happy-go-lucky face walking down the hall with a cheerful grin. With a kind word to say to everyone and an attitude unparalleled by most 8th graders, Juan was, and is, a standout to most every teacher. Regrettably, Juan’s personality is not his most memorable attribute; it is his inability to read that has made him unforgettable.

Overview

The following research is an interpretive biography of one, rather unforgettable, student. The study has attempted to take a historical assessment of his educational journey. A situation like his showcases both triumphs and barriers, including but not limited to learning disabilities, issues of power, politics, growth, and even alienation (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Through discourse with family, teachers, and the community that reared him, the aim of the study was to explore his
past and to arrive at explanations and contributing factors for his literacy struggles in American schooling. Although the study of merely one student might seem a lackluster and ineffective stab at real research, the results brought forth in this study demonstrate otherwise. In studying a single student and the scenarios in his educational journey that made him an 8th grader unable to read or write, the study provides in-depth opportunities for issues in relation to EL learning to surface and unfold. This research is an insider’s approach at an in-depth look into the multifaceted array of cultural influences, individuals, and experiences in a student’s life that shape the realities of his or her educational journey.

**Statement of the Problem**

As his 8th grade English teacher, I found out quickly that Juan could not read. Much smaller than the other kids his age, Juan physically appeared younger than his peers. Nevertheless, I shrugged off the information as trivial. In dealing with a wide range of students who were always in different stages of growth, I found that many students physically and socially behind the rest, usually made up for it in academic excellence. However, when asked to write and submit a paragraph, the truth of Juan’s illiteracy surfaced. He turned in five lines of unintelligible gibberish, made up of backwards A’s, upside-down E’s, and what appeared to be division symbols. He was in 8th grade and completely unable to read or write. At the time, I was a graduate student and already had mentally noted him as a possibility of intrigue for further study. As a teacher, I felt hopeless and heartbroken. My curiosity in Juan and his struggle have remained until this day, and for this reason, he is my research topic of study.

Although Juan’s situation may be an extreme case, studies in the last ten years report similar EL struggles in literacy acquisition (Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Cressler, Lippman et al., 2004). However, finding the exact sources of the problems that ELs experience
in learning to read and write is a difficult task to pinpoint. When it comes to ELs, issues of literacy and learning stem from a vast array of sources (Atkinson, 1997). Some literature findings suggest that teachers can do things in the classroom to enhance EL learning such as adding cross-cultural connections to the curriculum (Nieto, 1999). Yet others consider the difficulties to be rather immovable because EL learning is wrapped up in larger power issues within the country that are too big for a classroom teacher to combat (Barbules & Berk, 1999). This particular research project sides with neither of these claims wholly. The framework for this piece is sociocultural relies on Vygotsky’s theory that attributing learning problems to merely one classroom or societal fault is never the entire source of learning problems for a student (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988). Instead, students are affected by numerous factors when learning various content (Garcia & Godina, 2004). The problem would, at first, seem an easy one: to find out why Juan could not read. The reality of the situation is that one specific factor is not fully to blame for his struggles in literacy, but that it is a plethora of sociocultural aspects that lead to a student failing and/or succeeding in literacy and schooling (Cummins, 2000).

Aim of the Study

As a young child, I remember hearing a parable from a preacher in relation to doing good, no matter the impact. Sitting in what I used to refer to as big church aside my parents and brother, most of the words spoken in King James Version were too lofty and over my head and were incomprehensible at such a young age. Thus whenever the preacher told a story, a lesson, or a fable in intelligible vocabulary, I was hooked. However the following story touched me more than most. In fact, as a teacher and as a researcher, it has almost become the very rationale of why I teach, explore, and do the things that I do on a daily basis. In essence, it has become a creed.
A man goes to the beach, looking forward to a beautiful, sunny day of relaxation; one of those days in which the breeze and beauty makes him feel alive again. When he arrives, he is disappointed to find the beach in the most terrible of conditions. The tide has washed up not only seaweed, broken coral, and tiny shards of shells, but there are also thousands of starfish that have been washed ashore. Still clinging to life, the starfish are so littered upon the beach that even the usual coastal colors of the landscape have changed and appear a muddy brown. It would only be a matter of days before each of these starfish died, and cleaning up the beach would take an unfathomable amount of workers and time.

As he turned around to leave the beach with a sigh of frustration and an overwhelming sense of helplessness, he saw a man in the distance, throwing starfish back into the water. He walked over to him, and mindful of the many ocean creatures below him, he attempted to dodge obstacles along the way, walking in strange patterns in the sand.

“Sad day, isn’t it?” He asked he got close enough to converse.

“Indeed.” The man replied as he tossed another starfish back into its home.

“You know, it’s awful nice of you to do what you’re doing,” said the man, “but I feel I must say that it isn’t going to make a difference in what’s happening. There’s no way to help them all.”

Tossing another starfish into the sea, the man replied, “I helped THAT one.”

This story reminds me so much of education. There are the people who dodge those in need and try to stay out of the way. There are the naysayers who condemn research that does not do enough. Lastly, there are the individuals who sit back and watch others who try to make a difference and call them failures for not changing the world. Yet, I think it is also a prime example of people, regardless of the widespread outcome, who chose to make positive and impacting changes for those that they can reach. ELs are a growing number of students with
diverse learning needs, many of which have not yet to be pinpointed, corrected, adjusted, and identified (Garcia & Godina, 2004). There must be more research in the area of impacting and hindering factors in the culture, social lives, classroom, nation, and communities of ELs: even if on a small scale, it could result in positive changes for the future of these learners (Cummins, 2000).

This study aims to understand the sociocultural aspects that impact an EL student’s literacy. Yet, it is a mere study of one. As Cole and Knowles (2001) stated in their book Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research,

…we are not invoking an essentialist claim that to understand one is to understand all. Rather we are suggesting that every in-depth exploration of an individual life-in-context brings us that much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in communities. (p.11)

Juan is an atypical student, but are not there many more atypical students out there? If this study helps just one other student, one other teacher, or one other parent, then is it not an incredibly useful study?

With a reflexive eye, I must take into consideration, however, that not all research is helpful, but indeed could actually hinder a research subject. My aim for this study was to take any and all precautions necessary to ensure Juan, other participants, and students like him are safe and that their educational rights are protected. As researcher, my aim was to complete this project knowing at the end of the day that I have helped at least one starfish.

**Rationale for the Study**

Before beginning this study, I questioned myself as a researcher. Should the study surround multiple students or focus on just one? My conclusion had a tough arrival, but I feel very confident in my decision to study just one student, and to do so thoroughly. Riding on the coat tails of educational theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (notorious for his studies in voice), James
Wertsch stated that the study of one is always the study of many (Wertsch, 1991). Small scale issues point towards bigger ones.

My rationale is to look at the life story of one EL student’s educational journey to become literate by accepted standards in this country. A biographical look at the education of one student unable to read, may actually point toward larger, outside, impacting factors in education (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Researchers are scientists and therefore some things must be examined and analyzed through a microscopic lens in order to learn and arrive at the larger conclusions to the problems they research (Fine & Wies, 2003; Cummins, 2000). Many researchers have pointed out that the problems that ELs (a notably unique category of learners) face each day in literacy and learning are always connected to the bigger picture involving politics, Southern culture, classism, and racism (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Like a doctor looking closely at a swollen lymph node to determine if a larger whole body infection is present, we cannot ignore the larger real-world issues of ELs (English Learners). The literacy struggles and negative experiences revealed in this study are but mere symptoms of the wider chaos that surrounds each English learner as they enter the school building each day (Fine & Weis, 2003). Although Juan’s circumstance might seem rare, his experiences echo that of many, and for that reason alone, this interpretive biography is important and relevant research for today.

Another reason for researching an EL student in such depth is to closely look at the largest growing minority in the classroom (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). At every social, political, and emotional turn in America, educational researchers must take a look into the literacy classroom and find the gaps, inadequacies, progression, and other happenings related to learning (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). Therefore with EL students being at an all-time high in the United States, it is prime time for research in the area of English learners. Although this study
does not attempt to arrive at a cure or even an answer to the problems that have riddled Juan’s educational journey, it definitely provides insights that raise awareness and discussion leading to potential solutions (Fine & Weis, 2003). The study of one individual provides an eye-opening look into the inner life of an EL in a literacy classroom (Cohen, 2007). Educators cannot make leaps and bounds forward until they first realize where we currently stand (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003).

Thus, the following study is the in-depth research of the contexts, events, and emotions surrounding the literacy triumphs and struggles of one EL student, Juan. If the current operating system of American education calls itself No Child Left Behind it only seems rational to study the ones that unfortunately have been (Leman, 2008).

**Juan’s Background: A Teacher’s Investigation**

After identifying that Juan could not read, I associated the accent with his literacy problems and assumed that Juan had not been in the country for a long period of time. In speaking with him, I found out that he was born in Mexico. That fact ushered me to the next pivotal puzzle piece; Juan was in the EL (the abbreviation standing for English Learners, also formally known as the ELL or English Language Learners) program (Grissom, 2004). Throughout all of this, I did what many teachers do and made very stereotypical assumptions (Harklau, 2000). When I guessed that Juan was a newcomer to the English Language, I contacted the EL teacher who revealed to me an astonishing truth to the matter. Juan had been in the program since he was in fourth grade.

Although he was born in Mexico, Juan had been raised in the United States soon after birth. This was such alarming information because, according to EL program research by Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, and Pasta (1991), even in the late-exit models of EL programs, students
should test out of EL services after six years. After four years in the program, young Juan remained completely illiterate. This raises questions that this study has attempted to address about Juan’s lack of progression and stagnant academic growth.

Knowing that Juan had not been progressing in his literacy skills for quite some time, I immediately turned in another direction. I narrow-mindedly thought I had found the right agency for Juan when I inquired about special education services for him. To my shock, I had been beaten to the punch. Since second grade, four of his teachers had referred Juan to special education for testing though he was never admitted to the program.

In asking around school, I found Juan was unable to take the special needs tests in English or Spanish. To special education teachers that meant that his shortcomings were due to language issues (Solano-Flores, 2008). Meanwhile, the EL teachers continued to shake their heads and imply that his incapability to learn English was due to a learning disability, adding that even in his home language (Spanish), Juan was struggling just the same. Like two cruel children playing *keep away*, the EL and special education departments engaged in a cyclic game of catch with Juan that lasted into his middle school years. The object kept just out of his reach was his education.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question that this interpretive biography aimed to explore was the following: What did or did not happen in Juan’s life for him to come to 8th grade with an inability to read or write? Yet as is the case in most interpretive biographies, this question lends itself to many more (Denzin, 1989). Guiding questions for the study that were also answered and addressed were as follows:
1. Set within sociocultural/sociopolitical contexts, what (if any) events, people, and experiences in Juan’s educational journey have contributed to his state of illiteracy in 8th grade;

2. How do those who were part of Juan’s EL experience view the process of ELs and their acculturation into the schools of this southeastern US community; and

3. Exploring both systemic/everyday routines as well as novel events (as markers of his illiteracy along the way), what factors influenced of his literacy skills or lack thereof as an EL student in a seen American school environment?

**Contextual Setting**

_White_ and _Black_ are terms often used to describe opposites. In the South, those words are often still used to represent ethnicities of people (Fine & Weis, 2003), although, clearly, everyone does not fall into one category or the other. Juan, the focus of this research, is neither. Juan is Hispanic, and although not all English Learners are Hispanic, 80% of them are (NEA, 2012). This study does not categorize all ELs into the same ethnic category, but to ignore that fact many ELs are Hispanic is equally unwise (Nieto, 1999). Hispanics, just as any other underrepresented culture, are often called _Others_ (Nieto, 1999). Juan is in that big, broad, politically incorrect grouping: students who are neither White nor Black (Pappamihiel, 2002). This study focused on the sociocultural aspects that attempt to assess whether or not race and ethnicity played a role in relation to Juan’s life and journey of not fitting in to American schooling. This vast group of ELs are rarely heard, pushed down, and often ignored (Fine & Weis, 2003). Unfortunately, the voiceless needs of ethnicities that fall somewhere between Black and White are rarely heard and seldom met (Fine & Weis, 2003; Nieto, 1999).
Although African-American and Caucasian struggles linger, the voices of both communities are a loud and present reality in our nation, and education is impacted because of those voices (Cohen, De La Vega, & Watson, 2001). Funding and legislation have made tremendous gains in effort to mend and fix the brokenness between Black and White communities in effort to right what has been wrong for so long (Nieto, 1999; Fine & Weis, 2003). In attempting to meet the needs and voices heard from each side, U.S. education has let slide the voice of Brown (Cummins, 2000).

There is this shot in the opening scene of the movie, *Mississippi Burning*, where you see two water fountains. One is broken, and chipped, and water is dripping from it. The other is modern, and shining. A White guy goes up to the nice one, and the Black kid goes up to the old one. I remember saying to myself, ‘If I was in the scene, where would I drink?’ (Wu Wong, 2008 from *Somewhere between Black and White: The Chinese Mississippi*, paragraph 1)

As the preceding quote so adequately demonstrates, in movies, media, and politics the voice of the others is largely silent (Lynman & Figgins, 2005). Eighty percent of ELs are Latino (NEA, 2011); and since 2001, Latinos have passed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). America’s educational system can no longer neglect this community of learners (Lyman & Figgins, 2005).

With a unique culture and colorful history, EL students are in need of value, power, voice, and agency in education (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Unfortunately, where America stands today, many struggles from English learning students in the classroom and many of their reported educational experiences spawn off of and are interconnected to this one sociopolitical reality of the American system that limits the voice of others (Lynman & Figgins, 2005; Fine & Weis, 2003; Moore & Cunningham, 2006; Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). To have a voice, or a *say so* in any given environment, one must first have the particular power to speak (Sather, 2006; Moore & Cunningham, 2006). The contextual setting of this study was one in which the
researcher aimed to uncover the life and sociocultural surroundings of a student submerged in a society that has ignored his *voice* for years.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this study, I wanted to know Juan. I wanted to inquire about the known fact that he was unable to read or write at the 8th grade level. In this investigation, I used the sociocultural theory of student learning: the idea that learning has an interdependence with the context which surrounds it (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988). Most notable for his influence on the educational theory that states students learn amidst a whirlwind of social, economic, institutional, political, emotional, and cultural influences that impact it, I used a Vygotskyian approach to view and interpret Juan’s Southern American schooling (Wertsch, 1998). Although much work has been done in the area of sociocultural theory since, Vygotsky is still a leading and guiding figure with his ideas alive and pertinent to today’s research (Wertsch, 1998). Renowned for stating that “…A child's development cannot be understood by a study of the individual. We must also examine the external social world in which that individual life has developed” (Kublin, 1989, p.6-7). Vygotsky is the theorist whom would most agree with this study and its aim to study the student holistically.

This study aspired to do just that. Rather than study a boy, a student, a single individual, this research aimed to gather all the facts, emotions, contexts, and meanings from influences in Juan’s life that interconnect to his learning and literacy. This included the study of the community, the school, the teachers, the family, his friends, and perhaps even the religious institution that Juan grew up with. In this way, sociocultural theory is the prominent and most active theory at work in this study. I rely on the forefathers of sociocultural thought that believe
people, events, and environment can help or hinder learning, but regardless of which, they always have impact (Adamson & Chance, 1989).

Other theories, such as critical theory, are embraced in this study and revolve around issues of power, language, and literacy. This study analyzed Juan’s history through a critical lens, in order to examine and find weaknesses, lapses, and possible inadequacies (Popekewtiz & Fendler, 1999). Juan’s situation was riddled with issues of power and I looked closely into these sociocultural dynamics and appropriately discuss power throughout this research. *Power* has a direct link to learning (Freire, 2005). Thus, it is pivotal to lean on giants such as Paulo Freire. He is not a theorist that talked about lofty ideas and never took action (Freire, 2005); in fact, he was quite the opposite. Freire (2005) stated that we must “confront the culture that is imposed,” (p. 7) and help give voice to the voiceless through education: language and literacy. He led a Brazilian society to liberation through language and literacy learning (Ewert, 1999). In order to “effectively coordinate action in a society” language and literacy barriers must not exist (Ewert, 1991, p. 359).

Knowledge and learning in literacy are some of the easiest but most important steps to take in the process of liberation (Freire, 2000). It requires no tearing down of walls, burning of flags, or conquering of strongholds, instead it only requires effort. Fighting back in this way creates no casualties, but does create the necessary self-respect to stand up to oppressors (Freire, 2005; Ewert, 1991). In the act of learning, the newfound pupil gains such insight, freedom, and liberation that remaining immobile within his or her social hierarchy seems an impossible and intolerable notion (Freire, 2005).

His studies of the oppressed largely focus on a lack of literacy, knowledge, and skills held back from certain groups (Freire, 2000). Much like Juan, oppressed people who do not
speak the language of those in power (figuratively or literally) cannot rise up and seek change for they are held down by lack of language, knowledge, and literacy skills (Ewert, 1991). Freire actually inspired the Brazilian Literacy Movement by revealing to those who were oppressed, kept down, and held back by societal hierarchies that the ability to reconstruct their lives was through education (Freire, 2005). After Freire’s revolt of learning, a study of the hegemony and constructs of societies like Brazil would prove that literacy did, in fact, give power and voice to those who were previously oppressed (Freire, 2005). In the case of ELs and the possible link to inequitable circumstances that this study unearths, the steps towards change and educational equity require many voices to speak up. In Brazil, voices and peoples that had previously gone unheard had to take initiative to put power behind their voices; thus, Paulo Freire’s work with power through literacy intertwines throughout this study. If the theoretical framework is indeed the very backbone of research, then this study is upheld with the strongest of supports.

**Overview of Methods**

After much consideration, the methodological approach I chose for this study is the interpretive biography method. I chose this method mainly because it is a combination of all the methods that seemed to best fit the study. An interpretive biography resembles a case study in that it examines a fixed circumstance (Creswell, 2007). An interpretive biography is also historical in nature. Much like a historiographical approach to research, the interpretive biography method allows for researching and analyzing old documents and other artifacts, interviews about the past, and focuses on the history of a particular situation, rather than the present-day data collected from current events (Spalding & Parker, 2008).

Interpretive biographies are ethnographic in nature, as well, because to look into the cultural influences, social pressures, and societal norms of an individual’s education is to
submerge myself into the community, school, and people that surrounded the individual from the beginning of schooling until the time of the struggle (Creswell, 2007). Interpretive biographies are written in narrative form, and I knew that would work best with Juan’s situation. Juan is a student with a story to tell, and it unfolds best through a narrative format, just as it has been relayed to the researcher through interviews in story form (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2007). Although the task of arriving at just one method seemed a thorny one at first, I found that the method of interpretive biography intertwines all of the most fitting methodologies for this project into one solid research technique.

Confusion is a common characteristic among researchers while making methodological decisions (Creswell, 2007). It eased my tensions to know this because it took many months to sift through methodological approaches before I arrived at the interpretive biography method. As Hatch (2002), a qualitative research enthusiast, details in his book, he sees his graduate students regularly experience this turmoil when adopting a methodology for their research projects. He recommends that a researcher should first admit that the study falls into more than one methodology (Hatch, 2002), but he also advises that it is best to eventually settle on just one (Hatch, 2002). He alludes to reading papers he calls “sloppy” (p. 32) and nit-picks that using fickle language (such as case-study in one paragraph, and the term ethnography in the next) demeans one’s title as an authority in the area of study (Hatch, 2002). In response to his opinion on the matter, I decided to choose the one methodology that most agrees with my study and myself as principle investigator. Although I do differ with Hatch’s opinions on that matter of calling a project by more than one methodological approach being second rate (Hatch, 2002), decidedly I have chosen one route and that is the choice of an interpretive biography approach.
This study is not a cut and dry synopsis of a child. It is, on the other hand, a rich story that is bound to leave the reader feeling like they know Juan, the son, the kid, and the struggling student. The method of interpretive biography seems best fit for this study because it unravels the data in the form of a narrative (Creswell, 2007). It is data based upon scenarios, events, interviews and objects taken from the past, that urge the reader to create meaning behind the data being revealed (Hatch, 2002). Interpretive biographies place emphasis on the importance of a single individual’s experience and the way it powerfully connects to educational significance (Cole & Knowles, 2001). The aim of an interpretive biography is for the subject’s story to be told in the most genuine way possible, in order that truth may surface from the data revealed throughout the narrative (Denzin, 1989).

In my experience with interpretive biographies, the results seem to irrevocably stick in the reader’s mind, not as a phone number or a grocery list, but as a thought provoking, honest, and often heart wrenching historical documentary would do; for that reason, I chose this method. Denzin, the forefather of the interpretive biography method, explains that interpretive biographies are open to express the emotion of the participants, subject, and even the researcher (Denzin, 1984). This emphasis on researcher involvement also bodes well with the study of Juan. Since I know Juan personally, I had to choose a method that allowed for a relationship between all members of the study (Denzin, 1884). Lastly, interpretive biographies allow the readers themselves to interpret meanings and truths from the data instead of pointing out or arriving at definite truths for all (Cole & Knowles, 2001). These were just a few of the reasons for my choosing to make this study an interpretive biography.

Unlike Hatch (2002) advised, my method is not one pure and definite label. I chose my methodology, interpretive biography, because it is a hybrid of many. My option to be so
inclusive with my methodological approach rises out of my beliefs, the hidden core of a researcher. How can the story of a person be described in a single word? Methods are essentially genres of research and they are classified as art, movies, books, and experiences (Ajraldi, 2010). A walk into multiple video stores would prove this true in that a favorite movie could be found in the thriller section whilst another store calls it a horror movie. In the same way, I have carefully decided to leave rigid notions of labels out of the equation. Call this study what you will, my goal is that every reader can walk away and call it genuine.

I wish to justly deliver Juan’s story as research. I call it an interpretive biography, but I refuse to box myself in to meet a certain methodological criteria. Being able to be involved in researching a story like Juan’s is a privilege. It is his story, I am but the storyteller, and I’ve aimed to tell it correctly and to the full (Denzin, 1984). If creatively designing and tampering with strict methodological rules is incorrect and frowned upon by Hatch and others who share his view, then label me rebellious. Juan’s story is anything but typical, and it must be told atypically.

Relevance of the Study

The place of illegal students in American schooling, sociocultural factors surrounding education, and EL education are all rather hot and controversial topics today (Sather, 2006). Through an interpretive lens, this study aims to showcase the pitfalls, the mundane, and the celebrated moments in the life of an English learner. The relevancy is clear and important in that ELs are a massive and growing group of learners in the United States (Garcia & Godina, 2004). This study reaches politically charged subjects like immigration, stereotypes, lingering Southern racism, and political factors that most educational researchers have ignored because of political correctness and other social fears (Soltero, 2006). Therefore a study such as this one, delves into
the factors that contribute to and conflict with the success of English learners in American schools is a relevant one (Rubinstein & Avila, 2004). The honest nature of a struggling student and the people, culture, and community that are part of those struggles, is an important and needed study, indeed.

The research and data gathered during this study is riddled with emotions of daily struggles, soaked in the researcher’s intrigue of diagnosing what went wrong, and doused with honest description of Juan’s pure and wholesome personality. It is a story I knew must be told from the moment I learned of it. However, I also knew that this research of one must contribute to the growing body of literature that illuminates the educational experiences of Hispanics in American schools.

Yet, in reading Wertsch’s book Voices of the Mind (1991), he makes what I found to be a pointed statement about the meaningful nature of studying a single individual. When describing the power of voice, Wertsch made the strong statement that “…there is no such thing as a voice that exists in total isolation from other voices” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 51). Applied to this study of one, Wertsch and Bakhtin’s view is that the study of one is not just one individual story; it is the story of many (Wertsch, 1991).

This study is grounded in the idea that Juan’s voice will represent the cry of many others in the U.S. educational system experiencing a similar situation (Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard, & Freedman, 2011). Abiding by the newfound creed, the voice of one is the voice of many, this research gains a relational nature (Wertsch, 1991). With a slight word play, one might even say about my study that the voice of Juan is the voice of many. His story will not stand alone, but it highlights the struggle of many others like him (Cole & Knowles, 2001).
Definition of Key Terms

In order to better understand and support reader knowledge throughout this study, below are some terms that will be helpful to know. Many people often define certain vocabulary rather differently, so it is beneficial in research to clarify for the reader how these terms are defined for this study (Smith, 2009). These terms aid the reader’s understanding of the study, and it is helpful not only know these terms but also know the researcher’s particular stance on the definition of the phrases and words throughout the study.

EL- (the abbreviation for English Learner) The classification was formerly called ELL that stands for English Language Learner, but in the last few years was changed and shortened (Grissom, 2004).

Interpretive Biography (Denzin, 1989) - a life history account- “the process or method of doing biography- creating literary, narrative, accounts and representations of lived experiences; telling and inscribing stories” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p.3).

Illiterate- several researchers have slightly varying definitions for the term illiterate. There are also different types of illiteracy as well; for example, adult literacy (or functional illiteracy) is not being able to read on a sixth grade reading level (Garcia & Godina, 2004). Functional literacy is the ability to understand only enough words to function in life and society, but no more than that (Cohen, 2007). Although some people view illiteracy as not able to read and/or comprehend more than 1,500 words (Cohen, 2007), for the purposes of this study, I borrow the most basic and widely accepted definition of the term. Illiterate is not having the ability to read, write, or comprehend textual meanings (Illiteracy, 2012).

Bilingual- the term bilingual is used in this study to refer to an individual who speaks two different languages (Purcell-Gates, 1995). A consecutive bilingual, one who has grown up
knowing one language (Spanish), but has learned another (English) (Thomas & Collier, 1995). Having only social language, students interact socially through basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), although they are still be classified as illiterate in both of those languages.

Voice- the expression of thoughts, emotions, and circumstances; intended to be valued. Powerless groups have no voice. When empowered, voices begin to truly be heard (Freire, 2000).

The power to speak- this phrase is used often in the study and requires the following allegorical definition:

Tom is at a hardware store attempting to find a quick fix for a leaky sink. A woman overhears his issue and sees Tom with the wrong part in his hand. She walks over and hands him a different product saying that it will work better for his particular situation. He takes the suggestion with politeness, but ignores her advice and walks toward the cashier with his first choice in hand. In the parking lot, with his purchase in the bag, Tom sees the lady who offered him the advice. She gets in a utility van with the words “Jones Licensed Plumbing” written in large letters on the side. Tom goes back in the store and exchanges the part with the one she had previously advised.

As the story depicts, Tom understood the lady the first time she suggested the part, but her advice was not truly heard. Her voice had no power. He shrugged off her help because he had no reason to pay attention to a stranger’s advice over his own ideas. Mentally, he may have even delved further into the power/gender dynamic and decided that he was a man and assumed men generally know more about plumbing than women. But this all changed and her words were reexamined after she received power from being a licensed plumber. Being licensed is a
symbol of knowledge. Knowledge is power. In the same way, many of the struggles and reported experiences with literacy in the classroom have negative, harmful, nonproductive repercussions because ELs are a group that has yet to find a powerful voice in our nation so that they may adequately be heard (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Only then will change ensue (Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard, & Freedman, 2011).

**Summary**

Chapter I outlines the general nature of the study. Beginning by introducing the research to the reader, Juan, the central participant, and a rationale for the study is laid out. The problem stated in a narrative was that of Juan and his struggles with the literacy in school. Another narrative section of previous research was added that told of the researcher and her relation to the subject and her past experiences with finding help for him. Finding aid for Juan with various agencies in the school always ended in a dead end.

Insight into the researcher’s choice for interpretive biography as the method and to the nature of researching an individual student was discussed. The contextual setting of EL education today was detailed and lent further relevancy to this particular research. Terms to aid the reader were unveiled and defined as well. The relational aspects of sociocultural and critical theory as *power* by means of literacy serve as theoretical frameworks and a common thread throughout the remainder of the piece.
CHAPTER II:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Unlike many other research projects in the field of education, this is not the study of a group of people with a similar theme. Instead, this research is the study of an individual. As one looks closely into Juan’s life with a keen eye toward sociocultural aspects that have affected his education, a plethora of factors may surface. Instead of engaging in a quest to find overriding commonalities among factors, this dissertation aims to pull out relevant factors and examine them in light of their impact on an EL student’s development in a southeastern U.S. educational school system. The following review addresses pertinent literature relative to EL learners and their education in American schools to foreground episodes that arise out of Juan’s story.

The Power to Speak

Although it may sound related to the fact that some students cannot actually speak the same language as the general public, the mention of the power to speak isn’t actually based on speaking a common language at all (Sather, 2006; Cummins, 2000). The power can come from social status (e.g. celebrities, politicians), advocacy groups (such as NAACP), groups consisting of large numbers of the population (such as gay pride efforts to make aware the GLBT community), and people unafraid and unwelcome to speak out on behalf of loved ones who can’t speak out for themselves such as the Federation for Children with Special Needs, which is primarily made up of parents (Cohen, De La Vega, & Watson, 2001).

In this research, English language learners and their unique experiences are examined in the classroom, and at each turn, the oppressive factor is that this population of learners lacks the
power to speak out for themselves (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). What happens in education when a group of previously powerless people desires to speak? Change happens. A prime example of this phenomenon is when *Brown vs. Board of Education* was overturned ruling that “separate educational facilities (were) inherently unequal” (Kluger, 1975, p. 37). It would appear that the struggles and experiences of ELs are yet another American scenario of a country ignoring an obligation to deliver equal learning opportunities to its students (Kluger, 1975).

**Citizenship Barriers**

So what is the difference between EL students who do not rise up and speak out for themselves and previously oppressed groups who do? The unfortunate answer is that the majority of Southern EL students have been associated with the negative stigma of illegal immigration (Cummins, 2000; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Though it is greatly ignored in EL literature for its decidedly political nature (Nasir & Hand, 2006), the fact that “an estimated 1.1 million public school students are illegal immigrants” is seen to many Americans as a problem in itself (Rubenstein, 2008). How can literacy teachers expect students viewed by society as *illegals, others, outsiders, and unwelcome* to flourish in their U.S. classrooms (Sprigs, 2007)?

Many individuals in America wrongly assume that all ELs are in the country illegally. This is not so. However it is naive to ignore the fact that many of ELs are (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). Parents and children who are in the country illegally do not (in most cases) speak up for themselves or their students; likewise, they do not feel welcome at the school, come to meetings, ask questions, or hold a school accountable for their child’s learning (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). Any logical examination of this fact would prove its truth: *if Mom and Dad complain about the way I’m being treated at school, our citizenship could be questioned, and we could all be in*
trouble. It is obvious that in such weighted circumstances like these, when the situation is wrapped up in issues of citizenship and illegal status, parents and students are rendered completely powerless to speak out regarding education or other forms of inequity (Verdugo, 2006).

Language Barriers

English learners are given that title because they (most always) speak a different language at home (Pappamihiel, 2002). Many of their parents (whom in every ethnicity or racial group are the true and only advocates for their children) speak even less English than their EL student (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). This presents obvious problems as well. If a student enrolls in an American school system from Vietnam and there is no one there to translate for the parent or student in Vietnamese, an issue of speaking out of behalf of the child becomes another barrier completely (Lynman & Figgins, 2005). “People’s practical interests are reflected in their use of language to further mutual understanding of individual interests and to coordinate social action to satisfy mutual interests and needs” (Ewert, 1991, p. 351). Legal status or not, speaking a language different than the dominant culture’s with no way to commonly interact is no way to raise awareness about injustice or struggles in a literacy classroom or any other (Cohen, De la Vega, & Watson, 2001).

Political Barriers

Sadly, political factors also come into play in relation to struggles and the reported experiences of ELs in school (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004). It is obvious that among other important issues in the next election, immigration is one of the most popular, heated, and tense topics for voters. When interwoven and embedded so deeply in politics, certain issues like immigration and common language create anger and heated debate (Cummins, 2000). Fights
and bullying amongst students have been reported as experiences from EL students attending schools with strong political bias from parents and other cultural factors (Sprigs, 2007). An overwhelming amount of the literature points to ELs being singled out and *othered* because they are already seen as outcasts due to language barriers (Sprigs, 2007).

Whatever one’s political leaning or standpoint on the issue, the role of American education as it currently stands is clear and has remained the same message since the Supreme Court ruling in 1982 (Soltero, 2006). This ruling mandates illegal immigrant children deserve the same education as children who are U.S. citizens (Soltero, 2006). Thus, whatever the political cacophony, ELs should be getting equal opportunities in the classroom, but a lack of voice from these groups keeps this progress at a standstill (Cohen, De La Vega, & Watson, 2001; Soltero, 2006).

**EL Education in Alabama Today**

As previously stated in *Plyer vs. Doe*, all students no matter the citizenship status should be receiving the same education as American citizens (Soltero, 2006). However, the most recent news, information, literature, and legislation in Alabama suggest quite the opposite: illegal citizens are not welcome in state schools (Hing, 2011). This message rises out of the 2011 immigration law in Alabama that forces schools to ask for paperwork that proves citizenship status when enrolling (House Bill 56, 2011). Even if done so non-purposefully, the state has placed a stigma on illegal immigrant students and their families that they are unwelcome. This was not accidental; the 2011 law actually aimed to make the lives of immigrants in Alabama so uncomfortable and that the only choice would be to leave (Hing, 2011). By creating laws affecting the way illegal citizens rent homes, drive cars, work, and attend school, the law hailed
as “America’s toughest immigration law” (Hing, 2011, para. 1) is cutting the air supply off of a once thriving community full of life.

**Recent Legislation**

Although there is little research from the days following the 2011 immigration law in Alabama, the information gathered during that moment in history speaks volumes in regard to Alabama and its relations with immigrants and their children. Some impulsively compared it to a scene from *The Diary of Anne Frank* seeing large minorities leaving and withdrawing from school in droves. Recent news articles written by Gideon Aronoff (president and CEO of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and Jane Ramsey (executive director of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs) who wrote for the Jewish Forward called Jews to speak out against what they call is a “xenophobic travesty” for the state of Alabama (Aronoff & Ramsey, 2011, para. 1).

Throughout our history, Jews have been considered strangers and outsiders in their communities, and we know too well the pain of living in fear. We know that racial profiling incites feelings of helplessness, frustration, anxiety and anger for innocent victims. (Aronoff & Ramsey, 2011, paragraph 8)

Although the law has already been subject to change since human rights activists have begun to file lawsuits, as it stands, there is no doubt that EL students are and will be affected by these changes (House Bill 56, 2011). Given this new legislation, there is little literature to draw from in regard to its impact on students, but its importance and relevance to this study is clear. Although this study researches a time before this legislation, knowing that this study is about an EL student from Alabama with illegal status underscored its pertinence.

**EL Struggles and Documented Experiences in Literacy Classrooms**

All of the aforementioned research highlights the bigger issues of what is influencing, silencing, and stifling the voices of learners who are having difficulties in and struggle with literacy. Issues like poor representation of multicultural materials for adolescents in English
language arts classrooms (Nieto, 1999; Sather, 2006) echo the fact that these students are voiceless and underrepresented in society and in the classroom. Some EL classroom experiences allude to students questioning why the literature represented in an entire year’s worth of literacy instruction does not once represent a voice from someone their color (Nieto, 1999; Sather, 2006; Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard, & Freedman, 2011).

**Critical Thinking Skills and ELs**

Literacy instruction is the teaching and enhancement of reading and writing skills, often involving activities, lessons, and questioning grounded in the ability to critically think; yet when it comes to EL instruction, it is said to be culturally neglectful because the ability to critically think in a second language is a characteristic that does not develop quickly (Atkinson, 1997). In fact, when it comes to language acquisition, critical thinking is one of the last processes gained (Atkinson, 1997). Therefore to add to the list of issues, bullying (Sprigs, 2007), negative stigmas (Rueda, Salzar, & Higeareda, 2005), and lack of representational reading material (Nieto, 1999), critical thinking becomes another common issue for EL students and their struggling experiences with literacy (Atkinson, 1997).

**Lack of Cultural Representations**

Another common problem associated with literacy is a lack of cultural connectivity (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003) in the classroom. Teachers have been taught to connect what is being learned to prior knowledge, and if students are outside the cultural mainstream (as most EL students are) there is a lack of common cultural knowledge to aid in learning and building upon previous knowledge (Murphy, 2007). Multicultural education strategies try to bridge gaps and form welcoming learning communities for all learners, but research says that many teachers who consider themselves to be meeting multicultural needs are still alienating ELs (Klinger &
Problems specific to literacy manifest themselves in an inability to understand grade appropriate vocabulary (Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Cressler, Lippman, et al., 2004). This is a natural occurrence with ELs due to a lack of cultural connections. An example would be instructing a student to identify a clause when he or she does not know what identify or clause means. When linked to a word in his or her first language, a student still may be unable to connect the idea of a clause in an English sentence structure to a clause in their native tongue because sentences in other languages have dissimilar structure (Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Cressler, Lippman, et al., 2004). Low vocabulary knowledge can also be traced back to a lack of cultural knowledge on the teacher’s part as well. Without knowledge of a student’s home language or culture, connecting ideas from a EL student’s world to academic knowledge in the classroom is a daunting and often overlooked task by teachers (Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Cressler, Lippman, et al., 2004).

**Class Questioning**

As educational literature commonly states, questioning is a pivotal step in the learning process; this is no different for ELs (Cohen, 2007). Sadly, much of the literature in regard to the experiences of EL students have document that students do not feel free to ask questions (Cohen, 2007). Sometimes not even knowing useful vocabulary to ask the right questions, ELs reported feeling dumb, ignored, and non-participatory (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). Even when a student musters the courage to ask a question in class, studies show that they do not have the same nerve to ask follow up questions they need to ask to succeed, learn, and grow (Nagy & Scott, 2000). One of the most dangerous scenarios in a classroom is when students begin to accept that they cannot keep up, cannot reach the bar, and completely lose the drive and motivation to learn at all (Murphy, 2007). Often times, students internalize failure in school and begin to give up (Nagy
& Scott, 2000). This behavior first manifests itself in a student drifting off in class and a noticeable change in enthusiasm, from that point students may even end up dropping out or misbehaving in school (Moore & Cunningham, 2006).

**Differentiating Literature**

Overwhelmingly, when it comes to studies in relation to ELs and literacy instruction choosing the right literature and reading material is key (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). A student does not need to jump into an in-depth poem like *The Raven* or a novel like *Moby Dick* if he or she is not on that reading level. Although this might seem a far-fetched example, research says that many teachers unwaveringly require the reading of classical playwrights like Shakespeare because it is required, yet they do not supplement materials for ELs as they should (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Literature of such depth requires a firm literacy level and is completely out of reach for many ELs and their current state of language acquisition (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Using culturally irrelevant literature (material that does not relate to what a student knows or can identify from his or her own culture) also creates barriers for these students (Bernhardt, 2005). Being required to read a story about *Why I Love the Fourth of July* may be difficult to grasp if the student has recently moved from Mexico (Bernhardt, 2005).

**Lack of Translators**

EL students are also (and most often) grouped together, which causes problems in culture and connections as well (Verdugo, 2006). An Indian student may be placed in an EL class with ten children from Guatemala: how confusing might that situation become? The teacher teaches English through Spanish associations, leaving the Indian student to fend for his or herself (Nieto, 1999; Fine & Weis, 2003). Translators are usually chosen and hired in US school systems based upon the second language with the highest number of EL students who speak that common
language (Bernhardt, 2005). Unfortunately, that leaves many students out. Guatemala actually has 51 dialects spoken within its country border, whereas two Guatemalan students may not even understand one another (Ethnologue, 2011). Literature points out that this is another compounding factor that lead ELs to struggle in US schools.

**Testing and ELs**

Other reported struggles among ELs in literacy classrooms are those associated with poor testing skills (Solano-Flores, 2007). Solano & Flores (2007) write that testing results among ELs are incredibly low, because many students aren’t used to testing. Testing is actually an art form that our society and American students have relentlessly picked up through their schooling (Solano & Flores, 2007). Test taking skills don’t come naturally and students who are new to the art of testing find the vocabulary, requirements, and even instructions that come with a test to be confusing (Solano & Flores, 2007). Although the students may fully understand both stories that were read in class, they may not understand the test question to compare and contrast the two.

**ELs and Student Voice**

Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard, and Freedman (2011) pointed out another stumbling block in literacy acquisition for ELs is the inability to find voice as a both a reader and writer. The Alabama course of study for literacy instruction (along with various other state and national achievement tests) lists the ability to read and write from different points of view as a common objective (Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard, & Freedman, 2011). The ability to write in first, second, and third person points-of-view is a skill that takes years to develop, and not one that students automatically know how to do (Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard, & Freedman, 2011). An important part of writing and reading is about understanding tone, mood, and audience: Even EL students that can catch up very quickly with the rest of the class in other skills, tend to be unable
to compensate for their inability to find an appropriate voice in literature and writing (Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard, & Freedman, 2011).

Social and Academic Language Gaps

As previously mentioned in the terms and keywords section in Chapter I, when it comes to bilingual learners, there are two different types of languages being learned by every EL (Thomas & Collier, 1995). Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) is when a student can talk, cope, and function in society based upon his or her knowledge of their second language (Thomas & Collier, 1995). Cognitive Academic language Proficiency (CALP) is a student’s ability to know academic terminology, and understand a more formal tone (such as used in a classroom) (Thomas & Collier, 1995). Teachers often look at the way an EL student talks, listens, and interacts with others and sets the bar too high for their students (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

EL literature overwhelmingly reports this phenomenon as one of the most common and detrimental for EL students’ growth (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Many teachers do not know the facts: in literacy and language acquisition for ELs, social language comes much faster than does the language of academics (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). The language they see on television, the vocabulary in movies, and conversations among peers may never teach a student about the jargon or technical language expected in science, mathematics, English, or history class (Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Cressler, Lippman, et al., 2004).

School Anxiety Among ELs

Finally, and most ignored is an experience of ELs that is not visible, but frequently present. EL students report feeling large amounts of anxiety each day they enter an American school (Pappamihiel, 2002). The anxiety stems from various events that happen during the
school day, but mostly surround the fear of what is expected of them in the classroom (Pappamihiel, 2002). A common experience for an EL is to take a gamble each day on content (Pappamihiel, 2002). *Will I understand today? Will I be able to do what is required of me?* Entering the classroom each day, an EL student may never truly feel comfortable, safe, or able to conquer the academic tasks each day until this type anxiety resides (Pappamihiel, 2002).

No doubt the problems and experiences reported from this group of learners are outlandishly fatal for learning pivotal literacy skills needed to succeed in the workforce, further school, and life (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004). Yet ELs remain a group that for the most part has gone unspoken for in education (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoo, 2005). These issues and others like them that occur daily with learning and literacy among EL students will not be addressed, tackled, or changed if the American public does not recognize and legitimize their educational struggles (Cohen, De La Vega, & Watson, 2001; Fine & Weis, 2003).

**Agency through Literacy**

Although there are various definitions for the term *agency*, I have combined and simplified several into one overriding definition. Agency is human action aimed towards producing change (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006; Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999; Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Throughout history, literacy and learning have served as a catalyst for change among individuals around the world (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). A classroom is merely a small representation of the world and thus agency that comes from education, learning, and literacy also means changes for students (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006).

“The human dimension of agency emphasizes freedom,” yet the agency of adolescents has been stifled by the social order of the classroom which reflects a hierarchy of power embedded in the dominant hegemonic culture (Moore & Cunningham, 2006, p. 218). Nothing
promotes agency like literacy (Moore & Cunningham, 2006; Fine & Weis, 2003). Literacy is a critical agent of change in students lives and has the ability to propel them in life’s endeavors (Moore & Cunningham, 2006; Garcia, & Godina, 2004; Klinger & Vaughn, 2004). Having the ability to read and write enables students to press forward, move in and out of social constructs while breaking out of situated circumstances of oppression (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). Teaching the pivotal literacy skills to all students, including ELs is imperative. Regardless outside political agendas, social status, or the lack of empowerment and voice, all of the literature overwhelmingly argues and attempts to show the same point: the ability to read and write will enable students to move forward, progress, and achieve in the future (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004). Furthermore, education, learning, and literacy skills promote small-scale agency for example with a student going after a higher paying job or a large impacting agency as a public spokesperson in an organization that speaks out against oppression (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006).

**Needed Change for ELs**

To address these struggles and change EL experiences in school in relation to literacy, teachers should help them to develop a sense of agency (Moore & Cunningham, 2006; Nieto, 1999; Fine & Weis, 2003). Provoking the human will towards change is a difficult feat, no doubt, yet research findings state that teachers can actually be a prominent inspiration and driving force in ushering along actions to create the desired effect with students (Moore & Cunningham, 2006; Nieto, 1999; Fine & Weis, 2003). As the aforementioned highlights, raising a student’s agency can be done through literacy instruction (Moore & Cunningham, 2006), but more specifically, EL teachers can create writing exercises that allow students to express student voice in class (Sather, 2006).
A student learning, exercising, and practicing the skill of expressing voice through writing allows students to gain confidence in expressing personal thoughts and their own opinions (Garcia & Godina, 2004). Teachers who help students grow comfortable with expressing themselves can springboard students into abilities like public speaking and coordinating actions to promote change (Garcia & Godina, 2004). An easy task for teachers that is often overlooked is to highlight and praise students for sharing thoughts, ideas, and expressions (Sather, 2006). Rather than pointing out what’s wrong, grammatically incorrect, or missing, providing encouragement for EL literacy students in the formative language acquisition stages will help give them the confidence to continue growing, changing, and boosts confidence along the way (Rubinstein-Avila, 2004). When teachers show appreciation for students’ voices, the unique home languages and associated cultures, students gain agency by an indirect, teacher-fostered push (Lynman & Figgins, 2005; Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Using persuasive writing and showing the power and voice it possesses can also help usher creative and life altering benefits (Sather, 2006; Moore & Cunningham, 2006; Nieto, 1999; Fine & Weis, 2003).

**Literature Gap: Special Needs and EL**

The literature findings on EL students lead to a closer examination of the special education system in Alabama, especially when EL students have been left without a place for far too long (Salzman, 2005). I have already directly dealt with the two systems as a teacher and can report that the two systems do not communicate nor do they work well together (Salzman, 2005; Rueda, & Windmueller, 2006; Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). However my search for most pertinent literature and research in regards to ELs with learning disabilities and ELs in special education was surprising. Assuming to find a wealth of resources, the results I came across were weak and lackluster. After several months of searching, the previous studies in relation to
special education and ELs were dismal, at best. The closest surplus of related literature in relation to special education was simply about minorities in general. However, the minorities that most articles, books, and websites spoke of were African Americans with special needs rather than ELs.

**EL Misplacement**

The bit of information that actually exists in relation to special education and ELs in the classroom pronounce the fact that many students are misplaced in either system (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990). Special Education is a service in American schools that aids, helps, and protects students with special needs (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990; Wilmshurst & Brue, 2010). The confusion begins in that very definition (Krashen, 1991). EL students meet that definition, in that they need extra help, assistance, and protection: for this reason, many ELs are wrongly placed in Special Education (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). “Over representation of English language learners in special education classes suggests that educators have difficulty distinguishing students who truly have learning disabilities from students who are failing for other reasons, such as limited English” (Yates & Ortiz, 1998, paragraph 2). Special education, however, is not in charge of language acquisition and needs (Krashen, 1991). It is not within a special education teacher’s duties to teach English to a non-native speaker, nor have they been taught how to do such a thing (Krashen, 1991; Yates & Ortiz, 1998).

Some literature suggests that for every EL that is misplaced in special education, there is also an adverse reaction taking place. ELs who are in need of receiving special education and assistance are not being referred (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1991). In several documented cases, there have been EL students who truly qualify for special needs services, an IEP, or a 504 plan, and yet they are never referred to special education because his or her needs
are seen as *language barriers* (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1991). Ortiz (1997) has suggested that many teachers absentmindedly ignore the fact that a student could be classified as both a special education and EL student. EL students could just as easily have a learning disability as a student with English as his or her first language might have (Ortiz, 1997). The literature shows that the two systems don’t share students well. With red tape, state mandates, and federal funding, a student who *double dips* will more than likely not receive funding, aid, and assistance from both parties (Garcia & Domínguez, 1997).

**Special Education and Minorities**

Of the relevant studies found, the most notable piece I came across was in relation to minorities with special needs (Salzman, 2005). This study reported on the tracking of African Americans and Hispanics in the special education system in 2002. The results revealed an obvious racial overrepresentation in the nation’s special education system (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006). The nation began keeping a heightened awareness at this juncture as to the racial demographics of communities and the school systems therein (Salzman, 2005). At this point, states and school systems panicked and tried to compensate, change, and adjust racial demographics of students in the care of special education services (Salzman, 2005). Two problems have occurred after this study (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006). Both are pivotal to English Learners’ educational story.

**Hypercorrection**

Hypercorrection is a means of overly fixing a problem to the point at which it begins another (Salzman, 2005). Schools sensitive to the issue of inequitable representations of race have now created a new phenomenon. In effort to hypercorrect the numbers, English learners are sent to EL programs, and sometimes kept out of the special education system (Rueda,
Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). The United States even has school ratios now, designed to indicate racial percentages in special education classes. Schools may not show disproportionate numbers in these areas (Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). Because of the ratios, teachers, administrators, school boards, and the state are reluctant to place learners who actually need special assistance in the correct service for fear of racial stereotyping or skewing the numbers (Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). Thus, there has been a gradual decline of Hispanics who may need special education services since that time (Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005).

**Mislabeling**

Mislabeling is another issue that plagues not only EL and special needs students, but many others as well (Salzman, 2005; Ortiz, 1997). Schools that continue ignoring disproportionate numbers and have mass overrepresentations of ethnicities in one category or the other are mislabeling students (Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). In Rueda and Windmueller’s article (2006) entitled *English Language Learners, LD, and Overrepresentation*, the truth surfaces about mislabeling students and the irreparable damages it can cause to their psyche and future (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006).

The very basis for the inclusion movement was based around the destructive repercussions that surround grouping students (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). Grouped into a class strictly labeled *special education*, where students with minor learning disabilities like dyslexia or a student with a mild form of Asperger’s is grouped with students with severe disabilities like feeding tubes, emotional disorders, and severe mental retardation, a student’s view of *who they are* can veil the truth of their capabilities (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). Classrooms like that work as a constant reminder to students that they are below and beneath average (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). Therefore, when students with language barriers are put in special education services, simply
because teachers don’t know where else to put them, it could very well alter a student’s self-esteem and future (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). Teachers recognize struggling students and the need for help and assistance, but are often confused as to how they should get these students appropriate assistance (Salzman, 2005). As a result, many students are receiving inappropriate instruction from American schools (Salzman, 2005).

Mislabling and/or misdiagnosing struggling students can also lead to negative stereotyping (Rueda & Windmueller, 2005). When other students see teachers place EL students in special education they begin to wrongly associate certain minorities with intellectual incapability (Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). With no help in language acquisition, curriculum, and first language instruction, many ELs will never excel to the level they are capable (Salzman, 2005). Likewise, special education teachers are taught to teach students with special needs, and have no knowledge of how to teach English learners (Wilmhurst & Brue, 2010). If they address language barriers the same way, as they would teach a student with a learning disability, a severe misdiagnosis of teaching methods keeps those students from the education they are entitled and deserve (Rueda & Windmueller, 2005). Given the paucity of research in this area, there is a definite call for a deeper examination of these issues so that more accurate diagnosing and less hypercorrection is made in schools.

**Theoretical Framework**

The heart of this study is sociocultural theory. Out of this heart, do all the other veins and arteries branch out and explore. Sociocultural theory has important connections to teaching, schooling, and education (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). To study a person, at first would seem an effortless task, but literature proves that studying a student through sociocultural theory requires much of the researcher (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Sociocultural theory implies that the context
that surrounds an individual impacts all the ways in which a person learns. This is an intricate duty for a researcher (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988). “A key feature of this emergent view of human development is that higher order functions develop out of social interaction” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 98).

**Sociocultural Theory**

Vygotsky is the theorist most associated with this theory, and in fact, is credited with its creation (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988). “Vygotsky (1934/1986), described learning as being embedded within social events” (Kublin et al., 1998, p. 287). He also adheres to the idea that learning “occurs (amidst) a child’s interact(ions) with people, objects, and events in the environment” (Kublin et al., 1998, p. 287.) With this theory, research focuses on not one factor, but multiple and various factors that lead to a student learning. Sociocultural theory finds importance in every influence, including caregivers whose role Vygotsky agrees is pivotal (Trevarthen, 1988).

In *Lives in Context*, Cole and Knowles (2001) showed the strong link between interpretive biographical research and sociocultural theory: “Always, lives are understood within their respective and collective contexts and it is this understanding that is theorized” (p. 11). After taking an in-depth look into an ELs’ experiences with attaining literacy and attempting to answer the research questions along the way, most assuredly more questions arise within social, economic, political, cultural, and institutional questions will arise (Denzin, 1989). Findings as evidence found regarding the case of Juan’s struggles with literacy may cast a negative light on parties responsible. In that way, there is a sudden link to not only sociocultural theory, but critical theory as well.
**The history of sociocultural theory.** In determining the theories to be used in this study, a historical examination of how the theories and the forefathers of the theories came to be unfolded. The backbone of my study is sociocultural theory, which began by comprehensively examining the literature surrounding sociocultural theory. The focus of this theoretical literature is from the most prolific leaders in the field; in this case those would be Vygotsky and Wertsch.

**Vygotsky and Wertsch.** Lev Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist who studied behavior and learning (McClare & Winsler, 2006). He was influenced by prominent researchers like Marx, Freud, and Piaget, yet truly broke the mold when he created his own theory in regards to culture, environment, social, and societal factors that seem to be ever-present and consistent influences in human learning (McClare & Winsler, 2006). Vygotsky’s famous research-turned-theory, associated behaviors, actions, and learning with the many factors that continually influence it (McClare & Winsler, 2006). His studies of human development pronounce the fact that learning happens through various layers and stages of surrounding factors (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). He felt that one of many factors that affect learning is social interaction (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). Vygotsky has said, “it is through others that we develop into ourselves” (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006, p. 192).

Although many of his studies were performed nearly 100 years ago, a close examination of Vygotsky, his research findings, and the theories associated with his work still resonate in classrooms around the world today (McClare & Winsler, 2006). Factors small and large like race, politics, seating arrangement, friends, perceptions, faith, the school system, an individual’s past, cultural and personal experiences impact a student and the way he or she learns (Vygotsky, 1997).
Vygotsky had the idea that there are various stages and levels that a child must go through in order to learn and develop (Vygotsky, 1986). Easily comparable to an individual wearing several pairs of colored glass lenses over his or her eyes, a person wearing a yellow lens on top of a blue lens might view the world as green. While another person who views the world through a yellow lens, then a red lens, will view the world as orange. Just as this example demonstrates, student learning is filtered through numerous lenses (Vygotsky, 1978). In order to learn, knowledge must first run through a wide range of social, emotional, relational, and even institutional influences (Vygotsky, 1979).

Vygotsky’s work influenced other researchers (McClare & Winsler, 2006). One popular proponent of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory is James Wertsch (McClare & Winsler, 2006). Wertsch wrote a book called *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action* (1991), in which he specifically connects and draws from Vygotsky’s theories on culture and learning. As many other researchers have done, Wertsch links Vygotsky’s ideas to his own. Being a researcher of language, speech, and voice, he suggests that language always “exists in social milieu” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 51).

**Sociocultural theory and ELs.** The works of both Vygotsky and Wertsch are tremendously important in relation to ELs (Krashen, 1991). Wertsch’s studies translate to EL education in that his focus on language barriers and issues surrounding the words spoken in the classroom show a direct connection to how a student learns (Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky’s studies direct EL researchers to look holistically at the student and the many factors that surround him or her each day to fully understanding how ELs learn (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). From the book *Thought in Language*, Vygotsky reveals pivotal information in regard to language learning.

The nature of the development itself changes, (when learning a language) from biological to sociohistorical. Verbal thought is not an innate, (not a) natural form of behavior, but is
determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech. (Vygotsky, 1986, p.94)

Literature from Vygotsky and Wertsch suggests that language acquisition and development is wrapped in various factors that effect, change, help, and hinder a student learner (Vygotsky, 1997; Wertsch, 1991). Teachers must understand and closely examine the way ELs, these multi-leveled minds, are learning each day and take into consideration that each of them learn differently because of these outside forces (Vygotsky, 1997; Wertsch, 1991).

**Critical Theory**

Although, sociocultural theory is the alpha theory and overall guiding premise for any life history or biographical study (Cole & Knowles, 2001), critical theory also plays an important role. “Critical theory addresses the relations among schooling, education, culture, society, economy, and governance” (Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999, p.xiii). Having a critical eye to the inner workings of schools and inadequacies of social and cultural systems inevitably leads to explorations and questions of power (Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999). For this study it will be pivotal to assess who is in power, and by them being in power, who is not (Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999). Allowing critical theory and issues of power dynamics used as a guide means the researcher must also consider the social and political influences of the southern American small town environment and the racial stigma that still lies dormant within (Popekewitz & Brennan, 1998).

Yet critical theory is often criticized for its pointing out a fire, with no direction to the fire escape (Barbules & Berk, 1999). Critical theory seems alarmist to many for its nature of picking out inaccuracies, addressing faults, and signaling problems, yet giving no answers and remaining hands off to the subject matter (Barone, 2009). However, literature that supports critical theory points out that the realization of a problem is the first step toward change. Critical theory, as
Torres stated (1999), is the place in which we must start to point out possible omissions, gaps, lost opportunities, and wrongdoings in education. Paulo Freire perhaps absentmindedly endorsed critical theory by saying “to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one that makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006, p. 120).

In an overview of the literature and history of critical theory, a clear definition seemed elusive. In condensing and simplifying, however, critical theory revolves around critique (McLaren, 1999; Popekewitz & Brennan, 1998). It is used in education to raise awareness, shed light on a problem, and point out wrongdoings or overlooked issues (Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999). The literature promoting the use of critical theory in educational research is like a check and balance system (McLaren, 1999).

In summing up the literature examined, one could use the old Southern adage if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it in an explanation of critical theory. There is no need to change things in a flawless system, yet many argue that education is a broken system (Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999) and is far from flawless. Debatable as it may be, the inarguable fact is that education does and always will have problems, oppressions, inequity, and inaccuracies. Critical theory helps by pointing out these flaws in America’s educational system (Ladson-Billings, 1997). Oddly enough, researchers who use critical theory help usher positive changes in the world of education by being negative.

The history of critical theory. Critical theorists emerged on the scene in the 1950s through Marxism and socialism. Originally, it received a bag stigma, but soon proved to enlighten the masses by pointing out the flaws in a particular system (Popekewitz & Torres,
Critical theorists are known for identifying various forms of inequities and injustice in schools that often go unnoticed by the dominant culture (Popekewitz & Torres, 1999). In effect, critical theory points out problems that lead towards answers (Freire, 1999; McLaren & Torres, 1999; Giroux, 1981). Critical literature revealing the inequity in schools during (and in years following) the civil rights movement helped push for the movement of integration (Giroux, 1981). A more recent example would be the vast amount of critical theorists who show the flaws and the repercussions of No Child Left Behind. In today’s educational setting, with state and local administrative pushes for high educational outcomes, individuals in education often wish to solve problems with quick answers (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoo, 2005).

Many people in the business of selling quick fix educational programs and kit-based curriculums have made fortunes during the decade of NCLB high-stakes testing (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoo, 2005).

Although critical theory might seem particularly negative at times, the truth is that critical theorists uncover social, educational, and political inadequacies by probing what is and is not working as it should (Giroux, 1991). Without the literature that stems from critical theory in education and the events surrounding student learning, there would never be reason for change. Thus, critical theory focused around the system and events surrounding EL ponders the notions of what is and what could be.

In studying critical theory, literature reveals that both Kant and Marx are most notoriously associated with its initial use (Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999). Both played major roles in critiquing the social structure, society, and politics of the culture around them (Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999). Likewise, both are seen today as controversial because of the stances they took (McLaren, 1993). After these forefathers, came other critical theorists such as...
Giroux, Shor, McLaren, and Freire who continued to bombard the literature with a critical eye, evoke controversy, and foster enlightenment (Popekewtiz & Fendler, 1999).

**Summary of Literature**

Research findings clearly point out that our country has much to learn when it comes to the education of English learners especially with respect to issues outside classroom factors like immigration, political leanings, and social (Verdugo, 2006). Research findings have also highlighted that moving forward cannot happen without ELs finding a power and voice (Cohen, De La Vega, & Watson, 2001; Fine & Weis, 2003; Sather, 2006). As a famous quote by Mahatma Gandhi instructs individuals to “be the difference you want to see in the world” (Merton, 1948, p. 16), perhaps teachers of underrepresented groups should do just that. Critical theory focuses in inequities and point out areas where the oppressed through knowledge and literacy stand up for themselves, speak out, and crusade against injustices (Giroux, 1981). Conceivably teachers, as participants in students’ development, may foster and inspire future agents of change for EL education (Sather, 2006; Moore & Cunningham, 2006). The literature definitely points towards *the power to speak*. If gained, perhaps the common focus wouldn’t be on EL struggles and negative experiences with literacy any longer, but rather the typical scenario would be how successful EL students have become after learning to find a voice of their own (Cohen, De La Vega, & Watson, 2001). Lastly, the discussion and examination of historical precursors in sociocultural and critical theory build a substantive knowledge base that creates a nexus between the two that both speak to this basic structure of this study.
CHAPTER III: METHODS

The methodological approach chosen for this study is the interpretive biography method for its sociocultural approach to life study. This chapter includes the details of the qualitative methods used in this research. The first section focuses on the theoretical framework that closely discusses the theorists and researchers that have gone before me. They place so much value in the sociocultural context that surrounds a student, that to study a student without reporting on sociocultural factors would be of no legitimacy (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988). The next section explains the interpretive biography as the method and also gives importance to the fact that interpretive biography is a hybrid of many methodological approaches. Lastly, this chapter unveils exactly how the study was executed, who was questioned, and how the researcher’s role related to the material. A rationale is given for the study of one and why it is important to educational research at the current place and time in American society.

Research Questions: The Driving Force

The research questions for this study guided the method selection. Keeping the focus on the key research question to answer and address while collecting data, helped navigate and steer the study. The main question was what did or did not happen in Juan’s life for him to come to eighth grade with an inability to read or write? A secondary set of questions were also used as guiding questions along the way.
1. Within sociocultural/sociopolitical contexts, what events, people, and experiences in Juan’s educational journey have contributed to his state of illiteracy in 8th grade;

2. How do those who were part of Juan’s EL experience view the process of ELs and their acculturation into the schools of this southeastern US community; and

3. Exploring both systemic/everyday routines as well as novel events, as markers of his illiteracy along the way, what factors influenced of his literacy skills or lack thereof as an EL student in a Southern American school environment?

**A Qualitative Study**

In choosing a methodological approach, quantitative research methods were ruled out. I knew that researching Juan was sure to be personal. It is the study of an individual (Denzin, 1989). Since knowing young Juan, his educational journey has permeated my thoughts, plagued my thinking, and seems to be terribly tangled up in misunderstandings (Harklau, 2000). No doubt, researching this multifaceted journey cannot be quantitatively told (Creswell, 2007).

The big, broad spectrum of qualitative methodology seems most adequately fit for such a study. Yet finding and adopting one methodology was a tough task, because it meant that the researcher must rule out all others (Hatch, 2002). For this unique study, the terms *narrative*, *historiography*, *interpretive biography*, and *case study* were all possibilities among which to choose my methodological approach (Hatch, 2002). They overlap in areas, one melding into the other; this made the decision of narrowing down one specific methodology, a rather thorny undertaking (Smith, 2009).
Biographies in Education

Unlike the literature review, which summarizes vast amounts of literature about particular subjects related to the study of Juan, this section focuses on two of the main texts after which this research is modeled. *Interpretive Biography* by Denzin and *Lives in Context* by Cole and Knowles are by far the most innovative predecessors and most accurate forerunners in the area of educational biographies.

The important difference in the vocabulary usage in *Lives in Context* (2001) and this study is that this study was an interpretive biography (as Denzin does in 1989). Cole and Knowles refer to their study as a *life in context* (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Both focus on the research subject and researcher’s relationship stating that emotion will surface and must be portrayed as accurately as possible (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989). Life history accounts and interpretive biographies do not skirt around emotion, feelings, or the aesthetic nature of delivering an individual’s personal story (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989).

To do an interpretive biography requires an almost ethnographic style of research that requires the researcher to track down every available avenue for further information that could lead to answers about the subject (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989). For this study these books serve as road maps for the journey, in that above all other educational biographies, they both seem to look at the individual as being most accurately studied through his or her many sociocultural surroundings (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989). Building a narrative to Juan’s story in the most accurate way possible is the aim, thus the selection of these methodologists as guides (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989).
Interpretive Biography

Interpretive biographies are, at heart, the tales of a person (Denzin, 1989). This approach took off in other fields before it was widely used in the field of educational research (Denzin, 1989). Tying together various other methodological approaches Denzin (1989), explains this method as a case study, rolled into a historiography, executed through ethnographical means. Interpretive biographies circle around the word life story and life recreation, which initially struck a cord in considering how to best tell Juan’s story (Denzin, 1989). Much like a walk through an art gallery, this type of individual research focuses on the episodes that are seen along the way that create the meaning, not the arrival, finish, or conclusion. It is the re-storytelling of a life that gives interpretive biographies their meaning (Denzin, 1989).

Lives in Context

Cole and Knowles (2001) would not refer to my study as an interpretive biography, but a life history account. Any confusion about the definitions of the two terms can be found in the section entitled Definition of Key Terms in Chapter I. In the briefest of descriptions, they are one in the same. Cole and Knowles give this lengthy explanation for their expertise type of study:

…A life in context, a life situated within the complexities of family and community, (and) institution, …It is about a life profoundly influenced by social, economic, historical, religious, and educational circumstances. It is about a life shaped by influences of family and cultures; by existence within communities and within natural and cultural landscapes; by personal beliefs and independent actions. …My theories about the relationship of (a) life to broader circumstances (is) expressed throughout. All of these qualities make (this) a life history account. (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 3, Lives in Context)

Using sociocultural theory as the framework for this study, Lives in Context (2001) has helped interweave and join the idea of studying one individual with the notion that all factors must be considered when getting to the root of why a person learns the way that they do (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989; Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988).
One element of life history research pertinent to this research described by Cole and Knowles (2001) is their emphasis on “honoring” the subject’s story by “capturing the emotion of his/her stories” (p. 7). Denzin also abides in this creed as well. In his book, *On Understanding Emotion* (1984), he wrote that emotion is pivotal to the telling of a person’s story. Some of the most pivotal pieces in an interview could be when a participant cries, takes a long sigh, or even loses the words to speak (Denzin, 1984). Often times, emotion like this shows the real nature of the investigation, the grit, and the truth of why it should matter to the rest of society (Denzin 1984). Cole and Knowles (2001) lay out an array of strategies for remaining diligent and earnest to the feeling behind the piece and require researchers to expose the raw sentiment and real underbelly of the study: the emotion.

**The Atypical Nature of Life History Narratives**

Cole and Knowles refer to life history research as an “art form” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 10). It is aesthetic, emotional, and should appeal to the eventual reader, as it does to me as the writer and researcher (Cole & Knowles, 2001). These two books put great emphasis on the readability of the research (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989). In fact, there is no rigid and strict formatting whatsoever for a life history research project, unlike that of a typical dissertation (Breimer, Damen, Freedman, Hofstede, Katgert, Noordermeer, & Weijers, 2005). Thus at times this study may take unique twists and turns. Cole and Knowles (2001) say “such inquiry” as this should be “organic and fluid” and it is this route of meandering through a life as one would a museum that sets the pace at which Juan’s story is retold (p. 10).

Today, various methods of qualitative research are widely accepted, valid, and even hailed for its honest and reliable nature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Cole and Knowles (2001) definitely argue that life study research should not be held back with restrictions and formatting.
constraints, that it must (like art work) freely abide by narrative openness. Other studies agree that the research of a life must have readability, and by that token, the researcher must not be held back by irrational and perhaps, outdated rules of research when reporting atypical situations in narrative format (Coulter, 2009). The point of looking into a student and the sociocultural surroundings of that student is for others to learn from, interpret, and arrive at their own conclusions for change (Erben, 1999). Research is of no use if it is not read (Coulter, 2009).

Thus an attempt was made to omit superfluous sections and repetitive terminology in an aim to tell Juan’s story with the utmost justice and integrity it deserves. The interpretive biography method was most appropriate because this study is about Juan: a real person, with genuine feelings, and an authentic story to be chronicled. As the researcher, I perused documents and artifacts about him, asking personal questions as well as talking to Juan himself. This research is a life recreation on paper (Erben, 1999), and for this reason the interpretive biography was the best choice of methodology, blending aspects of the narrative, historical, case study with a distinctive personal twist and depth of an ethnography (Erben, 1999).

**Drawbacks of Interpretive Biographies**

The purpose of this interpretative biography was to find out what factors contributed to Juan’s illiteracy in eighth grade. The researcher aimed to uncover social and cultural factors from the subject’s home, community, society, culture, and schooling that contributed to his illiteracy. The research identified and examined the struggles and successes that other ELs can relate to or may have experienced in American schools. Identifying impacting factors in Juan’s story may help improve practices that assist EL teachers, uncover institutional issues and assist ELs in negotiating their schooling experiences with more success. However, there are major
drawbacks in the interpretive biography approach, and those must be addressed before beginning the study.

**Human error.** There are several limiting aspects to every methodology, but for interpretive biographies, the flaws are wrapped up in *human error* (Denzin, 1989). The predominant limiting factors associated with unreliable interpretive biographies are issues of researcher reliability and dishonesty, as well as, misleading or inaccurate data from interviewees (Erben, 1999).

**Interviewing.** In the case of interviewing participants for an interpretive biography, the data is reliant on trustworthy participants (Denzin, 1989). Events that might skew the data in a historical study are as simple as lapses in memory often referred to as *false memory* (Spalding & Parker, 2008). If given leading questions or suggestions, an interviewee might remember things incorrectly, accidentally fabricating or exaggerating the truth (Jayson, 2010). Historical data drawn from interviews must be based on honest interviews, digging up the past to reveal truths and unveiling unknown circumstances (Hatch, 2002).

**Researcher involvement.** Researcher bias can skew every aspect of a study, especially in interview sessions (Hatch, 2000). Are the interviews real? Is the truth being hidden or an alternate message being delivered to the reader? Is the researcher too close to the subject to paint a realistic picture of his or her life (Denzin 1989; Erben, 1999)? Taking special precautions to demonstrate the validity and responsible nature of myself as the researcher such as member checks, avoiding misleading questions, and memoing biases in a researcher journal, I attempted to effectively portray and recreate realities as perceived by the participants in an authentic manner and avoid negative connotations associated with interpretive biographies (Erben, 1999).
In conclusion, if the researcher is honest, up front with biases, reveals a meaningful rationale for study, and uses strong research methods to create a sense of reliability, trust in the reliability of the words emanate throughout the entire piece (Denzin, 1984). See Chapter IV for further information regarding researcher positionality in relation to the study of Juan.

**Setting of the Study**

The setting of this study was a small, Southern town in Alabama called Whitesboro. Unfortunately, the town has many lingering issues of race and dominant Southern, White, middle class idiosyncrasies. The current school board in charge of the school is not unlike the demographics of the school board in the years since Juan’s being in school: all White. The community has an odd contrast of two cultures colliding. There is one portion of the population that is described as wealthy, White, and affluent. This section of town was most dominant and influential because they were the boosters and contributors for extra school funding. In contrast to the wealthy community members, there was also a very low socioeconomic population. Many students from these households live below poverty level and this was mirrored in the school system with its free and reduced lunch count at 64%.

The school is a Title I school. It’s 40% Hispanic and 60% of those students are in the EL program. Although the school system being studied accepts students regardless of paperwork and/or citizenship status, our school board has insisted that there are a high percentage of students from low-income families and an assumption has been made that many of these are illegal immigrants. The economic hub of the town centers on not one or two, but four well-known chicken plants. As a teacher has the privilege to do, a quick look into student information files revealed that many, if not most, of the parents of my EL students have parents, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles, working at one or several of these plants.
Data Collection

Primary data for this study was collected through interviews. Data gathered from participants and other data sources occur throughout a six-month time period, from March until August. This provided the researcher time to interview each person of interest several times as needed. The interviews included six all-day interview sessions with Juan, thirteen of his past educators, my interpreter for the study, Juan’s father, and eight community members. Data were also collected and analyzed from Juan’s permanent file. These interviews abided by a semi-structured and conversational approach, as appropriate. Teacher interviews took place in school. Most of the community members were interviewed at businesses around Whitesboro and a few met me at school to discuss. Juan’s interviews took place at his new school, in the counselor’s office at Haywood High School. His father came to the school for interview sessions. Memoing, audiotaping, and transcribing were used to record data throughout the process.

Interpretive Biography Data Sources

When it comes to data collection in an interpretive biography, the ways in which a researcher may collect data are immeasurable and infinite (Denzin, 1989). However, Cole & Knowles (2001) lay out an exquisite road map for interpretive biographers to use along the way. They also point out that no study is alike, and that these are mere suggestions (Cole & Knowles, 2001). The researcher’s role is important in every step of the process (as mentioned in the section below), even the ways in which he or she chooses to collect data and areas in which they deny the collection of data could sway the study (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Interviews. Throughout the process of life history data collection comparisons are made (Cole & Knowles, 2001) which give it an ethnographic feel. “Like an ethnographer seeks data from sources,” so does the researcher of a life history (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 7). Interviews
are suggested as best working through natural conversations (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989). To get to the real truth of the matter in an interpretive biography, a researcher and the interviewees must feel comfortable around one another (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Collectively, interpretive biographers feel that “transcribing interviews, (is ok) afterward, but (also add that the researcher must) be present in the conversation while it’s taking place” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 9).

**Non-verbal cues.** In conjunction with the interviews, observations were also made (Cole & Knowles, 2001). A sigh, a breath, or even a silence can speak volumes, thus all pertinent nonverbal communication was observed and later recorded as data (Barone, 2009). My aim was to record all conversations with the participants, although some did not allow audio taping. I remained aware that the honest, authentic conversations sometimes come across quite sporadically and must not have to be formally recorded, but took notes so I could document along the way (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

**Documents and other historical data.** Data collection in a study of this nature considers all elements in the subject’s life as data (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Throughout the data collection, many considerations involving Juan’s life were taken into account. Objects being observed include but were not limited to “artifactual evidence, documents, journals, letters,” and any other product that appears in his life (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 9). I saw some of his drawings, his dead file, and his graduation exam scores. His dead file for Whitesboro schools consisted of his past test scores, birth certificate, and other school records. Even a close look at the subject and nature of Juan’s drawings and sketches gave some insight and shed light on his journey as an EL learner and who he is as a boy. To sum up, researchers of interpretive biographies suggest that research can and should honor the subject by “capturing the emotion of
his stories” throughout (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 7). This puts much of the data collection and validity in the lap of the researcher to retell as authentically as possible (Barone, 2009).

I received FERPA consent to utilize and report on Juan’s dead file for Whitesboro schools. I reviewed and analyzed documents therein, as well as pictures and drawings from Juan’s past. A total of 27 people are interviewed in this study. With the exception of Juan, real names were not used in this study. In order to protect each interviewee, they have been given pseudonyms. The town, school, and other proper nouns have been masked and replaced in order to protect Juan and the people who have freely chosen to participate. Participants have been given member checks to insure the data is accurately conveyed and reported in the study, these have been signed and kept in record.

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were Juan and the people that have influenced, known him, and have known of his struggles in school. All parties interviewed were, of course, aware of the research and have not only signed a form of consent, as IRB requires, but have completed member checks within two weeks of their interviews. Teachers, Juan’s family, and Juan were of key importance to the study. They were chosen due to relevance, but were told through IRB compliance that they could back out of the study at any time. No one was coerced into participation. For this reason, several people reserved the right to not participate in the study. While some gave the reason that they were “too busy,” others claimed they “didn’t feel comfortable speaking about the subject matter.”

Teachers and Administrators. Thirteen teachers were interviewed for this study. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to two hours in length in an empty office within our school building. Following transcriptions and re-reading them, all of the teachers had a follow up
session of varying time lengths based upon the questions generated from the first interview. Transcriptions of the interviews and also the final write-up were offered to each participant as a member check. Everyone involved in the study has not only read over their portion, but signed a member check agreeing that they have not been misrepresented in any way throughout this study. I interviewed 13 teachers for a total of 26 hours. Of the 13 teachers interviewed, most were from Juan’s elementary and middle school grades with one teacher from his new school was interviewed (see Table 1 for specific grade levels and associations to Juan). All teachers were interviewed in Whitesboro schools.

Although not all teachers agreed to participate, the interviews conducted were with various teachers and administrators that Juan had while he was in a Southeastern American educational system. This included but is not limited to (reading teachers, aids, after-school homework tutors, and even administrators of special education and EL services at the elementary and middle school level). A total of 13 people were interviewed in the teacher/schooling category.
Table 1
Table of Teachers Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Aesa</td>
<td>4th Grade</td>
<td>Elementary School teacher</td>
<td>“Juan was a newcomer, and so far behind, that at first I assumed his problems were associated with language barriers.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Kelly</td>
<td>Intermediate School Administrator (5th and 6th grade) Later transferred to Middle School Administration (7th and 8th grade) while Juan was attending.</td>
<td>Administrator who attempted to get Juan tested for special education, after hearing of his problems from teachers. Met with him during the school day with remedial math skills.</td>
<td>“With the influx of Mexican stores, the White community views Main Street as blight. The Whites in the community are moving their kids out of the system to schools with all white kids.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Evans</td>
<td>5th Grade Teacher (both 5th grade years)</td>
<td>Began realizing Juan’s problems were more than language barriers, held him back a year Juan repeated 5th grade: same teachers.</td>
<td>“He was such a good kid, kind, and sweet. He would draw me pictures and leave them on my desk.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Flowers</td>
<td>Title 1 Remedial Reading Teacher and Academic Coach (5th and 6th, then transferred to the middle school for Juan’s 7th and 8th grade years).</td>
<td>Helped Juan with remediation. He flourished in a small group setting with one on one time. Considered adopting him. Had him over to her home for an entire summer where she taught him to swim and read.</td>
<td>“Well, honey…I actually never thought of it that way. It didn’t feel threatening to me at all. I just did it because I thought he needed the help and I could give him that help.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Robin</td>
<td>7th Grade Teacher</td>
<td>Science Teacher, Juan’s first teacher in Middle School</td>
<td>“He threw his arms around me and said ‘you my teacher,’ he acted much younger than the other students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Description</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Rockton</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>7th Grade Teacher</td>
<td>Math instruction and had an EL teacher present in class as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Trelore</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>7th Grade Teacher</td>
<td>English and Reading Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Luna</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>7th and 8th Grade EL teacher for Newcomers</td>
<td>Wrote a letter and placed it in Juan’s permanent file stating that although Juan did not qualify for special education, his issues were far beyond Spanish to English language barriers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilio Paz</td>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom translator for Juan’s 7th and 8th grade school year</td>
<td>Translated for this study for all interviews conducted in Spanish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Chase</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>8th Grade Teacher</td>
<td>Teaches History and EL Classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Manning</td>
<td></td>
<td>Principal 7th and 8th Grade</td>
<td>Took initiative to place Juan in a study skills class with special education students. He listened to the cry of his teachers and to the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>issues with Juan, and changed Juan’s schedule him self.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myself</td>
<td>8\textsuperscript{th} Grade Teacher/ Primary Researcher of this study</td>
<td>Taught Juan English in the 8\textsuperscript{th} grade. Attempted to hold Juan back another year in 8\textsuperscript{th} grade but was told by Juan’s father that he didn’t learn in 8\textsuperscript{th} grade, that it would do him no good to be held back.</td>
<td>“As I looked back to the left corner of the room, I saw Juan, a sweet little brown kid under the American flag, pretending to read.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Jerald</td>
<td>11\textsuperscript{th} Grade teacher</td>
<td>Currently teaches Juan History. In closely working with Juan to boost test scores, she has helped Juan almost pass the history section of the graduation exam.</td>
<td>“On the first day of the semester, in the 11\textsuperscript{th} grade, Juan came into my room at the beginning of class, introduced himself, and told me he could not read or write…I told him we would work on that.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Juan and Family. Then I began interviewing Juan, the heart of the study. I spent a total of 30 hours interviewing Juan. We were given an empty room at Haywood High School (a vacant counselor’s office) and this is where our interviews took place each time. He was allowed to miss class days the few times I came to visit, since it was in regards to Juan’s education, they were excused absences. After speaking with Juan several times, I met with his father and spent three hours interviewing him at our school, with the aid of a translator. I also saw and spoke to him at school concerning Juan’s study for several other reasons (like to sign papers, read over his member check, etc.). Although I asked to interview the mother and Juan’s uncle, they were both unavailable for interviews due to work schedules.

Interviews with Juan’s parents and family were attempted. My hope was that based upon the number of influential people in his life, this family unit would expand to include uncles, aunts, and grandparents. However, only Juan’s father was interviewed during this research. While no reason was given for nonparticipation by others, it is assumed that busy work schedules, language barriers, and perhaps even legal citizenship was partially to blame for this. Further assumptions for the lack of participation from family members are presented in later chapters.

Community Members. The teachers, Juan, and Juan’s father helped direct me to my purposeful selection of how eight community members. I interviewed them in-between sessions with Juan. While some of them came to the school for interviews, I met others at their place of business. Most of the community sessions lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour. As with all sociocultural research, data collection branched out to other persons and places that were pertinent to his story. Community members were chosen to participate based on the fact that
each was seen as a specific person of importance relative to the racial, ethnic, sociocultural fabric of Whitesboro. I attempted to interview those people who had lived in Whitesboro, experienced the schooling and the gradual integration of Hispanics into town, people most affected by these social interactions, and people who were well-respected in the community.

Members of the community interviewed were chosen according to relevance. The selections were purposeful, rather than random in attempt to interview a diverse range of individual’s to glean perspectives on the culture. From the data collected through interviews with teachers, Juan, and his family, I realized that there must be certain categories in the community to be interviewed. These spanned from a Hispanic church clergyman to a White business owner. Furthermore, the purposeful selection of individuals was based upon the knowledge gained as the interviews with those closest to Juan developed and took form. These individuals from the community gave further insight into events, stories, or concerns that directed me to purposefully interview other people in the community. Moving outward from Juan to explore individuals from other areas and activities of which he has been involved, lent itself towards specific community members to interview. There were eight people interviewed in the data collection from the community of Whitesboro. See Table 2 for further information concerning community members interviewed.
Table 2

Table of Community Members Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Member</th>
<th>Relationship to Whitesboro</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Paraphrasing of Memorable Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Shanon</td>
<td>Daycare Provider</td>
<td>White Upper Class Woman: age 60-70.</td>
<td>The first time I experienced Spanish Speaking students was when my son was in 1st grade. There was a little girl placed in his class who didn’t know any English. She just smiled and nodded a lot. She was a novelty. By the time my son graduated, Hispanics were no longer seen as a rare novelty, they were a major part of the population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Day</td>
<td>Public library Worker</td>
<td>White Upper Class Woman: age 60-70.</td>
<td>The issue with Hispanics today and legal citizenship status, and their place in this world reminds me a great deal of when I was growing up as a child and went to segregated schools. I actually remember separate bathrooms and seating for white and black kids. It feels a lot like that now with Hispanics, that they are looked down on as second class due to citizenship status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Christian</td>
<td>Plant Supervisor</td>
<td>White Middle Class Man: age 45-55.</td>
<td>I must admit that having conservative political leanings, as I do, I begrudgingly felt people who weren’t in the country legally shouldn’t be here. However, when I was a supervisor, I was able to work with a large Spanish-speaking population and found that they are an amazing group of people who are hard-working, thankful for opportunities, and dedicated. As a man of faith, many of them are followers of the catholic church and are firm believers of their faith. Needless to say, my opinions have been swayed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Johns</td>
<td>Owner of local business</td>
<td>White Middle Class Man: age 45-55.</td>
<td>I’ve heard people in town make remarks about the way that certain sections of town are running down. It’s associated with the Mexican population. I have no problem with them if they are here legally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Alex</td>
<td>Local Politician</td>
<td>White Middle Class Man: age 50-60.</td>
<td>I feel that American Citizenship is a privilege that few posses and all wish to have. Yet in order to keep the United States the thriving nations that it is, all members must chime in. That means that all people living here, must follow US rules…having proper citizenship status is a law that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>Description</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor Paz</td>
<td>Preacher of local Church</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>We must abide by like any other. Members of my congregation and the Hispanic population in Alabama are terrified right now. Alabama immigration law is not easy for them to understand and many of them are uprooting and leaving family and community to hide in other states where they are safe from immigration police. Families are literally being split a part by these laws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Orquidia</td>
<td>Owner of local grocery store</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Alabama has been good to me. The community has accepted my business and it thrives due to the large Hispanic population that have needs that can only be met at a Spanish-speaking grocer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Ramirez</td>
<td>Local EL parent/ Stay at home mom</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Many of the parents here are not involved in school activities, most do not even attend ball games and extra curricular activities for their kids. This is partially due to work schedules but also because many are here illegally. They view every situation as a potential immigration ‘round up.’ Most of them pave out a road from work to home and do not deviate, especially lately, with new and rather shaky laws in place.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Those not interviewed. At various points during data collection, I believed I was being led to questioning his peers, yet in an effort not to embarrass Juan, I kept the research secluded from his friends, younger brothers, and other adolescents. As per IRB request, I knew that it was my responsibility to ensure that no harm would come to Juan through this research, and I did not expand into other avenues which included Juan’s peers, whom I feared might not handle the subject matter of learning disabilities and illiteracy with the maturity of an adult. Although it has left a hole in Juan’s sociocultural background, I believed that my number one job in this study was to protect Juan and yet seek information that helps to answer the questions surrounding his illiteracy. As such I looked into other aspects of the cultures to which he was a member that included what the community, school system, and town members have to say about immigrants and the high EL population in town.

Translator. A close friend and EL Aid, Emilio Paz, currently employed with the Whitesboro system is the Spanish translator for this study. He complied with all IRB mandates and signed paperwork and all documents regarding participant protection and researcher confidentiality. He verbally agreed to work with me on the study for as many hours as it would require to accurately translate for interviewees that answered questions from the study in Spanish. The researcher and translator have worked together each day in the classroom for the six years and feel comfortable participating in bilingual conversations. The study seamlessly integrates the use of a translator into the interview process, and places emphasis on the fact that the study would not work as effectively without his aid. Mr. Paz was interviewed as well, since he is a school employee and has worked with Juan in EL classes.

Interviews with Juan. Lastly, and most importantly, interviews with Juan were of course, of utmost importance in this study. His opinions, views, and relayed memories were the
very backbone of the data collected. I interviewed Juan for 30 hours, through the course of many visits to his school. We were allowed to use the counselor’s office and I was permitted to interview Juan as many times as I needed for the study. To narratively reveal authentic depictions about his past and the sociocultural factors that influenced it, we spent many hours in conversation and discourse.

**Accessibility**

There was no denying the fact that this study treads upon a thin line and relied greatly upon the researcher’s access to the community, school, and people involved to most accurately depict Juan’s story. Like it or not, as a White researcher and employee of the school system and state, I have a certain status or stigma that could be seen as disconcerting or even offensive to the community and participants that I studied. Seen as an “outsider,” some participants actually chose to back out of the study and felt uncomfortable speaking to me about difficult topics like race, power, and social hierarchy. I took several steps to combat negative associations to create a safe environment for all persons involved.

First, as the EL English teacher to most all eighth graders in town, I had already established a rapport with many of the Hispanic students in the community. My presence was a welcome one and not seen as intrusive or threatening in any way. Also, my translator is of Puerto Rican decent and also serves as youth minister to many of the EL students in town. His father is the preacher at one of Whitesboro’s Spanish-speaking churches, the hub of many ELs in town. Since my translator accompanied me throughout the interviewing process, and he was seen as a friendly insider and staple in the Hispanic community, I was able to navigate and obtain certain accessibility to the community that I could not have achieved on my own. Mr. Paz, the translator for this study, was so much a part of many of their lives, their community, and the
culture of town that I was able to add an aspect of comfort and reassurance to the participants of the study.

**Data Analysis**

After data was gathered, the information from documents, researcher memos, interviews, and other “life sources” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 9) was transcribed and then coded. Open coding is an open-ended qualitative approach to coding that is often used in ethnographic and deeper studies where most data is taken from interviews (Shank, 2005). In attempt to code the data according to meaningful and pertinent information as the study develops, I used open coding because it lends itself to a natural categorization of the data as it unfolds (Shank, 2005).

The transcript data was coded according to sociocultural factors and salient events in Juan’s past appropriate for the questions. For instance Juan’s high points in learning were noted along the way, and as it turns out, most of these successes happened during one-on-one time with a teacher, when engaged in learning by playing games or texting.

Then transcripts and interview notes were segmented, tagged, and divided into meaningful and pertinent groups. The analysis process used inductive coding to form the titles of categories for the data. For instance, to create the overall narrative, I pieced the story lines together to create a cohesive feel. An example of this would be that certain interviews with community members mentioned racisms lasting in the South; these led me to seamlessly connect Juan’s political thoughts, my own, and the political agenda of many individuals in the South. Once the data was coded, the codes were examined and organized into categories, themes, and relationships that guided the narrative.
Themes and Relationships

The goal for data analysis in this study is to eventually arrive at themes and to then show relationships between factors and salient events that influence El students and their learning, especially in connection to literacy. Adhering to the research questions at hand, the task of coding and data analysis attempts to find categories that connect among participants, including influential factors (whether positive, negative, or somewhere in between). Data analysis began in the first stages of interviewing and data collection. It remained ongoing and proceeded throughout the reminder of the study.

Narrative Format. As data began to unfold, a stream of consciousness narrative was drafted and revised as findings unraveled throughout the stories from Juan’s past. I merged the many episodes from different interviews and interviewee accounts of episodes and focused holistically, describing the events surrounding Juan’s literacy and learning. By finding data to support what impacted and influenced Juan’s literacy over time, the research questions were all addressed by the end of the study. Allowing the story to unfold as a narrative, in the same way as it has happened to Juan, the researcher attempted to present the feel of a true-educational life story (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Researcher Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken in order to create validity and reliability with this study. First, journals of the researcher’s thoughts, opinions, biases, and assumptions about many of the topics were kept and continued throughout the project. Cole and Knowles (2001) actually suggest this type of thought logging saying that it can help the researcher to consider his or her own assumptions along the way, to report them honestly, and to keep them from interfering with the data presented and gathered. I attempted to use this suggestion throughout data collection and
research development. An example of this is laced throughout the narrative. By inserting my own thoughts, that happened and took place throughout the research process, the reader can clearly see the difference between the hopping back and forth of data and the researcher’s own ideas throughout the study.

**Reflective Researcher Memoing**

Memoing one’s ideas can create an appropriate place for the researcher’s thoughts and opinions to be shared, but in an unbiased manner (Cole & Knowles, 2001). When the researcher inserts an opinion it must be apparent that it is a researcher view and not woven throughout the work as an overriding bias (Denzin, 1989). Reflections from the researcher were woven into the narrative and were stated as such. As the experiences of Juan (a student, an adolescent, Hispanic, male) were echoed in my own life (as a researcher, teacher, adult, female), I often wrote how it resonated with me. The bouncing back and forth from White to Hispanic experiences helped create obvious parallels and also displayed the differences and incongruity of racial experiences in the South. By keeping assumptions up front, writing them down, and changing these daily as the data was unfolding, I was allowed to reflect as my researcher views changed and modified (Cole & Denzin, 2001). The goal in this study was to report the data legitimately, while revealing and recognizing researcher thoughts and biases; thus I never stifled my own opinions or relationship to the topics in the study, but attempted to present them as such.

**Member Checks**

To ensure researcher trustworthiness and that everyone interviewed was presented accurately in the research, participants were given the sections containing their interviews for review. Several were read their words and signed that they agreed to the publication of the thoughts as their own. This ensured the data from interviews was not swayed with the
researcher’s own biases. Member checks were conducted throughout the study and served as a check-and-balance system to insure the interviews captured the real essence of what each participant reported (Denzin, 1989). Several times, an interviewee didn’t like the way a statement they made resonated on paper and a change was made. The researcher was sure to acknowledge and address these changes throughout. One example of this was that a teacher may have said a word that seemed too harsh out of context, so they would ask me to change their wording to better portray the message they wanted to be sent to the readers of the study. Keeping track of interviews, notes, thoughts, observations, and member checks created an audit trail for the study that provided authenticity and trustworthiness to the overall results.

**Triangulation**

In an attempt to reveal the most reliable and valid depiction of Juan’s literacy journey, the researcher used the method of triangulation to double check for accuracy in the data along the way. O’Donoghue and Punch (2003) call triangulation a “method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data” (p. 78). Doing this “gives a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation” (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008, p.147). Throughout this study, I used member checks, investigated data gathered from multiple interviewees and participants, analyzed pertinent historical documents, and also re-interviewed sources throughout the study in attempt to verify data (Altrichter, 2008). By using triangulation, the researcher has assessed various types of data to support findings and interpretations representing the actualities of Juan’s past.

**Researcher’s Role as Instrument**

There is an obvious importance placed on the researcher in an interpretive biography (Denzin, 1989). The data collection process in life history research is thorough, to say the least.
(Denzin, 1989). However, in order to “connect with the complexities” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11) of a person’s life, a researcher must act almost like an ethnographer at times, immersing themselves in the life of their subject in order to arrive at the most honest and genuine depiction possible. The researcher in a life study is required to adapt and adjust to every situation, taking everything in along the way (Denzin, 1989). A comparable situation might be that the researcher is a sponge. Data collection by the researcher is an overall absorption of everything that surrounds the subject. Thus, the role of the researcher is incredibly important (Barone, 2009). Any skews, diversions, or fabrications of truth create dishonest conclusions and also undermine credibility of the researcher in further roles of inquiry (Barone, 2009). Even in the matter of word choice the researcher of a life history project is placed in the utmost importance (Barone, 2009). And just like a teacher’s love or loathing of her students comes across to them in everything he or she does, the same can be said of a researcher in relation to the subject.

After data collection, the task of writing was much like being given a formable piece of clay with which to work. The story was formable and sculpted into many things, and although there might not be one right answer, the researcher tried be as honest to the project and subject as possible. Cole, Knowles, and Denzin (2001; 1989) all agree that the researcher’s role does not have to be one of reporter and no emotion, but the researcher can be an active participant as well. Thoughts, opinions, and feelings from the project should not be suppressed within the researcher, but shared (Denzin, 1984). Human nature will well up with sentiment at times, and it is healthy to reveal those feelings when they come (Denzin, 1989). Instead of viewing those feelings as bias and ignoring them, I explored them in the study (Denzin, 1984). An example of this is seen in Chapter IV, where rather than ignoring or keeping down my biases, I shared my own experiences with ELs, racisms in the community and the South. Doing this actually created a
more honest depiction of life than does a story that delivers no emotion (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Lives are wrapped up, touched, and inspired by emotional moments in time. To ignore these throughout the research creates the most inaccurate of tales.

Figure 1, outlines the many avenues in Juan’s life that I explored as a researcher. Although the connections began as mere assumptions that I planned to pursue in attempt to identify various sociocultural influences that have surrounded and impacted his schooling, as it turns out, many of them surfaced in the study. These did change and the connections and placement began to vary as the data collection began to unfold. However, I feel it important to reveal that these were the assumptions of the researcher before the study actually began.

For further information about researcher biases and involvement, see Chapter IV.
Figure 1. Sociocultural Assumptions of Juan’s Connections in Learning
Limitations of the Study

As a student and researcher, one of the limitations of this study is time. The data for this study were gathered over a period of six months. Although that might seem like a lengthy period in the expedition and exploration of a student’s educational experiences from birth to 8th grade, the influences, the interviews, and the culture surrounding that individual, six months was but a tear drop in the giant ocean of the past. Time constrained me as a graduate student and full-time classroom teacher, so I had to nail down a time frame I felt would best acquire the data I needed to move forward with the project, so I settled on six months of study. Considering the glass half full, the limitation of time also added a certain focus to the study. The tales from interviews, the documents, and other data brought forth in this span of time, I believed were the most useful and pertinent facts relevant in Juan’s schooling.

As projected at the beginning of the study, the family and many of the community members in this study did not have legal citizenship status. This proved to be a limitation in that many illegal immigrants were scared, timid, and chose not to have their thoughts about U.S. schooling reported. These individuals obviously did not want to rouse suspicion or appear ungrateful for their current situations and opportunities in America, and thus some individuals chose not to participate. The act of interviewing was connected to the lack of voice of illegal citizens in the South. This hindered the interview process in that some interviews did not flow as freely as planned, and grew tense with the issues of race, legal citizenship, and educational neglect. Many individuals in the community and in Juan’s family did not wish to sign a waiver, be photographed, videotaped, or recorded for fear of legalities. I respected their rights and simply moved on as this occurred in the study.
Summary

The previous section detailed the choice for methodology. It highlighted the theoretical framework that threads itself through the intricate details of how the study unfolded in the upcoming chapters. Allowing a less rigid notion of rules for the research to keep the study’s emotion, the work followed the advice of predecessors like Denzin, Cole, and Knowles (1989; 2001) who take a more natural direction of data collection so that the narrative structure may best be retold to reveal truth. Cole and Knowles (2001) stated that, “clusters of individual lives make up communities, societies, and cultures. To understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insights into the collective” (p. 11). This interpretive biography was the study of one EL student and his battles with literacy and learning which may represent the struggles of other ELs in the classroom. Therefore this study of Juan is the study of many.
CHAPTER IV:
RESEARCH POSITIONALITY

Since the researcher is so much a part of the interpretive biography process, I believed that it was necessary to create an additional chapter with sections revolving around the researcher. It is in this chapter where I share my biases, address researcher trustworthiness, and give rationales for how and why I have chosen to do this study in the manner that I have. Within this chapter, topics, questions, and forethoughts from the researcher are discussed and presented; my hope in this addition is that the information may in some way offer more researcher reliability and background insights into the study of Juan and why the researcher finds it so important to share this tale of EL struggles in illiteracy.

Researcher Biases

Using the interpretive biography method immediately invites questions related to researcher bias (Denzin, 1989). This study aims to be as valid and trustworthy as possible, therefore the baggage and assumptions I carry in relation to this topic and the participating individuals must be laid upon the table from the beginning (Erben, 1999). The role of the researcher can easily sway a study, especially when he or she knows the student on a personal level (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Thus, I have tried to lay out these biases as wholly and completely as possible in order to deliver the most valid depiction of what took place along Juan’s educational journey.
Teacher/Researcher Experiences with ELs

I have had the pleasure and experience of teaching English for the last six years at a school that is 40% Hispanic. This diverse group of learners is amazing to work with, incredibly intelligent, creative, kind, and respectful. I teach ELs with the help of a translator and have a wealth of experience in the classroom with these learners. In that way, the reader must note the previous feelings that I have about my students, be they negative, positive, or empathetic.

Teacher/Researcher Relationship with Community

Although I am not from the town, I do believe that I have come to know the community of Whitesboro personally. I have thoughts, opinions, and biases regarding the members of this community, as well as what is and what is not accepted. Although I have personal relationship with the teachers, school district, and students, my aim is to present the data collected with honesty and validity and not sugarcoat the truth in any form. In accordance with interpretive biographies, the data reported in this study is to be interpreted by the individual reader to make judgments and form opinions about the topics brought forth and discussed (Denzin, 1989).

Teacher/Researcher Relationship with Juan

As for my relationship with Juan, he was a former pupil whom I tried to help during the year that I had him as a student. He was intriguing in his odd mix of social disposition and lack of academic skills. My observations of him in the past will play a part in the research. I spoke with his father the year I had him as a student and I let him know that I would like to study Juan in the upcoming years. Since then, I have kept track of the family, since many Hispanic families are known for their frequent moves from town to town (Payne, 2005).

As I began this study, Juan was underage; he is now 18 years old. However, I do have Juan’s full consent for this study as well as his parents consent to participate in the study as well.
Currently, I had his younger brother in my classroom and with the recent change in immigration law in Alabama, I was informed through the younger brother that they were considering leaving. On the cusp of this dissertation, I contacted the father again and he said that the family had decided to stay in Whitesboro indefinitely and that Juan would be available for the study and his family would help in any way possible. Other than the few times I have spoken with this family in the school, I have no ties. My goal for this study is to be as unbiased as possible, but I am also aware that Juan’s story is an educationally, heart wrenching one. It proved to be a roller coaster of emotion, yet I agreed to take this ride through Juan’s education, and it truly effected me at the core.

**Researcher Assumptions**

Not only do I have a relationship with the community, school, and individuals taking part in this study, but I also have certain assumptions about the study itself. In approaching this research, there are certain opinions and ideas I have about the direction which I believe the study may take. Again, in effort to be as earnest and trustworthy as possible, I must reveal these to the reader so that they may know these from the very beginning (Cole & Knowles, 2001). The following are my assumptions made before the study documented in my researcher memos from December, 2011:

…I assume that the study of a young man like Juan, whose educational journey has led him to illiteracy, will be full of more failures than successes. I feel that the system has let him down in some way. Perhaps the community has failed him, his family has felt powerless to change things for their son, and the teachers have had little training, classes, or knowledge of how to fix the situation. My initial assumption about this study is that Juan’s illiteracy is due to multiple failings in the system and culture that surround him. However, I realize that these are mere assumptions. Nothing real can come from these opinions; instead the truths will surface in the interviews, documents, and conversations. Much like a hypothesis, I consider my assumptions to be merely educated guesses about what these results may reveal about Juan’s educational experience.
I believe that by revealing those biases, I began this study well-prepared and honest with the reader. Going in, knowing that my hypotheses may very well be proven wrong, right, or fall within the various shades in between, I know that research is about seeking the reality of a situation and I was eager to leave my assumptions and biases aside and begin a pursuit of knowledge.

**Rationale for Interpretive Biography**

Arriving at the choice to call this study an interpretive biography was complicated, to say the least. In my opinion, the qualitative genres seem to run together in sections, allowing a researcher a variety of choices for a methodological approach (Creswell, 2007). However, choosing a label is not something that agrees with me, or ever has for that matter. Even as a child, I avoided labels at all costs. When someone called me *an athlete* I quickly alerted him or her to the fact that I was also *an artist*.

As Alessandra Ajraldi (2007) wrote, “Labeling is humanity’s pet peeve… (yet) we all have a tendency to classify things. Anything that is not labeled is an anomaly and as humans, we are annoyed and discomforted by anomalies” (para. 4). Thus, I understand that arriving at a single label for my method is required. What I found in the quest is a method that combines elements of several methods into one. This section condenses the literature about the positive and negative aspects of the many methodological approaches that make up interpretive biographies and allows the reader to take the ride along the same journey that I took, which eventually led me to arrive at calling the study of Juan an interpretive biography.

As Figure 2 depicts, the choice for interpretive biography was mainly based around the fact that it was a joining of many methods, rolled into one.
Figure 2. Interpretive Biographies: A Hybrid of Many

Narrative Research

As is most obvious at this point, I consider myself less of a researcher and more of a storyteller, thus I knew my means of research must be written as a narrative. Although some call it bias and untrustworthy (Barone, 2009), a researcher who reveals data through a narrative
creates a uniquely aesthetic and expressive story (Coulter, 2009). Telling this young man’s tale and attempting to be completely untouched by its emotion (Denzin, 1984), keeping to data-driven numbers and dry discourse would not only be an injustice to Juan’s educational story, but it would be an impossibility for me as the researcher (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Naysayers of researchers that write in a narrative writing style say that the storyteller/researcher of a narrative study has entirely too much ownership (Smith, 2009). Although it is nonfiction, the author can manipulate and sculpt the data being delivered (Smith, 2009). For many, that seems too imprecise to be credible (Barone, 2009). By the same token, this creative crafting is what many researchers love most about story-format (Smith, 2009). When there is a powerful story to tell or retell (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002), sometimes the most adequate way to convey it is in the most well-beloved format of all: story format (Coulter, 2009). This familiar writing genre is easy to read and often flows in natural and seamless order (Coulter, 2009). In his influential book On Understanding Emotion, Denzin (1984) says that the emotion behind a piece is not something to hide or conceal, but rather to showcase. With such foreknowledge, the reader must know that I have chosen to go with a rich narrative description to best tell this tale. Interpretive biographies are inherently narrative in design and have the ability to reveal the tale of an individual as effortlessly as a storybook (Denzin, 1989).

Historiography

In telling Juan’s story, I came close to choosing what seems to be a close relative to the interpretive biography method. The unique twists and turns of a historiography seem oddly similar to the method of interpretive biography. Deciding between these two, I was forced to closely examine my research project and find which method would best apply. Currently, Juan is a high school student. What I know of him is from his past at the middle school level, and my
fascination in his story is not wrapped up in how Juan is doing today, as much as how did Juan end up in the eighth grade unable to read? Resembling a historiography (Hatch, 2002), I found that my study could easily be executed as such.

In further research, I found that Spalding and Parker’s (2008) broad definitions and descriptions of what it takes to write a historiography coincided rather well with my plan of research. Like my own research, historiographies gather data from the past, informal memos, personal interviews, and test documents, and then examine situations of the past to make sense of Juan’s present (Spalding & Parker, 2008). In this way, calling my research a historiography seemed legitimate. My reason for deciding against a historiography is because of the connection between the subject and the researcher. The emotion and personal feel was something I wanted to flow throughout the piece. Interpretive biographies have that emotion whereas historiographies seem more objective.

Case Study

In my final analysis of the various methodologies that closely relate to my study, case study research was an obvious choice. This method could adequately handle Juan’s story because his is a particular bounded situation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Although it might seem trivial, I shied away from the method of case study research, not just because of its popularity at the moment, but due to its missing link from researcher to the subject of research. I have seen various case studies and feel well-acquainted with the execution of the methodology, yet I felt inspired to try a different methodology, perhaps an obscure one, one that did not follow the traditional, more traveled route. Furthermore, I would prefer to circumvent the word traditional, for Juan’s case is anything but traditional. Lastly, some researchers (Creswell, 2007; Hatch, 2002) have noted that case studies have many critics who claim that the method lacks real world
application. I did not want the same thing to be said of my research, thus I decided upon an alternative methodology.

**The Choice for Methodology**

After ruling out all others, I knew I must closely examine the interpretive biography method to ensure I had the right map for the journey. To my surprise, I found the interpretive biography method to include many of the attributes I most liked about other methodological approaches, yet a more personal and close-knit narrative seemed to unfold throughout. Interpretive biographies are narrative (Denzin, 1989), which is a direction I knew this research must take. They are like historiographies, in that they are both wrapped up in the gathering of facts from the past to piece together the story (Denzin, 1989). However, while historiographers are often researching the situation (e.g. the Vietnam war, the 70s, the Bush administration), an interpretive biographer is more oriented towards the telling of *life stories* (Spalding & Parker, 2008; Denzin, 1989). Interpretive biographies, much like a case study, study a situated circumstance. But unlike interpretive biographies, case studies lack a *human emotion* factor that is largely emphasized in the other (Denzin, 1989).

**A Real Person, A Real Story**

The interpretive biography method is most appropriate because I am studying Juan: a real person, with genuine feelings, and an authentic story to be chronicled. In this study, I peruse documents and artifacts about him, asking personal questions as well as talking to Juan himself. This research is a *life recreation* on paper (Erben, 1999), and for this reason the interpretive biography is the best choice of methodology because it blends the aspects of the narrative, historical, and case study method with a distinctive personal twist and depth of an ethnography (Erben, 1999).
Critical Theory: The Road to Nowhere?

After choosing a methodology, another research component that baffled me was the choosing of theoretical framework. As I previously mention in the theoretical framework section (in Ch. II), I found a great deal of literature that opposed critical theory. Stating that critical theory is research that points out problems and leads to no answers, many critical pedagogs taut the theory as useless and frown upon its use (Barbules & Berk, 1999). Initially, I allowed that literature to sway me, and I agreed with the notion that critical theory doesn’t provide useful answers for education.

However, I side with that school of thought no longer. Pointing to the problem lends the first hand of help to change and arrive at solutions of how to move forward. To step out of oppression, one must first realize that they are being oppressed (Freire, 2005). Change does not happen overnight, and it is a hindrance to forward motion and progress when the voices of critical theorists are muffled by naysayers (Barbules, & Berk, 1999). Critical pedagogy theorists many times put the ideas of critical theorists on the backburner in lieu of an answer that hasn’t yet been found (Torres, 1999).

Interpretive Biographies and Open-ended Conclusions

To the dismay of readers who need a solution, an answer, or some magical literacy formula at the end of this research, I persuade you to stop reading now in that this study does not have a cure all. This research does not have the eventual outcome of showing the wrong route that was provided for Juan along the way, and then selling the right one in a shiny package called the right answer. In fact, brace yourself for the fact that the end of this study may suggest that there is nothing that could have been done to enhance Juan’s educational destiny and learning.
What I do is tell his story, as an English learner, so that others may reflect up the reality of his situations. The study allows the reader to arrive at their own answers and conclusions to help create new awareness and potential solutions. Perhaps it could even aid in re-envisioning teaching and learning in EL education to more adequately address literacy issues that Juan’s story as an EL exposes (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Life history inquiry is not, centrally, about developing reductionist notions of lived experience in order to convey a particular meaning or truth. Rather, it is a representation of human experience that draws in viewers or readers to the interpretive process and invites them to make meaning and form judgments based on their own reading of the ‘text’ as it is viewed through the lenses of their own realities. (Lives in Context, Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 10-11)

Nevertheless, I do realize that everyone wants an answer. Upon conclusion of this research, I am reminded of a scene in The Wizard of Oz where everyone has taken the journey and wants something at its end. The EL teacher wants guidance, the EL families want courage, the school board asks for a brain, and our main character, Juan, who has lost his way, will ask for the thing that everyone else his age seems to possess: the ability to read.

A Call to Arms

Alas, this study is not a skip down the yellow brick road to arrive at my own ideas as “the great and powerful Oz” (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939). I am but a mere researcher showcasing a student whose predicament and encounters in and out of school highlight the issues of many other students (Cole & Knowles, 2001). This study gives voice to the voiceless in our society, and hopefully will evoke ideas for change; although the study will not create those ideas here. In effect, “pay no attention to that man behind the curtain” (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939) because the powerful conclusion that comes from the end of this study will come from within each reader. . . hence my choice for the term interpretive biography.
This study points to the issue of ELs in the classroom today, as it stands: fairly unknown, and rarely spoken of. As educational theorist Habermas said, "self-conscious awareness of knowledge distortion is enlightenment" (Ewert, 1991, p. 359). Not all research has to arrive at an answer for the problem, but action and change always have the precursor of awareness: to call attention to the issue (Popekewitz & Fendler, 1999). Hopefully, this study allows a repressed group of people to become aware of situational circumstances in the classroom and urges education towards change. This study will do anything but leave the reader thoughtless, without answer, and no plan for action, it is a call to arms; the way in which to fight the battle is left up to the individual.

**Crisis of Representation**

In studying Juan, I dare not overlook the dangerous territory on which I tread. Regardless of how much I might try to ignore my own role as a researcher, I must state that I am of White descent. The color of my skin alone puts me at a disadvantage to conduct this study. I am not bilingual, nor do I even attempt the daunting task of learning to speak another language. Likewise, I am not from another country, I do not have a different culture other than the average American citizen, and I have never dealt with a learning disorder nor have I ever fallen behind in school. To tell the tale of Juan, a person in whose shoes I have never treaded, will be a rather daunting and difficult feat indeed.

I am representing a group of people to which I do not belong. I am an outsider attempting to look in, assess, and analyze. As much as I may try, my opinion will in some way be skewed for it is impossible for me to see through anyone else’s eyes but my own. On the same token, however, I will attempt at all costs to most accurately depict Juan’s story. I am aware that just as Juan learns through a sociocultural range of influences, I too, am a researcher.
affected by similar outside and unseen forces. As a researcher, I realize that it will be impossible
to tell the tale of someone else with correct precision and absolute truth, but I am up for the
challenge. Juan’s story needs to be shared, told, and learned from.

In 1905, George Santayana wrote the following famous phrase in regards to studying
history: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Juan’s story must be
told so that educators, researchers, and others may learn from it and hopefully progress to live in
a world where no student slips through the cracks, but a world in which every student gets the
education he or she deserves.

**Why Study One?**

In telling people about this study, I’ve been questioned by many: *why not study more
than one student?* As I briefly touched on in the rationale, coming to the conclusion to study one
student for this dissertation seemed, at first, a weak attempt to dodge a fuller workload.
Although, I knew this wasn’t the circumstance, I felt as if the study of one was not as grandiose
as I had always dreamt it to be. Yet throughout my doctoral degree, this young man’s struggles
with literacy continued to not only remain in my thoughts, but to plague them. His story and
what I knew of his past brought up many questions and few answers. My heart and every part of
my very soul as a researcher had to find out what had happened to Juan. I knew this was the
most appropriate and fulfilling quest for me.

When first examining Juan’s situation, I found *the study of one* to be problematic. I kept
internally attempting to answer the question: *so what?* Example: *After reading this, I know what
happened to one kid, in one state, in one classroom. How does that apply to other kids in other
states with other problems?* I took issue with the notion that research of one individual was
simply the voice of one specific scenario (Creswell, 2007). Research should help people,
provide answers, and apply to various educational scenarios (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and although I was curious about Juan’s situation, I was not sure it would ever translate into meaning for others. Worries like these, about Juan’s story having no applicability kept me fearful of studying one student, rather than many more. I did not want Juan’s study to end up meaningless and disappearing in a vault of forgotten dissertations.

However, I could not shake the notion that Juan’s story needed to be told. I set out to find how the study of a single person might actually showcase the inner workings of the culture, society, political arena, and educational atmosphere of today (Denzin, 1989). To my surprise there is an overwhelming amount of literature to validate a study of one individual. Cole and Knowles (2001) sought supportive research as well in their attempt to show the importance of biographies in education. One of the first people who spoke out about life history research was Dollard (1935) who said that to understand one individual is to understand “cultural and social phenomenon” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 12). Later, it was said that a person is a “cultural informant of their culture” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 12). While these do seem to offer some validation for studying one student, I was not convinced.

It was Goodson, Knowles, Cole, Ball, and Casey that began doing work in educational life histories that I finally began to understand the relevancy (Cole & Knowles, 2001). “In as much as it is humanly possible, life history inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11). They continue, “It is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11). Therefore to study Juan’s past with a critical eye, to ask the questions, and to spur discussion among the masses will help society to eventually arrive at fixes for the problems in EL education. The
findings of this research and others like it aim for the long-term goal wherein ELs are no longer passed through the educational system unable to read or get the help they need to be successful learners. In other words, to study one student, is to study a thousand. To study Juan is to study many.
CHAPTER V:

THE QUILT

My father’s mother, whom we all called Big Momma, used to make quilts. I watched with a skeptical eye as I saw her pull squares of fabric from a basket filled with batting and an odd disarray of colors and patterns. Even at the age of five or six years old, I knew that brown polka dots on a green background would clash with a red and black plaid. Child development research findings state that kids are really into matching, they enjoy matching games, learn to match their clothes, and I knew that these colors and patterns would not match (McClare & Winsler, 2006). Yet, somehow they always did. When Big Momma was finished, her quilts were always remarkably cohesive and aesthetically pleasing. Some people like her have an eye for creating beauty out of what on-lookers might initially see as disorder, finding order out of chaos (Peters & Rodabaugh, 1988). It is with an eye for creatively connecting patterns, a trait inherited from my grandmother that guides my writing throughout the retelling of Juan’s story.

This study unfolds as a “stream of consciousness” narrative. For those unfamiliar with this writing style, it’s not always chronological (Dorrit, 1978). Much like a quilt, the reader is given small stories along the way, bits and pieces that gradually build and connect in the end to form the overall narrative (Dorrit, 1978). For this study, an interpretive biography and writing as a “stream of consciousness” seemed to be the most natural approach to walking through the various memories and documents that make up a person’s past (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Not always sticking to the chronological format, and/or the structured configuration of a typical
dissertation, I have attempted to compile the facts, events, and entangled emotions therein and relay them to the reader in a storied form (Schaffer, 1984).

Stream of consciousness writing is a literary term typically used for fiction writing, but has recently seeped into the creative nonfiction realm (Nordquist, 1995). The research, which unfolds here, is a factually accurate narrative presented in an atypical approach. This method paints a better picture of the various sociocultural experiences that impact a student’s life and help construct “holistic” meaning (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 10). Nonfiction writer, Donald Miller, compares this style of writing with jazz music; it’s all over the place at times, but somehow it makes beautiful sense (Miller, 2007). Stream of consciousness writing is “a narrative technique that gives the impression of a mind at work, jumping from one observation, sensation, or reflection to the next” (Nordquist, 1995). In essence, this research is like one of Big Momma’s quilts; the bits and pieces are pieced together in such a way to create a meaningful, intricate holistic picture at the end.

**Southern Story-telling**

As a researcher whose roots are in the South, I lean on the theory that all aspects surrounding and influencing a person make up who they are, the choices they make, and the work they produce in life (Kublin, 1989). Under this belief, I feel that it is mostly my having grown up in the South that promotes my stream of consciousness writing style. Dr. Catherine Davies, head of the Linguistics department at the University of Alabama, did a study on the way that Southern story-tellers seem to “meander” through the telling of a story (Davies, 2008). Throwing in both poignant and meaningless facts along the way, many people from the South take the long route” when it comes to delivering a tale to an audience (Davies, 2008).
Three for a Dime

My other grandmother is Momma Jo. Momma Jo tells this one joke. I have heard it 1,000 times. It goes something like this: A visitor comes into town and asks the guy at the train station, “What time does the train come in and when does it leave? How deep is that pond out there and how much are those bananas? The man at the station answers, “Comes in at three and leaves at nine, up to your ass, and three for a dime.” My grandmother is my favorite person in the world and hearing her tell this joke never gets old. It is not actually the joke that is funny; it is the way she tells it. She will forget portions and has to start over… and although she is 93, she giggles like a 13-year-old girl every time she says the word ass. I don’t even know that I think the joke is all that funny, but watching her turn a simple three-sentence joke into a thirty-minute I Love Lucy episode is less about enjoying the punch line and more about enjoying Mamma Jo (this is what we call her). Her name is actually Mavourine Samantha Stone and people call her Jo…but that another entirely different, extraordinarily long, insanely enjoyable story.

I Digress

Thus, as I attempt to study Juan from several sociocultural angles of his learning and literacy, I must tell you that I have been impacted by Southern influences growing up in Alabama; and in telling Juan’s story, I may indeed, take the long route. Famous Southern storyteller Kathryn Tucker Windham has said when questioned about her meanderings, “I am a Southern storyteller; I digress” (Davies, 2008). Like the joke Momma Jo tells, the reader should take into consideration that this way of revealing the narrative is less about the answers at the end, and is much more about the journey (Denzin, 1989; Cole & Knowles, 2001).

With the exception of a few documents from Juan’s academic record, the majority of the data in this interpretive biography has come by way of conversational interviews (Cole &
Knowles, 2001). While there were questions made in advance to guide the researcher through the process, the overall feel of the interview sessions was an attempt to maintain free-flowing discourse. The interview guide formats can be found in the appendices. This study comes from a compilation of those interviews, relayed information from Juan, his parents, his teachers, the surrounding community, and myself (former teacher of Juan and primary researcher of this study). As Denzin (1989) says that a true interpretive biographer always does, I have digested the information to tell his story through my own voice (Denzin, 1989).

Individuals are merely “living illustrations of social conditions” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p 12). Through interviews, various sociocultural influences surrounding Juan and his learning, I examined the community of Whitesboro, Juan’s teachers, Juan, his family, and many of his educational documents in his permanent file. Although a person cannot be summed up in a text through listening, taking notes, reading, then re-reading transcripts, and reflexively looking into the various meanings of what I heard, wrote, and saw, I have attempted to re-create Juan’s educational journey of literacy (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Studying Juan will “enable us to grasp history and biography as well as the relations between the two within society” (Denzin, 1989, p. 50).

The Researcher as Part of the Research

One reason I chose the interpretive biography as my method is because I cannot and do not wish to remove myself from the story. The founder of interpretive biographies, Denzin (2001), describes interpretive biographies as openly accepting and acknowledging the researcher as part of the research (Denzin, 2001; Cole & Knowles, 2001). Most qualitative research is delightfully depicted through the tint of the researcher’s own personal lens, and rather than attempt to ignore and dial down my own opinions, views, and relationship with the participants, I
have chosen this method so that I can showcase them (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interpretive biographers feel it is more honest to explain, describe, and walk through the data as the reader gets to know the researcher (Denzin, 1989; Cole & Knowles, 2001). To fully accept first person, qualitative, narrative research as credible, one must find the investigator and writer to have a certain honest quality than enables them to relax and trust this guide to walk them through the journey (Denzin, 1989; Coulter, 2009).

**Reliability: The Product that Sells Itself**

When I first began a friendship with the man who would one day become my husband, I knew I needed to be able to trust him. He knew me enough to know that I do not trust people easily. Rather than say, “Trust me,” he instead chose to demonstrate who he was by simply living his life beside me for quite some time allowing me to peek in, when I wished to, and observe. He was like an easygoing salesman who felt confident in his product knowing it would sell itself. As our friendship slowly began to mature into something more, I had been given the chance to observe the way he lived life. I would compare it to the first few scenes in a movie meeting the protagonist for the first time. It was evident that he is the good guy within the first few scenes. The choices he made were always honorable. He was funny, but didn’t make jokes at other people’s expense, he was not only kind to those he knew, but to strangers, waitresses, and people around town. At every turn, I found him to be immensely and effortlessly good. I came to the conclusion that he was trustworthy; and he didn’t even have to tell me this. As I came to know him as a friend, it became glaringly obvious that he was indeed, quite reliable.

In the same way, Juan’s story unveils not only pieces of Juan’s life, but reflexively reveals bits of my own (Denzin, 1989). Much like a real relationship, trust must be earned and this happens through coming to know a person. To pretend as if I am merely a surveillance
camera in the corner of Juan’s life, observing and reporting data to the reader in a robotic and detached manner would do Juan’s story and the reader a disservice (Denzin, 1989). As is the case with many Els, Juan’s tale is riddled with emotion, the ups and downs of academic life, the immigration to a new world, and the treatment therein (Cohen, 2007). This is the story of one human and it can and should tug the heartstrings of anyone who has ever gone through the hard-knocks of finding their place in this world (Denzin, 1984).

Following the advice of interpretive biographers like Cole, Knowles, and Denzin (2001; 1989), I have chosen not to delete myself from this research, but to become very much a part. I allow the reader to walk alongside me as I navigate through Juan’s past and unveil the story of what it is to be a boy, an immigrant, a son, an English learner, and a struggling student. My hope is that the reader may come to know me as reliable. Through a compilation of interviews with Juan, his family, and teachers, I have composed a narrative I feel “recreates” Juan’s educational journey (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 10).

**Purple Bananas**

I dabble in just about any artistic outlet. I have been an art teacher for several years, and I have been painting, drawing, and writing since childhood. My entire life, I have enjoyed the process of creating things that are different. Kenneth Patchen (1968) describes creativity as filling a need within the soul, an unquenchable desire to create. My mother always tells this story about me.

I once had a two-week stint in art lessons. Knowing how much their daughter loved innovation my parents paid for me to take lessons one summer. I was excited at first, but soon began to lose interest because of the subject matter. As a kid, I did not want to draw a still-life consisting of an overturned clay pot with pearls draped out of it, spilling onto the table. I did not
want to draw a bird house, and for that matter, I did not want to draw realistic scenes at all (is not that what photography is for?)

With each session I grew less and less content. One day I came out to the car and told my mom that I must quit. My parents are not and have never been advocates of me quitting anything, so in a disapproving tone, my mother asked why I had become so frustrated as to quit. I went on to explain to my mother that the art teacher constantly disapproved of my work, and would tell me that I was not accurately depicting each scene. That day, when I was supposed to be using oil crayons to realistically depict a bowl of fruit, I painted my bananas purple. The teacher said I must redo the scene, and that alas, bananas were not purple. So, I asked my mother if I could quit, and for the first time ever, my parents supported my quitting.

Although, I am sure many structured, by-the-book researchers might find my research to be too fluffy and may roll their eyes at my stabs to write up educational research, this is not the first nor will be the last time that people of such prestige sigh at my weak attempt to be taken seriously; a perfect example are my purple bananas. Those who enjoy by-the-book styles of writing will more than likely not enjoy the stream of consciousness tale about Juan as I have decided to tell it (Nordquist, 1995). I feel that in writing Juan’s story I have remained true to my unique writing style and his story rather than attempt to be the type of researcher and writer that I am not so excuse me while I paint my bananas purple.

The Choice

Juan was the first born of his family. His journey to America is in no way dissimilar to that of the typical EL student’s immigration tale (Harklau, 2000). As is the case many times in the life of an EL, the Estrella’s move from Mexico came on the heels of an overwhelming desire for better lives for family, lucrative jobs, and safety (Harklau, 2000). Moving to America had
been a tireless gnawing feeling in Mr. Estrella’s gut. The draw from the land of opportunity beckoned and the Estrella family soon conceded. They were not alone.

As Mr. Estrella detailed in his interview, his brothers and their families were moving as well. Researchers of Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. state that family is a large part of the rationale (Krashen, 1991). As most illegal immigrants have reported, although they knew they would be in the country illegally, the Estrellas said that the good that would come from the move far outweighed the bad (Rubenstein, 2008). Mr. Estrella explained it by saying there was an overwhelming idea that everyone was doing it, and there is a certain sense of safety in numbers (Krashen, 1991). In effort to keep the family together, the family hired what Juan called “a wolf.” He went on to explain, “a wolf helps people get into the country and helps Mexicans find jobs, documentation, and homes in safe places.” In further research, I found that wolves help many illegals cross U.S. borders (Rubenstein, 2008). The Estrellas came to America and landed in the Southern town of Whitesboro in 2004. As many others have reported, the draw of small towns like Whitesboro for many ELs are the various local plants where undocumented workers can work and maneuver in a town undetected among the masses (Rubinstein-Avila, 2004).

Jumping off a Bridge

As a child, I often gave the answer “everybody is doing it,” when I was backed into a corner or in trouble. My parents always gave me the peer pressure speech ending with the question, “If everyone else was jumping off a bridge- would you?” I would always answer with a sigh full of teenage angst and walk off with my head hung low until one sunny summer out on the river. I was with friends on a hot August day when I was actually faced with the hypothetical scenario of jumping off a bridge alongside my friends. No questions asked, after watching nine
other friends jump off the local bridge in our hometown and land in the muddy water below, I followed suit.

In the unseasonably cold water, I remember thinking that I could now change my answer when asked that same question by my parents. I could actually reply to my mother, “Yes, I would jump off a bridge…in fact, I did jump off a bridge!” Like a new article of clothing, I could not wait to wear this new response in a teenage battle with my parents. My mind was reeling; I could not wait to use this new zinger…might I actually win an argument?

To quickly answer that, no, I never did win an argument with my parents. Retrospectively, I am not even sure how good that would feel. Rhetorical questions are meant to elicit a certain response, and thus I realized that my parents actually never wanted to know what my behavior on a bridge would be (Koshik, 2005). This question was always asked to urge me to make up my own mind, not let someone else do it for me. The question is not to promote not doing any activity that your friends do, but rather the question is to remind a person to never let someone else call the shots (Koshik, 2005). In effect, they were telling me what is right for one person, is not always right for you.

Assessing the Situation

In my interview with Mr. Estrella, he revealed that his brother’s peer pressure to move to the U.S. did have some weight, but that was not the eventual push that made him jump off the proverbial bridge. Mr. Estrella had to assess the situation and find out what was best for his family; he had to make a choice that researchers say many immigrants must face (South, Crowder, & Chavez, 2005). He could break up the family and stay in Mexico living a dismal poverty stricken, existence amidst an unstable, unsafe society or he could keep the family together by moving to the United States, the land of opportunity (South, Crowder, & Chavez,
2005). Basically the option was to follow American law or follow family. Getting to know the Estrellas in the past year, it is quite clear why the tight-knit family chose the route that they did. In contrast to research that states immigrants come to America simply because everyone else was doing it (Krashen, 1991), the Estrellas made the choice as parents. Like any parent wants their child to do when faced with peer pressure, they assessed the situation and found that in this case, it was best to jump. The answer Mr. Estrella would give about jumping off a bridge after his brothers would be a resounding yes. He would do anything for the good of his family.

**Going to School**

Juan’s father told me that he was scared to put Juan into American schools because he had always been such a baby. He was a sweet kid, and he hated the thought of leaving him in that big building alone and he did not even know the language (Gracia & Dominguez, 1997).

Mr. Estrella said,

Dropping him off at school that day, Juan was so scared…it reminded me of when I dropped him off at kindergarten for the first time in Mexico. He would actually take his bottle into school with him…he was just a baby. But I saw the same scared nature in his eyes when I dropped him off at Whitesboro elementary as a ten year old.

This notion of EL parents being scared of leaving their kids at school is a common theme in EL research (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997).

Several times in learning new details of Juan’s story, I tried to put myself in Juan’s shoes. Imagine being ten years old plopped into a school where no one speaks your language. You are asked to spend the day with strangers and learn. This is exactly how Juan explained his first day of 4th grade. As most EL research suggests, ELs are scared when they arrive (Fine & Weis, 2003). Mrs. Aesa, his first teacher, described Juan’s disposition his entire first year by saying, “He was confused, scared, and lost.” Garcia and Dominguez (1997) found these same reports
from EL students interviewed across the nation. They are timid, scared, and reluctant to participate (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997).

Juan said, “I cried and cried, not wanting to go to school in America, but my grandfather had me come sit in his lap one night and told me that American schools could give me a better education…better than any education that my parents had ever had” (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997; Fine & Weis, 2003).

Juan went on to say that his ideas about school changed after that. “My grandfather is my hero, so I began trying to enjoy my schooling more. I would do anything to please ‘mi abuelo.’ So, I stopped crying about school and accepted it as a fact of life.” The way adults see education impacts students who see them as authority figures and role models (Payne, 2005). Students often mimic the thoughts and ideas of their loved ones (Payne, 2005). Clearly, Juan did.

The Wall

From that point on in school, once his timid reservations left him, Juan’s personality began to shine. Mrs. Aesa described Juan’s personality as “delightful.” Students can never really begin to learn until they feel a sense of safety and feel comfortable in their surroundings (Murphy, 2007). “He gave me a hug and a smile on the hour, every hour. But in his defense, nonverbal communication was about all we had between us.”

In the first stages of language acquisition, non-verbal communication is heavily relied upon (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004). She went on to say that Juan could talk to several people in class who spoke both English and Spanish, but his learning soon hit what Mrs. Aesa referred to as “a wall.” Juan needed some extra help in school and this became obvious to most everyone who encountered him throughout the day. His language, reading, writing, and communication skills were almost nonexistent in either language. It was difficult for teachers to understand
exactly what was to blame for Juan’s lack of understanding. Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Cressler, Lippman, et al. (2004) have found that many EL teachers report an overwhelming sense of confusion about how best to teach EL students. She said, “I asked that he be sent to Mrs. Flowers each day for tutoring. She could work with him exclusively to help him catch up where he was lagging behind in reading and writing.”

Mrs. Aesa was hoping to break through this learning barrier, but throughout the fourth grade, even with the extra help and interventions provided for Juan, the wall was still very much in tact. Some teachers are unaware of how long language acquisition takes, and they may assume that learning disabilities are to blame for the slow growth and progress in school (Ortiz, 1997). However, as she reported “his inabilities to retain information caught my attention in a way that no other EL had before.”

Writing with Heart

After being assigned to Mrs. Flowers, who would take struggling students out of class and give them extra special help, a rather special rapport between the two began. Many ELs report that one on one time with teachers helps tremendously (Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, Cressler, Lippman, et al. 2004). Juan tells it like this:

On the first day that I ever met Mrs. Flowers, she asked me what I wanted to learn. No one had ever asked me that before. I told her, I liked a girl in my class named Merriam. I wanted to write her a note and tell her that I liked her, but I didn’t know how to write. Mrs. Flowers helped me to write the entire letter.

Although he was simply copying down what Mrs. Flowers told him to write, letter by letter, Juan wrote a note to Merriam that day. Research states that victories, however small, in language acquisition can boost student confidence and promote further achievements (Pappamihiel, 2002).

“Before I left, I told Mrs. Flowers that I wanted to learn how to write my name and draw a heart around it. She taught me how that very day and that’s how I began writing my name. I
didn’t even know how to write my name before then!” From that point on, Juan said he would leave girls letters in their lockers that would simply have a heart and his name written inside it.

“I’m pretty sure that’s all it takes to let a girl know that you like them,” he told me.

“Girls like hearts.”

**Unconventional Mrs. Flowers**

A teacher who helps a student write a note to another student seems a bit unconventional; but that is Mrs. Flowers in a nutshell. In a strange way, she reminds me of Jesus, here to save the world, but not exactly whom you would expect. Mrs. Flowers talks about as slow and Southern as a character right out of the movie *Steel Magnolias*. She is a retired teacher who still works tirelessly for the school system and genuinely goes out of her way to help those in need. If she walked into a private school AP English class full of affluent white kids from the *good side* of town she might very well turn over tables like Jesus did at the temple for similar reasons. She reaches out to those less fortunate. The kids in her class are not the prettiest kids, the kindest kids, the best smelling kids, the athletes, or the most brilliant bulbs in the box, but they were sent to her for help and she diagnoses their needs most remarkably. In turn, she gives these kids what they need in order to learn. One-on-one interaction between students and teachers draws upon a student’s innate desire to please the adult (Murphy, 2007).

During Juan’s first day with Mrs. Flowers, she colored outside the lines of what is normal and typical for learning and literacy help, and she helped him write a note to a little girl named Merriam. Mrs. Flowers knew that the way to promote their relationship and the way to Juan’s heart was to find common ground and start with something attainable (Pappamihiel, 2002). In interviews with Juan’s past teachers, nearly all of them say they can remember his trademark heart with the letters inside that spelled out the name J-u-a-n. He would write his
name on his paper this way on up until high school. This was not the first, nor would it be the last of the unconventional methods I would come to know of Mrs. Flowers and her Christ-like nurturing of those in need.

As a result of my interviews with Juan, I came to see Mrs. Flowers as a hero. She had no formal rule book; it seems that she was simply willing to meet kids at the crux of “learning” and did “whatever it took.” Her work ethic is stellar, her methods extraordinary, and her genuine love for kids is unparalleled. Teachers that go the extra mile to form relationships with students are said to have the greatest learning outcomes with their students (Murphy, 2007). This was true of Juan and Mrs. Flowers. Since this study, I have reflected upon her unique teaching methods while reaching out to special education, EL, and struggling students in my own class. I have begun to ask myself WWMFD? What would Mrs. Flowers do? I think I shall make a bracelet; they will be all the rage.

**Like Mother and Son**

In my interviews with Mrs. Flowers, she spoke very fondly of the many years that she gave Juan the extra help he needed in school. Although our interview sessions didn’t cover her upbringing, her past, or her reason for becoming a teacher, it is easy to see that Mrs. Flowers has an intrinsic desire to help people. This is a trait in teachers that literature suggests seems to be fading out in teachers (Narvaez, Khmelkou & Vaydich, 2008). She seems to work with kids from the bad side of town exclusively. The irony is that she and her husband are wealthy beyond belief. However, you would never know it. Her demeanor exudes acceptance and equality. Her money is spent giving and helping those less fortunate. She is one of a kind; a term I would also use to describe Juan. It is no wonder the two hit it off so well.
“I just fell in love with Juan immediately,” Mrs. Flowers said in her slow Southern dialect. “His personality, character, and wholesome love for life was just contagious.” While other teachers that I interviewed echoed this sentiment, Mrs. Flowers’ love for Juan was more genuine than the rest. In fact, the way other teachers described their relationships with Juan sounded more like the love one feels for animals at the pound. It is as if Juan’s educational circumstance was like a nauseating commercial for the ASPCA, the ones that can literally bring a person to tears. Sure it is heart breaking that animals are abused. I wish I could do something about it, but then the commercial goes off and I am back to a funny episode of Will and Grace. The relationship between the animals and me is gone.

But to Mrs. Flowers, Juan was much more than a fleeting thought or a tear-jerking commercial. Juan was like a son. In writing about these two, calling them “mother” and “son” is the best relationship phrase for the two. They had a love between them like an adopted mother and son. In fact, during an interesting and very honest interview session she revealed to me that she and her husband seriously contemplated legally adopting him.

An Interview with Mrs. Flowers

There was something just not clicking with Juan. He had major literacy problems. He was different from day to day. Sometimes he would come in and be able to sound out a word. The next day, I could point to a letter and he couldn’t make the sound for it. Everyone knew something wasn’t right. I was hired with title one funds to help struggling students like Juan. I saw him for one period every day from 4th grade on up until the 8th grade.

We had him about one week. I shared my office with another woman and we both worked with kids who needed extra help. After one week, we knew he should be tested for special education. After he was finally tested and didn’t make the cut for special services, I took matters into my own hands. I had worked with him for three years and I thought ‘this little guy needs help…I love him, I’ve got the time, if I don’t help him, no one else will.’ So, I asked him if he would like to come over to my house every Wednesday during the summer to work on his reading skills. I would pick him up at their trailer at 9:00 in the morning and would drop him back off at 4:00 pm once a week. He was so excited when I pitched the idea to him.
I had the interpreter write up a letter for me in Spanish and Juan went home to explain it to his parents and see if it was ok. Juan’s father said that he could only come if his cousin could come over as well, which I saw as a pretty wise parenting move, because he didn’t know me from Adam.

So we started up the first week of summer. Initially, Juan and his cousin came to my house each week, then it trickled off to it just being Juan once a week at my house for the entire summer. I would teach him for a while, we would work on his reading, I would make lunch, my husband would come home from work, and we would all sit down and eat lunch together. My husband and I just fell in love with Juan. He was so sweet and humble. I taught him table manners and I also taught him how to swim…but I wasn’t quite as productive in the reading department.

I heard the special education coordinator shrug off Juan’s learning issues by saying that his problems were language barriers, but I can tell you, it was more than that. Back in the 4th grade, we started with sounds. He was so far behind, at that point, that we had to work with an interpreter for him to understand me. As the years went on, we slowly worked up to pre-primer words and vocabulary. The summer that I worked with Juan, I saw the most progress. We worked all the way from pre-primer to 1st grade literacy skills.

By the end of June, my husband and I were in love with Juan. We knew that Juan’s family had been reported, that Juan’s family worked all the time, and had extreme financial burdens. I had been inside their trailer once. It was so sad and run-down…and dark. There was a 60 inch flat screen, a baby crying in a cradle in the living room, and another kid who was about five years old whose feet were turned in really bad and who needed a doctor. I wouldn’t have wanted to sit on the furniture; it was like a third world country. There were no adults, just kids taking care of babies. When Juan had swam at my house, I had noticed burn marks on his legs from a horrible injury in his past…I’ve actually forgotten the entire story, but the bottom line was that my husband and I felt we could give Juan what he needed, and that his parents were struggling to survive.

Jim (Mrs. Flower’s husband) and I started out buying Juan t-shirts, coats, shoes, but then we ended up getting him birthday and Christmas gifts. He became a part of the family. He was so gracious when given things, he always said thank you, smiled, and gave us big hugs. It was our pleasure to help him. I know that he loved us back, too.

Jim and I began having some serious conversations about adopting Juan. I have a friend that had adopted a boy and it worked out really well for everyone involved. So, after talking with my husband, I decided to wade into the waters a little bit and see if that would be something the parents were interested in. I began asking Juan questions about his home life and his parents and what went on there. My husband and I came to realize that although the Estrellas struggled financially, Juan was greatly cared for, depended on, and crucial to the family dynamic. He was loved and his family would never have relinquished their rights to being his caregivers. My husband and I were sad, but anytime a kid can be with a family that loves them, it’s a good place for them to be.
We still had Juan over to our house for the remainder of the summer, and Jim and I both loved every minute of it. We decided to take a vacation right before school was starting up again. It was about three weeks that had passed when I saw Juan again at school in August. To my dismay and shock, he had somehow forgotten everything he had learned that summer. It was like starting all over at square one! Language barriers don’t make a kid forget what they’ve already learned. It was more clear to me than ever that Juan needed to be in special education.

Bringing a Student Home: Risk or Benefit?

After hearing Mrs. Flower’s interview and scanning over the transcript, I began wondering if bringing a student home would be more of a risk or benefit. The notion of a woman taking the personal initiative to care for a stranger and bring him into her home is baffling to me. Even in our interview, I could not help but continue to ask, “You actually brought him home?” I know my mouth must have hung agape every time she answered me. I could only think of the risk involved in bringing a student home. Kirkle (2006) found that many teachers are scared of having relationships with students due to fears of lawsuits and other job related troubles. However, Mrs. Flowers did not bat an eye to my skepticism. Mrs. Flowers is what my generation would loosely refer to as old school. Alongside this term, I guess that would make me and my generation new school teachers.

Unfortunately, kids in my generation grew up when the horrifying lifetime made-for-tv movie about the true story of Mary Kay Letourneau played weekly. As a kid, America’s Most Wanted focused on finding kidnappers, and when I was in college, studying to become a teacher, one of the most popular shows was called “To Catch a Predator.” “The King of Pop” had a career overshadowed by court cases and criminal charges involving young boys. McGruff the Crime Dog came to our school to tell us to associate the words stranger with danger. Before teacher internships at the University, student teachers were told “Do not ever be alone with a student. If it ever comes down to your word against theirs, people always believe the child, no
matter how innocent you are.” Socioculturally speaking, my generation has soaked in the idea that adults and children do not mix, if they do, there is trouble. Research findings show that teachers my age have heard that message for so long that it has become ingrained within us (Zirkle, 2006). It has even been reported that the negative outlook on teachers being predators, rather than educators, has tainted the occupation so much that it drives potential teachers away (Zirkle, 2006).

This did not go away when I actually became a working teacher. On the nightly news and heard in the world around me were constant tales about teachers in trouble. Although some teachers seem to have legitimately done wrong in their position, others seemed to be but innocent bystanders. I actually remember hearing the following on a local radio station on my way home from work one day:

Announcer: The lawyer representing the injured child, whose family is suing Mrs. Doe, says that the classroom coat rack was eye-level for the students and that the child’s injury to his vision was due impart to her lowering these racks. The teacher claims she simply lowered the coat racks in her classroom to teach her students about responsibility and the daily duties of being a student, like hanging up one’s own coat, and that she never meant for anyone to be hurt.

Because of irrational fears from cases like that, many new teachers feel pressured to “drink the Kool-Aid” and join AEA (Alabama’s NEA branch) because of the offer of $1 million worth of coverage in case of a lawsuit (Brimelow, 2004). Since then, $40 per month comes out of my paycheck out of sheer fear that one day a student will cry wolf.

**Fear Preventing Action**

In an article titled *Paralyzing Fear: Avoiding Distorted Assessments of the Effect of Law on Education*, many teachers reveal that fears about getting in trouble as a teacher prevent their action in schools (Zirkle, 2006). I have personally experienced this. I was turned down last year when proposing a field trip for four of my top students because students are no longer allowed to
ride in a teacher’s car. I raised the money on my own to pay for the trip, but because of this silly fear, we had to pay for a 50-passenger bus to load five measly kids. That is money wasted out of educational fears. Sadly enough, because I am aware of the *kids cannot ride in cars with teachers* rule, in freezing temperatures and insanely hot ones, I have passed my own students walking to and from school to their homes and have never once offered them a ride. I am motivated by fear of what people might say, and in turn I am afraid of losing my job. I do what I have been told. I am a mindless soldier of the *new school*. Students are not to be my friends or my loved ones. Compared to Mrs. Flowers, I realize that I am soulless and heartless when it comes to kids. I sit on my raft, watch my back, and watch the children sink.

**Kicking it Old School**

Although the idea of taking a student home is a by-gone notion to me, Mrs. Flowers’ did not think twice about doing so. Research shows that education has changed drastically in teacher/student involvement, so much so that there are not many teachers like Mrs. Flowers left (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002). In her interview, I increasingly grew more and more astonished at the reality and extent of personal time and care given to Juan. She bought him clothes, taught him table manners, his “yes mams” and “no mams,” how to swim, and also tutored him in reading for free all summer. As many teachers view it, I was taken aback by the risk involved (Zirkel, 2006). So I asked her about the risk it took to do such a thing.

“Weren’t you afraid to take on that responsibility?” I asked her, being a skeptical teacher of the new school who has heard countless tales of lawsuits and job loss.

Mrs. Flowers looked as if a light bulb was coming on. It was glaringly obvious that the thought had never occurred to her.
“Well, honey, (she paused)…I actually never thought of it that way. It didn’t feel threatening to me at all. I just did it because I thought he needed the help and I could give him that help.”

In that statement is the true difference in new and old school teaching methods (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002). The difference is focus and care. I do not take students home, get to know them personally, or become a part of their lives because of my job security, my reputation, my fears, and my time consumption. However, teachers like Mrs. Flowers are focused less on themselves and much more on student needs, on the child, and toward helping others. She used her time, her money, and risked her reputation—all to help Juan. During the school year, Mrs. Flowers had seen a deficit and tried to help Juan catch up by seizing the opportunity for him to learn through the summer when other students were at a stand still. While fear typically prevents action in many teachers, it did not stop Mrs. Flowers (Zirkel, 2006).

She used her own finances, time, and risked lawsuits and rumors to benefit a single student. Old school heart is unfathomable to new school teachers like me. My generation was taught to stand back, do not touch, no hugging, or sharing smiles. We are crippled, instead, by our fears (Zirkel, 2006). Mrs. Flowers was the opposite and her impact with students is, has, and probably always will be more productive. Teachers who put in extra time get better results (Pianta, 1999). Juan learned to read that year on a kindergarten level, more than he would been able to do in three years in a classroom each day. The ripples that reach and affect those around her are ones of hefty proportions. She was a tidal wave in Juan’s education-parched life and I was but a brief mist of water.
My Role

Like all of Juan’s teachers that I interviewed, I, too, confess that I adored the kid. As his 8th grade English teacher, I found out quickly that Juan could not read. McLaren and Torres (1999) reported that many EL educators are unaware of how to tackle the issue of teaching reading to struggling readers, and I, too, was unsure of how to proceed. Much smaller than the other kids his age, Juan physically appeared younger than all my other students. When asked to write and submit a paragraph, on the first day of class, I truly saw the extent of Juan’s literacy struggles. He turned in five lines of unintelligible gibberish, made up of backwards A’s, upside-down E’s, and what appeared to be division symbols. This agrees with literature that says ELs often mask their educational struggles in class with excellent behavior or social skills (Cohen, 2007). Unable to read or write, he attempted to tread water in my class, but quickly began sinking.

I spoke with Mr. Luna, the EL teacher, and he caught me up to speed with Juan. He let me know that Juan’s problems seemed to be far beyond language barriers and that he seemed like a candidate for special education. While many educators mistake language barriers for learning disabilities, research says that people who specialize in language acquisition (such as Mr. Luna) can best identify the discrepancies (Wilmhurst & Brue, 2010). Mr. Luna also told me that he had already been tested and that the test revealed that Juan did not qualify for special education, but that personally he disagreed with the results. Mr. Luna said his hands were tied and I felt mine were too. I spoke with my administrators who let me know that all of Juan’s teachers had extended their efforts to try and help Juan, but to no avail. It felt like a hopeless uphill battle and our favorite kid was getting beaten up each day at school by literacy deficits.
Teachers all over the U.S. report feeling that they cannot change the status quo and in effect give up due to this overwhelming feeling of helplessness (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002).

**Passing the Buck**

Alas, I did what many other secondary English teachers do, I passed the buck. Curtain (2005) says that many secondary English teachers feel comfortable passing EL students from grade to grade, without truly assessing what they’ve learned. As a secondary English educator I have been taught how to analyze literature, how to spur classroom discourse, and assist students in becoming better writers by way of my commenting on their compositions; however, I did not know how to teach a kid to read (Beers, 2003). Interestingly enough, I found that I am not alone in this thinking. Research supports my findings that as Juan moved on in school, year after year, his teachers reported feeling less and less able to help him (Beers, 2003). His fourth grade teacher actually felt comfortable working with Juan on his literacy skills, yet as he moved up each year to a new grade, never progressing, his secondary teachers became less and less comfortable teaching reading and writing skills (Beers, 2003). Beers says that many teachers are simply uncomfortable and unwilling to dial down the content to meet students at the level where they actually need instruction.

Mrs. Chase, his history teacher in 8th grade said,

As a secondary history teacher, I have never had a student with such low literacy skills. I honestly didn’t know what to do with him. I have to get all my students to pass a test at the end of the year based on content they’ve learned with me all year. I’m really not trained to teach skills, I’m to teach them history. So, with a kid like Juan, who needs so much extra help with the basics, it would be easier if he had an IEP and received personal instruction through special education.

Research suggests that the feeling of helplessness in dealing with the education of a struggling student often leads to them being misplaced in special education (Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005).
For me, teaching reading was such a foreign notion. I am not alone; Beers (2003) says that many secondary teachers report that they do not know how to teach basic reading skills. At the level at which I taught, all kids had the basic concepts down, or they had not been passed on to the next grade. However, Juan had a serious hole in his education. In Alabama, EL students are supposed to be passed through each year to the next grade (NEA, 2011). Regardless of his learning or growth during each academic year that Juan had been in school, he was ushered along to the next grade. Each year, the teachers were less and less knowledgeable about basic literacy instruction and because of that Juan learned very little in his schooling (Beers, 2003; Garcia & Godina, 2004).

I am sad to report that by the end of the academic year that I had Juan as an English student, I did what literature reports of many EL teachers do; I gave up (Curtain, 2005). I loved the kid, wanted to help him, but I honestly did not know what to do. Beers (2003) reports that many secondary teachers say that they don’t know how to teach literacy skills to students who are far behind. I notified people in charge, who knew of his situation and literacy struggles, and when they said “nothing more can be done,” I did Juan a disservice by believing the lie (Woods & Jeffrey, 2005).

Wish I Had Done More

One of the questions I asked each of Juan’s teachers at the end of their interview session was, “If you could go back in time, what, if anything, would you have done differently to help Juan.” Although the replies varied slightly by each individual’s word choice, I heard the same message from every teacher that participated in this study. Juan’s past teachers, spanning from 4th grade to 11th grade, reading teachers to math teachers, each one of them said that they wish they had done more. I agree with that sentiment, as I too, wish I had intervened more, been more
proactive, and changed Juan’s situation for the better. Literature findings supports the notion that teachers retrospectively regret the extent to which they intervened and wished they had helped more (Howard, 2006).

“I didn’t know what else to do, at the time, but looking back, I feel that I actually could have done more,” said one of his former math teachers.

“I would have fought for him. I would have stood up and demanded something be done,” said a domineering Mrs. Flowers.

“I wouldn’t have taken no for an answer,” said one of the administrators that worked hard for Juan to be tested, then was denied. The echoed phrase by each teacher was that they all wish they would have done more (Howard, 2006).

As each year passed, Juan experienced what many ELs do; he was moved from teacher to teacher, grade to grade, unable to read or write, trapped in a system of rules and regulations (Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Past, 1991). It was the year I had him in class, when I was finishing up the school year with Juan that I remember accepting defeat and preparing to pass Juan on to the next grade. In the hallway, while talking with one of his other teachers, Mrs. Flowers pulled me aside:

I have found a rule that says that although we can’t hold an EL student back, his parent can. If we all agree that Juan needs to stay here another year, instead of being sent to the high school unable to read or write, we need to have a parent meeting with Juan’s father quickly, so that he can give us permission to retain him.

All of Juan’s teachers agreed that Juan needed more help and assistance before being shipped off to high school, so a few days later, Juan’s father came to the school to meet and discuss the idea of keeping Juan in middle school another year.
The Meeting

My friend and translator for the study, Emilio Paz, was there the day of the meeting with Juan’s father. Mr. Estrella does not speak English, so Mr. Paz translated throughout the meeting. Each teacher Juan had that year was in attendance. The principal and EL coordinator; Mr. Luna, was also there. I remember this meeting vividly. It was the moment I realized that Juan would be my dissertation topic.

We took turns. Each teacher would explain how Juan had struggled in his or her class throughout the school year. The meeting went slowly, due to translation issues, but Mr. Estrella nodded in agreement and expressed that he was well aware of Juan’s problems. Finally, our principal told Mr. Estrella the sad fact that we had to pass Juan on to the next grade unable to read or write, unless Mr. Estrella requested that he be retained. We all began to chime in. Several comments sounded like this:

“It would help him tremendously.”

“High school will be very difficult for him.”

“If we keep him another year, that’s one more year of learning for him, which will benefit him greatly.”

We all sat by and waited for our messages to be translated to Mr. Estrella. I watched his face, taking it all in, and his nods that once showed he agreed, were fading. After he had time to think, Juan’s father shook his head in a negative fashion. He spoke directly, boldly even. His disposition seemed to change as he was telling Mr. Paz what he thought about our ideas for retaining Juan. He was passionate. It was as if he came into the meeting a full water balloon and he had just then decided to burst.
“Mr. Estrella said he doesn’t want Juan here another year,” relayed Mr. Paz. We all sighed, as if he had told us that our football team had lost a game, but he went on. “He said that he wants Juan to be put back in the 4th grade.”

All of the teachers around the table looked at each other knowingly, and now that I think back about it, we looked at Juan’s father a little piously. Some even began to chuckle under their breath. It was as if everyone was tickled to see how inaccurate Mr. Estrella’s ideas of U.S schooling were. Someone spoke up from the table.

“Mr. Estrella, we can’t do that. You can’t pull a child back several grades. I’m sorry, but it just doesn’t work like that.” She smiled back at us, and Mr. Paz began the translation again.

Mr. Estrella spoke. Then we heard the message from Mr. Paz.

“Mr. Estrella said that he wants him back in the 4th grade because it’s the last time he learned.”

**Crickets**

When people are speechless in movies, cartoons, or television shows, I love the way the audience can hear crickets chirping in background. The sound of crickets is funny, like when someone tells a bad joke and no one laughs. When I hear crickets, although they would seem to be the background noise of some camping memory, or a night out beside the lake, they remind me of a dropped jaw, an individual rendered speechless, and they denote a surprising new twist that has just been bombed into the narrative. Perhaps my mind was playing tricks on me the day of my meeting with Mr. Estrella, but I could swear that I heard crickets chirping after we were told that in an entire year spent under our tutelage, Juan’s father told us that his son had not learned a single thing.
Questions Raised

To make a long story short, Juan went on to high school after that meeting. In our attempt to tell Juan’s father that Juan did not need to move to the high school where he would be forgotten and where teachers did not care, Juan’s father had essentially told us all that we had already done that to him. It was not a confrontational, emotional, or particularly fiery meeting at all. Each teacher took their dose of medicine in their own way and left the room.

One teacher I interviewed said she left the room thinking, “He’ll regret not letting him stay.”

Another teacher told me that she felt sad. “I feel sad that Juan didn’t learn from us, and I wish I could have done more.”

But for me, I left that meeting plagued with serious questions that have lasted in my mind for years:

What made Juan’s father wait so long to tell us that his son hadn’t learned? Did he feel like he had a voice and say-so in his son’s education? Why was Juan unable to learn? Did he have an undiagnosed learning disability or was it simply slow language acquisition all along?

How did being passed along year after year to the next grade hurt Juan’s literacy skills? What factors influenced Juan’s literacy skills? What will happen to Juan in the future?

I was provoked by that meeting, in fact, to continue and further my studies to eventually do my dissertation on the questions I had in relation to Juan’s situation. I wanted to take a much closer look into the life of a Hispanic EL who doubled as a struggling, yet striving student.
CHAPTER VI:

THE STAR OF THE SHOW

After being approved to study Juan, I began creating mounds of paperwork to be signed by Juan, his family, teachers, and community members that would also participate in the study. IRB classified Juan as a student who needed to be protected at all costs during this study (in that he was underage, had a possible learning disability, and that he was a minority.) It was clear that he needed to know his rights. When first explaining the process of the study and the interview sessions to Juan, after receiving consent from his parents, and over viewing the entire research study with him and all that it would entail, I delivered to him, what I thought would be reassuring news.

“And in order to protect your identity, I will give you a fake name, so that no one will be able to trace the study back to you.” I thought this was a good thing. It would help save Juan of some embarrassment or unwanted attention. But Juan had other ideas.

“I like my name. Can you use my first name?” As his elder, I was trying to show him the wisdom behind using a pseudonym and attempted for quite some time to talk him out of this, but Juan won me over to his idea.

“I want people to know that this is really my story. I think it will help others, and so I want my story to be my own.” After three returned IRBs, a doubting dissertation committee, and resistance from my chair, the clearance had come from the compliance office that I could indeed use Juan’s first name throughout the process. Everyone was surprised by this, but I was shocked. Juan, however, was quite excited when I told him the news several weeks later.
I did insist for his own protection, that he have a pseudo last name in this study.

“Would you like to take a couple of days to think about a last name?” I asked Juan. “You could pick it out yourself.” He shook his head no rather quickly.

“I don’t need time to think about it, Miss. I know what I want it to be.” He smiled.

“You do?” I was surprised, shocked, and a little excited about his quick reply. The anticipation built. He smiled shyly, as if embarrassed by his request.

“Can my name be star?” He was making a reluctant face, while clinging to his request.

“Juan Star? That’s what you want your name to be in the study? Juan Star?” I chuckled inside at the simplicity. He had such a child-like manner with this; how was it that I did not expect something wildly creative and child-like as this? As creative director of this study, I had secretly wished and assumed Juan would pick a classic Hispanic/Latino last name. Juan Star was so generic and... English.

“What about keeping your name Spanish? Since your story may end up representing the story of the ‘every man’ in your culture, could we somehow make your last name sound like a common Spanish name?” In my head I was somehow trying to telepathically urge him into a name like Mendoza or Cortez, meanwhile, Juan was sticking hard and firm to his first request.

“The word star is ‘estrella’ in Spanish. Could my name be Juan Estrella?”

I sighed, realizing that you cannot give someone a choice and not let them actually choose.

“Si,” I told him.

We smiled at one another as I began to write down his name on my notepad. I began thinking of how the name Juan is common, and Juan’s story in many ways is the common experience that many EL students have faced entering and attending U.S. schools; however, the
name Estrella was different and an unusual route to take. That is also a large part of Juan’s story- unusual, peculiar, and atypical.

“From here on out, you are known as Juan Estrella. Nice to meet you Juan Estrella.” I say this as I stick out my hand to shake his limp noodle of a handshake, and he chuckled embarrassingly.

I do not mind him being the star at all, in fact, when it comes to this study he is the star of the show.

**Leaving Home**

After deciding to study Juan, I called to Whitesburo High School and found out that Juan no longer attended in the Whitesburo school system. I was not surprised by this because research and my own past experiences with immigrant families has made me well aware of their transient nature and frequent moves from town to town (South, Crowder, & Chavez, 2005). He had moved. When I spoke with his father, Mr. Estrella told me that Juan was now living with an uncle in the nearby town of Haywood. I did not ask any further details, but I found his transfer of living and school spaces as quite odd. Thus, when I started interviewing him, the elephant in the room, had been the issue regarding Juan’s family and new living situation.

Normally, I would not pry, but in order to truly study the sociocultural factors of Juan’s learning, I needed to know why Juan left home. After all, Vygotsky (1997) places a wealth of emphasis on the role of parents and caregivers in the development of a child and his or her learning. Now at a different school, living with his uncle rather than his parents, he seemed to be flourishing in this new position. But I needed to know more about this. I was scared to ask about a family problem so big that it ended in his leaving home, and I was a bit scared to pick at what might be an open wound. After all, I am an educational researcher, not a therapist. The
task of asking, without prying, proved to be a difficult one. So to begin, I was taking tips from qualitative researchers that have gone before me that instruct how to get the most from an interview session, and I just started by asking something basic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

“So...tell me a little bit about your family...your home-life.”

As research points out, Juan’s family was the typical Hispanic-American family; they were a close-knit family built around the Catholic faith (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Juan went on to explain he had a mother, father, and two younger brothers. I knew this already, but wanted to hear it all from Juan. His two younger brothers were Carlos and Pablo. Juan is the oldest, Carlos is the middle child, and Pablo is the baby.

“Pablo is smart,” Juan spoke up. “He’s way smarter than me and Carlos.” He said this with a proud air about him, but then his smile began to dissipate as he said, “My father always wanted me to be more like Pablo.” This might not seem alarming, at first, but the reality is that Juan is nine years older than Pablo. “My dad would always say, ‘Juan, why can’t you read like Pablo? Why can’t you do this or that like Pablo does in school?’ I guess I’m just not as good at school as he is.” Although this was never brought up as Juan’s reason for leaving home, I could not help but think of the emotional toll it must take for one sibling to constantly be compared to another. Not only can these comparisons deteriorate sibling relationships, but it also works to damage the adolescent/parent relationship as well (Stocker, Dunni & Plomin, 1989).

Juan’s other brother Carlos is exactly like Juan. He is four years younger than Juan and they have the exact same learning issues; I have taught them both, so I know this. It is uncanny. Carlos is sweet, kind, and helpful in class, just like Juan, yet I taught him in the 8th grade this past year and he is unable to read or write as well. An odd fact and major difference in their learning, however, is that Carlos is in special education. We (the teachers and administrators at
Whitesboro) were told Juan did not classify for special education services, yet Carlos (under different special education management) was admitted.

**A Test Passed**

In an interview with one of Juan’s first elementary teachers in Whitesboro, Mrs. Evans described her first insights into Juan’s struggles in school. These problems and difficulties were echoed by many other teachers interviewed in this study.

I have taught many newcomers through the years. I know how to teach EL students, but Juan was different. There was this extra barrier to his learning that seemed to be an obvious disability. Not only could he not read or write in either English or Spanish, but teaching him was as fruitless as throwing uncooked spaghetti on the wall...nothing stuck. To me, that signaled a learning issue beyond normal second language acquisition. Even in math, if we covered a concept, we might leave the day with him somewhat understanding, just to come back the next day to see that he had forgotten. I got with his other teachers and spoke with our administrators in attempt to get him special education services, but it was all for naught. We were told he did not qualify. EL students were typically never placed in special education.

Mrs. Kelly, the administrator at Juan’s school during that time took it upon herself to personally fill out all the paperwork. She rounded up all the documentation needed for Juan to be tested for special education services and she said, “We all felt very confident that Juan would test into the program.” In retelling the scenario, she said,

However, when it came time to present Juan’s documentation to the special education coordinator (Mrs. White), I was told that Juan’s learning issues were because of his being an EL and these weren’t a sign of special needs. Mrs. White (special education testing coordinator), sent word from the central office that he would not be tested. The teachers were sad to see that Juan wouldn’t have the help they thought he so desperately needed.

But the teachers and administrators never gave up. All of the teachers interviewed in this study stated that they could say, without a doubt, that Juan was a definite candidate for special education. Each year, his teachers gave the same efforts to get Juan the additional help they felt he needed in school, to no avail. The data from interviews with many of Juan’s secondary teachers revealed, however, that as Juan got older, teachers stopped trying. Literature suggests
that the reason for this is the sense of defeat that the teachers feel for cases like Juan’s (Beers, 2003). This feeling causes teachers to give up (Beers, 2003).

Like a squeaky wheel, at first, from 4th grade until the 6th grade, Juan’s teachers tried to have him tested for special education. Eventually, the squeaky wheel was greased. Mrs. White tested Juan. However, when the results came back, teachers were told that the discrepancy levels weren’t far enough apart to land Juan in special education. For an EL to get special education services the test must reveal that the student’s learning issues are not language barriers; unfortunately, his test scores did not reveal this. Rueda, Salazar, and Higareda (2005) report that there is often difficulty in assessing whether or not a student has a learning disability.

To be on the safe side, most tests and administrators who read these scores would rather rule out a student than to mislabel them.

In layman’s terms, Juan passed the one test he needed to fail in order to get help. None of the teachers or administrators could believe it, and throughout my months of interviewing Juan’s former teachers, most all of them say that the assessment was somehow incorrect. As Mrs. Robin put it, “Juan needed extra help far beyond EL assistance and interventions; he needed an IEP.”

Mrs. White of Whitesboro

One of the many teachers who was unhappy with the ruling that Juan was not in need of special education, blamed Mrs. White, system-wide head of special education.

It’s all Mrs. Whites’ fault. She just did as she pleased while she was here and people let her get away with it because of who she is and who her family was. It was amazing to see that no one ever called her out on her high-falutin’, gate-keeping of the special education system. She acted high and mighty over the teachers, and would shut us down rather quickly, but have one rich, white, parent come in her office asking about special education services, and buddy, they got attended to.

This sentiment was echoed by many teachers and even several community members.
Mrs. White was actually the daughter of one of the founding families of Whitesboro. Whitesboro was named after her ancestors who were confederate soldiers, who founded the very well-to-do Southern town. With large plantation-like homes, a bustling down town center of commerce, and acres of farming, Whitesboro became a highly reputable town. Teachers and community members that I interviewed all commented on similar facts about the former prestigious air of town.

One community member, Mrs. Shannon, said,

The last 15 years, the ‘country-club’ section of Whitesboro has become increasing disgruntled with growing number of Hispanics. Until a few years back, there were absolutely no people of color on the mountain upon which sat the town of Whitesboro. These people look down on the Hispanic community and the African Americans in town...strangely enough, the townspeople seem to pride themselves upon this fact-the fact that it was once an all-white town.

One article stated that the way immigrants have been treated in Alabama is a “xenophobic travesty” (Arnoff & Ramsey, 2011). They even go so far as to compare Alabama and their relationship with Hispanic immigrants to German towns and the relationship to the Jews during World War II (Arnoff & Ramsey, 2011).

**The Cadillac Slide**

My grandfather used to live in Whitesboro. A rather wealthy man all his life, when he finally got older and wished to settle down, he bought a home in Whitesboro. I can remember him picking me up to come stay with him for the weekend on the lake. His Cadillac was always in immaculate condition and the leather seats were always freshly treated with ArmorAll®. As we would wind up the hill to Whitesboro, my body would slide around in the back seat. No seat belt and a pair of slick fabric Umbro® shorts really added to the value of what my brother and I had referred to as the *Cadillac slide*. My brother (whom my grandfather fondly called “cowboy”) and I really came to enjoy riding in the car with him as children.
One day, in the Cadillac, soon after arriving in Whitesboro, we saw an African-American man selling fruit on the side of the road.

My grandfather said, “You don’t see many of them around here.”

“What? People selling fruit?” I inquired.

“No. Negroes…you don’t see a lot of Black folks around Whitesboro.” And he sort of smiled. I was too young to know that I should have been appalled by that statement and my grandfather’s pride in it. I’ve never thought much of my grandfather’s satisfaction with the town of Whitesboro, until now.

**Gatekeeping**

To my dismay, Mrs. White has since moved school systems and could not be reached for interviews. However, I feel that much of the data I gathered from teachers was actually more related to personality conflicts and less about her job as special education coordinator in relation to Juan’s story. Everyone loves to blame someone else, and so as I tediously went through the transcripts, I found that Mrs. White was simply the name that people wished to blame. I sensed that if I would have asked these teachers in a casual conversation who killed Laci Peterson, Nicole Simpson, or John F. Kennedy, they would have all collectively said “Mrs. White” in unison. Their blame seemed unfounded, and here is why.

Although it would seem that Mrs. White was keeping Juan out of special education personally or as some put it, out of her sheer enjoyment of “being the gatekeeper,” what I actually found out in regards to special education law gives her decision about Juan more merit. In her defense, a study in 2002 revealed a massive overrepresentation of African Americans and Hispanics in the U.S. special education system (Salazman, 2005). This caused many special education coordinators to make decisions regarding placements into special education based on
race and the disproportionate numbers began changing quickly to adjust the overrepresentation (Salzman, 2005).

Simply put, special educators were told that Hispanics and African Americans were being mislabeled and placed into special education when they should not be (Grissom, 2004). No one wants to mislabel a child, so in order to combat this idea, many special education coordinators, like Mrs. White, began making it more difficult for Black and Hispanic students to enter the system. Nasir and Hand (2006) report that (depending on the school) some Black and Hispanic students are more or less likely to be placed in special education due to disproportionate numbers. If what I assume is correct, Mrs. White was operating on the assumption that Hispanics were often times wrongly placed in special education as noted by Grissom (2004).

She must have been aware of the fact that language barriers as noted by researchers often manifest in the classroom as learning difficulties (Garcia & Godina, 2004). She was overtly attempting not to flood the special education system with mislabeled Hispanic students. However, aligning with the research on ELs and being identified as requiring special needs, there is a hypercorrection within the system, and Juan (a student who most likely had a severe learning disability) was never identified as having special needs (Ortiz, 1997).

The Photo

My grandfather was in my Alabama History Class textbook in elementary school. I actually do not tell people that, but he was an Alabama congressman during the 1970s. Normally, a kid would be proud of that fact, but not me. I was in 4th grade and I spotted my grandfather’s big head with a crew cut standing beside his close friend, the infamous Governor George Wallace. I raised my hand with eagerness to point out my famous family member while my teacher continued the lesson on the civil rights movement. She began talking about all of the
horrible racists that had come before us, and she pointed to the picture on the page where my
grandfather and several other people stood in front of a building. I eagerly did the pick me
wiggle with my hand raised so I could tell the class my grandfather is in this picture! The
teacher did not see me and she kept going.

“This is a famous photo of George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, standing in the
doorway of the University of Alabama to keep a young Black girl from attending that school and
getting her education.” The class gasped. I gasped. And then I slowly lowered my hand. My
grandfather was standing close beside Governor Wallace, near the entry, supporting the arguably
the worst decision ever...to not let young Authurine Lucy into the same university where I will
now graduate.

Being older now, I see that my grandfather was a loving man to my family and me, but
also a racist one. I do not love him any less for I truly feel he was scared of the unknown in the
same way that the community of Whitesboro is scared of the Hispanic population. He stood in
the doorway in a misguided attempt to purify education as Mrs. White stood in the doorway of
the special education system. In essence they both were advocates for keeping things the same
and supporting flawed socioculture and sociopolitical systems. They were status quo sticklers.
In their unique administrative roles, they were anti-change. Since the day I lowered my hand in
class denying my grandfather’s existence in my textbook, I have hoped to make a difference in
education. Just as he made a negative footprint in the world of education, I hope to make an
even greater one, yet positive. As Paulo Freire would say, those who dare to teach are cultural
workers of change (Freire, 2005). As teachers, we must find the inadequacies of education and
alert people to change so that a lack of literacy will never oppress anyone (Freire, 2000).
Through the retelling of Juan’s educational story, I feel that I can be an advocate for change, and a warrior against the sameness upon which my grandfather so desperately tried to cling.

**Goodbye Note**

I began the day still wanting to know, as I had the day before, why exactly Juan had moved out of the house with his parents and in with his Uncle. I had floundered with my questions the day before, so I just bit the bullet and asked straight forward why he had moved. Juan was quiet for quite some time; it seemed like centuries of silence.

I realized very soon that silences in conversation go against my personality in every way. The term *awkward silence* has obviously been coined for a reason. With every second hand on the clock that ticked away, I desperately wished to back out of the question. As an artist and sometimes cartoonist, I would depict this scene as two different versions of me. The real me who outgoing and fun loving and never wants anyone to feel uncomfortable in conversation being attacked by this new version of me as a researcher. The real me is at battle with the researcher version of myself. As I am asking interview questions and feeling instant regret for asking such deep, prodding, intravenous questions, the researcher version of myself is behind me holding my mouth, not allowing me to talk, because she knows that sometimes silence and time provoke meaningful data and answers during interview sessions (Creswell, 2007). My qualitative professor prepared us for this in grad school, and I both despise and value him for his wisdom on the matter of awkward silences during interviews. In the moments I spent waiting for Juan’s reply, I literally began to sweat, waiting for Juan’s answer. Finally, Juan’s voice disrupted the silence.
“I love my family very much, but when I got in middle school, my father and I began to argue a lot. One day, in the heat of an argument, my father gave me a choice. He said ‘if you don’t want to live here, then you should just move.’ So the next day, I did.”

He went on with his story, and several times got very emotional and serious, a thing I rarely saw in his child-like persona.

“It was very sad. It makes me cry to think about how it all happened.”

In interviews with Juan’s father, he told me that he would knock on Juan’s door every morning and tell him to wake up and prepare for school.

“One morning I came in… and he was gone.”

Mr. Estrella called his brother, Juan’s uncle, and found out that Juan had been with him and they both felt it would be best for Juan to simply stay.

Juan said, “My dad knew I was safe and my uncle said he would take care of me and felt like it would be good for me to live there a while. My uncle has taken great care of me, but my family still misses me a lot, and I miss them too.”

Juan revealed that the hardest thing for him throughout the entire process was leaving his brothers.

“I actually have two brothers, but the youngest brother I’ve always felt was the one who looked up to me most. The night I left, I had my little brother write a note for me, because I couldn’t write.” His brother was in 3rd grade and could write better than he could as a 16 year old. He went on to say, “My brother cried and refused to write the letter at first, he did not want me to go…my brother- I love,” he told me.

“How did your mom and dad take this? Do you see them frequently? Have you even seen them since?” I asked.
“My mom was really sad. The first time I saw her when I came back home, I was scared that she was going to hit me and be furious, or maybe even ignore me and not talk to me at all, but she didn’t. She walked over really slowly; she burst out into tears and hugged me! I was so surprised that she wasn’t mad. She told me that she would have never let me leave if she had been home the night that my father and I argued… the night I left.”

Shift Work

Juan’s mother being at work the night he left was not at all unusual for the Estrella family. During an interview with Mrs. Flowers, Mrs. Kelly, and some of the teachers at the elementary school, I discovered a little more to Juan’s home life than he revealed.

Mrs. Flowers said,

When Juan first came to America, his parents were working night shifts at the chicken plant. In order to stay a family and for the family to see each other, Mr. and Mrs. Estrella would leave the three boys at home at night by themselves. The parents would put Carlos, Pablo, and Juan to bed and they would both leave for work. They lived in a trailer and would have other family members from the trailer park come in to check on the boys periodically, but all in all they were left unattended. Someone reported them to the police and Juan and his family received a case-worker.

Many low-income illegal families work these same heinous hours and schedules but are otherwise very dedicated to family (Hing, 2011). From that point on, Juan’s parents had to work separate shifts. It was good because there was always someone home with the boys, but at the same time, they never had quality family time anymore. It was like the Estrellas were divorced, trading up time spend with the kids like the dance of parents in a typical custody case.

Mr. Estrella told me in an interview, “My wife and I work different shifts…we have to.”

In an interview with Juan, he said, “I like it at my uncle’s house. There is always someone there to hang out with. I have lots of cousins and everyone is always in and out. I live a good life with my uncle.”
A Five with Two Zeros

Nowadays, Juan lives with his uncle. His uncle (who I will refer to as Uncle Estrella throughout the study) works construction. This pays incredibly well, especially in comparison to the money made by his other family members at the chicken plants around Whitesboro. When asked what he wants to do when he grows up, Juan says, he wants to be a boss like his uncle. Many Hispanic ELs have illiterate parents and feel doomed to grow up to fall into the same trap of illiteracy and occupations (Purcell-Gates, 1995).

“My uncle has a really nice, big, white truck, and since he is the boss of his job, sometimes he just drives around in his truck checking on all the people that work for him.”

Juan works for his uncle in the summers and on weekends to make a little money. Juan told me that his uncle has taught him a great deal about relationships with other people, including white people in town.

“I need to work hard and be honest, never be lazy, and I will earn respect in life and prove myself to everyone.”

“You’re uncle is a smart man. That’s a great rule to live by,” I say.

“Yes,” he chimes in, “He is a good man…he takes care of everyone in the family.”

Juan told me that his uncle makes him go back and visit his parents frequently. “I’m glad he reminds me because I get busy with other things. He tells me that I always need to stay close with them, and I agree.” Juan reportedly sees his parents every week, upon his uncle’s request. He alternates visiting when his mom and dad are at home so as to see them both.

It is no wonder that Juan feels that his uncle is so wealthy. Compared to his old lifestyle and way of living, Juan is living the American dream. As previously mentioned, his parents
work separate shifts at two different the chicken plants in Whitesboro. Juan told me that his Dad makes about $200 per week while his mother only makes $150.

I would never have asked how much the Estrellas made, but Juan was very forth coming with this information. However, having this information, I feel that it is pertinent to know that Juan’s family and likely many other Hispanic EL families are living at a poverty level despite working full time.

“I want to be a boss like my uncle because he makes way more money than my parents do. One time when I worked for my uncle, I got a check with a five and two zeros on it!”

I was puzzled as to what he meant by this. Seeing my furrowed brows and confused face, Juan grabbed a pencil on the desk beside me and wrote down $500 on a sticky note. He turned and showed it to me with contentment. I had begun to get so wrapped up in Juan’s stories and fooled by his excellent social skills that I had forgotten why I was there. The reality of Juan’s ever struggling skills sank in. As an 11th grader, he still did not know how to pronounce the number five hundred.

“Wow! That’s a lot of money,” I told him.

He shook his head to agree with me as he flipped the light pink post-it note back around where he could see it. He flashed a huge smile. Watching him, I could see the reflection of dollar signs in his eyes like an old cartoon where Sylvester the cat salivates at the sight of Tweety-bird and dreams of him on a plate. What Juan secretly dreams of doing with that money, I may never know, but the look was priceless.

“That’s a big number,” He said looking at his own handwritten numbers on the note.

I shook my head and said, “Yeah, it is.” I sat back and watched him revel.
Chasing Rabbits

In the South, when you get off topic, it is called *chasing rabbits*. Throughout the data collection, which was a series of interview sessions, I had questions prepared, but began to notice that I would veer off and *chase rabbits* periodically. Getting off-track was something Juan was good at doing, and like many ELs, it served as an important coping mechanism while he was in school. According to Klinger and Vaughn (2004), one of the coping skills common to ELs is shifting topics from those they struggle with to those they are confident in discussing. When things got tough, he would change the topic to something he knew. What does Juan know? *Girls.*

Most of the rabbit chasing (a.k.a. off-topic paths) that Juan led me down throughout our interviews were related to current or past girlfriends. To say Juan is girl-crazy, does not quite sum it up. He likes girls immensely, yet in a rather innocent way. His love for the fairer sex reminds me of how the little girl next door loves kittens. It is a pure love. Nothing about Juan is threatening or even begins to venture into the realm of what typical hormone driven teenage boys are like. His atypical approach to women is quite refreshing, so when he wants to talk about the ladies in his life, I allow him to confide in me, just like the little girl next door wants to stop me at the mailbox to show me her 2012 kitten calendar. This is just one of the many ways that Juan Estrella is unique and likeable.

“You’re a different kind of kid, Juan.” I tell him this as he is thirty minutes into one of his many stories about his current girlfriend, Maria.

“Yeah, Miss, I like to be different. Doing the right thing is easy for me because it feels good. I am also a virgin.”
Yikes! As an educator, I desperately wanted to turn the conversation from that point. I thought to myself: I do not want or need to know any of this. This is uncomfortable and quickly heading into an icky place. I tried to butt in, however he was mid sentence and full throttle. I tensed up and tried to figure out if it was humanly possible to shut off my ability to hear using only my mind. It did not work.

…and my friends pick on me for that and say ‘Juan, why don’t you want to sleep with a girl you love?’ Ya see, I love my girlfriend, but I saw my cousin have a baby with a girl that he didn’t love. Now he is stuck with her and that baby forever. I love my girlfriend, Maria, and I try to always be good with her because I don’t want her parents saying ‘stay away from Juan- he gets in trouble.’ Even though my uncle lets me talk on the phone late at night, I don’t keep talking to her later because I want her parents to know that I’m a good kid.

I slowly began to release my gritted teeth, as if I had physically braced myself for a wreck, to find that no collision had occurred. It was like lighting a firecracker to find that when the wick had burned up, the firework was a dud. The rabbit had been chased and I was actually pleasantly surprised to open my eyes and see where Juan had taken me. Although I would have never asked about Juan’s sex life (never, never, never), what Juan revealed about himself was remarkably responsible and mature. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) reported in 2011 that 53% of Hispanic male teens report being sexually active (CDC, 2011). Through this story, Juan revealed that what he lacks in academic skills, he makes up for in wisdom unrelated to academics.

Through several days and continuous hours of interviews, I hoped to learn not only Juan’s deficiencies, but his strong suits. While well over half of Hispanic teenage boys are sexually active, many are also experimenting with drugs and alcohol (CDC, 2011; drugabuse.gov, 2012). Juan chose not to crumble to peer pressure for a moment of pleasure in order to protect his future. That is a lesson that many American young adults cannot or choose
not to grasp. While most kids his age pass classes, statistics say that they are making poor choices at home, in the streets, and in their sex lives (CDC, 2011; drugabuse.gov, 2012). Juan is doing the opposite. Although school seems to daily whoop up on him, there is a strange wise nature to Juan Estrella. To have initially described him as child-like, in many ways, he is strangely more mature than many other young people his age.

**I Just Walk on By**

As Cole and Knowles (2001) have suggested in order to target and more specifically hone in on what needed to be asked in further interviews, I would run through the interview transcripts and write out new questions which I felt needed more clarity. One of the overriding questions I had about Juan and his literacy was the question of embarrassment. From the first few interviews, Juan revealed that he was often compared to his younger brother, who was smarter than he was—embarrassing. He talked about having to have his younger brother write for him, because he could not do it for himself—a bit awkward. Not only that, but he had no clue how to pronounce $500—thwarting, to say the least. The strange thing about all of these circumstances is that he never seemed embarrassed about his inability to read. Literature suggests that students who struggle in literacy acquisition feel embarrassed and ashamed in school and I wondered if Juan had ever felt this (Pappamihiel, 2002). They also report being bullied and teased in school because of their learning struggles as well (Springs, 2007).

“Juan, do you ever or have you ever felt embarrassed in school? How about not being able to read or write as well as other kids your age? Have you ever experienced any bullying because of this or felt ashamed?”

I was beginning to notice that as the interviews rolled on with Juan, I grew more and more comfortable asking what needed to be asked directly. I was leaning less on the
sugarcoating of thorny questions and actually began to thrive on the daunting nature of direct questions. In interpretive biographies comfortable conversation enables more freely flowing and truthful data to emerge (Denzin, 1989). Juan started his reply quickly.

“My uncle always gives me good advice for my life. He tells me not to get in trouble at school and I try really hard to be good.” He took a deep breath and seemed rather cheerless reporting the rest. “People push me, and I’ve been bullied lots of times but I never push back. I always assume that whoever is pushing me is just jealous, and so in a way- I feel sorry for them.” He sort of shrugged his shoulders as if to throw off a negative feeling, then suddenly becomes aloof.

I don’t like fighting anyway. I don’t like to get in trouble. I don’t even think it’s good to see a fight. My friends at school always gather around when a fight is taking place so that they can see what’s happening and who’s winning. I don’t do that. I just walk on by. The other day, there was a fight in the hall at school and I just kept walking. I passed the crowd of people and my girlfriend says ‘Juan, where are you going? Don’t you want to see the fight?’ When I said no, she gave me a really funny look.

Juan laughed with a certain knowledge and wisdom that only a person twice his age should possess.

Having taught teenagers for the last six years and having been one myself, watching Juan talk so sensibly about life as a teenager was like discovering a new animal species or a man with two heads. In my expert opinion, a teenage boy who thinks that true love should wait and that watching fights is small-minded is freakish enough for a circus. Juan’s take on life was refreshing and revealing. Over time, I came to see my research subject as less of a pitiful victim and more of a progressive role-model. Yet sadly, the central issue remained; Juan was unable to read.
The Daily Chore

I began asking more prodding questions to Juan about what it was like growing up in America with his parents. Finding out about a student’s home life is critical in a sociocultural study (Vygotsky, 1997). Through a sociocultural lens, I wanted to find out what Juan was going through at home during the crucial formative years of his schooling (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988). I had questions. Did Juan’s parents care about his ability to read and write? He was supposed to be learning and remained stagnant for so long, did they not notice? I needed to know more.

“Juan, what do your parents think of American schooling, mainly your schooling at Whitesboro. Did they focus on grades?” I asked him. I was well aware of the research that states students soak in educational views from their parents, so I thought perhaps the Estrellas did not focus on academics (Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard & Freeman, 2011).

Juan had been sitting with his hands folded nicely in front of him. He answered as if he was on a talk show; I was the host, and he was my interesting celebrity guest star that all of America wanted to know about.

“My parents taught me a great deal about hard work. Growing up I had to make my bed each day, and they never allowed a moment to pass by with a dirty dish in the sink. We did lots of chores to help pull our weight. School was like doing the dishes, they wanted it to be done and done right.”

I found it strange that Juan compared school to a daily chore, but being unable to read and write from fourth grade on up until high school, school must have felt much like a mindless, expected duty. Researchers before me have reported that illiterate and students far behind the norm like Juan often go years in school without being challenged as a learner (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). Some ELs are not challenged because the content is so far over their heads and language
barriers are also an issue (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). As a result, I suppose school was a bit of a chore for Juan all these years.

“My uncle feels the same way about school as my parents did. He expects me to conduct myself well at school, not to get into any trouble, and to learn as much as possible.”

The way that Juan explains his family’s view of school completely debunks what many of the White community members and teachers thought about EL families. Overwhelmingly, teachers and the White community members assumed that EL parents do not care about their kid’s education, because they do not come to school or contact teachers as much as other White parents do (Verdugo, 2006).

While the teachers and White community members feel the parents are to blame, an interview with Juan’s father reported differently. Mr. Estrella revealed that he and many EL parents like him do not feel welcome at the school. This sentiment about school by Hispanic parents is echoed in other research findings (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

Juan’s father made a statement that agrees with the sentiment reported by many other illegal, Hispanic families involved in U.S. education (Soltero, 2006). He said,

Although I am not illegal anymore, when I was, I definitely didn’t feel that I had a say-so in my boys’ education. Many times I wanted to speak up, and had serious questions and reservations about his learning and his needs, but I didn’t feel like I could speak my mind at a US school.

Nieto and others have found this to be true of not only EL families but a prominent comment made frequently by most minority families in schools which employ predominantly White teachers (Nieto, 1999; Krashen, 1991). Pappamihiel (2002) reported that if no one represents their culture or race on the faculty or administration, people feel that they have no representation. Language barriers only add to this feeling of distance between school and minority families (Pappamihiel, 2002.)
Mr. Estrella went on to talk about work schedules at many of the chicken plants in Whitesboro. He told me that it is virtually impossible for certain shifts to make it to the school within the hours that they are open. McLarren and Torres (1999) would critically say that schools cater to White middle class jobs and that they do not prepare or help other parents by providing better time in which to meet. He attributed the fact of many EL parents not being as involved in local schools with the English/Spanish language barriers that exist. Language barriers reportedly keep many EL parents out of schools (Krashen, 1991). Along with this fact, he mentioned that many EL parents do not fully understand their rights and what U.S. education is able to provide (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). In general EL parents, especially illegal citizens, feel that U.S. education is so much better than schools in Mexico, that complaining about it never crosses most of their minds (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; Soltero, 2006).

Juan said, “My uncle and my aunt take great care of me. They keep me around, even though I cost more money, they want to keep me.”

Collectively, through interviews with the entire extended Estrella family and having conversations with them about daily life, money seems to be the driving force of everything. Literature suggests that although many Hispanic families like Juan’s do not live lavishly, money is seen as food, a car, and happiness (Medina, Saegert & Gresham, 1996). Money is the opposite of worry and it seemed that worry was something the Estrellas had done for years when it came to their overall living and expenses. Juan had inherited this idea that money makes things happen, but he did not seem to worry as the rest of his family did in regards to money. In fact, during the study one day I came to the realization that Juan had never worried a day in life. Juan was always rather content. His teachers and parents agree that is just who he is: easy-breezy Juan.
Sweet Juan

When asked to describe himself, Juan had the following to say:

“I would describe myself as a happy person. Maria broke up with me one time and said, *Juan, why aren’t you sad?’*”

He smiled happy in the knowledge that he could drive a girl crazy. He was so aloof about the whole thing.

“I guess I just don’t get brought down very easily. I think that’s what people like about me.” I nodded to agree. He really had a certain superpower of happiness.

He went on to say that he had first realized his good qualities from his grandparents.

“We are all very close to my grandmother and grandfather. All the other kids would get jealous because my grandpa loves me the most.”

I laughed because I am sure that’s what all kids think about the love from their grandparents.

Still chuckling, I ask, “Why do you think that?”

“They say I’m the sweetest.”

He says this with a smile that let me know that he was proud of his reputation as *sweet* and he did not try to hide this with a manly facade. Hispanic men are known for a manly characteristic, which is called *machismo*. This is a macho-man mentality that exudes overt strength, pride, and even a pompous attitude (Fragoso & Krashubeck, 2000). But Juan does not seem to have a trace of machismo at all.

In the simplest of terms, Juan liked being liked, and he went out of his way to help others feel important as well. In an interview with Juan’s middle school science teacher, she gave a statement that could be no closer to the truth.
On his first day in my classroom, which was his first day of middle school, while other kids sat scared of the new school and new teachers, new classes and an unfamiliar building, Juan came up behind me and threw his arms around my waist. He exclaimed ‘You my teacher!’ with a huge smile on his face. It was precious. I’ll never forget it.

Mrs. Robins said that Juan was refreshingly different than all the other kids.

It’s strange, ya know…when I think about Juan, I think of his attitude and that stellar personality. He had such a willingness to learn and an eagerness to please. In those ways I wish all of my students were like Juan. However- when it came to his actual academic progress, test grades, and troubles with literacy, he was anything but exemplary.

Literature supports the finding that ELs like Juan do overcompensate for what they can’t do in the classroom for exemplary people skills, citizenship, good conduct, and work ethic (McLaren, 1993). However, these are merely coping mechanisms (Pappamihiel, 2002).

Many Hispanic male students experience later literacy development in the classroom and carefully learn to camouflage these deficiencies with coping mechanisms like acting out in class, behavior issues at school, or an overall distaste for school (Rubinstein-Avila, 2004). For many adolescent boys, pretending not to enjoy school is an easy way to hide the fact that there is a more serious learning issue that is facing the student (Rubinstein-Avila, 2004).

Eager to Please

Looking at Juan’s daily struggles in school, language barriers, inability to read, write, or comprehend any textual meanings, and issues with memory and learning, it is easy to understand how a student like Juan might “give up.” In fact, research studies have reported time and again that students who struggle with basic concepts of literacy end up feeling a sense of failure (Pappamihiel, 2002). For kids like Juan who demonstrate exceptional social language, but still lack in academic language, they often begin finding other ways to occupy their minds during the school day (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004). Many times this leads to getting in trouble in school, misbehavior, and very commonly dropping out (Verdugo, 2006). This begs the question: why
was Juan so happy to be in school? Why was he still so eager? Where did this intrinsic motivation come from?

In my interviews with Juan’s teachers and scanning the data, it was obvious that one word kept appearing through the transcripts when teachers were discussing Juan’s behavior and work ethic in school: the word that kept popping up was the word *eager*. Eagerness is a quality that all teachers wish their students have, but few seem to possess (Pianta, 1999). We all wish for our students to have an inner desire to please themselves, their teachers, and their parents, but eagerness is not a word that is usually used to describe the classes of students we are dealt.

Juan’s father said, “Juan has had a desire to please people since he was a baby! We would say ‘no’ and he would crawl away in his little diaper from whatever we had scolded him from touching.”

Mrs. Rockton, one of Juan’s past math teachers, said “Unlike most struggling students, Juan was never lazy; neither did he ever roll his eyes at my efforts to help him. He actually seemed to enjoy the extra help and attention.”

For some students, attention and praise from an adult is all it takes to promote an eagerness to learn (Curtain, 2005). Juan did not follow the statistics that prove kids like him drop out (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Someone forgot to tell Juan that giving up is easiest and the most common choice for kids who just do not seem to *get* school (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

So, I was incredibly proud to find, that even though Juan does and has always struggled in school, at 18 years old he is in the 11th grade and still in school today. I was pleasantly surprised to see that he stuck with it, regardless of how non-productive his schooling was for him (Curtain, 2005). Despite his being able to legally drop out at age sixteen years of age, he chose to stay in school, against all odds of passing. I was proud of him and the way that his life
endlessly debunked literature that suggests struggling students, ELs, Hispanics, and unchallenged students have a higher drop out rate than other teens (Ortiz, 1997).

Many struggling students drop out because they report feeling overwhelmed with the content and simply because they do not fit in (Pappamihiel, 2002). However, Juan never really viewed himself as an outcast or outsider, as many Els do (Pappamihiel, 2002). Instead, Juan’s view of himself as a student has always been and actually still is rather upbeat and optimistic. He sees school as a place to hang out with friends and to see teachers who care about him.

“My uncle, father, and grandfather have told me school is important. I will be able to have a better job in the future if I stay in school.”

Time and again I found that regardless of his literacy skills and learning struggles, Juan has traits that make him a stellar human being. Although his traits cannot translate into making good grades, or passing tests, his work ethic, attitude and good choices will make him a productive adult and exemplary employee one day.
CHAPTER VII:

THE GRADUATION EXAM

One of the days that I spent interviewing Juan, we had been at it for several hours and
began to hit a lull. I had been spurring Juan’s stories of his life and schooling with detailed
questions, and kids his age aren’t fond of this. Nevertheless, for this data to accurately depict the
nature of what went on that led to his illiteracy in the eighth grade, I had to keep probing every
last detail (Cole & Knowles, 2001). As he and I began to show fatigue during the interview, I
mentioned the word “test” in passing. It triggered something within him that perked his interest.
His eyes lit up and he jumped out of his seat with urgency. “I’ll be right back!” He dashed out
the door with a smile and I saw him fade into the hallway of students. He left me in the
counselor’s office at Haywood High School; it had become our impromptu place for
conversations and interview sessions.

I smiled as I heard him hurrying back down the halls toward me in the office.

“Excuse me… pardon me!”

I watched his little body weave in and out of the high school traffic with the nimble
agility of a cat. Each step he made was perfectly calculated to cut through the sea of teens. He
darted in between the typical slow walking meat-heads, he methodically stepped through the
gothic kids covered in black and studded in silver, and he wove in and out around clumps of
gossiping girls, arm in arm, sharing whispers and rolling their eyes as he blew past them like a
breeze. When he saw me, although I was sitting behind a glass door, he began talking to me as
he waved a paper in the air, still speeding closer. I couldn’t hear him at first, but then as he got closer, I began to make it out.

In a distant muffled voice I heard him say, “I got my graduation scores back!” Then the door swung open and I heard perfectly as he finished, “You want to see them?”

“Of course!” I said, expecting good news. I gently took the paper out of his hand and asked, although I could read for myself, I asked, “What test is this?”

With the excitement of a young child, he said with rather broken English, “These is my graduation exam scores, Miss!”

**Hey, Miss!**

When I first began teaching in Whitesboro, I had actually never been around such a large Hispanic community. I was like many other White, middle class Americans who are not well acquainted with any other culture but their own. Solano-Flores (2008) has reported that many teachers know very little about the cultures represented in their classes. While literature suggests that some teachers never grow to adapt, learn, and open up to the various cultures represented in their classrooms (McLaren, 1999), I eventually came to know the new community of learners. For me, this was one of the most beneficial and eye-opening experiences of my life. One of the funny quirks that I was unaware of, that I had to quickly adjust to, was how the kids said my name. In English, students call teachers by their specific last name, such as Mrs. Jones, Miss Jenkins, or Ms. Rogers. However, in Spanish, it is acceptable to simply call all teachers by Senora (Howard, 2006).

Research findings state that when EL students begin to learn English, they apply their first language rules to make sense of the new language, that’s why subject verb agreement and certain phrases seem so ill constructed at first (Thomas & Collier, 1995). Howard (2006) says
that for this reason, many teachers are called “Miss” by their Spanish-speaking EL students (pronounced like Greece with an “M”: MEECE). I have many fond memories of this term. At first, I tried correcting students:

  Carefree Student: “Hey Meece!” (Student says with a smile).
  Cantankerous Teacher: “Mrs.? Mrs. who? Who am I?”
  Carefree Student: (hanging head low, no eye contact) “Mrs. Gilchrist.”

(Cantankerous teacher gets her name pronounced correctly and feels respected. Carefree student is left feeling like a scolded student, and no longer goes out of her way to speak to a teacher again.) Misunderstanding language acquisition and scolding students for applying first language skills inappropriately to English can steadily beat down a student’s confidence until they do not feel like speaking in English anymore (Lynman & Figgins, 2005).

After that scenario happened several times within my first year, I decided to accept being called “Meece.” It became like a nickname that I originally despised, but have now come to enjoy it and find endearing. Any given morning, a kid might say, “Good Morning, Meece,” as they walk down the halls, and seven or eight female teachers might politely echo back “good morning,” for we know not which “Meece” they are referring to. For the first four years of my teaching career I was called Miss Naugher by some but Meece Nah-yeh by most. After getting married, I have been Mrs. Gilchrist to some, but Meece Geelcreest for most. For the last six years, I have answered to “Meece.” As I now am on the cusp of becoming Dr. Naugher Gilchrist, it is sad to think I will no longer hear my former doting name that I have so come to embrace and adore. I will miss being Meece.
Almost Does Not Count

The condition of the paper that Juan had given me not only was crumpled, but it had apparently been his placemat at lunch a time or two, possibly had a large car or SUV roll over it, back up, then roll over it again, and Juan had obviously been bored and scribbled his name all over it, several different ways. I looked at the paper: Haywood High School Graduation Exam. Juan was peering over my shoulder with excitement.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” He said this with such confidence and pride that I continued to scour the page to find what it was he was referring to. I was speechless. Nothing about these scores was good. Juan had failed every portion of every test. In all my studies of Juan, his poor literacy skills were evident at every stage. However, now, as a high school student, I somehow had hoped that Juan had hit his stride in the academic world, that unbeknown to me, he had begun to excel once outside of Whitesboro schools. But these test scores were a cold hard slap in the face bringing me out of the world where lived the warm and the fuzzies. Language acquisition and literacy skills are best learned in the early stages of life and in the more formative stages of growth; it suddenly hit me that if Juan did not get it then, it would be even tougher for him to learn now (Beers, 2003). The reality was that Juan was still struggling academically in school. I did not know what to say when he asked me what I thought about his scores.

“Well, let’s see,” I said trying my best to be gentle, as he seemed so eager for me to see his grades. “It says here that,” I began to slow down, “you didn’t pass any section of the test.” I flashed him a look of chagrin to let him know I hated that for him—which was strangely not an act. In the world of teaching I often find myself acting sad to see that a student failed a test when in reality, they should have studied, and there was more they could have done. But my care about Juan was sincere, not an act. Juan has a certain quality about him, a simple and genuine
likeability that draws you in: he is Forrest Gump with a tan. In attempts to remain distant and disconnected to Juan, while trying desperately not to adore this kid, many have failed.

Juan took the paper from my hands and showed me what exactly I needed to be excited about. “Look, Miss! I got a 4, a 9, and a 5! Mrs. Jerald says that I almost passed the history part!”

Sure enough, the scores on all the other sections showed him failing the test rather drastically. The History section, however, he only missed by 5 points. I smiled.

“That’s great Juan.”

“Mrs. Jerald says I can definitely pass this part next time,” he said with excitement.

And that was it. That’s what he was so excited about: almost passing a test. I thought to myself, doesn’t he know that almost passing is failing?

Later, I interviewed his history teacher, Mrs. Jerald, and asked her about Juan’s progress, growth, and learning as an 11th grader. She was so overwhelmed with pride about the score. The following is an email Mrs. Jerald forwarded me that she had sent her administrators in the first few weeks of having Juan as a student:

Juan Estrella is in the 11th grade, and he cannot read. On the first day of the semester, he came into my room at the beginning of class, introduced himself, and told me he could not read or write. I told him we would work on that. I did not realize that he is only capable of writing his name and copying from the board or the book. You can tell by the vocabulary he copied for my class that he simply copies everything in the book without understanding any of it.

Mrs. Moorely had him for Language last semester, so I spoke with her about Juan. She originally thought the program would be good for Juan, but she soon realized that many other students could read and write more English than Juan, although Juan helped her quite a bit with translation.

I spoke with Mrs. Donald about Juan several weeks ago. She stated at that point that he could not read or write at all, and since he had no one at home that could read or write and help him, there was nothing we could do now. She believed it was too late.
I printed his progress report and learned that he had Mrs. Gesson this semester as well, so I spoke with her. She said he could copy words from the board, but he did not appear to understand anything until she helped him one-on-one. She said he could complete simple equations. Do not let his grade in my class fool you – he has never taken one of my tests or quizzes. Mrs. Donald takes them for him using his answers given to her orally.

After talking with everyone over a period of a few weeks, I came up with a couple of ideas. Being in my class is not helping Juan at all. He can’t read the textbook or the study guide or take notes unless they are written on the board, and even then he doesn’t understand what he has written. He is a wonderful young man and listens to lectures and even laughs at my jokes. He is very polite and has never been any trouble. However, when he graduates he may very well remain unable to get a job because he can’t even fill out an application.

Idea #1: Let Juan be a “teacher’s aide” in a kindergarten or 1st grade class during reading time. This way, he would be exposed to the sounds of letters and sight words.

Idea #2: On days that Coach Gilbert does not have any ISS students, he could work with Juan one-on-one.

I’ve grown to love this kid and would be thrilled to see him learn to read and write before he graduates high school with nothing more than a measly certificate of completion. Can we help him?

In speaking with Mrs. Jerald, she said that Juan was denied the opportunity to do either of the suggestions that were made in the email. She explained that she simply had to step in on her own (as Mrs. Flowers had done years before) and spend her planning time with Juan working on her subject area of the test. Because of this, combined with the fact that Juan’s test was read aloud to him, Juan almost passed the History portion for this year. My thoughts changed. As I looked back down at the scores thinking about what almost passing a test must mean to a kid who can’t read or write, I too welled up with pride for his almost passing the test.

**Drawing Cars**

Rather than comment any further on his graduation exam scores, I tried to transition back to interview questions. I noticed the scribbles on the sides of Juan’s exam scores. He could make really good letters that looked like the fancy lettering of a tattoo. He had obviously written
on the results while in another class. I have never been quite sure why human nature is to “doodle” while on the phone, listening to a lecture, or in church, but I have graded enough papers in the last six years to know that it happens a lot. I remembered that Juan had always been a creative fellow. This sparked me to ask him if he still drew. I remember him drawing me several pictures in 8th grade, often involving cars or Mexican flags… or if I was lucky, a car painted like a Mexican flag.

There was always a fury of flames billowing out of the tail pipes of these low-riding muscle cars, and as an art teacher as well, I could vouch for the fact that they were always really well drawn and perfectly to scale. Research suggests that humans have a need to connect through various forms of communication, and for students like Juan with low literacy skills, drawing became an outlet in which he could express himself (Deasy, 2002). Drawing is a form of communication and while struggling students often feel embarrassed to share their writing in class, students feel confident to share a drawing or artistic rendering of some sort (Deasy, 2002).

“Juan, I see that you still draw. These letters are good! Like a tattoo, you know?” I watched him seemingly blush.

“Yes, I like to draw…for a long time it was all I could do in American school.”

Pretending to Read

Juan went on.

“I drew a lot in school because when I first came to Whitesboro, it was hard, mainly because I couldn’t read or write or understand English. Being unable to read is difficult because it makes you so bored at times.”

I asked Juan more questions about being unable to read as an El and newcomer. Many ELs report being bored when immersed in a different language other than their own (Cohen,
I asked about what it was like not being able to read and progress further in school. He expanded on the topic, and from his nonverbal cues, it did not seem to be a touchy subject for Juan in the least.

“In the fourth grade, the other kids in class could all read. There was a time in the day, where everyone would take out their books and read independently. I would try to draw, but sometimes my teacher would think I was playing and make me put up the drawings.”

What many teachers assume is a student playing is often times a student mind learning (Beers, 2003). For struggling students like Juan, often times the only level of class activity in which students can participate in are the simplest most childish ones (Beers, 2003). Research suggests that teachers must consider why a student is not active in the high-level class activities, and is only participating in the simpler ones like drawing (Beers, 2003). Drawing for a teacher is actually filling an intrinsic desire within a student to produce something during class time like everyone else (Beers, 2003).

“So how did you occupy your time in school when everyone else was reading,” I asked.

My teachers kept giving me Spanish books. They thought I could read them, I guess. In order to please them, I would sit behind the books and pretend to read. The teachers didn’t understand that I couldn’t read Spanish either, so they seemed happy when I pretended. I couldn’t read what the other kids were reading, so I just smiled and nodded and looked at the pictures.

ELs have great coping mechanisms and for Juan, pretending to read was one of them (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004). Juan was actually so good at hiding his illiteracy, that many of his peers are unaware of his inabilities. In preparing for this study, I first considered interviewing Juan’s peers, but soon realized that would not work. For one reason, I did not want to ever cause Juan any embarrassment, and for the second reason, I didn’t want to blow his cover as an undercover illiterate who disguises as a reader each day (Beers, 2003).
The Tennis Ball of Shame

I remember where Juan sat in my class vividly. I remember this because when Juan was in my class in 8th grade, unable to read or write, just sitting in class listening to the crazy White woman talk about Edgar Allan Poe and gerunds, Juan sat in the left corner of the room underneath the American flag. We play this game in my class with a tennis ball when we are reading out loud. A student will read a section of the text, then chooses who reads next by throwing them the tennis ball. Although it would seem a silly game, research shows that reading for fun dramatically drops off for boys when they get in middle school (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). I have found that incorporating a ball, believe it or not, actually makes the boys want to participate (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997). Many boys have an inner desire to compete and be active, and reading is not exactly that type of activity. Yet, when reading incorporates a ball (something usually associated with competition, action, and play, the boys in class seem suddenly involved in the class readings (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997). Ridiculous as it sounds, the same boys who hate reading will enjoy reading for hours if I allow them to throw a ball across the heads of their peers in English class.

This game is the reason why I remember so vividly where Juan sat. Juan would pretend to read along with everyone, and he kept up the act because he so desperately wanted to be thrown the ball. Everyone knew Juan couldn’t read, and for the most part, he was never chosen. One day, however, a couple of mean boys picked up on the fact that Juan couldn’t read and thought it would be funny to pick on him. In class, school bullying plays out like this; struggling students, like many ELs and special education students are picked on for their not knowing answers and being ill-prepared to participate (Sprigs, 2007). Juan was a target for this bullying. I heard the little monster choose Juan’s name, and I knew he had done it not because he liked
Juan, but because he wanted to embarrass him. It seemed as if the ball stayed in the air for an hour, I did not know what would happen next.

Juan caught the ball and looked up with the biggest beaming smile on his face. I had not realized that his inability to read meant that he had not gotten the ball all year, and that like all the other kids, he had wanted to play. EL and inclusion students are often left out of whole class activities in a type of non-purposeful neglect by their teachers in attempt to spare them embarrassment (Rubinstein-Avilá, 2003). I was so nervous for him. I had no clue what he would do, and time stood still. I wanted someone in charge to do something, and I was so caught up and enthralled in what was happening to realize that the person in charge was me.

Juan looked down at his book and his happy face got serious like a five-year-old kid who is just learning to tie a shoe. He opened his mouth and let out a few sounds.

“Bah-cho-mehr…the…cat…”

“Ok—stop,” I interrupted, “pick who will read next and throw them the ball.” I said this trying not to even address the fact that Juan had completely made up a sentence of nonsense. Sprigs (2007) says that sometimes addressing an embarrassing situation with a student who has been bullied in class can work to further aggravate and draw attention to the issue. I noticed a few kids look up from their books and try to find another person in class to make eye contact with and laugh about Juan’s reading, but I quickly caught their glances with the do not even think about it teacher look, and no one was able to follow through with their ridicule.

As other kids were reading, I realized that my heart had been pounding out of my chest in nerve-wracking embarrassment for Juan. I was even sweating. As I looked back to the left corner of the room, there sat Juan, a sweet little brown kid under the American flag pretending to read. I thought about how most kids pretend to do things that they cannot. Pretending is a
creative exercise and healthy creative practice for the development of a student mind (McClare & Winsler, 2006). Some pretend to be race-car drivers, super heroes, or professional athletes, while Juan went on, as many ELs do... pretending to read as noted by Rubinstein-Avila (2003).

Gibberish

The strange thing about Juan, one of the factors that in fact led everyone to assume that he had a learning disability, was the fact that Juan did not really seem aware of his inability to read. While some students realize that they struggle, many learning disabled students are oblivious to their inabilities (Soltero, 2006).

Mrs. Trelore, a former English teacher said,

When I asked students to write a paragraph, by gosh- Juan would write me a paragraph. But while it was the equivalent length of a paragraph, it was nothing more than gibberish. It was a mass of letters. If I remember correctly, sometimes he would even leave spaces, and add punctuation, but it was meaningless. Yet at the same time, he didn’t seem to understand that he wasn’t writing.

Cursive writing. When I was a kid, I remember seeing my mother write in cursive. I thought cursive was the prettiest lettering on earth and I would try to mimic it. Before learning an advanced skill, students often pretend as if they already know how (McLare & Winsler, 2006). My father would bring me his old papers from work, and I would flip them over so I could draw on the back. Sitting at the kitchen table while mom was cooking, I would often try to write in cursive. I would draw squiggly lines that looked like cartoon ocean waves. I would stop for different words and add punctuation, and then ask my mother if she could read my letters. She never could, but she would always reassuringly add, “do not worry, you will learn.”

What I was too young to realize is that I did not know cursive (McLare & Winsler, 2006). There was a complex skill set to cursive that my mind did not understand. When I finally learned cursive in second grade, I understood that scalloped lines on a page is not cursive.
writing; there was a lot more to it than that. When my baby brother wrote me a letter in pretend cursive, like I had done before, my seven-year-old self laughed at how immature it was for him to think his cave drawings of water actually had meaning, though perhaps they did to him. I would think to myself the opposite of what my mother had said about me: he will never learn.

**Coping Mechanisms**

One of his former teachers, Mrs. Evans said, “Juan got credit for doing things, so his grades were never as low as they really should have been. Sometimes if I was giving a homework grade and he attempted it, I would give him an A… after all, he tried so hard.”

As it turns out, scores for doing things such as writing the appropriate amount, filling in blanks, and always turning things in kept Juan’s head above water many times. There is actually a significant amount of literature to support the fact that teachers, like Juan’s, often give higher scores or passing grades to students who have otherwise exemplary work ethic (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). His good behavior and prompt work were actually great coping mechanisms for his being illiterate. Juan told me in one interview that he had passed many tests on books based solely on the pictures or the audio. Juan’s coping mechanisms didn’t stop there. Many ELs mask their learning and literacy deficiencies by turning things in on time, doing the required amount, and having good conduct in class (Soltero, 2006).

One of his math teachers, Mrs. Rockton said, “He was notoriously smiling and pretending to understand, rather than asking questions, I never knew he was having a problems until it was too late.” Things like pretending to read and never asking for help actually hindered the process of his learning in school, because it hid his disabilities and problems for so long (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003).
Statements like these, by one of his former teachers, Mrs. Evans are echoed in the literature (Soltero, 2006; Rubinstein-Avila, 2003; Yates & Ortiz, 1998).

Juan was such a good kid. He was never a behavior problem and he always had what he needed for classes...he could pay attention and answer questions about things that were taught in class rather well. One of the only holes in his education was his ability to read and write, and although it seems as if that’s a biggie, in the world of education, there are many other ways to assess a student’s learning. Juan could slide under the radar very well...To be honest, I was quite shocked when I first saw his inability to read and write. He’s such a fantastic kid, I couldn’t believe how something that huge had slid by me. He could definitely pull the wool over your eyes and make you think that he didn’t need the help that he so desperately did.

The Wool on his Eyes

The reality is that Juan is not manipulative. He was not trying to fool people into thinking he could do more than he could. Like I did with cursive writing as a kid, he really did not even understand the premise of reading and writing enough to know that he was not doing it (McLare & Winsler, 2006). Through slowly unraveling the data throughout the study, I began to realize that in essence, he was never pulling the wool over anyone’s eyes but his own. Through my interviews with Juan, I am sure the reader will come to the same conclusion as I did; Juan does not know enough about reading and writing to understand how far off he truly is.

Can Juan Read Today?

Soon after I made my final decision to study Juan for my dissertation topic, I began pitching the idea to others. I told the premise of my study to anyone and everyone who would listen. My dissertation chair was the first person to ask me the question that had begged to be asked by everyone who has heard even a snippet from the details of Juan’s journey. I can see her deeply caring eyes, as she leaned towards me over her desk in her office. After I finished explaining the details of what I knew from Juan’s battle with literacy and academics, her eyes begged as if I were holding onto the last five minutes of a movie she’d been watching.
“Well?” She said intensely, looking through me, enthralled in Juan’s story, as if I were not even in the room. “Can Juan read today?” I was pleased to see her eagerness for Juan’s literacy growth and she didn’t even know him, but that’s in her personality. She has a desire to know and a care for students, so naturally she accepted when I asked if she would be my guide in this study.

Later, my committee of five professors whose opinions and thoughts I was eager to hear after presenting my research proposal, all looked at me and begged the same question:

One said, “Well, I’ll ask it…Can Juan read and write today?”

Another echoed, “I know! I can’t wait to find out where he is today.”

One of the committee members who was out of the country at a conference, even finished up his email to me after reading my proposal by posing the same question: “Excellent job, just a few tweaks to be made here and there. Please don’t forget to explain to the reader whether or not Juan can read today- trust me, they’ll want to know.”

Yet, no one wanted to know how Juan turned out more than I did.

Sea Urchins

I once had a biology professor for an undergraduate class that was working on her dissertation while teaching my class. She came into the lab one morning and seemed really overworked and even her hair and clothes seemed a bit disheveled.

“I had a nightmare about sea urchins last night,” she told us.

As it turns out, her dissertation was all about sea urchins. In her dream, she was in the process of data collecting and something she had done to the sea urchins made them all die. She continued by saying that if something like that really happened in her study, it would make her
entire research worthless. At the time I thought to myself, you are a crazy woman. How old are you? 30? Quit going to school like a normal human being and chill out.

Needless to say, after writing an insanely long dissertation proposal for my study of Juan, I had a nightmare about him.

Just like my wild-eyed biology professor had done, I began freaking out about the idea that my study could fall apart at a moment’s notice. I really took a chance by studying Juan. I had not seen or heard from him since the 8th grade. In speaking with his father, I learned that Juan had not only moved school systems (from Whitesboro to Haywood), but that he had moved out and was now living with an uncle. By my approximations, Juan was 18 years old. I had nightmares that Juan had dropped out of school. I had dreams in which he declined to participate in a study like this. I thought he could be all aloof and distant now, and think that taking the time to be studied is immature and beneath him. For all I knew, he was in a gang, with tattoo sleeves and a hateful attitude toward the people he’d once known when he was young and naïve like his 8th grade English teacher.

Yet those were just fearful dreams and Juan did not disappoint. The first time I met with Juan to discuss the study, he looked exactly the same. He was still bright-eyed and innocent. He came around the corner at his school and hugged me with that same ferocious kindness he’d always had. Throughout my first day of interviews, I got updates on what Juan’s life is like today. He is an 18-year-old Junior and is still in school. This was a pleasing and heartwarming surprise.

“My uncle says I can get good jobs if I graduate.” He said with pride.

Juan was more than happy to participate in my study of his education, in fact, he was delighted. “I think my story will help other people,” he insisted. Although older now, he still
possesses a child-like eagerness to please, is incredibly polite, and has a happy-go-lucky attitude about life in general.

**The Moment of Truth**

Over a six-month span of time, I was allowed to interview Juan, nearly once a month at school and was allowed to use entire school days. I visited Haywood High School throughout several months, and the school was incredibly obliging to work with my needs. In this time that I got to know Juan, he never ceased to amaze me. Juan could talk. I always had certain questions that were meant to guide the conversations (Denzin, 1989), but as I became more involved in the stories and the tales that Juan was effortlessly delivering, Juan’s life became to me, like a favorite new soap opera. I began to ask spur of the moment questions like, “Oh really? What was that like?” Although I was supposed to be taking notes, sometimes I would just sit back and enjoy the moment. He was honestly entertaining, and not in a poor Juan way, but in a let me have your autograph sort of way. Sometimes I caught myself hankering for popcorn and a coke as he revealed the stories of his life (Payne, 2005). Children of poverty often thrive on entertainment in any form they can get it (Payne, 2005). Entertainment relieves a person of the pain of the real world and story-telling can transport a person to another world (Payne, 2005). Throughout the interviews, I became increasingly impressed with Juan’s speaking skills and his positive outlook on life was an absolute mystery of intrigue.

It was time to find out if Juan could read. I had procrastinated long enough, and what I had seen from him, thus far, made me extremely optimistic about what I would find in regards to his literacy growth since I had known him in 8th grade.

“Ok Juan, we’ve already discussed your troubles with reading and writing in the 8th grade, but how are you doing today? Can you read and write today?”
“Um . . . It’s getting better, because I can read better than I used to. I can read kinda better.”

“Really?” I said with excitement. He used the word “better.” That was a good sign. I was eager to know exactly what he meant by that.

“Let’s find out a little more about this,” I told him. “There are people who are really, really, good readers and people who can’t read at all. Where would you say you fall?”

“Um,” he had to think about it. “I would say I’m in the middle.”

“Well- that’s good!” I said. “Back when I knew you, in 8th grade, you could not read or write at all.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I can just still only read little words, though,” he said, trying to belittle his skills. “I can’t read big words.”

I was used to this idea. Many of my students over the years said they didn’t know how to read big words when in reality they really could. Many students do not like the challenge of reading new vocabulary or higher grade-level texts and find it easier or more comfortable to reader beginner books (Beers, 2003). I looked around the room to find some text so that Juan could demonstrate to me how well he was able to read. For all of our interview sessions, we would meet in the counselor’s office, so there was nothing to read but a few hokey inspirational posters on the wall. I spotted a calendar.

“Can you read that word?” I was pointing to the month of June. I was so excited to hear him read, that I could hardly contain myself.

“Juh-juh-July?” He sounded out the word and looked up to me to see if he had gotten it right. Meanwhile, I was crying inside.
“No…that one is not July, but it is a month that starts with a J. Want to take another stab at it?” I asked.

“June,” He questioned loudly as if he knew he had gotten it right.

“Yes! That’s it! Good job.” He was guessing. He knew what sound it each letter made, but he could not put it together. In late literacy development, many students begin guessing at words rather than sounding them out because they are too embarrassed too read the words aloud (Percell-Gates, 1995). When a student guesses a word correctly, he or she fools the teacher into believing they have actually read the word, when in reality, it was given away by context clues (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). In fact, if he had have guessed it right the first time, I would have been fooled myself. He was such a smart kid. How could he have progressed so little in his literacy skills all these years?

Respect

I spotted a poster on the wall that said Respect is not a gift, you have to earn it. I asked him to read it for me. I felt that having him read the calendar actually gave him twelve choices and that the motivational poster actually would allow me to see what he could do.

“Reh-reh-spr-represent is not a jah-ft jaft, you have to eh-eh-,” I interrupted him.

“Sound it out. That’s a long e because it has a vowel beside it.” I am a secondary literature and language arts educator talking to an 18-year-old like a child. Not only do secondary teachers, like myself, feel ill equipped to teach basic reading skills, but secondary teachers also shy away from literacy instruction because it seems to belittle the student (Beers, 2003). I suddenly felt I was being extraordinarily condescending towards him by breaking it down. It felt so demeaning to help a kid that old read (Beers, 2003). But Juan, unlike most kids,
was happy to be helped. He finally got out the last word and asked me with a huge smile if he had gotten it right.

I explained to him that he had missed three words, but that he got the rest correct. Like a kid counting his candy, Juan then walked up to the poster and counted each word and did a little subtraction using his fingers.

“That means I got six words correct,” he asked me. I nodded to let him know that he had the math right and he stepped back and looked adoringly at the poster in front of him as if he’d just painted the Mona Lisa.

It was a silly poster; it may have even had a big, orange cartoon cat on it, but he was so intensely proud of it that I knew he did not read like that often. What I had asked of Juan that day might have been a demonstration of the very pinnacle of his learning and literacy achievement at the ripe age of 18. Yet he was still in school attempting to sound out words, read, write, and participate each day. While much of the literature surrounding ELs and struggling literacy students does agree with Juan’s scenario, he also debunks much of it by way of his eagerness to learn (Pappamihiel, 2002). He turned back to me to pose a question.

“What was that word again?” He pointed to the word respect, and I told him. “Oh,” he turned his head and squinted at the word. “Respect,” I heard him whisper to himself as he mouthed through the letters and sounds slowly.

Juan has earned my respect; no doubt about it. He tries harder than any student I have ever known, and while there are not mounds of research to back this fact up, each of Juan’s teachers say this fact is inarguable. He deserves respect for having stayed in school for so long, experiencing so much heartache along the way. While I can report that Juan can read much better than before, he still can’t read much more than kindergartners can. On the upside, he is a
good person, he tries his best, and he is an exemplary student in every other aspect. I was not at all disappointed by what I found out about the person, Juan Estrella today. The answer to *can Juan read today* is not a definite “no,” but it is not a great report. While my research found that even at age 18, he is unable to read, the miracle of the matter is that he’s never given up trying.

**Texting**

I asked Juan what has helped him the most when it came to his literacy skills and he gave a rather surprising and unexpected answer.

“I know it sounds silly, but texting my girlfriend has really helped me learn how to read and write better. In fact, I sent a text to my dad the other day and told him I loved him. He didn’t even believe it was me! He said, ‘Son, I didn’t know you could write like that!’ He was pretty proud of me.”

He unwaveringly said that texting helped him with his reading and writing skills. As many studies have suggested, students learn best when they are provoked to learn and find value in what they are learning (Gee, 2006). The interviews with Juan, his parents, and teachers revealed that Juan learned best when he was eager to learn because it was fun (Gee, 2006).

“I used to teach him through games…he seemed to like that,” Mrs. Kelly said remembering the work she did with Juan back when he was in 6th grade.

“I do love games,” Juan told me after being questioned about the way he enjoys learning the most. “Mrs. Kelly used to try to guess the answer before I could figure it out, she made everything competitive, and I enjoyed that.”

When learning is wrapped up in gaming and competition, it gives students a drive to win and as a result to learn (Gee, 2006). Texting on his phone was incredibly engaging for Juan much like a game.
He said, “I want to talk to my girlfriend, and if I need to write her back, I can’t always have someone over my shoulder texting and reading for me. At first, I was lost, but the abbreviations help me.” Although texting creates a shorthand that many researchers have written off as “erosive” of student grammar skills (Maltais, 2012), it has also strangely been linked to student benefits (Maltais, 2012). Juan experienced the latter.

Juan began to show me his phone. He texted some abbreviations and told me what they meant. I acted as if I was learning these for the first time although they are very common place for anyone who frequently uses text messaging. He wrote WRUD on his phone. “This is how you ask someone, What are you doing?” He was so proud to have a language in which he could express himself. This short hand lingo for teens had managed to sink in to his mind, while standard American English had remained elusive for years. He was thrilled to have the ability to communicate in written form on his own. I found the literature in regards to texting and its link to literacy and learning to be a sea of contradictions (Kim & Kamil, 2004). While many feel it hinders grammar skills and overall English writing skills, others feel that any exposure to reading and writing for students throughout the day does more good than harm (Drouin & Davis, 2009).

I asked him other questions about what texting had done for him. He said that he finally felt he was able to write notes and that was the greatest feeling, not only to write someone, but to understand without help from anyone else what someone was trying to convey to him. Being that Juan has the literacy skills of a young child, I looked towards literature that might support my findings that texting had helped, rather than hindered Juan’s literacy. A study on children from birth to eight years old demonstrated the effective nature of digital devices and communication for young literacy learners (Marsh, 2005). Marsh (2005) reveals that shorthand is actually a benefit and useful communication for early literacy learners. It spurs kids to want to
learn more and advance their skills as readers and writers when they see how it can be put to use (Marsh, 2005). Although secondary teachers find text lingo to be deteriorative to reading and writing skills, for students like Juan, it can actually help (Drouin & Davis, 2009).

Juan took his phone and tapped out the letters “ILU” on the screen of his phone and smiled. He turned it to me and said, “See this? This means I love you. It is the greatest feeling in the world to be able to write this to my girlfriend and she writes it back to me like this “ILU2.” He was so excited, and for the first time, he had a written form of communication. The excitement I saw in his eyes was the look of learning. He was experiencing literacy. Although it was not standard American English, spelled correctly, or grammatically accurate, he was transmitting a message, and others were able to understand it (Drouin & Davis, 2009). The look in his eyes was the look of freedom. I was reminded of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1998) in which he speaks of literacy as a liberating freedom. Many EL students have struggled so long with language acquisition that they feel empowered when finally gaining literacy skills and I saw it in Juan’s zeal for texting that day (Moore & Cunningham, 2006).

After this particularly eye-opening interview with Juan, I went back to Whitesboro and resumed teaching. As I walked through my school building, I noticed the signs that said *no texting*. Teachers were notorious for saying, *If I see your phone, it is mine.* The policy for students at Whitesboro for students and their phones is a zero tolerance offense. But what about kids like Juan? Since “…adolescents enjoy using technology for leisure literacy activities, writing text messages and emails, listening to songs, surfing the Web, and so forth” (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007, p.7), why not capitalize on these benefits with second language learners? (Kim & Kamil, 2004).
After signing all the appropriate paperwork for both the IRB and FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) requirements, I was allowed to have access to Juan's old educational records. I found myself strangely eager to delve in. I had allowed my imagination to run wild assuming that the papers in his educational files would somehow unlock the answer to his problems with literacy and learning. Like a cheesy depiction of a lawyer from an episode of *Law and Order*, I thought I would flash my badge, demand of the secretary to "pull the file," and allow my keen senses and deductive reasoning to allow me to solve the case of the missing literacy skills.

Alas, it was not as easy as figuring out that it was *Cornel Mustard in the hallway with the candlestick*. Rather it seemed that looking at these documents there was no person, place, or institution of which to place and or narrow the blame. After closely analyzing the documents in his file, the only conclusion I was left with was the idea that Juan's disservices in education were an odd mixture of no one's fault and everyone's fault. Since he had transferred to another school, Juan's educational documents left at the Whitesboro school system were referred to as his *dead file*. This term could no better sum up what was actually enclosed. The distinctive learning curve one would hope to see in yearly progress through testing scores and the typical blips on the radar that signify the life and growth of a student were not revealed in Juan’s file. Juan’s learning curve seemed to appear more like a flat line rather than the healthy blips and beats of success. If his file could be summed up in a noise, it was one long and heart stopping tone of educational stagnancy.
The Swim Bladder

I was once on a deep-sea fishing trip, a catch and release type of venture for fun. I vividly remember the fight and tenacity of a particularly wily pink snapper. After receiving stomach bruises from reeling him in, steadying the rod against my torso with each drag, I pulled him up and took a picture. I let him off the hook and tossed him back into the water and watched him swim away like all the others I had caught that day, but this one was not like the others. The fish swam downward about two feet into the blue, and then floated back to the top. He wiggled down again, but only made it about a foot and was pulled to the top again very quickly. Something had happened in the course of removing the hook that had punctured his swim bladder. This accidental puncture is what caused him to fill with air and imitate a floatation device, rather than swim like his innate fish desire was driving him to do.

Watching him attempt to swim into the abyss, just to be pulled up again was sickening and cruel. I did not mean for it to happen, and it was breaking my heart to know I had done this to him. I did not really understand why this fish was reacting so different to the normal protocol of catch and release, and my not knowing how to fix the mistake was causing him to suffer. My fellow anglers seemed not to care quite so much and told me it was time to move on to the next spot. As our boat drove off, I could not help but think of that little snapper floating on top of the water, swimming circles on the surface unlike the other fish. He was doomed to spend the remainder of his life unable to go deeper. The salty mist stung my eyes but I kept them fixed on that spot of pink in the sea of blue. As we cut through the water, I watched the little fellow grow smaller and smaller. Due to the amount of fish I caught that day, I received applause for being a great fisherman. Not only was I praised by others, but I am allowed to go on fishing, never
learning from my mistakes, or ever finding out what went wrong. I just simply hope to never leave behind another fish behind like that, endlessly treading water and getting nowhere.

**Treading Water**

Juan's file revealed he had been treading water for quite sometime. His standardized testing information from 4th grade up until 10th grade was in his Whitesboro file. This file included SAT (Stanford Achievement Test) scores, ARMT (Alabama Reading and Math Test) scores, and his ACCESS (A test for measuring English Language Proficiency in conjunction with the WIDA consortium) scores. After reading every document closely, I had hoped to have an "aha moment," instead, I heard crickets. These papers revealed, of course, that Juan was behind grade level. While his oral speaking and listening skills were almost on grade level, his literacy skills sunk his overall scores in every other category. It seemed as if he were two people in one. This underscored the literature in my research that many budding ELs have social capabilities far above their academic language and literacy abilities in English (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). While many ELs report feeling pressed beyond what they are capable due to teachers misunderstanding their literacy skills based upon their social skills, Juan’s scenario seemed to be void of that particular mislabeling (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

I decided to visit Mr. Luna, the EL teacher during Juan’s middle school days. I was hoping he could help me decode some of the testing information during his interview session. When speaking with Mr. Luna about Juan, one statement he made seemed to stick with me and continuously spark questions. For some reason, Mr. Luna, unlike all the other teachers, had a difficult time recalling who Juan was.
“I apologize for saying so, but from the name alone, I do not remember Juan Estrella. He sounds familiar, but his story is much like the story of other students I have had through the years. The struggles sound so similar.”

As a teacher, I too know what it is like to forget a name, or pass a student outside of school and it never registers in my mind that they were a former student of mine. However, what I realized was that every other teacher interviewed knew and/or remembered Juan except for Mr. Luna.

Some teachers like Mrs. Chase even went so far in their interviews as to say, “How could anyone forget? His case was so severe, so atypical, and heart wrenching…I don’t think he’ll ever be forgotten.”

Yet, to Mr. Luna, the EL teacher, Juan’s story was literally one of many. I found this rather interesting and asked questions about how similar Juan’s story is to others he has encountered in the EL program. I brought along a yearbook and opened a page with Juan’s smiling, beaming grin and pushed the book over to Mr. Luna.

“Oh, yes. I remember now.” He went on, “Ok…looking back, now, I do remember Juan’s situation. The thing that harmed him in school is one of the things I find most harmful for any EL; it is this notion of passing them through each grade with a 60.”

The rules concerning ELs state that if a student is trying and giving their best effort in classes, they must not be held back due to not meeting the standards (Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991). This moving a students from grade to grade, without passing is called social promotion by most researchers (Leckrone & Griffith, 2006).
Mr. Luna added, “That needs to be looked at.” He went on to describe that as an EL teacher, he was instructed by administrators to go into teacher grade books and manually change failing EL student averages to passing grades at the end of each grading period. He explained:

While it sounds like sketchy behavior, this is actually what the state mandates that we do. We can only fail students whom we can document haven’t attempted the work…For so many students, like Juan, they end up being passed from year to year, grade to grade, without learning. While I realize this idea was initially meant to help ELs, I feel like it is in many ways hindering their education.

A critical look at these statements suggests that Mr. Luna had made an incredible understatement. Socially promoting mainly Hispanic ELs and not holding them to the same bar of accountability as other students could easily be appear to be the authority handpicking a group in society as a ready-made pool of workers. Disempowered laborers can never really pull out of the oppression of low paying jobs without literacy skills needed to read and write. As Freire (2000) advocates, the issues that hold oppressed people back from achieving a better life and advancement to better their lives, are the very literacy skills they do not have.

Yet, Mr. Luna did not even begin to touch on the side of critical analysis. Instead, he quickly changed the subject as he looked at Juan’s scores. He told me that what the ACCESS scores revealed is that Juan’s language is merely a “survival” skill and less of a formal language (Thomas & Collier, 1995). As well as he does in the social portions of his tests, it is clear that has no grasp of either English or Spanish in written form. Again, this agrees with literature about EL language acquisition and teacher expectations (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoo, 2005).

“I would venture to say if you spoke to Juan, he would be speaking a very choppy Spanglish.” He flipped through Juan’s dead file.
Mr. Luna shook his head as if he was a bit baffled. “Remarkably, these test scores show little to no academic improvement in Juan's test scores from 4th through 10th grade. While the idea of staying stagnant within a school system for so long seems impossible to most, I see it frequently in my position.”

I kept wondering how a student like Juan could not soak up an education like sponge to some degree. Juan’s file was a "Dead File." What these records revealed was a kid who had been swimming in circles atop the surface level of the water unable to move into deeper water.

**The Three Oddities**

I found three oddities in Juan’s file: a teacher sign-in sheet, a letter written by Mr. Luna and a referral to special education. The sign-in sheet was a sheet that was located in the front of Juan’s file. It struck me as both odd and important to Juan’s educational story that the sign-in list requires signatures of anyone and everyone who has ever looked at the contents in the file. They are to sign and date. There were two signatures: Mrs. Flowers and Mrs. Robin. Mrs. Flowers said she looked into it to shed some light on Juan’s situation while Mrs. Robin merely stated, “I had to look up his address one time.” I began wondering why a student with so many red flags raised by teachers had never had his documents pulled more than twice. I began to assume that although teachers sometimes feel sorry for a student, they don’t always act upon these emotions or go out of their way to help either (Freire, 2005).

The second and third oddities were related to Mr. Luna, so I inquired about the two.

I gave Mr. Luna the letter. “There was a letter in 2007, which you personally inserted into Juan's file…Could you elaborate and expand on this matter?”

In summary, the letter basically wrapped up Juan’s struggles in school and stated what interventions and steps had been made to assist Juan. Mr. Luna’s letter said that Juan’s academic
teachers at the elementary school tried to get Juan tested for special education and it was deemed (by Mrs. White) that his issues were with language and that he had no need for special education services.

The letter said “all the teachers (and the administration) had thought that Juan would get in the program. When he didn’t, all we knew to do was keep Juan in the EL program. He has continued to remain stagnant in growth and academic achievement since then.” Mr. Luna told me the following:

I wrote the letter in an attempt to vocalize the fact that Juan needed special services. In attempt, I was rinsing my hands of the dirty situation…something needed to be done, and nothing was being done. I am an EL teacher in one of the biggest Hispanic communities in the state of Alabama- I am expected to speak up for them. That’s why I wrote the letter. I wanted people to know on down the line, when they looked into Juan’s file that I tried to help and found that my hands were tied.

Along with this letter was a letter of referral for special education from the year that I had Juan in 8th grade. I remember signing it. It was signed by myself, Mr. Manning (principal), Mr. Luna, the counselor, and even the assistant superintendent.

As Mr. Luna looked at the paper that was titled Referral for Additional Services, he said “What Juan had was a learning disability…and probably a rather severe one at that. This was yet another attempt to get him help.”

He went on to say that Juan was unlike all the other newcomers he had taught. He admitted that he understood slow language acquisition but that Juan’s issue was forgetting what he learned. Like pushing the reset button on a watch or clock, Juan’s learning would seemingly fall out of his head from time to time. Mr. Luna knew that Juan needed special education.

“He was denied again after this attempt,” stated Mr. Luna with a look of frustration. “It’s been my experience that at one point, there was no sharing of students between the EL and
Special Education system. NCLB changed this slightly, but it’s still very difficult. It’s tough to rule out that language barriers aren’t the reason a student is having a difficult time learning.”

As stated in the literature review (Chapter II of this study), structured systems of funding like special education and EL services do not like sharing kids (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006). Studies show that when it comes to minorities, it is tough to place them into special education for fear of mislabeling a student (Rueda Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). EL students are typically twice as difficult to test into exceptional education because many are minorities with language barriers (Salzman, 2005).

Mr. Luna said, “No doubt, it’s tough for kids in Juan’s situation.”

**Strange Spots of Normal**

Traveling year after year through documentation of Juan’s past schooling and standardized tests and report cards, I felt as if I were on that same fishing boat, seeing Juan fading into the distance: helpless and left behind. But I did find small, brief glimpses of life. Among some of the most “normal” documents were the following: a request for his documents to be sent to his new school system, a copy of a birth certificate from Mexico, and a certificate of immunization. Alas, I did find one above average score that stood out above the rest. Juan not only passed his physical fitness test in 2009, but I am proud to report that Juan scored above average on the number of pull-ups performed in his PE class that year.

I thought about my husband, a tall and lanky high school kid who in his younger years resembled the body type of “Shaggy” from *Scooby Doo*. I have heard him reminisce on more than one occasion that he was always embarrassed in PE when it came time to do pull-ups. He had a whole lot of height and a rather long torso to pull up with those teenage arms and adolescent strength. Then I thought of Juan: a little bitty fellow with tiny arms, short in stature,
and a kid with piles and piles of untapped youthful energy. As the scores showed, he demonstrated an above average skill level in the pull-up department, and as I thought about his grin coming up past his hands to rest on the bar, and his peers and PE coach counting aloud on the ground below him, I could not help but think to myself Go Juan!

**An Inside Outsider**

Mr. Luna’s interview not only demonstrated that Juan’s story is very similar to many others ELs in Whitesboro schools, but it also showcased and highlighted other interesting tidbits in regards to race relations in Southern schooling. Mr. Luna is a Hispanic American who has lived the U.S. since his childhood. He has been teaching ELs for nearly 12 years.

“I have to be careful of what I say and do working for the school system, yet still being a Hispanic male in Alabama.”

When I asked him to expand on this, he grew rather uncomfortable and said,

I live in two worlds each day. At home, I am a member of the Hispanic community and disagree strongly with the laws in our state…but at school, I feel as if I am a white, middle class employee of the state. I am living in the middle, and it’s tough for me to speak about such things.

In Whitesboro, Mr. Luna mentioned being a type of inside/outside, fitting in with both White and Brown communities, yet truly feeling that he fits in neither world completely.
CHAPTER VIII:

SOUTHERN POLITICS

Whitesboro is a conservative town to say the least. It has been my experience that there is a tremendously powerful bandwagon notion when it comes to politics in the South. Whitesboro is not far from where I grew up and every town within two hours of my hometown is in the Bible belt. It is for faith reasons that politics are swayed by Southern conservatism, and it seems that these views spring forth out of the majority of voting individuals in the state.

Politics irk me. In politics it seems that one must chose a side based on the lesser evil. I have never understood the incongruent nature of how the issues got so divided. Why must I dislike gays to fight for the life of an unborn fetus? Why must I wave my right to owning a gun to join the side that believes everyone should be able to have health care? It is all very confusing, and often times people simply pull the same lever as the people before them. In the South it seems that lever is mostly located on the right.

The issue of illegal immigration is somehow wrapped up and intermingled in politics. Due to political views, many Hispanic ELs in town have a negative stigma. One member of the community had this to say of the racial stigma surrounding Whitesboro:

People sit at home at night and watch television and news commentary about how illegals are not paying taxes, soaking up medical expenses, and should be sent back to Mexico. Then, throughout the day, people in town see, talk to, and work with Hispanics...they murmur about what they’ve seen on T.V. and their views about illegal citizens just begin spewing out of them because they are so ingrained.

There was a time, before I taught in Whitesboro, that I latched on to the Southern political view of immigration. By no means did I ever protest in the streets of Montgomery with
signs chanting “send em’ back where they came from,” but I did do what most Southerners do, I silently judged them and blamed my distaste on my patriotism. It was not until later that I realized if you truly love America, then you understand why everyone wants to live here. Before my job in Whitesboro, I too, called the entire Hispanic population “Mexicans” because I simply did not know any better. I just believed what my peers, my community, and my religious affiliation seemed to tell me.

But after coming to know my students, every stereotype was debunked and I truly began loving my students for their unique and multifaceted cultures. I quickly learned that not all Hispanics are ELs and that many of them are not from Mexico. They are from various other places from South America, Puerto Rico, and even Cuba. After falling in love with the kids, my job, and the townspeople, I grew proud. I was quick to alert people to the fact that I was working in Whitesboro. Each time I mentioned the town or the job, however, I got the same reaction. From sweet old blue haired ladies at church to my brother’s redneck friends from the local junior college, everyone had the same strange reaction.

“Oh you work in Whitesboro? I’ll bet you have a lot of Mexicans.”

I have never really known exactly what that is supposed to mean, but it was always irritating and said with a sorrowful tone. People from Whitesboro would all agree that they have heard this comment because it is constantly brought up by outsiders, and it is consistently off-putting.

Sometimes I want to say, “I do. I do have a lot of Mexicans. I also have a lot of Guatemalans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and plain ol’ White kids. You got a problem with it?” But I never say that because they are but parrots, repeating the phraseology of others around them. They know not what they do.
A Stinky Sponge

I am not confrontational with people, not because it does not need to be said, but because people who make comments like that do not seem to know any better. More times than not, people that make these comments have never known a person with brown skin, they have never been to a country where English is not the primary language, and they’re simply repeating what they have heard another person say. They are living in the South, a place with an ugly past, and have accidentally soaked up some of the leftover dirty Southern culture around them like a sponge. The sociocultural theorist in me spurs my heart to believe that people are but mere products of their culture and societal norms. After all, people are but “cultural informants” of their surroundings (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 12).

I must confess, that until I actually began working with the Hispanic community on a daily basis, my thoughts about the world were very tainted by the Southern culture around me, as well. When pushed, I was like a sponge seeping out an ugly discoloration of a huge Southern spill called racism. As the data from interviews reveals, however, the community members in Whitesboro assumed it to be rinsed out long ago, but the remnants left behind have left a stink growing hidden in the minds of many Southern community members. As my interviews reveal, the lasting residue affects El kids (McLaren & Torres, 1999).

Whitesboro Community Interviews

I decided to interview several community members in Whitesboro about the Whitesboro school system, racial relations in the community, and the Southern influence of politics. After interviewing Juan, his family, teachers, and also looking into his school records, I felt that looking at the community would give me a final sociocultural puzzle piece to examine (Denzin, 1989). A person’s surrounding culture influences who they are so I chose to focus on the
community of Whitesboro rather than the school for a change (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Although eight different community members were interviewed of various ethnicities, genders, and ages, overwhelmingly, their responses were all eerily similar in regards to how Whitesboro reacts to ELs and the ever-growing population of Hispanics in town. Community members did not always report their own reactions to the questions, but they instead gave answers about what they have picked up from living within the community.

Collectively, from the individuals interviewed, Whitesboro citizens seem to pick and choose when they do and do not accept the Hispanic population. An overall negative light was cast upon the Hispanics by the White community members. They felt that in regards to “community upkeep” the Hispanic population brought down the town’s property values. The White citizens in town attribute the rougher areas in town with low prices in housing and the steady decline of the community. The Hispanic population was blamed for not aesthetically keeping up their homes to the expectations of others in the community. White members of the community felt that the Hispanics knew nothing of “curb appeal” and “overall property maintenance.”

In general, the section of town populated by White citizens felt that since the influx of Hispanic individuals into the community, there has been a decline in the housing market and prestige of Whitesboro. While people in other towns across America seem to be facing the same issues in the housing market due to the U.S. recession, Whitesboro is choosing to place the blame elsewhere. In conjunction with these concerns was the idea that White citizens found the Whitesboro School System’s high ethnic population and diversity to be driving people out of town. The supposed decline of Whitesboro schools was another reason they felt property values were in decline.
In contrast to that, various community members specifically pointed out that “fat cat” rental agencies and rental home owners were to blame for the decline. Some reported that the Hispanic population brought in much more money to Whitesboro than ever before. Home owners who owned rental properties were seen as crooked because the established community viewed the neglect of these properties.

Mrs. Shannon had the following comments in regards to the Whitesboro population:

The Hispanic population is greatly taken advantage of in Whitesboro, especially by rental owners. Illegal citizens really have no rights as renters. They don't speak up for themselves and hope to fall under the radar of immigration police, so they don't complain about the price of rent or their lazy landlords. They live in slums because they can't speak up for themselves.

The interviews revealed what seemed to be two very distinct and opposing viewpoints in Whitesboro: the Hispanic voice and the White established citizenry’s voice. Using words from community member interviews, the “high society, White upper middle class types” generally look down on the Hispanic population for over running the town with Spanish businesses and dilapidated homes. Meanwhile the Hispanic voices I interviewed were rather quiet about these matters. They simply reported feeling judged by Whites in their society in general.

Although Juan revealed that he had never experienced racism personally or at school, his father said that he had. Racism is much easier to spot as an adult (Lynman & Figgins, 2005). He gave this story as an example of lasting racisms in town.

At a clothing store in Whitesboro, the Estrella family was shopping for some deals on school clothing. While his mother was trying on a dress, Mr. Estrella watched his three little children play outside the dressing room. Juan, just a little boy at the time, was laughing and playing with the glass mirror, endlessly occupied with his own reflection. He sneezed and didn’t cover his mouth and the mirror was dirty because of this accident. Mr. Estrella said that the look from the workers in the store said it all. They were talking right in front of them, assuming that the Estrella’s couldn't understand the English being spoken.
Despite what may have been lost in translation, a condescending tone of disapproval was understood across the cultures. Mr. Estrella said, “The worker commenting on the kids had said they wished we would leave, so I knocked on the door of my wife’s dressing room and told her we needed to go.” He went on to say, “My money is hard earned. I don’t want to give my business to people like them.” He added that people generally roll their eyes at his not knowing English. “They get frustrated when I can’t read the debit card screen, or try to ask a question in English, because it’s not that good. So, I usually carry someone with me that speaks English. The boys speak it well- so they help me.”

All in all, both Hispanic and White community members that I interviewed live in Whitesboro as happy members of the community. They reported feeling a part of the community and that overall race relations were experiences of positive encounters. Yet, much like a sick person who claims to be healthy, the symptoms reported suggest an underlying ailment.

**Look at Us Now**

Each year I teach a unit on the civil rights movement. My English students read literature that spans across newspaper articles from the 1960s, short stories of the Underground Railroad, Langston Hughes poetry, and quotes from Maya Angelou. I always have my students watch excerpts of the old Pepsi sponsored production of the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary. This is a collection of real interviews and news footage from the Civil Rights movement based the year after schools were desegregated.

My students always have the same reaction to the video: *Why were Blacks and Whites so scared of going to school together? Look at us now!*

Each year my students laugh at the past because our room is made up of White, Brown, and Black kids who seem to get along seamlessly in school. They shrug off the scenes depicted
in the movie as “long ago.” They are blind to the fact that racisms are still very much alive and well their Southern community of Whitesboro.

**White Flight**

In my interview with Mrs. Kelly, a community member and administrator in the Whitesboro school system, she introduced me to the term *White Flight,* which I had never heard of before.

As an administrator, I am aware of many people who have left our school system for no other reason than to avoid having their students attend school with Hispanics. With such a high Hispanic population, I think the community has the idea that our school is focusing on educating Els rather than white kids. When people don’t like the school system, property values in town decline. Because of the low socioeconomic population associated with the chicken plants, we often lose students to schools with little or no diverse populations. Parents move and enroll their white kids in schools with other white kids. They call this white flight. They flock to be with one another.

Mrs. Kelly’s statement agrees with studies of this strange, educational phenomenon (Fairlie, 2000). She went on to say that the Whitesboro school system has to constantly combat the idea that its schools are “less than” other schools because of student demographics (Fairlie, 2000).

“It’s a constant struggle to keep our upper class White kids in the system. White people rush out when other cultures encroach upon their own, and they leave to congregate with other White communities…it’s a sad reality in the world of education” (Fairlie, 2000). This extreme drive to get away from high minority populations in public schools forces families to fork over thousands of dollars to private school tuitions and even forces some families to move residences to get their student zoned for a school district they desire for their children (Fairlie, 2000).

**Teach to the Top**

I was once asked to serve on the superintendent’s advisory committee. Perhaps I am still on this committee, as I am pretty sure we only met once. The one time that we actually did meet,
I had a revelation. It was in that meeting that I came to understand the old cliché about committees: “A camel is a horse designed by a committee.” Indeed, strange, odd, and deformed versions of reality can spring forth from committee planning.

The superintendent alerted us to the fact that our school system was getting a bad reputation among our academically elite (and predominantly White) students and that something must be done to keep these students from leaving as studies report many school systems do (Renzulli, 2005). Although my immediate thought was, let them leave; everyone else around the long, mahogany table was taken aback at the thought of losing the top tier of students. The superintendent stated with pride his solution to the problem. “In order to keep our best and brightest students in our system, Whitesboro is adopting a new motto: Teach to the Top.”

My mouth instantly hung agape in astonishment over the horrible idea and I looked around the table as if everyone else would be just as appalled as I was. However, contrary to my surmise, the other teachers were doing the traditional smile and nod of approval. I thought perhaps I was misunderstanding the idea, so I listened intently to the explanation of this new mission statement. As a district, we were going to effectively hone in on the education of our upper academic tier of students.

The Eyes on the Prize video flashed through my mind in that moment. Angry parents, teachers, and board members in Boston schools in the 1960s were scared of changes in the racial population of students within their school systems, yet Whitesboro masked their anger as care for the ones leaving. What was happening in Whitesboro was no different. I had so many questions and never voiced them: Why was Whitesboro so desperate to hang on to the students who were motivated by racial prejudices to leave in the first place? If teachers were now
supposed to teach to the top, what did that imply about our students at the bottom? Teach to the Top seems to leave, given the title, some students behind.

I had always pictured my classroom as this beautiful animal: made of a multicultural conglomeration of various languages and cultures infused and coexisting together. I had thought of Whitesboro as unique people teaching various cultures of learners with special needs and talents. However, this committee was transforming my animal, a wild and natural animal of which to be proud, into a monster: an awkward, ugly, and insidiously, dim-witted monster.

The Monster Created by Committee

In the months to come, after the committee overwhelmingly voted to accept the Teach to the Top slogan, Whitesboro schools began to change. Like many others in the recession, the Whitesboro schools were experiencing financial cutbacks. When funds began running low in the school system (a system with a 40% Hispanic population, a massive EL student community, and parents who speak Spanish only), it was interesting to see what did and did not receive budget cuts within the system. The Bible says, “Where one spends his money, there also is his heart” (Matthew 6:21), so where is the heart of the Whitesboro public school district administration? How it spends its funds reveals a great deal of who they are, which students they care for, and which students they do not.

With our new Teach to the Top slogan, budget cuts left some areas unaffected. That year, Whitesboro added violin lessons and strings class for elementary students. There was also a foreign language option for kindergarteners. While this would seem an opportune chance for Whitesboro students to learn Spanish (a rather useful language to know in Whitesboro with Mexican grocery stores, restaurants, businesses, and the high El population of students), the system opted to teach the kids Mandarin Chinese. Mandarin Chinese, I was told, is a prestigious
language for international business: extremely cultured. I have since researched and never in the
history of Whitesboro has there ever been a student whose home language is Mandarin. To say
that this choice was an “ill-fit” for our community would be an understatement.

My middle school English classes were affected as well. It was during that year of
budget cuts that our system became fixated on “honors” classes and “advanced” study. Teachers
were told to press our students and constantly challenge the top. I could not help but notice that
my advanced classes looked like the bottom of a bowl of cereal; a few bits of color, but for the
most part, the scene was a sea of white.

Whitesboro was fishing for the upper echelon of students and they were using the right
bait. In fact, the adorable little students playing violins are pictured atop the school’s website,
now. The little tikes are playing for a crowd at the Fine Arts Center. It appears very affluent,
cultured, and sends the vibe that Whitesboro is indeed the place to be. A mere click to visit the
system website causes one’s pinky to just lift right off of the mouse at the cultured sophistication
of it all.

It’s cute, no doubt. People love the pageantry of children doing educated and mature
things. With a drop of a curtain, our superintendent and the committee had performed a David
Copperfield-like magic trick rather quickly. In a blink of an eye, Whitesboro appeared a
prestigious learning institute. There was applause from the community. However, even
Copperfield would admit that there are no magicians, only illusionists. And through the process,
pageantry, and funding required to create this illusion, funds were taken from other places, areas
that were considered of less value and prestige.
Magic Lost

That same year, the middle school lost its EL teacher. Mr. Luna had to move to the high school to teach English, which left the middle school with one interpreter for over 600 students, many of whose parents speak Spanish only. My friend, the poor overworked interpreter for this study, Emilio Paz, was supposed to be attending classes with EL students all day, but he never did. He was in the office almost all day interpreting for parent-teacher conferences, interpreting for discipline issues, and re-typing and translating documents to go home. He touched every document in the school from a science teacher’s syllabus to a note informing parents about a school dance. He was overworked and, because of this, we had no help for new comers in the classroom. Struggling students, like Juan, who spoke little to no English were placed into classes alone to sink or swim.

The Best Intentions

These are observations of a school system attempting to deal with a reputation. As with any interpretation, this tale of the community in which Juan was schooled, Whitesboro, has many sides including many people with good intentions. In six years working there, I have found the intentions, in general, of Whitesboro’s community members are true and rightly motivated, but the outcome is often unanticipated and rather scary at times. I say without reservation that the people of Whitesboro care for children and have good hearts. They were simply never educated in how to effectively teach English learners. From my experience and the data gleaned from interviews it is clear that the teachers honestly care for their students in Whitesboro and the administrators truly want to help. However, the execution of helping these struggling EL students has been a long and winding road of trial and error. Adversely, errors in education often have repercussions that affect students...like Juan. The town of Whitesboro allowed me to study
them in an effort to move forward and change for the better. This speaks volumes to the character of the educators and administrators there. They have expressed that they want to find out what they are doing wrong and fix the problems.

In retrospect, there is nothing wrong with “teaching to the top” if the middle and bottom are not neglected in the process. That slogan was a futile stab at mending a fence in a broken pasture that had been leaking sheep for years. By spreading the *Teach to the Top* slogan, I do not think the superintendent nor the members of the committee actually ever meant to say *teach a few really well and leave the rest behind*. However myopic it was, there were educational changes made because of the motto that likely affected students’ learning both positively and negatively. While now there is a five-year-old somewhere in the world who can play *Hot Cross Buns* on the viola, there is also an EL student who sat in a history class with no translator like Charlie Brown listening to the incomprehensible, muffled tones of an adult. Oscar Wilde once said, “It is with the best intentions that the worst work is done.” And so it was with Whitesboro that year.

**The Colorblind Lie**

I asked Juan if he had ever experienced racism in schools and he quickly said, “No.” I had already poised my pencil for what I thought would be a rather lengthy and juicy report of neglect or hate words, but Juan actually said that he had never experienced racism in school at all. However, some studies suggest kids that experience racism in schools rarely identify or label it as such (Cummins, 2000).

“Teachers and kids don’t see people for their color, and I like that.” He was completely sincere about this sentiment. To my surprise, many of the teachers I interviewed agreed with this notion as well.

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“Teachers have a great way of seeing kids for who they are and not what they are. A
dentist’s kid, a struggling reader, an illegal citizen, a special needs student, or an academically
advanced student, they are all the same in our eyes.” Well, over half of the people I interviewed
made comments that led you to believe that colorblindness was the best help to kids of color in
schools. Ladson-Billings (1997) states that many teachers have a misguided view of what it
takes to educate minorities.

A Tired Notion

My husband, an elementary teacher at an inner city Birmingham school is the person
whom I typically bounce ideas off of, and he bounces them right back to me. After reading him
a section of my writing one morning on our back porch, he gave me the stink eye looking over
the rim of his coffee cup.

In a rather annoyed tone, he said, “Please don’t tell me that the bottom line of your entire
research is to relay the message that all teachers should be colorblind . . . Gag.” He rolls his
eyes.

That’s such a tired notion, and it’s also incredibly naïve. People who claim to be
colorblind tirelessly feign care and all it does is teach people to neglect differences. It’s
2012, people. We are supposed to be embracing differences, not pretending they don’t
exist and mowing them all down in attempt to see everyone as equal. Colorblindness is a
disservice to students.

He takes a sip of his coffee, and adds, “It’s such an 80s idea.” Clearly, Ladson-Billings would
agree (1997).

My husband’s distaste for this word comes from an interesting afternoon of professional
development. A strange workshop facilitator asked my husband and his colleagues to stand in a
line. They were to take a step forward if they felt they were truly colorblind and did not
recognize their students by color. Everyone but Blake, my husband, stepped forward. Other
teachers looked back at him with disdain and he quickly grew uncomfortable with his choice. As the facilitator thanked him for his honesty, he never got to explain himself and why he felt that colorblindness is so inappropriate to use in response to culturally diverse classroom needs. Thus, he explains it to me on a regular basis to account for his not speaking his mind that day. In looking at educational research on multicultural education, I found that my husband was right. Colorblindness was actually once touted as the cure all for teaching diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 2005). However, multiculturalism has actually replaced this notion in the eyes of most modern researchers (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Educational scholars agree with Blake’s notion that colorblind teachers are not the answer. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1997) wrote, “If teachers pretend not to see students’ racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs” (p. 33). She calls colorblindness a “dysconscious racism” (p. 31). Claiming to be colorblind as a teacher is an “uncritical habit of the mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 31-32).

Any teacher who claims to be colorblind is doing a disservice to his or her students by neglecting their race, “one of the most salient features of the child’s identity” (Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 32). Ties to students’ unique backgrounds and helping them find pride in who they are should show up in curricular planning and instruction rather than to see all students the same (Ladson-Billings, 1997). We do not teach kids to mask who they are; we teach them to love and respect who they are. In using this logic, multiculturalism is essentially the opposite notion of colorblindness (McLarren & Torres, 1999). While colorblindness still sounds good, it is a bygone notion that merely sounded good under the guise of equality.
After researching the facts about the notion of colorblind teachers, I told my husband “No, this is not about needing colorblind teachers.” If anything, this study has revealed that teachers who claim to be colorblind are not the answer. Instead, Juan’s story points towards a need for culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1997). Culturally relevant pedagogy is about celebrating student diversity, reveling in the multicultural dynamics in class, and demonstrating and modeling pride in the unique cultures of your student population (Gay, 2010). Colorblindness overlooks the beauty of diversity and might actually be the cause of many minorities who have reported feeling that in order to fit into American schools, they must act like White students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Brandon, 2003). If teachers are not embracing multicultural inclusively and culturally relevant pedagogy, they will revert to their default setting which is to treat all students as if they are just like them (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Oozing Happy

As the months passed, visiting once a month, I grew sad knowing this would be my final interview session and conversation with Juan. Spring was coming to a close and the heat came into Alabama with a heavy hand. On the way to Juan’s school, I reflected on our meetings as I realized I would have to rely on the air conditioner and could no longer ride with the windows down. I smiled thinking of how I would miss seeing him and also had to chuckle to myself as I realized there the certain ease about our meetings had caused me to began thinking of the sessions as less work and more play. Juan is a great young person with an infectious personality, and being around someone oozing that much enthusiasm and happiness is like treating the soul to a spa day.

It was this final interview day when Juan was talking about illegally coming to America and what it was like to be a Mexican-American in today’s world, a question popped into my
head. This was not an interview protocol question; neither am I sure that it has anything to do with Juan’s education, but it would definitely reveal a lot about Juan from a social and cultural perspective (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). With the topic of illegal immigration being a politically hot button item at the moment with elections coming up and state legislation ever wavering on the matter (Soltero, 2006), I decided to ask Juan a question about politics.

**Mr. President**

“Juan, if you could tell the President one thing…” I began to rephrase the question, “What I mean is, if you could speak out on behalf of EL students or Hispanics in the South, what would you say? What might you tell the president?”

I had been interviewing many other people between the times that I visited and spoke with Juan including his teachers, community members, and even Juan’s father. I had come to know the regular protocol of interviews and timing. I had supposed by posing a question to Juan as serious as the one I had given him, he would need time. But he answered quickly, as he always did, and it made me assume that he had actually given some thought to the topic already.

I would tell the president that being an illegal, or having family members that are illegal, is tough. I would tell him to close his eyes and imagine himself in our shoes. Imagine being at home with your family and the cops come in and burst in the door and knock you on the floor and arrest you in front of your family and the little kids. They take you away and send you back, but who is left to take care of the little kids? I say that Black, White, and Brown people have problems all the same, colors of skin and speaking different languages shouldn’t be the cause of people’s problems.

My mouth was agape. To think, there I was high and mighty White woman finishing the paper that would award me the right to a doctoral degree in philosophy, all the while Juan had much more important things to say. Any problem I had ever faced seemed suddenly unimportant, and began to fade away. I thought of my family sitting in the living room laughing, or around the dining room table enjoying one another’s company, and my father, the most
honorable man I know to be thrown to the floor like a criminal in front of my eyes. Juan’s take on “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes” is a great message to send the president and the world.

**Little Atticus Finch**

During the summer of my dissertation, I found myself in the thick of a writing rut. I was a bit burnt out, and my husband would spontaneously take me on little day dates to help take my mind off the demands of writing so that I could return to it later, refreshed and revived. In early July, my husband whisked me away to the Alabama Theatre that was located downtown to watch the classic Harper Lee book turned movie *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. While movies and books have always had the magic ability to take my mind elsewhere, this Sunday matinee was different. At first, as I watched the scenes roll on, the naive spirit and spunk of Scout reminded me of Juan. As I watch the events in the story strike the same cords within my heart that they always have, the harmony began to change tune within me. I was thinking far less of White and Black relations in the past and focusing far more on the current White and Brown relationships of the here and now. I thought back to conversations I had with Juan. I saw him less as the loud and excitable Scout and began to see him much more as the ever pulled-together Atticus Finch.

On the porch swing, Atticus tells his daughter in both the book and movie versions that, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view- until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (Lee, 1960, p. 30). That is exactly the message Juan wanted to tell the president. Atticus backs down from petty fist fights in the story while never backing down to fight for what is right (Lee, 1960). Juan mentioned in an interview that he hated fights and would not even watch one.
As an English teacher and literature connoisseur, I began seeing Juan’s story as an archetypical one. Juan’s journey in education was one of the classic situational archetypes: innate wisdom vs. educated stupidity (Harrison, 2003). The definition of this scenario is played out when a character exhibits wisdom and understanding intuitively as opposed to those supposedly in charge. Although my study could arguably have been viewed as a blame game for victims like Juan, his tale morphed into an entirely different study altogether (Harrison, 2003). Juan’s life story was heroic, one of intelligence, wise choices, and brilliant advice. Without intent, his words put me in my place through my on reflections on more than one occasion. Secretly hoping that the repercussions of this study would lead to various publications and establish me as a shiny heroine, I found myself a peripheral character to Juan’s most wholesome and pristine persona (Harrison, 2003). In comparison, I was even Machiavellian at times.

As the credits began to roll, and everyone applauded the old film, it hit me that Juan is, indeed, Atticus Finch. His focus is on family, doing what is right, and he remains rather positive despite his losses in life (Lee, 1960). To say the least, it was a rather eye-opening day at the cinema.

**In the Pew**

As my study of Juan drew to a close, I increasingly felt the need to put myself in Juan’s shoes, in the shoes of all EL students. I wanted to feel what it is like to be in an institution surrounded by no one who speaks the same language, so I went to one of the many Spanish speaking churches in Whitesboro. Emilio Paz’s father is actually a preacher at the largest Spanish-speaking Baptist church in town and Emilio works there as youth minister, so I attended with him one Sunday. As I walked in the church, I passed the youth group and it seemed as if the entire teenage population was a current or former student of mine.
As I sat through the sermon, understanding a mere two out of every ten words that were spoken, I mentally clung to the few bits that I could identify. In the earliest forms of language acquisition this is frequently the impulse of many ELs as well (Cohen, 2007). The feeling I had was a small glimpse of what my EL students feel as they are tossed into my English classroom every day for nine months a year; lost and frantically grasping onto the few words or body language that they can comprehend (Nagy & Scott, 2000). I attempted to listen and felt some success as I picked out a few Spanish words, but for the most part I was lost. A common feeling of students immersed in English classrooms is the feeling of being lost (Soloano-Flores, 2008).

As my mind began to drift, I felt deep empathy for ELs and how confused and unintelligent a person feels when they cannot speak the language (Nagy & Scott, 2000). Furthermore, I was an outsider and unable to move forward because I was incapable of making my thoughts known nor understand the words of those around me (Cummins, 2000). Feeling like an outsider is how Juan and others like him must have felt in school on a daily basis (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). It was gut wrenching to know that while I had sat through the service voluntarily and with no test afterward that EL students in our schools are not as lucky. Studies of EL students report the feeling of incredible amounts of pressure to perform as the other kids do (Pappamihiel, 2002). I can vouch for the fact that language barriers cause a person to feel rather helpless and dim.

I did identify some biblical names throughout the service that I recognized. After hearing several minutes of preaching, I spotted the name “Moses.” As that was the only word I could identify, my thoughts faded away from the sermon once again. I attempted to fill in the blanks about what I knew of Moses, while Emilio’s father was preaching away emphatically. As
I thought back to the tales of Moses that I had known since childhood, I began to see obvious parallels between his life and Juan’s. I came to conclude that Juan is indeed a Moses-like figure.

**Moses**

Moses, whose true mother in attempt to save him, sent him to a different world in hopes that he would be better off, succeed, prosper there, and be safe (just as Juan’s parents brought him to America). A prestigious woman of Egypt happened upon him as she was going about her daily business and raised him up out of the basket from the bushes, took a close look into his eyes and fell in love. She took him in as her own (just as Mrs. Flowers did). He was raised as a prince by this woman, yet never truly found his role or “fit” into the place that his mother had dreamed would be his haven for growth and achievement (likewise, Juan never fit into American schooling).

After returning to his Jewish ancestry, Moses played an intricate role in leading his people out of captivity, but not without help. At first glance, he seemed a man with no special skills, and the Bible reveals that he had a handicap: a speech impediment. Because of this, Moses doubted that his life could ever be used to help his people because of this crippling speech disorder (like Juan’s crippling illiteracy). Many viewed him as incapable. However, as is the case in most Bible tales, the Lord provided a way to bring his plan to fruition. God sent Aaron to speak for Moses, to interpret and go alongside him to tell his story to Pharaoh (the person in power) in order to create a change for the Jews.

**The Promised Land**

Perhaps these comparisons are contrived, but I see Juan as Moses. The name Moses means “teacher” in Arabic. Juan’s story is meant to teach the world more about the process of educating EL students. Moses had a journey riddled with atypical and outlandish moments in
history: both miracles and adversity that many other people have and will never experience. Juan’s ups and downs mimic these trials. As many individuals can identify with a piece of Moses’ tale, so can Juan’s tale be easily identifiable as well. Both Juan and Moses’ stories reveal a multitude of qualities and behaviors such as diligence, obedience, and integrity that can help in the journey of education and life. The story of Moses has been told so that others might learn from it and the plan is that Juan’s tale may also shed light on the educational future of ELs.

I see myself as Juan’s “Aaron.” My first name, in fact, is no stretch of this; the female version of “Aaron,” is Erin. Aaron played no intricate role and has never been touted as the man who led the Jews out of captivity, but he played a part. He was the mouthpiece of which Moses spoke. Moses is, no doubt, the main character and a hero figure for the Jews. Aaron was but a minor player, whom God used to assist Moses and his people out of captivity. Aaron told Moses’ tale and it led the Jews to a type of freedom that they needed. In the same way, perhaps in the way I have retold Juan’s educational journey, ELs, like Juan, may be led into educational freedom in the United States.

As the sermon drew to a close, a smirk came over my face as I noticed the familiarity of it all. The music softly faded in as Brother Paz, much like a Southern WASP (White Anglo-Saxon preacher), grew increasingly sincere. Through nonverbal cues, I gathered that he was opening the altar for prayer and commitment. This is how many sermons end in the South. Things need finality, even sermons. I thought about how sad it was that my study wouldn’t end with an answer, nor even offer a remedy to fix the problems discovered in the study. But remembering Moses’ journey, I found a certain solace about leaving the study as it is--an interpretative biography.
Moses wandered in the wilderness for years and he died without entering the Promised Land. In the same way, Juan came to America, the so-called “Land of Opportunity,” and never got the education he deserved. An interesting twist to the story of Moses is that he led the Israelites in the right direction, out of captivity, but never got out of the wilderness himself. He died in the wilderness, never reaching the Promised Land. To my dismay, Juan’s story unfortunately ends in his illiteracy. This study cannot help him, but the hope is that it may lead other English learners to never be overlooked, unheard, or mislabeled again, so that they may inherit literacy, which in American education is the Promised Land.
CHAPTER IX:

TODAY

Juan’s story is a historical glance back at what left him functionally illiterate in the 8th grade. While the majority of the study is a narrative form of retrospect, the research definitely lends itself to figure out what it means for today’s world. The following are interesting postscripts of data taken before, during, and after the interviews that give readers a better idea of life today for Whitesboro, Alabama, and Juan. The wider world of meaning for the field of education is addressed in Chapter X.

Whitesboro Today

I am proud to report that today Whitesboro is a different place. This study takes a historical look through the lens of Juan’s interpretative biography and follows him backward into this school system and the way in which he, an EL student, was moved through the school in a neglectful manner. Whitesboro was not prepared for the influx of EL students that moved quickly into their community; although they rolled with the punches and tried to adjust. They underwent years of trial and error with ELs to arrive today as one of the leaders in EL education in the state of Alabama.

Today, people actually come from other states and other school systems to see how ELs are taught in Whitesboro. They are exemplary, but it is because they have learned from their mistakes. It takes constructive criticism to produce growth in education, therefore this interpretative biography of the education of Juan aims to provide insights for other school systems as well. I am proud of the positive change that has been made by Whitesboro in the last
few years and feel honored that they would allow me to take a peek into the inner workings of their bumpy past.

**Alabama Today**

While Whitesboro has made such positive strides forward, I considered that the South, Alabama as a whole, must be changing and moving toward a better future for all learners. However, a conversation with a woman I recently met disturbed me and shook me out of a moment from Dr. King’s dream speech and landed me quickly into the real world. The woman introduced herself to me as Connie Saddler; she lives in a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. We met as fellow teachers, and when talking about my research, she began to chime in. I found it strange that she felt she could chime into my study as she looked to be the stereotypical, science teacher: bright-eyed, curly-hair, eager about learning and her students, and the main attribute—she was obviously a White woman who worked in a very predominant all-White school district.

In getting to know her, I heard of her tales as a biologist. She traveled around the world to various nations with her husband, a fellow scientist. Along the way, from orphanages, they adopted two boys, one from Pakistan and the other from Kazakhstan. She told me some tales of how malnourished they were when they were young and that teachers often use food in class as rewards and that her boys still associated food with something to fight for in order to live each day. She said there are many cultural misunderstandings that happen with her kids frequently in Southern schooling.

However, the piece that stuck with me, that I found to be most relevant to Juan’s story, is related to lasting racisms in the South. Below, I have paraphrased a story Connie told me about an incident on the playground involving one of her boys.
One day, I took my boys to the park. I told them to go play and make friends and one of them came back to me with a really confused look on his face.

He said, ‘Mom, am I a Mexican?’

‘What? No, son, you’re Pakistani.’ I got ill with him because he knew that; we talk about it all the time and want him to be proud of his heritage.

I asked him, ‘Why would you think that?’

And he replied, ‘I went to play with a little girl over there and she got up and left and said she wasn’t supposed to play or talk to Mexicans.’

However, mixed up this little girl was about the true racial identity of Connie’s son, the truth of the matter is underscored about what children are hearing from their parents: Mexicans are second-class citizens. Unlike the stories of my grandfather that can be written off as misguided, the fact that young children in Alabama are growing up with racist notions that mimic those from the pre-civil rights era is a disturbing reality about our world.

Juan Today

Juan is still living with his uncle and travels regularly to Whitesboro to visit his parents. He worked for his uncle over the summer and enjoys making money and riding around in what he calls “the big white boss truck.” Juan, his father, and his uncle all have legal citizenship status and say they will most likely stay in Alabama all their lives, having no fear of citizenship legalities.

“I love it here. Alabama has been good to me,” Juan replied after I asked him about living in the South. Yet having interpreted the data of his educational biography through a critical lens, I could not help but raise an eyebrow to this notion.
This fall, he returned to Haywood High School as a 19-year-old senior. Thinking back to typical hazing rituals and seniors who tease underclassmen, I smiled as I asked him, “How do you feel about being a senior this year? You will be in the oldest grade now... you might possibly even end up being the oldest kid in school- what will you do with all that power?”

He replied with a rather serious tone, as if correcting me, and proceeded to kindly correct my wrongly directed thinking once again.

Oh, Mrs. Gilchrist, I would never pick on a little kid. I will be kind to everyone, being a senior. I can use my power for good, and maybe by changing and being nice, I can make all the grades below me realize that being the oldest doesn’t mean that you have to bully the other kids...then, maybe, when those kids get older to be seniors like me, they will say ‘I will be nice to the little kids, like Juan was nice to me.’

In effect, Juan told me he will use his seniority to rule over the underclassmen with kindness.

This kind-hearted senior remains illiterate till this day. While several researchers have slightly varying definitions for the term illiterate, I borrow the most basic and widely accepted definition of the term. Illiterate is not having the ability to read, write, or comprehend textual meanings (Illiteracy, 2012). For every bit of kindness he has, unfortunately, this is a literacy scenario that warrants the classic cliché good guys finish last.

Juan of a Kind

Juan Estrella will turn 20 in January, the month after my graduation. When I learned of the two close events in our lives, I suggested a celebration.

“How about when you come back to school after Christmas, I will come back to school to visit you one day...I will give you a copy of our final product and bring you the lunch of your choice! How’s that sound? We could celebrate you being a senior, me graduating, and to your story being told!”

“I would love that!” He smiles with that child-like look of excitement.
I make notes about our little fiesta and smile about my random idea that seemed to work. He enjoyed this study just as much as I did. I think highly of myself as I realize that I may possibly have made a change and impacted in his life, simply by being in it as an enthusiastic proponent of his education. I was thrilled by this notion and I asked him, “Is there anything else you want me to bring that day?”

He thinks, but not for long. He has a light bulb moment and then he blurts out quickly, still eager with even the thought of it: “Could you bring Mrs. Flowers?”

I sigh and fall into a slump of defeat because I realize that Mrs. Flowers was in Juan’s life for Juan, and alas, I merely used him as a stepping stone along the way of my own educational journey.

“Sure,” I say, “I know she’d absolutely love to see you.” I jot this down so I will remember to ask her to come back with me in January. I think of how by simply being in his life, freely, with no ulterior motives, no one pushing, through no intervention, and no job description, Mrs. Flowers came into Juan’s life and selflessly helped him learn. I did not. The more I began to think of it, Mrs. Flowers positively affected Juan, and he positively affected me. If anyone had learned, grown, and been enhanced through the journey of this study, it was me. The rock that Mrs. Flowers threw into Juan’s education still had lasting ripples that were lingering on and have even managed to touch me today.

Since studying Juan, I have changed. I have now taken a new job elsewhere in the state. My new school system is 1% Hispanic, yet they have at least two people on staff at every school in the system that speaks Spanish. The supply and demand between my new system and Whitesboro seem hopelessly tangled. But because of Juan, I look at things differently, now. He has inspired me to look out for those in need and to help those who can’t speak up for
themselves; those whose voice is powerless; like a senior choosing to use his power over underclassmen for good. Thus for all the EL families who feel their children are being cheated in some way, perhaps this story will help shed some light on providing answers and insight toward a better educational journey of literacy for ELs in the future.

Juan tossed me a side hug on the way out of the counselor’s office at our last interview session.

“Twill see you at the fiesta!” He said with a smile. He got up and walked out; meanwhile, I sat down to my things and began typing up some notes for myself. I was so grateful that he had shared his stories with me. In my head I was repeating what I heard the various teachers interviewed in the last six months about Juan; I wish I could have done more. I wish I could have thought of some important way to end things with him, to say goodbye...to say thank you. I should have given him a gift card, or a handshake, or a thank you, at least. I was in the process of regretting my dumb, last minute party idea and when I heard the door creak open again, I looked up.

It was Juan. He leaned in with his body and stuck his head in, somehow wrapping this neck around the door like a human rubber band. He must not have liked the way we ended things either. Even he must have known that I should have said something more poignant, given him a copy of Oh the Places You’ll Go with a handwritten note inside, or suggested something better...

“Mrs. Gilchrist, I thought of one more thing I’d like for the party...” he said with a rather meek look.

“Sure! Name it and you’ve got it, bud,” I said with eagerness in my voice. Great! I would be able to get Juan something he had specifically requested. Perhaps this would remedy
my feeling of empty handedness. He had given me so much, and I felt I had given him nothing in return.

“Could my girlfriend come?” He asked me.

I smiled and nodded. This is Juan: the star, the English learner, the struggling student, the Mexican immigrant, the artist, the kind hearted, and the girl-crazy, little gentleman.

“Of course she can come,” I say. He smiled with graciousness and left quickly after that and I have not seen him since.

I look down to my computer and see the working title of my dissertation, a play on words of Juan’s educational tale of illiteracy: Juan of Many. The gist of this title was in reference to Juan’s story, his struggles, highs, and lows of literacy and language acquisition. His story would echo what many other ELs are experiencing in American schools, especially in the South. On the open document of the computer screen, I watched the cursor blinking beside the title, as if it were nudging me to realize the enormity and importance of Juan’s tale. Alone in the counselor’s office, I had a poignant flash of self-reflection that, like Juan, I will never forget. Although I had loved the title in the beginning, at that moment, after holistically researching this kid from every aspect of his learning that I possibly could, I deeply considered changing the title to Juan of a Kind.
CHAPTER X:
INTERPRETING THE BIOGRAPHY

The typical protocol of interpretive biographies allows the reader to interpret for themselves the final conclusion of the research study (Denzin, 1989). While I have chosen to abide by Denzin’s format, I also agree with others who deem research to be pointless without drawing together meaningful and useful information that contributes to knowledge regarding the phenomenon under study, in this case ELs and literacy (Barone, 2005). Therefore, I have chosen for Juan’s story to conclude with a basic summary of the findings that came from the research questions, and then I take a look forward to what these finding might mean for the field of literacy and EL education (Barone, 2005). These are my own interpretations from Juan’s story and given the nature of interpretive biographies it is not the only finale.

Denzin (1989) says that research must allow the reader to interpret meanings from the data and apply where applicable. In essence Juan’s story is a tree with many branches; his story casts a wide net in educational research where interpretations may be made and applied to situations that span not only ELs but include learning disabled students, immigrants, Hispanics, and struggling literacy students. In light of the aforementioned introduction, the final chapter reveals in a more traditional layout, some ways in which Juan’s story contributes to education, research, policy, and practice.

Summary of Answers to the Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study revolved around Juan’s inability to read or write in eighth grade. *I set out to find through sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts,* what
(if any) events, people, and experiences in Juan’s educational journey contributed to his state of illiteracy in eighth grade.

Other secondary questions addressed in the study were the following:

1.) What did or did not happen in Juan’s life for him to come to 8th grade with an inability to read or write? Set within sociocultural/sociopolitical contexts, what events, people, and experiences in Juan’s educational journey have contributed to his state of illiteracy in 8th grade;

2.) How do those who were part of Juan’s EL experience view the process of ELs and their acculturation into the schools of this southeastern US community; and

3.) Exploring both systemic/everyday routines as well as novel events, what factors influenced his literacy skills or lack thereof as an EL student in a Southern American school environment?

Looking holistically at Juan’s life through a six month span of time, interviewing his family, past teachers, community members from his town, looking into his past educational documents, and then actually meeting with Juan himself, I found that the data could best be represented in what seemed to help Juan and what seemed to hurt Juan along his educational journey, which unfortunately ends in functional illiteracy.

Barriers to Literacy: What Hurt Juan?

It was obvious through the unraveling of Juan’s story that various sociocultural influences were at play in the life of this EL. In a close analysis of Juan’s world and his life in U.S. schooling, numerous sociopolitical areas of intrigue were revealed.

Lasting race issues. Juan’s story revealed that there is still overwhelming and lasting racism in the South. As it was once pointed towards African Americans, and mainly focused on
White and Black relationships, it appears that from interviews with teachers, Juan’s family, and Whitesboro community members, that the brunt of racial tensions are now falling on Brown.

Rather than disappearing, it would seem that after White and Black tensions began to fade, the eye of racial scrutiny then fell upon the growing number of Hispanic and migrants working in the factories in the South. Findings from this study agree with others that suggest that Hispanic ELs do experience racisms (Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). Throughout the study community members report the racial tensions as “reminiscent” of Black/White relations. Now, with the new immigration laws in Alabama, some literature even suggests that this not only mimics, but parallels the mass Persecution of Jews in WWII (Arnoff & Ramsey, 2011).

While the research questions are answered at length throughout the interpretative biography, in summary, it appears that among members of the Whitesboro’s community there are underlying and continuing tension among the races living within the area. The tensions may exist due to immigration legislation, politics, or a lasting residue from a bygone age in the South and its segregation of races. White people rule the school board, make up the majority of teachers in Whitesboro, and in stark contrast, the voice of people of color is a muffled one (Nieto, 1999). Not particularly surprising, since Hispanic immigrants who don’t speak English, rarely feel comfortable standing up for their kids in a predominantly White ruled society (Verdugo, 2006).

**Teaching to the top.** The study suggests that mission statements and slogans like this from the Whitesboro school board effectively redirected fiscal and support resources to other programs which were oppressive in nature to EL education. The data gathered from interviews with community members, Juan’s father, teachers, and Juan suggests that Hispanic ELs were a group that largely went unheard in Whitesboro. With evidence from Hispanic community
members like Juan’s father, Mrs. Paz, Mr. Luna, and various others, it became clear that Whitesboro neglected the EL community and in most cases catered to the White Middle class students in an effort to prevent “white flight.”

The measures that the school took in order to prevent white students from attending other school systems was both astounding and aggressive in nature. Funding was siphoned out of EL resources and redirected into areas seen as “prestigious” according to the wealthy White class. This finding agrees with research that schools take drastic measures to hold on to families with money, and likewise associate that financial boost with White families (Fairlie, 2000). It further reveals the lower value placed on educating EL students underpinned by implicit racism which forms a nexus to findings that state EL students and their families don’t feel welcome at school, by the community, and school board (Renzulli, 2005).

**Colorblind teachers.** Teachers often claim to be colorblind in dealing with diversity in the classroom, but in doing so, they revert to a *default* and begin to treat everyone the same. While this would seem genuine at first, what Ladson-Billings (2005) advocates in multicultural research suggests that every student should be treated as an individual, each with their unique cultures and experiences. As Juan’s story points out, all EL students are not the same, in fact all students are unique to their personalities, races, ethnic backgrounds, and cultures. Their differences (cultural and otherwise) must be noted and addressed in order to best reach their needs as learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Juan’s story reveals that atypical students (like Juan, that do not fit into the mold), may often be overlooked by teachers (Gay, 2010). However, in Juan’s case, many teachers recognized his struggles and tried to ascertain appropriate support for him. Unfortunately they had little success in changing the status quo due to systemic policies that
seem so entrenched within the established institution called schooling that they are rarely challenged.

**Oppression and power.** Power has links to learning and education. There is power to in being a literate citizen, power in being able to choose to attend college or other career vocations, and power in being able to access what every other citizen has available to them. Without question, there is power and promise in achieving a public education. Unfortunately, Juan’s story reveals that immigrant Hispanic ELs in the South are often powerless or feel powerless when it comes to the education of their children, thus their children suffer because of this lack of advocacy (Freire, 2005).

Knowledge and learning in literacy are some of the easiest but most important steps to take in the process of liberation (Freire, 2000). Juan’s story shows that he was not held accountable to learn how to read and write, but was ushered through the system via social promotion. Juan was not held responsible for his literacy like the other kids, he was not accepted into special education like the other kids, and likewise never learned to read like the other kids. In essence, he was gently patted on the head for participation and moved along year after year. This system-wide policy speaks volumes about how the education of Hispanics within this school system is viewed and valued. As a result of having no voice or advocate and lack of challenges to the system, students like Juan are being educated for lives of menial labor. Menial labor is not used here in a pejorative sense; but given the current policies, actions, and situations presented in this work, students like Juan had no choice. It did not matter whether they learned or not, the educational system chose to socially promote him for effort not mastery. The educational system’s choice limits his opportunity to choose other vocations or careers if his illiteracy is not addressed.
In order to “effectively coordinate action in a society” language and literacy barriers must not exist (Ewert, 1991, p. 359). Language and literacy barriers both played an intricate role in Juan’s story. Juan’s voice, like the voice of others is stifled, he is disempowered with respect to his future due to his illiteracy. With a critical lens, this can be seen as an oppressive move to hold down particular groups in society and by withholding their education, in turn never allowing them to progress (Freire, 1989).

**Literacy Development: What Helped Juan?**

**Gaming and Competition.** Juan’s story agrees with literature that suggests that adolescent boys, and in many cases, all kids enjoy learning when it occurs in the form of “play” (Gee, 2006). In the interviews, Juan says he remembers trying his best to “beat” Mrs. Kelly, when she would review math problems with him, explaining that he “always wanted to win.” The competitive nature of students is an immediate urge and pressure from within that motivates students intrinsically (Marsh, 2005). The results of the study find Juan himself identifying that when he was involved in gaming or competition, he was engaged and had moments of growth and success.

**Texting.** Although Juan’s literacy development is limited, an unfortunate reality of the study, he did report experiencing a late-life literacy renaissance with the purchase of a phone plan that allowed texting. While Juan is still unable to read and write at a functional level, text lingo seemed to provide him with a system of signs and symbols that he could easily understand. The results and findings from the texting portion of the study reveal that Juan found texting a valuable way to communicate in written form. The use of texting though controversial, may have a place as a strategy for incorporation into teacher practice with struggling literacy students. Juan’s literacy skills grew tremendously while texting his peers, family, and his girlfriend. It is
Wertsch (1998) who said, “language exists in social milieu,” which means that the idea of learning for one’s self and choice in social situations, rather than being pushed through academics helps students to make the lasting connection (p. 51).

**Relationships and social connections.** The study revealed that Juan progressed when personally cared for by a teacher. The results of this research reiterate what has already been stated by previous literature that suggests one-on-one time is pivotal for learning, especially for students with special needs in class (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997). Juan clearly formed positive relationships with his teachers, his uncle, and grandfather. These people placed a central focus on the value of schooling and education. As a result of this one-on-one push, Juan was able to beat the odds in some ways; refuting the statistics about Hispanic dropout rates, drugs, and teenage sexual activity (CDC 2011). When wrapped up in a conversation over the phone or in a one-on-one reading lesson with Mrs. Flowers, it seemed that Juan learned best through a close connection with others. Relationships were important. Relationships with others not only caused him to stay in school, but promoted his desire to continue learning. Juan has stayed in school and stayed away from potentially harmful activities, violence, and lives a rather healthy teenage lifestyle.

**Suggestions for Policy**

While the research questions were addressed in a basic summary of what helped and hurt Juan along the way, the research lends itself to several positive and beneficial moves for policy makers. At the school board and community level and spanning outward to the much broader field of EL education and policy makers, Juan’s story was riddled with issues that call for more to be done to improve EL programs and EL students’ learning experiences.
**Being Mindful of Diversity**

When looking back on the study, two interview sessions seem to collide to form my first suggestion for policy. Looking back at the data, Mr. Paz and Mr. Luna both described Hispanics who work in U.S. education as “living in two separate worlds.” Likewise, Juan’s father, Mr. Estrella, described U.S. schools as unwelcoming for the Hispanic community. The implications for policy, here, suggest that schools should take advantage of people who are pivotal in both education and the Hispanic community. Having Hispanic community members could be used as an outreach to create a sense of comfort, ease, and trust between schooling and EL families; perhaps such actions could connect pieces of the diversity puzzle where there has previously been missing pieces. Schools should utilize and value the inside/outsiders like Mr. Paz and Mr. Luna and use them as liaisons who consult with Hispanics, EL students, and community members in effort to help them reach out to more diverse learners and create more balanced curricular experiences for all. Individuals working for the school system, who are also an integral part of the Hispanic community, should be given important roles within the educational system to bridge the diverse cultures and help navigate the differences to fill the gaps in EL relationships within the southern school culture.

With better relationships formed across the cultures, an easement could be created between parents, students, and the school system, which translates into higher academic achievement (Cummins, 2000). The policy suggestion is to change the focus on missions such as “Teach to the Top” and focus more on mission statements that address all students, from all backgrounds, striving to learn. Time and again, literature suggests that helping form better relationships with our learners and their families, promotes success in school (Bernhardt, 2005).
Ditch Social Promotion

Another suggestion for policy makers is directed towards a much wider group than just school boards. The issue of social promotion was addressed within the study by Mr. Luna. As an EL teacher, he seemed to think promoting EL students to the next grade level, without requiring anything other than participation, was a disservice to these students. Juan was passed from grade to grade, unable to read and write. There are laws that actually mandate that EL students (like Juan) who show effort in class, be passed on to the next grade level (Hing, 2011). ELs like all students need to have requirements to feel the urgency to learn, and if a student is not progressing in the EL system as they should be, special education services should ensue. Juan’s story points to the fact that EL and special education don’t easily share kids, and somehow, for kids like Juan, a connection must be made between the two programs, so that students like Juan don’t continue to be misplaced or not placed in programs that would assist his learning.

Suggestions for Practice

Juan’s story had various teachers through the years echoing the same sentiment, “I wish I could have done more.” Therefore, in looking back through the research, I feel it is necessary to bring forth ideas and options for teachers to use with EL, struggling literacy students, and even students with special needs. Howard (2006) wrote an article called *We can’t teach what we don’t know*, and this article paired with many others make helpful suggestions for White teachers who work in multiracial schools.

Multicultural Teachers

This study points out the fact that there is an obvious need for teachers to spend time getting to know the unique backgrounds of their students. Teachers should be excited about
using the many different cultural colors of the classroom as eagerly a child with a new box of crayons. Sadly, research findings report that teachers who claim to be colorblind are more likely to teach as if each student in his or her class is White (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The default setting is always reverting back to a teacher’s own cultural experiences, thus White teachers teach as if every student is White (Gay, 2010). It is important to focus on multicultural education rather than colorblindness and identity masking (Howard, 2006). To properly educate each child, teachers must not ignore the differences, but work to meet each child at that unique level (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004).

**Classroom Connections to Culture**

The story of Juan’s educational journey through literacy parallels literature that suggests that communities are not always prepared for ELs and teach them as they do all children, ignoring differences and teaching as if colorblind (Ladson-Billing, 1997). As the teachers reported in the study of Juan, EL students are many times a surprise to teachers and communities and they do not deal with the change in a positive manner (Arnoff & Ramsey, 2012). Juan and his family view Juan’s education as good, not great; while they don’t place full blame on the school, they still feel that more could have been done in order to help Juan succeed. Mr. Estrella said he did not feel welcome at the school, and many other EL parents from research states that they do feel overlooked (Grissom, 2004).

Schools do not always consider the working situations that exist for many EL parents and that limits their opportunities to influence their child’s education (Howard, 2006). EL parents feel they seldom have a say in their child’s education, and this is something that can be changed with thoughtful actions and cultural connections (Gay, 2010). By teachers reaching out to include, inform, and cater to all families the same, positive strides forward can be made to build
trust and form a close-knit community of diversity and strength for all learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Incorporation of Gaming and Technology Driven Interaction**

When I look back through Juan’s history in Southern American schooling, the teaching approaches and technological tools that most helped him to learn were based around two activities that are not typically embraced by classroom teachers: games and texting (Gee, 2006). As a teacher myself, I rarely leave time for games. As for texting, it has not been allowed in most classrooms due to cheating associations and misconduct (Drouin & Davis, 2009). But clearly Juan enjoyed games and texting, as most students do (Gee, 2006). This study provides evidence that through texting and games, literacy skills have an opportunity to grow. With the growth of literacy arises freedom (Freire, 2005).

Although once frowned upon, technology integration through the use of texting seems to be changing (Maltais, 2012). Once steadily reported by researchers as a *hindrance*, many are finding it to be helpful and beneficial for students (Silva, 2012). Texting offers students easy access to the language with few rules and much success (Edick, 2012). Teachers should not be so quick to assume that playing in class is not conducive to learning. Social interaction through playing games and other technology driven social interactions like texting may be the key to opening doors to literacy that have previously been locked for those like Juan. New research is pointing to the fact that teachers should begin embracing and promoting text messaging rather than nay saying and scrutinizing it (Silva, 2012).
Suggestions for Research

All throughout the interview process, I found interesting topics of study surrounding Juan’s learning. There were various prodding questions and themes that didn’t seem to fit into this study but would definitely lead to excellent discussion for further research in the future.

Illiteracy and Success

One of the possible research agenda is associated with literacy and the success of individuals who have poor literacy skills. Juan had amazing and above-average personal skills. He was kind hearted, good natured, cooperative, obeyed the rules, and had excellent work ethic; yet he could not read. It would be interesting to research and find out how failing attempts at literacy, as presented through formal education, play out in a person’s future. How do individuals like Juan, with little to no literacy skills compensate by using their “people skills” in various workplaces? How might one set of skills be more valued than the other in life?

Special Education and English Learner Programs

How different are the EL and special education intervention programs? What are the learning accommodations and/or modifications for a student who is in both? Although Juan was not admitted into special education, how exactly might he have learned more with an IEP and being labeled as an inclusion student rather than an EL? What are the reasons that the two programs did not work together? Do they provide similar interventions and methods of help or are they different? How was Juan’s brother admitted into special education, yet Juan never was?

Texting, Literacy, and Language Acquisition

As previously mentioned in the study, texting seemed to help Juan. There is little research on texting and the productivity of its use with EL students and struggling literacy learners (Drouin & Davis, 2009). While most texting studies are on adult, regular, and
mainstream educated students, it seems that texting at home, for social reasons, may provoke kids to learn at higher levels. Without a doubt, further studies on the matter of ELs, text messaging, and literacy would be an interesting and useful future research agenda (Gee, 2006).

**Open Ending**

Although I have given various definitions of an interpretive biography, in its most basic form, the term reveals itself in its very name (Denzin, 1989). This is Juan’s educational biography; it is left up to the reader to make meaning and apply those meanings where needed in the world (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Although the re-telling of Juan’s story may not have come up with a solution to a problem, it’s poignant because “the problems of one person mimic all” (Denzin, 1989, p. 50).

There is no doubt that a person cannot be “summed up” in a mere six month study (Denzin, 1989, p. 59). However, from what I gathered and learned in that time, I have attempted to gather and create meaning for the reader, myself, and the field of education as reflectively and honestly as the process would allow (Denzin, 1989, p. 69). Studying one person’s “educational life history” for me was an honor, and I have tried to depict his journey with intellectual honesty and integrity. Juan’s educational journey is a life in context to learn from (Cole & Knowles, 2001). It is a “living illustration of social and cultural conditions,” and from this, education must listen to and see what’s happening in the lives of our everyday learners (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 12). Juan’s story is one of many and yet unique, set within a Southern education system. While Juan slipped through the cracks, studying his past can assist educators and administrators find the gaps and patch or fix them so that others may achieve literacy as a promise of American education.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Guiding Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

Community Interview Protocol

(INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO CHURCH MEMBERS, NEIGHBORS, AND OR CITIZENS OF THE SURROUNDING AREA AND CULTURE)

1.) Do you remember your first experiences with ELs in the community and entering American schools?

2.) What are your experiences and feelings about schools in town in relation to non-English speakers? Explain.

3.) What are your thoughts regarding the notion that there are EL students in Alabama schools unable to read and write in 8th grade? Explain your feelings and emotions, comments and questions.

4.) In your opinion, how might not being able to read in 8th grade affect a student?

5.) When (if anytime) have you witnessed an injustice in school (regarding learning)? (Prompts: Did you wish to speak out on your behalf? What provoked this? If you witnessed and did not speak out - What prevented you to keep quiet?)

6.) In your own opinion, what are ELs issues with learning? Explain these issues (both in and out of the classroom).

7.) How do you think the school, community, and surrounding area view the Hispanic population and their students in school? Explain.

8.) Is there anything else you would like to add in response or to add to the information we have discussed or in any matters of the study?

Teacher Interview Protocol

1.) What grade/year did you teach Juan?

2.) How would you describe Juan? Tell me about any past, present, and/or future relationship you have/had with Juan.

3.) Please describe in full any educational/academic successes and/or failures you have seen or have knowledge of from Juan’s schooling.

4.) As his teacher, did you recognize any difficulties with his learning? If so at what point did you realize Juan had difficulties with learning? What alerted you to this fact? (Prompt: Paperwork? A colleague? An incident in class)
5.) What help or assistance (if any) did you or anyone else seek or provide Juan in the classroom? Explain this assistance and why it was provoked.

6.) 6). Did you feel you were able to teach Juan effectively? Explain why or why not (prompt: any hindrances, support or positive incidents).

7.) 7) How would you describe his work ethic in school? How would you describe his attitudes toward or during school? In your opinion, did these affect him in any way?

8.) In your own opinion, what (if any) were Juan’s classroom or school issues in the year that you taught him? Explain these.

9.) If you could go back in time, what (if anything) might you do to change/help Juan’s educational situation.

10.) Taking in all outside impacting forces, what were some of the factors that you think most impacted/influenced Juan’s lack of literacy skills in 8th grade? List all and explain why you feel they were important in Juan’s lack of development.

11.) Did you feel Juan was taught effectively? Without naming names, explain why or why not.

12.) When (if anytime) did you wish to speak out on Juan’s behalf? What provoked this?

13.) When (if anytime) did you suppress the desire to speak up on Juan’s behalf? What prevented you from speaking out?

14.) Although we know many factors contribute to a student’s overall development and learning, and that no one person is to blame- what or who do you feel was the biggest help to him and the biggest hindrance? Explain your answers.

15.) 17.) Do you feel EL students have advocates in school? Taught effectively? Explain why or why not?

16.) 18.) How do you think the school, community, and surrounding area view the Hispanic population and their students in school? Explain.

17.) 19.) How would you describe EL parents and their relationship with the school system? Explain.

18.) 20.) Do you feel equipped to teach/educate ELs?

19.) 21.) Is there anything else you would like to add in response or to add to the information we have discussed or in any matters of the study?
Family Interview Protocol

1.) In what year did Juan first enter American schools? How would you describe his experience or transition into school?

2.) How would you describe his learning progress each year of his schooling? Did you recognize at any time that Juan was struggling in school with reading or other content areas? If so, what grade/year did you realize Juan was behind and having learning difficulties in school? Explain what alerted you to this fact.

3.) Think back on his experiences in school or in other places—please describe these experiences as fully as you can (whether successes and/or failures).

4.) What help or assistance (if any) did you or anyone else provide Juan? (prompts: classroom, tutors, outside experts etc.) Explain the details and contexts surrounding any assistance including why it was provided, and who suggested the supplement.

5.) Focusing on literacy (reading, writing, comprehension skills), please tell me about any problems and/or positive experiences you recall impacting Juan’s reading ability?

6.) Discuss with me what your views are of how Juan was taught reading and other areas in school? What aspects do you see as good one for him and what would you have changed? Without naming names, explain why or why not.

7.) When (if anytime) did you wish to speak out on Juan’s behalf? What provoked this?

8.) When (if anytime) did you suppress the desire to speak up on Juan’s behalf? What prevented you from speaking up?

9.) In your own opinion, what (if any) were Juan’s issues with learning? Explain these issues (both in and out of the classroom). Were there ways in which you assisted Juan in school?

10.) In your opinion, were his needs met? Explain your answer.

11.) If you had to describe Juan to someone who didn’t know him, what would you say?

12.) If you could go back in time, what (if anything) might you do to change/help Juan’s educational situation and learning needs.

13.) Taking in all outside impacting forces, what and or who were some of the factors that you think most impacted/influenced Juan? (Prompt: Explain why you feel they were important in Juan’s development).

14.) Although we know many factors contribute to a student’s overall development and learning, what or who do you think was the biggest help to him and the biggest hindrance to his learning experiences? Explain your answers.

15.) Based upon your experiences, do you feel EL students are supported and have advocates in school? Explain why or why not?

16.) How do you think the school, community, and surrounding area view the Hispanic population and their children enrolled in school? Explain.
16.) How would you describe EL parents (like yourself) and their relationship with the school system? Explain. (Prompt: What interactions do you have with the schools your children are enrolled in?)

17.) Do you think that schools in Alabama are adequately educating Hispanic ELs?

18.) Is there anything else you would like to add in response or to add to the information we have discussed or in any matters of the study?

19.) Could you explain Juan’s schooling experiences before he came to the US?

Interview Protocol for Juan

1.) What grade/year did you first enter American schools?
2.) Tell me about your earliest experiences in schools? What were you worried about? Excited about? What were your emotions and how did you feel entering a school when you didn’t speak English?
3.) Describe what and how you interacted with your friends. What about teachers?
4.) Describe what events, activities, or tasks you found engaging and wanted to do in school? Outside of school? What things did you not want to do?
5.) How would you describe your successes and or failures in school? (You can go by grade if you wish.)
5.) When you were in school, (8th grade and younger) who were the people you wanted to be like or looked up to? (Celebrities, sports stars, or people you know?) What kinds of careers or jobs did you think about doing as you moved through the grades? As a child, what did you want to be like as an adult?
6.) What (if any) problems did you have in school? Did you seek help? Did others find help or assistance for you? Did certain teachers help? If you received classroom help- what kind was it? Explain this assistance and why it was provided, and who suggested the supplement.
7.) How would you describe your ability to read? (Describe any hindrances and/or positive experiences you recall about your life and how the ability or lack of ability to read impacted you).
8.) Describe how your ability to read has affected your learning in school. Out of school (other disciplines?)
9.) How would you describe your experiences with learning and the ways in which you were taught? Explain some of the ways you were taught in the previous grades.
10.) Describe what you think is the best way for you to learn? Who are the people you think you learned the most from and why?
11.) What grade(s) do you remember learning the least from?
12.) What are problems you feel like you faced in school? What were the toughest areas or subjects for you and why? What is the easiest? Why?
14.) When (if anytime) have you needed to speak up for yourself? What provoked you to speak up?
15.) When (if anytime) have you felt you needed to speak up and you did not? What prevented you from talking?
16.) If you had to describe yourself to someone who didn’t know you, what would you say? What did you like as an 8th grader? What interested you?

17.) What are your experiences and feelings about school in relation to non-English speakers, like yourself? Explain.

18.) Do you feel there are any underlying feelings of racism, classism, or any societal hierarchy in town? What about school? In the state?

19.) What is your reaction to hear that this study is about you? Why do you feel it is important for us to know your story?

20.) How did not being able to read in 8th grade affect you? Emotions?

21.) In your own opinion, what are ELs issues with learning? Explain these issues (both in and out of the classroom).

22.) If you could go back in time and change your journey in schooling and in the community, what would you change?

23.) Do you feel EL students have advocates in school? Who speaks up for you in school?

24.) If you were in charge of how teachers teach, how would you change how teachers teach EL students in the future?

25.) How do you think the school, community, and surrounding area view the Hispanic population and in school? Explain.

26.) Is there anything else you would like to add in response or to add to the information we have discussed or in any matters of the study?