

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Maria J. Oreshkina entitled “Teachers’ experience of working with underachieving students: A comparative phenomenological study of teachers in South Africa, Russia, and the United States.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

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**TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE OF WORKING
WITH UNDERACHIEVING STUDENTS: A COMPARATIVE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA,
RUSSIA, AND THE UNITED STATES**

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to teachers and their students

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ABSTRACT

This research project presents three phenomenological studies: (1) teachers' experience of working with underachieving students in South Africa, (2) teachers' experience of working with underachieving students in Russia, and (3) teachers' experience of working with underachieving students in the United States. It also involves a comparative study of teachers' experience of working with underachieving students in the three countries. All teacher participants in these studies were recommended as expert teachers who displayed qualities of teacher professionalism such as (1) commitment to learners; (2) the ability to make decisions in complex and ill-defined contexts; (3) reflective practice; and (4) a body of specialized knowledge (Ingersoll, 2003).

The first three studies employed an existential phenomenological research methodology for studying experience. This methodology gave an opportunity to identify the thematic structure of teachers' experience for each country and to provide a non-dualistic description of the experience of teachers working with underachieving students. A comparison of the three thematic structures provided an opportunity to describe invariant themes of that experience.

Similarities identified in the thematic descriptions of teachers' experience allowed the introduction of the concept *culture of the classroom* which included the following characteristics: (1) holistic approach to students; (2) creating a safe place for learning and taking time to establish a relationship with students; (3) teachers' focus on students learning; (4) helping students become independent self-reliant individuals; (4) teachers' involvement in students' lives; (5) teachers and students growing and changing together;

and (6) teacher knowledge in their respective disciplines and high sense of teacher efficacy.

Similarities in the lived experience identified among the three groups of participants can be explained by teachers' expertise and mastery of the art and science of mediated learning described by Feuerstein (Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, & Miller, 1980). The focus of existential phenomenology on the experience as it is lived by an individual allowed the identification of invariant themes of working with underachieving students across different cultures.

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Chapter 1

What is it about those two?

You know, teaching is...it has to be...there has to be a relationship there. You have to care...care so much that you're thinking about them after school hours, that you're constantly thinking about how to help them reach their full potential. You know, you may have a class of twenty-five ...the majority are doing well, but you have two that just aren't performing like the rest. What is it about those two? (Angela, an American teacher)

This is how Angela, an American middle school science teacher, talked about her perception of underachieving students. Her quest to help students overcome their learning obstacles is fueled by genuine concern and attentiveness to the individual realities that her students face. Angela – like other teachers who participated in studies of teachers' experience of working with underachieving students in South Africa (SA), Russia (RU), and the United States (US)– was a teacher who was successful at addressing the needs of underachieving students and very much committed to her work.

In this dissertation I present findings about the thematic structures of teachers' experience of working with underachieving students and compare similarities and differences across three studies conducted in countries with very different socio-political circumstances: South Africa, Russia, and the United States. The findings of the three studies provide a description of the meaning of teaching underachieving students as it emerged in an interpretation of expert teachers' unreflected stories about their work. It provides an opportunity to look through the eyes of expert teachers and to determine the thematic structure of their experience shared by participants within each of the countries and then in comparison with one another. Rather than studying predetermined and often isolated elements of teaching that is the focus of much research on teaching, an

existential phenomenological research approach provided an opportunity to discover what stands out for teachers. The comparison of the three studies was an opportunity to reflect deeply on how similar or different the meaning of teaching is to teachers who live in very different socio-political environments with different systems of teacher education and who work with students facing very different circumstances. To be sure, the study of teaching is very complex and often relies on assumptions that need examination.

1.1. Knowledge on Teaching: Complexities and Solutions

For a long time educational psychology research in general and research on teaching in particular rested on a Cartesian view that assumes the separation between person and world, between body and mind, and between oneself and others. Furthermore, within this view the individual was described as a set of traits that had to be disentangled from one another in order to be understood.

As a result of that view, the teacher and the student became the subjects of fragmented research. This research advanced our understanding of teaching and learning in many ways; it failed, however, to portray the teacher and the student “in their humanity” as May, one of the American participants, described her students. A quick overview of the history of research on teacher knowledge is an example of a fragmented study of teachers. It seems that understanding how research on teaching developed is critical if we are to seek alternatives.

The early research on teachers was carried out in a behavioral tradition and explored relationships between the sequence of teachers’ behaviors and students’ learning (Calderhead, 1996). It soon became clear, however, that just copying someone’s behavior doesn’t make one a good teacher and researchers switched their focus to the

study of teachers' mental worlds. Teachers' thinking, planning, and decision-making became the focus of an information-processing approach to studying teaching (Clark & Peterson, 1985).

The advance of research on what teachers know and how they know it led to a larger acceptance of the view that much of teacher knowledge is intuitive and implicit (Polanyi, 1962; Jarvis, 1999), that teachers' knowledge is formed in practice (Grimmet & MacKinnon, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985), and that "what teachers know and believe is complexly intertwined, both among domains and with actions and contexts" (Borko & Putnam, 1996, p. 677). The Cartesian divide between person and world, therefore, started to gradually narrow by accepting the view that teachers' knowledge (as well as students' knowledge) is contextualized and is influenced by teachers' past and future histories.

Munby, Russell, and Martin's (2001) most recent overview on teachers' knowledge reveals the complexity of this concept. Teachers' knowledge, however, continues to be studied separately from other meaningful aspects of teachers' lives. Cartesian divide led to the study of some aspects of teaching, such as teachers' knowledge, to the exclusion of others, such as teachers' emotions and teacher-student relationship. Zembylas (2005) noted that "emotion is the least investigated aspect of research on teaching" (p. 466). Similarly, until recently the study of teacher-student relationship was underestimated which is evident in the fact that the chapter by Juvonen (2006) on relationship between the teacher and the students, "Sense of Belonging, Social Bonds, and Social Functioning," only appeared in the 2006 edition of the *Handbook of Educational Psychology*.

According to David Berliner (2006), fragmented research on teaching led to a seeming irrelevance of educational research to practitioners since it does not address the teacher's reality in its complexity and entirety:

We do what scientists often do: we simplify in order to understand. One-way to simplify is to retreat from the real world of practice. We also simplify by studying one or two of the four commonplaces [teacher, knowledge to be taught, student, and the classroom] with little regard to the other two or three. ...By adopting the reasonable scientific strategy of simplification in experimentation, we may sometimes appear irrelevant to educators needing to be successful in environments of greater complexity than the psychological laboratory. ...For whatever reasons, we do not affect the lives of teachers in the ways we had hoped. Our scientific work has implications for classroom practice, but does not often end up changing practice (p. 6).

One of the attempts to overcome the atomistic description of the world of teaching is grounded in the narrative tradition. This is how Carter (1993) explained the potential of the narrative research to the understanding of teaching:

Stories became a way, in other words, of capturing the complexity, specificity, and interconnectedness of the phenomenon with which we deal, and thus, redressed the deficiencies of the traditional, atomistic and positivistic approaches in which teaching was decomposed into discrete variables and indicators of effectiveness (p. 6).

Connelly and Clandinin (1985, 1988, 1995, 1999) used narrative to explore teachers "personal practical knowledge" (mentioned earlier in the category of teachers' knowledge), which they defined as a combination of teachers' past experience, present situation, and future plans and actions. "Personal practical knowledge is found in teachers' practice. It is... a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the experience of a present situation" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p.25). According to Clandinin and Connelly, this knowledge exists in the form of narrative life history, "as storied life compositions" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 2).

Clandinin and Connelly (1985) drew attention to studying experience through narrative:

Educators need to focus on experience, in particular, teacher and student narrative unity. In drawing up, developing, remaking and introducing narrative, the richness of past experience may be brought forward and credited as teachers' and students' personal knowledge of their teaching and learning situations. Teaching and learning situations need continually to 'give back' a learners' narrative experience so that it may be reflected upon, valued, and enriched. We want knowing to come alive in classrooms as the multifaceted, embodied, biographical, and historical experience that it is (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, p. 197).

Another alternative to overcoming fragmented description of teaching has been offered by the science of phenomenology. The focus of existential phenomenology is on a rigorous description of experience rather than explanation of discrete elements such as thoughts, actions or emotions. The purpose of existential phenomenology is the very description of human life in its "first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity" (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 5). By attending to the first-person description of an experience, existential phenomenology creates an opportunity to uncover the world of teaching in its complexity and from the perspective of teachers. Existential phenomenology, however, does not stop with a subjective description of experience, but has its goal to bring to light the invariant themes of experience as they emerge in accounts of several people.

1.2. The Existential Phenomenological Approach to Studying Experience

The roots of existential phenomenology are in the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard saw the purpose of existential philosophy to "elucidate the fundamental themes with which human beings invariably struggle" (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989, p.

6). The German philosopher Edmund Husserl introduced phenomenology to study how reality is experienced, that is how it appears to consciousness, “so that one might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989, p. 6). Phenomenology became a “new science in which there could be systematic investigation of those things that we take for granted in everyday life” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 9).

Phenomenology focuses on consciousness. Heidegger described human consciousness as consciousness-in-the-context or being-in-the world. Being-in-the-world is always intentional, that is it is directed towards the world and reveals our relationship to phenomena. “Like perception, human experience is continuously oriented toward a world it never possesses but towards which it is continuously directed” (Thomas & Pollio, p. 14). Our experience is always intentional, that is by attending to what stands out we reveal what is meaningful to us. In other words, “what I am aware of reveals what is meaningful to me” (Thomas & Pollio, p. 14).

If in a Cartesian view person and world are separated from each other, in an existential phenomenological view person and world are interconnected and co-construct each other. According to Merleau-Ponty, the connection between person and world is possible because of the intentionality of experience. “Intentionality captures the fundamental structure of human experience and reveals an essential interconnectedness between us and the world” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 14). In a phenomenological view,

Intentionality does *not* refer to plans and planning but to a general patterning of human experience which suggests that human life can only be understood as always and already in some context (as “being-in-the-world). Intentionality, as it is used in phenomenology, describes a basic

configuration of person and world that is most obvious in human perception (p. 15).

The relationship between person and world can be described in terms of figure-ground phenomena in Gestalt psychology. In this relationship, personal existence is a figure that stands out against the ground of the world. There are four major existential grounds - others, world, time, body, and – against which the personal existence is experienced. Thomas and Pollio noted, “If we are to describe human life in terms of experience, we must begin by describing the *first-person meaning* of each of its grounds [time, other people, and world]” (p. 19). Paraphrasing Thomas and Pollio, if we want to learn what is meaningful for teachers in their experience of teaching, we must turn to teachers and ask them how the world of teaching appears to them.

Existential phenomenology as a philosophical stance for understanding the relationship between person and world, as well as a research methodology that paves the path to studying a first-person meaning of a phenomenon, has become increasingly accepted among educational researchers. McPhail (1995) explored the possibilities of utilizing an existential phenomenological approach in special education. In this discipline the tradition of positivistic research based on the assumptions of Cartesian dualism “has created a view of the individual with disabilities that is mechanistic and psychological in the narrow sense, rather than holistic and psychological in the broad sense of being culturally sensitive” (p. 160). Existential phenomenology opens up a possibility for the discipline to communicate ‘the others’ way of seeing things” (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij as cited in McPhail, 1996, p. 163).

The findings of the two studies that McPhail presented, described the being-in-the-world of individuals with exceptionalities. Cousin, Aragon, and Rojas (1993), as cited in McPhail, studied the literacy development of an adolescent male with learning disabilities. They found that the literacy of this young man improved when he was engaged in more natural activities such as writing a letter to a researcher about a novel that he read. They also found that he was conscious of his strengths and weaknesses in literacy, and of his development in general, and of how this awareness was expressed in his life.

The second study (McPhail, 1993) explored daily experiences of three groups of adolescents, average-achieving, low-achieving, and those with learning disabilities. McPhail found, contrary to the conventional view on the effect of labeling, that adolescents with learning disabilities experienced their school environment more positively than students from the other two groups. The students with learning disabilities also experienced the resource room more positively than they did the self-contained classroom. As a result of the study, a more holistic description of students' daily experiences emerged. McPhail emphasized that phenomenological approach to describing students' experiences created an opportunity to see "the ways meanings can be constructed in ... contexts that are otherwise outside of our experience" (p. 164). The emphasis of the two studies was on explicating and understanding the meaning of being-in-the world of young people with exceptionalities. As I will show later, existential phenomenology has the potential of going further than explicating subjective meaning of an experience and can describe invariant themes of a phenomenon.

Van den Berg (2002) explored phenomenology as a possible way of explicating subjective meaning of teaching in the process of reforms, since “teachers’ opinions and reactions to policies pertaining to their professional practice depend, in part, on their own personal meanings” (p. 582). The policies of reform implementations, in Van den Berg’s view, are usually rigid and fully planned. Such a linear-methodical approach is unsatisfactory for the current world, “which is full of ambiguity, problems that are difficult to define, unstable situations, and unpredictable patterns of interaction” (p. 613). Van den Berg concluded that to attend to existential meanings of teaching is the only way to design flexible and culturally sensitive reform strategies.

Although phenomenology seeks to find how a phenomenon appears in the first-person world, its ultimate goal is to describe the thematic structure of a phenomenon/experience. Polkinghorne (as cited in Thomas & Pollio, 2002. p. 41) noted that the “purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the structure of an experience, not to describe the characteristics of a group who have had the experience.” Therefore, generalizability is a possible outcome of a phenomenological inquiry that provides an understanding of what a phenomenon is like. The point of inviting more than one participant is to help the researcher “see” what is invariably thematic in the experience and what are the variations of that experience.

The focus of existential phenomenology on experience gives an opportunity to overcome fragmentation of research on teaching pointed out by Berliner and provide a holistic description of various experiences of teaching and learning as they are perceived by teachers and/or students. The philosophical assumption of phenomenology, that person and world co-construct one another, makes possible to provide a non-dualistic

description of those experiences, that is, the description that regards an individual's existence in its connection and relationship with world.

1.3. The Study of Teachers' Experience of Working with Underachieving Students

Together with the Applied Educational Psychology research team under the guidance of Dr. K. Greenberg at The University of Tennessee, I explored teachers' experience of teaching underachieving students using a phenomenological research approach. It was a research journey that included interviews with teachers on three continents, as well as a personal journey towards a deeper understanding of teachers' work with underachievers. The research project presented here was inductive in nature, that is, it did not test a particular hypothesis but evolved as one research question led to others.

In the fall of 2002 Dr. Greenberg and I interviewed nine South African educators who were considered expert teachers in their work with underachieving students. All of these teachers were introduced to the mediated learning theory developed by R. Feuerstein (Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, & Miller, 1980) and were expert users of the Cognitive Enrichment Advantage (CEA) educational approach (Greenberg, 2000) that is largely based on the main tenets of Feuerstein's work. At that time we thought that the thematic structure of the experience of teachers who intentionally used mediated learning theory would be somewhat different from the thematic structure of teachers who had no formal expertise in the mediated learning theory and used mediation as an art that occurs naturally in humans. At the same time we had an intuition that there were similarities in the culture of the classroom that we had felt in our work with teachers in Russia and the United States.

The opportunity to travel to Russia came soon, and in December and January of 2002 – 2003 I interviewed seven Russian teachers about their experience. Finally, I interviewed nine American teachers in the fall of 2005 and winter of 2006. The interpretive analyses occurred separately for each study with several months lapse between each set of analyses.

The research questions in this dissertation are:

1. What is the thematic structure of the experience of expert teachers working with underachieving students in South Africa, Russia, and the United States?
2. What are the differences and similarities in the structures of the experience of expert teachers from South Africa, Russia, and the United States?

The significance of the study is the fact that this is the first research project to examine the experience of expert teachers working with underachieving students from an existential phenomenological perspective in the three countries: South Africa, Russia, and the United States. This project explicated a thematic structure of the experience in each country and provided a non-dualistic description of the experience of teaching underachieving students. The possibility to explore the experience cross-culturally gave an opportunity to describe similarities and differences in the thematic structures among teachers from three different countries. This comparison allowed bringing to light the invariant themes of the experience of working with underachieving students for the teachers of the Western ways of knowing.

1.4. The Socio-political Contexts of South Africa, Russia, and the United States

The socio-political, cultural, and demographic differences among the three countries are tremendous. Regardless of their past histories, all three countries continue to change. Educational reforms in South Africa and Russia are a part of a larger socio-economic and political transformation aimed at undoing the injustices of the past and creating an open and more democratic society. Economic constraints among other problems, however, impede implementation of desirable changes.

The reforms in the United States are a response to the increasing diversity of students and the desire to raise national standards of achievement. Greater federal government participation in what traditionally was a matter of local control is the prominent feature of the current changes. In the chapters to follow, I will provide a more detailed analysis of the current educational reforms in each country.

Familiarity with the general demographic profile of each country helps to locate the place of education systems within the scope of each respective society. The population in South Africa is almost 44 million people and the population growth rate is negative, -0.46% . The population in Russia slightly exceeds 141 million and the population growth rate is negative, -0.484% . The population in the United States slightly exceeds 301 million people, and the population growth is positive, 0.894% (World Fact Book, 2007, <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>).

Since the study of teachers' experience of working with underachieving students has a comparative component, it is necessary to reflect upon other research that dealt comparatively with education in the countries of interest. Alexander's (2001) study *Five Cultures* and Schweisfurth's (2002) study of teachers' perceptions of reforms in South

Africa and Russia were conducted within the field of comparative education. These studies are relatively recent, comprehensive, and rich in their descriptions of the educational contexts at large, as well as characteristics of each country's teaching practices and classroom interactions.

1.5. Comparative Studies in South Africa, Russia, and the United States

Alexander's project *Five Cultures* explored primary education at the levels of system, school, and classroom in France, India, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The study focused on "educational policies and structures" as well as on "classroom practices" (p. 4). The project was quantitative-qualitative in nature, with a qualitative component performed in an ethnographic manner. It included school visits, classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, as well as the study of official documents. I have to note that Alexander's project was conducted in the middle of the 1990s, before the accountability movement in American education started in 2001 and possibly influenced the content and pace of interactions in American classrooms. We are left to wonder how American schools would be described now in the times of the No Child Left Behind Act. At the same time it is plausible to think that some patterns of communication specific for each culture will persist despite educational policy change.

In Alexander's study, Russia and the United States appeared on the opposite ends of the continuum for most of the variables studied. On the system level, centralized control and governance, top-down decision-making, never questioned by teachers, students or parents were characteristic of Russian schools, whereas decentralization and diversification were major features of schools in the United States.

On the individual school level, Russian schools were standard in architecture, building plans, and classroom organization thus conveying the message that school is the place for work and only work. In contrast, American schools varied in architecture and building plans. Classrooms had several focal points and sent the message that schools are for study, as well as play, rest and communication with others.

Classroom interactions also varied drastically: the class as a whole was the focus of instruction in Russian schools whereas individual students or smaller groups were the focus of instruction in American schools. Communication in Russian lessons took place in the form of a dialogue and served the goal of checking previous knowledge and building-up new knowledge. Dialog with an individual student was public and was conducted with the purpose of the whole class learning from it. The emphasis on standardized pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar was striking.

In the American classroom, communication took place in the form of a conversation, more individual than public, more informal than formal. While diversity and even unpredictability in content and structure were the features of the American lessons, similarity in structure was noticeable in the Russian lessons. It should be noted, however, that similarity and structure in Russian schools did not indicate a lack of creativity. “The difference between routine and creative teaching in Russian schools was like the difference between what Bach and contemporaries achieved with the fugue: alike in form, but in detail and outcome very different” (p. 218). The following two excerpts provide succinct yet rich description of the classroom realities observed in the two countries.

Teaching [in Russia] had a strong emphasis upon the acquisition of facts, principles and rules, and some of this narrowly and very instrumentally directed at memorization and recall. However, we saw how teachers' collective pedagogical theorizing emphasized the scaffolding function of interrogatory classroom discourse, and how, in practice, teachers implemented this by working publicly on the understanding of individual children until the scaffolding process was complete. ... The dividing line between the 'pedagogy of mutuality' and 'didactic exposure' was not the culture so much, as, quite simply, the difference between good and run-of-the mill teaching. The Russian model at best generates far more cognitive dynamism than some Western observers are prepared to admit (p. 558).

In Michigan schools [we observed] a good example of teaching which is intersubjective, respects children's understandings, and through group collaboration and the careful narrowing of options seeks to take all the class towards a shared and systematic way of knowing mathematically. However, the more common condition was one which never quite managed to square the circle of learning. The professional discourse of some of the teachers made much of respecting the child's way of making sense of the world, but having encouraged them to make that sense, they too often left it at that (p. 559).

Russian and American schools, Alexander concluded, represent examples of two different forms of pedagogy: directed pedagogy in Russia and negotiated or democratic pedagogy in the United States. The former is "steered and controlled by the teacher and authority is for the most part rationally exercised and consistent rather than arbitrary" (p. 522); the latter "is a more difficult idea to implement, for it, too, is controlled by the teacher and it therefore embraces at best a tension and at worst a contradiction" (p. 522).

Schweisfurth (2002) used a case-study approach to explore Russian and South African teachers' perceptions of educational reforms. The study included four steps: (1) exploring teachers' biographies including their own schooling experiences; (2) conducting structured reflection on an observed lesson; (3) interviewing teachers about key influences on his/her practice; and (4) verifying results.

Schweisfurth found that teachers in the two countries “often spoke from contradictory, or difficult to reconcile positions, or said one thing and did another” (p. 63). These contradictions stemmed from competing imperatives when teachers “were caught between different versions of how they ought to act” (Alexander as cited in Schweisfurth, 2002, p. 63). For example, the teachers from both countries wholeheartedly supported the imperative of introducing more democratic relationships in their classrooms. At the same time they were lacking necessary skills or felt challenged by external circumstances to change the existing mode of communication with students. While Russian teachers criticized authoritarian teaching, there was little evidence of more democratic interactions. Some Russian teachers noted that being attuned to the affective needs of their students had always been the hallmark of their teaching. For South Africa, the implementation of democratic teaching in the conditions of declining school discipline, especially in socio-economic disadvantaged areas, seemed non-realistic and even threatening.

The competing imperatives were also evident in the areas of pedagogy and curriculum. While teachers from both countries stated the need to implement a child-centered approach to teaching, they feared that this change would lead to a decline in discipline, would be time-consuming, and would not allow exploring problems in depth. Supporting the need for new curriculum, teachers did not feel competent to teach new subjects and the lack of textbooks and appropriate resources made teaching a new curriculum even more problematic. Schweisfurth concluded, “In many cases teachers were not aware of the competing imperatives or were not willing to admit them. When a

given teachers' personal esteem was being compromised by a professional or societal demand, the prevailing pattern was to protect one's self" (p 75).

Differences in teachers' perceptions of reforms reflected the specificity of the national contexts. First, the stories of South African teachers were more diverse while the stories of Russian teachers were easier to generalize. The diversity of South African teachers was the result of different socio-economic and cultural realities from which those teachers were coming. South African teachers also showed stronger identification with their racial group than with their nation as a whole. Second, the distinction between the past and the present was more evident among South African teachers than their Russian colleagues. Third, while reforms in South Africa were aimed to overcome educational inequalities, the introduction of a market economy in Russia led to a noticeable gap in quality education for children from different societal groups. Fourth, many South African teachers reported a continuing deterioration in the culture of teaching and learning whereas the interviews with Russian teachers revealed the continuity in teaching-learning traditions and high academic expectations. Schweisfurth concluded, "in a sense, this difference is a similarity – while the cultures of education in Russia, on the one hand, and of the historically deprived school in South Africa, on the other hand, are very different, both these cultures have persisted" (p. 126).

To summarize: Alexander's study was an ethnographic research project that provides a third person description of the educational context. This description revealed noticeable differences in the organization of education in terms of system, school, classrooms levels, and pedagogy. Schweisfurth's study was a combination of a third-person description (lesson observation) with a first-person reflection in a dialogue with

the researcher. This approach yielded that teachers' perceptions of reforms were more similar than different. The possibility of studying teachers' experience of working with underachievers from an existential-phenomenological perspective opens up a possibility of studying how an experience "appears in consciousness" of teachers from different cultures and to clarify the meaning of the experience in a dialogue. This perspective should help us understand the teachers not purely as individuals within their respective cultures but as human beings in a complex world.

1.6. Teacher Professionalism

The teachers that participated in the study were highly qualified practitioners. Ingersoll (2003) pointed to four qualities of teacher professionalism: (1) commitment to learners; (2) the ability to make decisions in complex and ill-defined contexts; (3) reflective practice; and (4) a body of specialized knowledge. Indeed, those were the qualities displayed by the participants of the study. They were committed to their profession despite the challenges that they encountered. As the interviews showed, they were able to make decisions in ill-defined situations, were reflective, and received quality training in their respective disciplines. I have to caution that the study of habituated practitioners could yield different results from those presented in this study.

1.7. Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation consists of seven chapters.

Chapter 1 "What is it about those two?" outlines some characteristics of existential phenomenological philosophy and locates this study in relation to research in educational psychology and in comparative education.

Chapter 2 “Tell me about some times when...” presents the research questions and description of the research methodology.

Chapter 3 “I want to make a difference in their lives” presents a description of the South African socio-political and educational context and South African teachers’ experience of working with underachievers.

Chapter 4 “School is the meaning of our lives” presents a description of the Russian socio-political and educational context and Russian teachers’ experience of working with underachievers.

Chapter 5 “I DO care about them” presents a description of the American socio-political and educational context and American teachers’ experience of working with underachievers.

Chapter 6 “It is ...a relationship with a child that makes a difference” presents a comparison of the three studies.

Chapter 7 “It must be you and me, together” discusses the results of the study and their implications for teacher education and research.

Chapter 2

Tell me about some times when ...

“Tell me about some times when you were teaching students who were not achieving as much as you thought they could.” This was the request that I posed to all of my participants in the three countries. Teachers’ experience of working with underachieving students was the phenomenon that I studied.

2.1. Research Questions

Two research questions guided the study:

1. What is the thematic structure of the experience of expert teachers working with underachieving students in South Africa, Russia, and the United States?
2. What are the differences and similarities in the structures of the experience of expert teachers from South Africa, Russia, and the United States?

2.2. Existential Phenomenological Research Method

Existential phenomenological research methodology includes the following steps:

- (1) selecting the phenomenon of interest;
- (2) conducting a bracketing interview;
- (3) identifying participants;
- (4) conducting a series of phenomenological interviews;
- (5) interpreting data;
- (6) seeking feedback from the participants; and
- (7) disseminating results.

2.2.1. Selecting the Phenomenon of Interest

Teachers' experience of working with underachieving students was the phenomenon of interest in this research project. I used a broad definition of underachievement – students who are not achieving as much as they could, students who are not reaching their potential, and students who have difficulties in learning. In the interviews teachers themselves chose the stories that they wanted to share, thus preserving their meaning of the phenomenon “underachieving students” and the experience of working with such students.

2.2.2. Conducting the Bracketing Interviews

The purpose of conducting the bracketing interview with a researcher is to help him or her become aware and suspend assumptions, that is, bracket them, that he or she may hold regarding the phenomenon of interest. As phenomenologists point out, it is never possible to eliminate prejudices regarding the topic; it is important, however, to bracket them in order to focus on an experience of another human being (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Two bracketing interviews were conducted to help me become aware of my assumptions. The first took place prior to the phenomenological interviews of teachers in South Africa. As a special educator I believed that all students could learn and achieve regardless of their present level of performance and that teachers' confidence in students' potential was essential for students to achieve. I also thought that teachers would describe their underachieving students in terms of their academic deficiencies. The interview with Dr. Greenberg revealed her assumptions. She believed that teachers who are experts in the mediated learning theory and the CEA approach are different from

other teachers in that they have high expectations; they know how to diagnose and help; they observe for deficits in prerequisites of thinking rather than characteristics of disabilities; they understand the connection between cognition, affect, and motivation; they design instructional activities that incorporate critical attributes of a laboratory for learning criteria, that is, no one right answer; and they seek to challenge their students

In the interviews with the South African teachers, they frequently used the concept “zone of proximal development” that fueled my interest in how Russian teachers understood the same concept. Because of that interest I asked the Russian participants about their understanding of the concept in the interviews. The modified procedure of interviewing the Russian participants will be discussed in the section 2.2.4. Conducting the Phenomenological Interviews.

A second bracketing interview was conducted after completing the analysis of the South African and Russian data and before interpreting the American interviews. At this point my assumption was that the American teachers’ experience would be somewhat similar to the experience of the South African teachers. That assumption rested on my belief that the American and South African cultures have more in common with each other than with the Russian culture and that the use of the same language would produce more similar descriptions of teachers’ work.

2.2.3. Identifying the Participants

This dissertation includes four studies: three phenomenological studies and one comparative study. The first study involved a series of phenomenological interviews conducted by myself and K. Greenberg with South African participants in September and October 2002. Nine South African educators were interviewed for the study: two

occupational therapists, two speech therapists, one art teacher/therapist, three classroom teachers, and one former teacher who at the time of the interview was holding an administrative position. In Chapter 3, I will refer to the South African participants as teachers to keep consistency of description across all three groups of the participants. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the Applied Educational Psychology research team in the spring of 2003 and the fall of 2003 and a thematic structure of the experience was developed in the spring of 2003.

The second study was a series of interviews with Russian teachers that I conducted in December 2002 and January 2003. Seven Russian teachers participated in the study: two speech therapists/teachers of primary school (in Russia the degree in speech therapy allows teachers to teach primary school students with speech impairments), one special educator who at the time of the interview was holding the position of a psychologist, one speech therapist who was conducting one-on-one and group sessions in a private school, and three classroom teachers. Interviews were translated, transcribed, and analyzed in the Applied Educational Psychology research team in the fall of 2004 and the spring of 2005 and a thematic structure of the teachers' experience was developed in the spring of 2005 and compared with the structure of the South African teachers' experience.

The third study was a series of interviews conducted with American teachers in the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006. Nine American educators participated in the study: four special education teachers and five classroom teachers. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed in the Applied Educational Psychology research team in

the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006 and a thematic structure of the experience was developed in the spring of 2006.

A fourth study involved a comparison of results produced in the three studies. The research team compared the thematic structures of the teachers' experience, as well as the quotes of the participants that supported each theme. The comparative analysis was conducted in the spring of 2006 and the fall of 2006. More detailed description of the research sites and qualifications of the participants will be provided in the chapters describing the findings in each country. It is important to note that only one male teacher (a teacher in South Africa) participated in this research project. All other participants in the three countries were White female teachers.

All teachers that I interviewed met the following three criteria: (1) having the experience of working with underachieving students; (2) having the willingness to share that experience with the researchers; (3) being recommended or known as an expert practitioner by an expert educator. The interview data confirmed that the participants displayed the qualities of teacher professionalism described by Ingersoll (2003). The approval from school principals/directors was received prior to meeting with the participants when the interviews were conducted on school property (Appendix D). Before each interview the participant read and signed a consent form (Appendix C). The transcribers and the members of the Applied Educational Psychology research team signed confidentiality pledge forms (Appendixes A and B). The title of the research project in the forms is "The experience of teachers with underachieving students: A phenomenological study" and is different from the title of this dissertation. My last name is also spelled differently, Orechkina instead of current Oreshkina.

2.2.4. Conducting the Phenomenological Interviews

Learning about experience takes place in a phenomenological interview, an open-ended dialogue where the researcher and the person focus on some phenomenon of interest. The purpose of the interview is not analysis or explanation, but description for the participant and understanding for the researcher. This dialogue usually starts with a request of the researcher to share one's experience of a phenomenon. Keeping the focus on experience rather than the person is critical. Thomas and Pollio (2002) described the relationship between the researcher and the participant as follows: "The person to whom we are talking is the expert on his/her experience; we are there to learn about it from him or her" (p. 21).

The interviews started with the request: "Tell me about some times when you were teaching students who were not achieving as much as you thought they could." Out of nine interviews in South Africa, Dr. Greenberg conducted five interviews and I conducted four interviews. I conducted all other interviews in Russia and the United States.

If participants had difficulties in answering this question, we re-phrased the request by saying, "Tell me some stories about your students who had difficulties in learning" or "Tell me some stories about students that are particularly memorable." Sometimes asking a broader question helped to involve participants in an interview, such as "What is it like for you to be a teacher in the classroom, to work with children..." If a broader question was asked first, we further repeated the initial question to focus the teachers' attention on the work with underachievers.

Subsequent questions were determined during each interview and were used to clarify the meaning of what was being said or to ask for elaboration. The examples of some follow-up questions are: “You said it is a challenge for you to work with your students. Can you say more about this challenge?” or “You earlier said that you remember all difficult children by their names ...”

In the Russian study I made an attempt to experiment with research methodology and become a researcher – co-participant. In the end of the interview I shared with the participants some instances of my own experience of working with underachieving students or I sought the teachers’ responses to more specific questions, such as how they understand the zone of proximal development. As a result of experimentation, I found that if a story resonated with the participants’ experience, it fueled their desire to talk more about their work with underachievers (which was the case in all the interviews). In response to my question, most of the teachers provided their understanding of the concept, but were surprised or confused to hear that question (by that time they had an idea of the pattern of the dialogue). For example, some initial responses were “I did not talk about it ...” or “Is it related to what we are talking about?” Although the teachers provided many stories that were examples of how they worked in the zone of proximal development, they did not actively use that label in their stories. A brief exchange about the concept, however, did not seem to influence the direction of the conversation. All teachers were genuinely involved in the dialogue and shared what stood out for THEM in their work with underachievers. This modification was not extended to the American study nor was it a part of the South African interviews.

At the end of the interview we asked the participants if they had anything else to share. When the participants felt that they had nothing to add, the interview was ended. It is worth noticing that ALL the participants genuinely thanked us for an opportunity to participate in the study and expressed interest in the results. The group of American teachers was informed that the interviews were a part of a bigger comparative project.

All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. All participants from South Africa were interviewed in English. Some of them were native English speakers; others were native speakers of Afrikaans. The fluency of Afrikaans speakers in English and their use of English language in many social settings of South Africa ensured that the participants did not experience linguistic constraints in talking about their experience.

The interviews with Russian teachers were conducted in Russian and transcribed in English. Russian is my native language. If the research team experienced difficulties in understanding the transcribed text, I explained in different words the meaning of what had been said and together with the research team sought a more accurate word, expression or metaphor to capture the meaning of what the teacher had said. Some metaphorical expressions that Russian teachers used were translated word by word to communicate the original meaning of a metaphor. In the text of the dissertation, more accurate explanations of these metaphorical expressions are provided in brackets.

2.2.5. Interpreting the Data

An understanding of the experience does not stop with the end of an interview; that is only the beginning. The focus of phenomenological analysis is on *interpretation*, “bringing out what was there”, not an inference, “bringing out what was not there to begin with” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p.22). Through an interpretation of his or her data,

a phenomenological researcher strives to describe the structure of human experience, that is, to bring to light invariant themes of experience that surpass the variations of experience as presented in individual accounts.

A phenomenological research method employs a hermeneutic analysis of interpretation. The hermeneutic circle is an interpretive procedure through which the researcher relates a part of the recorded account to its whole. Phenomenological research accepts that the person who shared the experience and the researcher who heard it have different past histories and even perhaps different socio-cultural and /or historical contexts. The understanding of meaning becomes possible through what Gadamer called a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer as cited in Thomas & Pollio, p. 22.), a connection “with one another in terms of past and present contexts” (p. 22). Phenomenological interpretation involved mediation “between now and then as well as between you and me” (p. 23).

The interpretation of these data was conducted by the Applied Educational Psychology research team. The team consisted of doctoral students of the Applied Educational Psychology program and was guided by Dr. Katherine Greenberg. All but one member of the team were introduced to existential phenomenology in a doctoral seminar at the University of Tennessee and participated in several phenomenological research projects pertaining to education. The group met once a week for a two-hour session.

Interpretation of these data started with reading the interviews aloud. The reading stopped whenever the team felt that a sufficient part of the text had been read for analysis or when something particularly stood out and there was a need for reflection and

discussion. When the reading of a passage was stopped, the team members discussed what stood out for them in an interview, that is, identified meaning units. A meaning unit can be as short as a word or as long as a paragraph. The team members had to explain to each other why a particular meaning unit stood out for them and how it enlarged their understanding of the experience. Examples of meaning units could be a metaphor such as “stumbling blocks,” when one of the participants talked about difficulties that underachieving students experienced in learning, or a phrase such as “He got wings” when the teacher talked about positive changes observed in a student. This process of finding and clarifying the meaning of what had been shared during the interview process is an example of the “fusion of horizons” described earlier.

The next step included developing a thematic description of the experience that emerged from an individual interview. In this study I used the definition of a theme as “patterns of description that repetitively recur as important aspects of a participants’ description of his/her experience” (Thomas & Pollio, p. 37). In other words, the experience presented in each interview was summarized on a more abstract level as a set of themes. Often at this point the team used categories to simplify the management of these data. Category is an abstract generalization, often in technical language that referenced a meaning unit that referred to a seemingly important aspect of one or more teachers’ experiences. Themes were almost always represented in the words of a participant that best described the meaning of some aspects of the experience for all participants in the given study.

When themes were identified within each interview, the research team worked together to identify global themes across all interviews that would eventually represent

the structure of the experience. It was done by bringing together themes and categories from individual interviews (this time represented by quotes from the interviews) and by trying to establish commonalities and relationships among themes. The members of the research team wrote the quotes that represented the themes from individual interviews on post-it notes, sorted them thematically, and then placed them on a board, thus trying to establish the relationship that was emerging among global themes and smaller units called sub-themes. It is important to note that global themes in the structure were representative of themes identified in individual interviews.

In a thematic structure of experience, the meaning of the whole is different from the summative meaning of its parts. In other words, structure is a gestalt.

A structure is what it is because of the parts or ‘constituents’ that make it up. At the same time, the structure is not a mere summation of parts, but is co-determined by the parts. Whole and part co-determine one another in a circular relationship (Robbins, 2006, p. 188).

An example of a structure being different from its parts is the emerged meaning of the phenomenon working with underachievers described as the “you and me” relationship. This meaning was not obvious to the team before the global themes were brought together and the relationship among them was established. Later the members of the research team went back through the interview data and found plenty of examples that supported the conclusion that the relationship between the teacher and the student is at the heart of overcoming underachievement.

Working on a structure also included identifying a ground theme - a common meaning against which other global themes emerged. For example, the ground theme in the Russian interviews was “School is the meaning of our lives.” All other themes

elaborated the meaning of this ground theme. The theme “Everybody is a special story” uncovered how teachers perceived their students. The theme “We go together to the heights” showed how teachers perceived the learning process whereas “Our backs are wet – the work can bring you joy” revealed how teachers viewed themselves in the learning process. Finally, the theme “They bring all these good surprises” captured teachers’ perceptions of student change. One can see how these themes helped the team understand what teachers meant by “School is the meaning of our lives.”

In the process of interpretation, the research team was particularly sensitive to figurative or metaphorical language. This language is usually used when ordinary words fail to fully convey the meaning of an experience. By using metaphors we look at the world psychologically. Romanyshyn in Robbins (2006) described seeing psychologically as “the way of seeing which opens up a world which matters and which must be understood” (p. 189). For example, Olga, a Russian teacher, used a metaphor “two horses in one yoke” to describe what she saw as a goal of teaching/learning. With this metaphor she emphasized the importance of developing students’ identities (further in the text I use the term “personality” which is a more accurate translation of the Russian word “lichnost” that the Russian teachers used in their interviews), as well as helping students progress academically. This metaphor helped the team appreciate the importance of students’ identities in learning and to see the learning process as transformational and forward moving.

The ultimate goal of a phenomenological analysis is to identify invariant themes of experience that surpass the variations presented in individual accounts. “The rationale for looking across interviews is ... to improve the researchers’ interpretive vision”

(Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37). Only by attending to variations can one discern what is truly invariable. Churchill (2006) succinctly described the essence of phenomenological research as “what is ‘phenomenological’ ... is *not* simply its foundation in individual experience, but rather its movement from individual to universal possibilities of experience by means of free (or random) variation” (p. 92). By free variations Churchill meant all the possibilities of an experience that could appear in the imagination of the researcher. Indeed, having spent a long time studying teachers’ experience, I personally and the research team members as well had an opportunity to consider different instances of teaching and learning and the global themes identified in the three studies persistently came up in those considerations. More importantly, an opportunity to consider teachers’ experience of working with underachievers cross-culturally created even a stronger case of identifying invariant themes of the experience.

Another way the research team used to describe the experience of teachers was to prepare a “psychological essence” – a relatively brief description of the experience as if all participants talked in one voice. These descriptions, developed for each study, were based upon the words of the participants and represented the global themes and their relevant ground themes. In the presentation of each of the three studies, the findings are first presented in the form of a psychological essence and then as themes. A variation on such a description for the South African study was presented in national and international presentations and in a chapter of the book *Research in Education in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East, Book V: Undertaking Educational Challenges in the 21st Century* (Eds. C. Sunal & K. Mutua).

Upon completing of the interpretation of the South African and Russian data, the first comparison of the thematic structures took place. The research team compared the global and ground themes and then supporting quotes to identify differences and similarities. When the interpretation of the U.S. data was completed, the research team then compared the global and ground themes, their meanings, and the meanings of the supporting quotes across all three studies.

To ensure the reliability of findings – whether someone else would identify the same thematic structure - preliminary results of one series of interviews (South African interviews) were presented to an interdisciplinary research group. To ensure the validity of the findings – whether the thematic structure reflects teachers’ experience – I also obtained feedback on findings from the participants in each study.

2.2.6. Obtaining Feedback from the Participants

Feedback from the participants was obtained in three different ways. The South African teachers were contacted in the fall of 2003 via e-mail with a request to look at the findings and to express their opinion. I received a response from four of nine participants. These teachers expressed agreement with the overall thematic structure and provided some additional comments. Those comments were further incorporated in the description of the South African teachers’ experience.

The American teachers were contacted in the fall of 2006. Three focus groups were conducted and seven of nine participants participated in the meetings. These teachers also largely agreed with the overall thematic structure of the experience and provided some comments on the findings. These comments were incorporated in the final description of the American teachers’ experience.

The Russian teachers were contacted in the spring of 2007. Three teachers of seven provided their feedback on the findings in a phone conversation. These teachers agreed with the overall thematic structure of the experience and provided additional feedback. I also shared the findings of the study with one teacher who did not participate in the study. She agreed that the thematic structure reflected her experience. All teacher comments were incorporated in the description of the Russian teachers' experience. The three different ways in which the feedback was obtained is one of the limitations of the present research project.

2.2.7. Disseminating the Results

The results of various aspects of the four studies were presented at American Educational Research Association (AERA) meetings in 2004 (San-Diego, CA), 2005 (Montreal), 2006 (San-Francisco, CA), and 2007 (Chicago, IL). Additionally the results were presented at International Association for Cognitive Education and Psychology (IACEP) meetings in 2003 (Seattle, WA) and 2005 (Durham, England). The feedback received in those meetings helped me to refine findings and facilitated further thinking.

Chapter 3

I want to make a difference in their lives

I work with children and for so many years I wouldn't do this if I didn't want to. So, I am here and yes, I really want to make a change in the lives of the children that I work with (Harriet, a speech therapist).

The commitment of the South African teachers to make a difference in lives of their students was admirable. The interviews with South African teachers were conducted in September and October of 2002, when the children who were born in 1994, the year apartheid was abolished, just started or were just about to start school. Who were those children? This is how George, a teacher from a township (a town in the outskirts of a metropolitan area created for Black South African workers during apartheid) responded to the very first request to share his experience of working with underachievers:

Well, I tried different learning strategies and see if I can improve their learning. But I must, however, state that due to the social conditions it is very challenging. When I refer to social conditions, you cannot get material across to a hungry child. You cannot get material that you really want to across to a child that comes from a dysfunctional family.

Below are the words of Cathy, an occupational therapist in a former all-White school, in her response to the interviewer's request if she had anything else to share:

Cathy: (silence). I've, the only thing I can still share with you is that I still feel that, that White kids that I'm working with are very privileged. I compare them to...or that my situation to the situation that is telling myself in the mixtures of pain when you work with those people, it is just terrible. It is just terrible. You know, so that the kids that I see are so privileged. You know when you go into those schools; you've got 60 kids in a classroom. About 20 of them would have so low muscle tone. They can't even hold a pencil. They can't even sit on a chair. There is no therapy for those children. So, these White kids are really privileged. So, what is a solution, you know?

The students that our participants were working with were very different. Some were Whites while others were Black South Africans, Colored (people of mixed races) or Indian/Asians. Some of them came from families that enjoyed standards of living compared to Western countries, while others came from a very impoverished environment.

The current educational reforms are a part of a larger social and political transformation. The aim of these reforms is to ensure that all students have equal access to quality education. To grasp the degree of challenge that the reforms are trying to address, it is critical to recognize that the present-day reality for many Black South Africans has not changed; the world of poverty and social separation is still evident in students' lives today.

3.1. Historical Background of Current Educational Reforms in South Africa

Currently the population of South Africa is 44.8 million people, with 79 % - Black African, 9.6% White, 8.9 % Colored, and 2.5% Indian/Asian. The population growth rate is -0.46% (negative) and 5.3 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. South Africa has eleven official languages. While English is the official language of services and commerce, only 8.2% of South Africans speak English at home. At the same time 23.8% of South Africans consider Zulu their native language, followed by Xhosa – 17.6%, Afrikaans – 13.3%, Sepedi - 9.4%, Setswana – 8.2%, Sesotho – 7.9%, Xitsonga – 4.4%, others – 7.2% (World Fact Book, 2007, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sf.html>).

Apartheid became the official policy of the government in 1948. Several laws had been put into place to establish the superior position of the Whites vis-à-vis other

racial groups. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 was “by far the most important [laws] and by far the most deadly in its effect” (Huddleston as cited in Clark & Worger, 2004, p. 48). According to Christie and Collins (1985), “the provisions of the Bantu Education Act leave little doubt that central control was to be the springboard for educational policies to contribute towards the reproduction of black labour in a stable form” (p. 171). The act brought all educational institutions under the state control and enforced racial segregation. All aspects of school functioning – management, curriculum, teacher resources, and maintenance – became a matter of state control.

Other measures of Bantu Education included racial segregation of higher education, the development of secondary schooling in homelands in order to remove Black youths from urban areas, and a further diversification in Black reserves along tribal lines. The policy of establishing “homelands” or foreign states for Africans based on their tribal origins was particularly promoted in the 1960s. As a result, over 3.5 million people were forcefully removed over the period of the 1950s to the mid 1980s (Clark & Worger, 2004, p.65).

Governance and administration of education was complex and consisted of 18 racially and ethnically separate structures. The education for Whites, Coloreds and Asians/Indians was a matter of three respective houses of parliament. Education for Black Africans residing in homelands fell under the responsibility of homeland departments whereas education for Black Africans in urban areas was the responsibility of The Department of National Education. Weber (2002) described the complexity of educational governing:

Despite the decentralizing features and tensions, all the 18 departments were tied to the overarching apartheid constitutional dispensation and through the centralized allocation of finance. The Department of National Education, formed in 1984, coordinated the different departments at the top, except those of the 'self-governing' and 'independent' homelands'. In apparent contradiction to the centralization at this level, decentralization characteristics persisted... in practice policy functions were uncoordinated, chaotic and wastefully duplicated because of the proliferation of many interdependent committees within the bureaucracy (p. 619 – 620).

Dramatic differences in budgetary provisions of schools for Whites and Blacks furthered the inferior conditions of Black education. According to Davenport and Saunders's data (2000), "in 1948 each white child cost the state 6.2 times as much as each African, 5.8 times as much in 1982, and 4.5 times in 1989" (p.674). Nearly all White teachers had a high school diploma and one third had degrees while only 2.45 % of African teachers had degrees, only 16.09% passed Standard Ten (or Grade Twelve), only 62.9% passed Standard Eight, and 18.56% passed Standard Six (Davenport & Saunders, 2000, p. 674).

In 1989 teacher per student ratios were 1:19 in White schools, 1:22 in Indian schools, 1:23 in Colored schools, and 1:41 in African schools (Hofmeyer and Buckland as cited in Fataar, p. 78, 1995). In 1991 literacy rates were 30% among Black Africans, 60% among Colored, 82% among Indian, and 97% among Whites (the Population Census of 1991 as cited in Fataar, 1995, p.78). The statistics of Black schools enrollment during 1982-94 were not stable and the high school graduation (matriculation) exams pass rate between 1982 and 1986 was just under 50% (Davenport & Saunders, 2000, p. 676). Although in the 70s' and 80's schooling for Blacks expanded, it only included primary level and did not lead to the improvement of its quality (Fataar, 1995).

Schools in homelands and townships became places of resistance to the oppressing policy. One of the most prominent movements of Black Africans was the uprising in Soweto in 1976, a densely populated township in the Johannesburg area, in a protest against using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. The riot led to the deaths of 174 Africans and two Whites and was followed by a year of confrontations, in which 575 people were killed and 2,400 wounded (Barbarin, 2001). As a result of the Soweto riot, 350 schools for Blacks were destroyed in 1976-77, “and the 294 suffered a similar fate in 1985 – 86 in the African residential areas alone” (Davenport & Saunders, 2000, p. 675) It was becoming evident that resolute changes were inevitable.

The end of apartheid came in 1990, when President Frederick de Klerk put an end to the banning of the African National Congress, a leading party in the struggle against the apartheid, released its leader Nelson Mandela from prison, and banned apartheid laws. The first elections were held on May 9, 1994 and led to the establishment of the Government of National Unity. Restructuring education was one of the priorities of the new government, which expressed its commitment to non-discrimination, democracy, and a unitary system of education and redress.

3.2. Current Educational Reforms in South Africa

The Constitution of 1996 and the South African School Act of 1996 provided a foundation for developing a new system of school organization, governance, and funding. The new policies include racial integration of all schools, unified governance of education on the national level and granting more authority to local levels, implementation of a new national curriculum based on an Outcome Based Education (OBE) philosophy, and the abolishment of corporal punishment.

This transformation of the educational system takes place in challenging socio-economic conditions. The situation is particularly difficult in former homelands and townships. Nearly 16% of school age children are not in school as a result of poverty, inability to afford school fees when schools require it, early pregnancy, lack of transportation, and the necessity of some school-age children to work in order to supplement family income. The drop out rate remains high and out of 100 students in grade 1 only 52 will reach grade 12. The high teacher student ratio, inadequate teaching resources, and the breakdown of the culture of teaching and learning are the prominent characteristics of Black schools (Christie, 1998; Spren & Vally, 2006).

Under the apartheid policy there was no national curriculum. Curricula developed for White schools were further utilized and modified by other departments of education. The Outcome-Based-Education philosophy (OBE) became the foundation for what was formally called Curriculum 2005 (also referred to as the OBE curriculum). This curriculum is aimed at overcoming drastic differences in the formerly segregated apartheid curriculum and to give all students an opportunity to be life-long learners. The implementation of Curriculum 2005 started in 1998 and by the year 2005 all general education grades were expected to adopt it (Sedibe, 1998).

Cross, Mungadi, and Rouhani (2002) described new curriculum as “a paradigm shift from content-based teaching and learning to an outcome based one. It also marks a departure from ‘fundamental pedagogics’ (a racially-based prescribed set of learning objectives) to progressive pedagogy and learner-centered teaching and learning strategies” (p. 178 – 179). Some scholars, however, raised concerns about the potential of OBE to bring desirable changes. Jansen (1998), for example, pointed out that the

innovation was doomed to fail “because this policy is being driven in the first instance by political imperatives which have little to do with realities of the classroom life” (p. 2).

Jansen pointed out ten reasons why OBE was an inadequate curriculum for transforming South African education: (1) it has complex and confusing language that puzzled even educational experts; (2) it has the flawed assumption that curriculum changes initiate economic growth; (3) it has the flawed assumptions about lived experiences of schools; (4) it has the incompatibility of pre-determined outcomes with the values of a democratic society, the processes of critical thinking and creativity; (5) it values the product of learning over the process and views teachers as merely non-critical implementers of reforms; (6) it ignores the issue of values and the question of what is the value of education; (7) it has complicating management that affects teachers; (8) it values outcomes over content and avoids the issue of what comprises the content of South African curriculum; (9) it has an absence of a fiscal base or political will to implement the necessary re-engineering of the education system; and (10) it has the lack of developed assessment systems.

Rensburg (as cited in Cross et al., 2002) pointed out that in the development of Curriculum 2005 the theoretical underpinnings were overlooked and, as a result, some important questions were neglected: What is general education? What is the curriculum of the past? What is the curriculum of the future? How does learning take place? How do we organize knowledge to improve learning? How do we deliver knowledge? (p. 177 – 178).

After its announcement in 1997, Curriculum 2005 “soon became the object of much controversy and contestation and culminated in a crisis with the school system” (p.

172). Schools in Black communities that were anticipated to benefit from it the most turned out to be in the least favorable conditions of adopting new policies. As a result, “the OBE policy of Curriculum 2005 has in many respects widened the divide between well-resourced and poor schools” (Todd & Mason, 2005, p.231)

In response to this crisis, the Department of Education appointed a Policy Review Committee in 2000. The work of the Committee, however, did not lead to re-examining the underlying principals of the policy. Cross et al. noted:

From its brief, the Review Committee was not expected to do away with Curriculum 2005 or to question its approach (OBE) and basic assumptions....It was primarily concerned with addressing what has been perceived as an implementation crisis and proposing measures to deal with it (p. 183).

Suggested changes included: strengthening teacher preparation and preparing a necessary cadre for on-site teacher training, producing learner support materials, especially textbooks; relaxing the pace of implementation; reorganizing and reinforcing curriculum function on the Department of Education and local levels; and phasing out Curriculum 2005 and phasing in Curriculum 21. While the government endorsed most of the recommendations of the Committee, the name of the policy – Curriculum 2005- stayed the same. Cross et al. commented:

Given the nature of the recommendations, this was not just a matter of semantics. It indeed reflected a major surgery on the existing curriculum approach and content. The question that this raises is how Government can address major policy shifts without giving the impression that it is for another major policy departure, which could certainly become more disruptive than the existing curriculum. This highlights the fact that very often in educational reforms political concerns are made to prevail over pedagogical concerns in order to mediate conflicting interests in the political domain (p. 186).

Characterizing the scope of reforms in South Africa, Brook Napier (2004) noted, “nowhere... is change completely absent” and “the most valid assessment of outcomes to date might be articulated as some degree of transformed schooling everywhere” (p. 70). As recent surveys showed, education remains high on the list of priorities of the South African people. Responding to the survey on the problems not resolved since dismantling of apartheid, education was mentioned fifth, preceded only by unemployment, crime and violence, housing, and sanitation (Brook Napier, 2004).

Samoff (2003) pointed out that in the analysis of reforms it is essential to consider two roles of education, as reproductive (or instrumental) and as transformative. The former prepares for the world of work whereas the latter “enables people to understand society in order to change it” (p. 432). When the instrumental role of education is emphasized, as is the case in the contemporary South Africa, the curriculum revolves “much more about information to be acquired than around developing strategies and tools for acquiring that information, generating ideas or crafting critiques” (p. 432).

Commenting on the situation in South Africa, Samoff noted:

The rhetoric of liberation and empowerment notwithstanding, the commonly held view is that education must enable Africa to run faster as it tries to catch up with those who are ahead rather than forge new paths or transform the international economy and Africa’s role in it (p. 441).

The challenges that South African educators face are hard to overestimate. Some of their students come from families whose standards of living are comparable to people in developed countries; other students survive in environments of poverty, food deprivation, and extreme living conditions. What was the experience of teachers of working with underachieving students in these types of environments?

3.3. Participants of the Study

Nine South African educators participated in this study. The participants were recommended by South African colleagues as highly successful teachers. All participants, but one, were White female teachers. One participant was a male teacher. All participants worked in racially diverse educational settings. Five participants were from a large metropolitan area and worked in formerly White schools. At the time of the interviews, their schools were racially integrated and more racially and ethnically diverse students were entering their classrooms. The four other participants worked in smaller towns or a township and also taught racially diverse groups of students. The work experience of teachers ranged from 16 to 27 years. The description of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the South African participants

Names	Areas of expertise and experience
1. Ellen	Speech therapist in a historically White, currently racially integrated school for children with learning disabilities ((elementary through high-school age) Number of students - one-on-one sessions or a group of 10 – 15 students Years of experience – 8
2. Harriet	Speech therapist in a historically White, currently racially integrated school for children with learning disabilities (elementary through high-school age) Number of students - one-on-one sessions or a group of 10 – 15 students Years of experience – 26
3. Evelyn	Occupational therapist Private services in a historically White school (elementary through high school) She worked with students in one-on-one sessions Years of experience – 23

Table 1. Continued.

Names	Areas of expertise and experience
4. Carol	Art teacher - therapist in a school for the deaf (elementary through high school) Years of experience – 25
5. Cathy	Occupational therapist Private services in a regular historically White school (elementary through high school) She worked with students in one-on-one sessions. Years of experience – 27
6. Alice	Special education high school teacher (age of 14-18 years) Population of students: 45% Blacks, 35% Coloreds, 15% Whites, and 5 % Indians She taught mathematics and Afrikaans as a second language Many students of her school failed regular school programs because they were taught in English, their second or third language Number of students – 18 Years of experience – 22, as a special education teacher – 6
7. Sally	Teacher in a regular school She taught 5 th grade and had multicultural population of students - Blacks and Coloreds Number of students – 33 Years of experience – 16
8. Mary	Former special education teacher and administrator at the time of the interview Teacher – student ratio in schools that she worked is 1 : 45 – 50 Students in those schools were not always in the grade corresponding to their age: 33% are overage, 33% under age, and 33% are right age for the class. Diversity of languages was one of the serious issues in her area Years of experience - 30
9. George	Regular schoolteacher in a township Teacher-student ratio is 1: 50 Years of experience – 16

The first seven participants were expert users of the Cognitive Education Advantage (CEA) educational approach (Greenberg, 2000). One participant, Mary, received training in CEA but was appointed to an administrative position after the training. One more participant, George, was attending a seminar in CEA at the time of the interview.

The CEA approach provides students with knowledge and vocabulary about cognitive processes and affective-motivational states and helps them construct personally relevant learning strategies. The knowledge about cognition, affect and motivation is presented as Building Blocks of Thinking (cognition) and Tools for Learning (affect and motivation) (Table 2).

The CEA approach is based on Feuerstein's theory of Mediated Learning Experience (Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, & Miller, 1980). Mediated learning is defined as an interaction between the child and a more knowledgeable individual in which "stimuli emitted by the environment are transformed by a 'mediating' agent... This mediating agent, guided by his intentions, culture, and emotional investment, selects and organizes the world of stimuli for the child" (p. 16). The theory emphasizes both the need for being sensitive to student learning needs and personal meaning and the importance of transcending an immediate experience to apply newly constructed knowledge elsewhere. Since the CEA approach is content free, all participants successfully integrated it in their practices and shared their experiences of using CEA before their interviews.

Table 2. The CEA Building Blocks of Thinking and Tools of Learning

Categories of Building Blocks of Thinking	Building Blocks of Thinking
1. Approaching the Learning Experience	Exploration Planning Expression
2. Making meaning of the learning experience	Working Memory Making Comparisons Getting the Main Idea
3. Confirming the learning experience	Precision and Accuracy Space and Time Concepts Selective Attention Problem Identification
Categories of Tools of Learning	Tools of Learning
1. Understanding feelings within the learning experience	Inner Meaning Feeling of Challenge Awareness of Self-change Feeling of Self-competence
2. Motivating behavior within the learning experience	Self-regulation Goal Orientation Self-development Sharing Behavior

3.4. South African Teachers' Experience of Working with Underachieving Students

The South African teachers worked in very diverse educational settings and with very diverse population of students. Listening to their stories, however, common aspects of their experience were noticeable and were woven together in a coherent narrative.

3.4.1. Psychological Essence

I really want to make a difference in the lives of the children I work with. My students have a lot of stumbling blocks that make it difficult for them to learn, to grow, and to develop. They have a history of failure. Underachievement is a very emotional experience. However, I believe that all my students can achieve. My biggest task as a therapist is to show them how they can overcome stumbling blocks, how they can turn them into stepping-stones.

When I start working with a child, I look first at the whole child: What does this child need? What is his family situation? How does he feel about school? What is his problem? I try to involve parents and other teachers in what is going on in the therapy process. Their support is very important for students' success.

I must carefully build a safe and caring place in the classroom, with space for everyone to develop. I start from the level where students can experience success. I do everything possible to motivate, support and encourage them. Yet, I don't stagnate, I challenge them, extend their abilities and put their ceiling higher and higher. With CEA I have the tools my students need to become successful and independent learners. They become excellent mediators, they take these tools, they teach others, they go home and teach their parents, they explore, and they ask questions. As a result, they achieve and feel good about themselves. I feel that implementation of cognitive education approaches in the classroom is a new way of life for me as a teacher.

Each student and each year is a challenge for me. When I experience a challenge, I try my best, I make efforts, I work hard to find new ways and means of teaching. It makes me reflect on and improve my practice. Challenge is a positive force in teaching. But I do not only teach, I learn from my students. I have to be in sync with my class, be ready to change in a split second to go from teacher or therapist to mother, father and even policemen. While I can become frustrated with the many parts of the system that interfere with our success, I love the challenge of helping my students.

Working with my students is a extremely rewarding and satisfying experience. I feel that I am doing something right, that I build a better human being and a life-long learner, and none of this is accidental. It is a joy and privilege to work with my students. The results of using a cognitive education approach are amazing. I have a happy feeling deep inside my gut when a student tells me that, for the first time in his life, he feels clever now.

I really want to make a difference in students' lives. Governments, education department, teachers – we all must pull together to enhance learning opportunities for our

students. Only if we work together – Whites, Browns, Blacks, Indians - and learn from each other, can South Africa regain the status of a developed country.

3.4.2. Thematic Structure

The thematic structure of the South Africa teachers' experience includes a ground theme and four global themes.

Ground Theme: *I want to make a difference in their lives*

Theme 1: *They have potential, but they don't know about it*

1.1. *They've got to handle so many stumbling blocks*

1.2. *They can all achieve!*

Theme 2: *Let's go and find out*

2.1. *Look at every aspect of his functioning*

2.2. *Then I start to give them a safe place*

2.3. *You have to change your direction within a split second*

2.4. *With Blocks and Tools I see a light!*

2.5. *You become a mother, a father, a policeman... depending on what is needed*

Theme 3: *It was very challenging – but it is also a joy and privilege*

3.1. *I really struggled*

3.2. *It makes you actually grow with the kids*

Theme 4: *The results were amazing*

4.1. *That was a miracle!*

4.2. *Miss, this is the first time in my life that I feel that I am clever*

Ground Theme: *I want to make a difference in their lives*

The determination to “make a difference” in the lives of their students was the driving force of our South African teachers. The title of the ground theme is a combination of George and Harriet’s words about their work. George extensively used the expression “to make a difference” in his interview. For example, he stated: “We [teachers] really want to make a difference and get right into the problem.” Harriet talked about making a change in the lives of her students:

I work with children and for so many years I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t want to. So, I am here and yes, I really want to make a change in the lives of the children that I work with.

The teachers experienced making a difference as a process of growing together with students, as building something. Carol expressed it: “And I could share that growth, that development from seven-year-old to an eighteen, - nineteen, - twenty-year-old in my class.” Alice stated:

It is wonderful. It makes you actually grow with the kids. It is a little bit of growth in every child is actually a huge growth of yourself.... Because it is something that you can see, you have been a part of that child developing and it is not accidental, it is your work ...you know that you have made a difference in the child’s life...you are actually part of building something else.

The teachers experienced making a difference as giving their students a chance to succeed. This is how George described his effort to make changes in the lives of students who face the reality of poverty, gangs, drugs, and unemployment:

I’ve got pupils that have been through the system. That particularly, they made a success of their life. Although the gangster element was there, the hunger was too, but they’ve made it. It was that something there happened to them. I do a lot of development work myself. For example, I attend many courses, conflict resolution, mediation, new linguistic programming and now approaching Tools [referring to the CEA Tools for

Learning]. So, I put it all in and see what I can do. If I can save one - that's fine. But I would like to save more.

Alice, empowered with knowledge of cognitive education, compared a teacher to a doctor:

I think I can keep comparing [a teacher] to a doctor at an accident scene ... and the person, he actually stops bleeding and the heart starts [beating] and everything... after they see that the person is back to normal and even better. This is actually... somebody actually died emotionally and because of the lack of success and support and help for direction in life and suddenly I've got the Tools [referring to the CEA Tools for Learning] now.

The effort to do everything possible to help students change academically and personally was salient in the interviews. The teachers shared many stories of how they took initiative and did whatever was needed in order to put a change process in motion. The teachers' determination to make a difference was based on their firm belief that all students can succeed in learning and life. The theme *They have potential, but they don't know about it* captured the teachers' perceptions of their students.

Theme 1: *They have potential, but they don't know about it*

Alice's words "What I DO know ... they HAVE potential but they do not KNOW about it" gave the name of the theme. The theme helped to understand how the teachers perceived their students. An individual student with his/her aspirations, needs, and past histories was the center of the teachers' attention. Participants perceived their students as capable of doing more and at the same time struggling with many problems, or "stumbling blocks," as Harriet described them. Two sub-themes appeared: (1.1) *They've got to handle so many stumbling blocks*; and (1.2) *They can all achieve!*

Sub-theme 1.1. *They've got to handle so many stumbling blocks*

Harriet used a metaphor of “stumbling blocks” to describe students’ difficulties in learning. She put it this way:

They can be underachievers because they have got to handle so many stumbling blocks. I mean there is not just one or two. All these stumbling blocks, they’ve got somehow to overcome. And I think they give up. And they just don’t try anymore. That is how I see them. And when I say stumbling block, I refer to the things that make it difficult for them to learn.

Negative emotions and the lack of motivation were the most prominent “stumbling blocks” of underachievers. The teachers talked about underachievement as “something emotional” and students appeared to them as “insecure,” “very negative,” “slightly depressed,” “passive,” “not interested,” “children that looked down,” “children that are obviously not comfortable, obviously not happy.”

Underachievement as a fear of failure stood out for many teachers. This is how Sally described her students: “They’ve got the sense of failure, ‘I can’t do it. I am no good.’ All that self-talk has been going on for quite some time.” Evelyn described one of her students: “He was really failing, even with his negative thoughts, even one said, ‘You know, this child is a major problem.’ ... But he was also not coping on an emotional level with expectations and he had no motivation.” Anxiety and fear of failure stood out for Harriet:

I think that underachieving is something emotional... it’s not believing. It’s anxiety...it’s, I’ll rather not make it, not being a failure, you know. I think that’s what stands out with underachieving children. They look passive, when you look at them, they are passive. They are not interested.... But I think, the base of it ... is this anxiety and fear, fear of failing.

Repeated failure in the past was related to another stumbling block, frustration and not believing in one's abilities. This is how Ellen perceived her students' frustration: "Whatever you ask them, they just cry and these tears just stream out because of frustration and the fact that they don't even try because they so often failed in the past." Sally's experience was similar: "What stands out is frustration, the child who creates frustration." Students' not believing in themselves was manifested as "the kids with no self-esteem, with no knowledge, with no will power" (Alice), "they do not want to do anything" (Alice), and "they give up" (Harriet).

According to Harriet, because of giving up and not trying, underachievement becomes a way of life. For her, underachievement stood out as a choice: "But that's a choice. You got to work all. It's a way of living. A way of life.... I think ...nothing is easy. Everything...you have to learn. And it takes a little bit of effort and it's a choice to put in that effort not to be underachieving."

Impulsiveness was another stumbling block that stood out for the teachers in their students. This is how Sally described one of her students: "He is totally underachieving in Grade Four. That is dreadful. Very impulsive." Harriet shared: "They just can't control themselves, they react before they think." Sally described how impulsivity disrupts students' learning process: "Because of impulsivity they take a jump into the things and then they afterward realize that it should not have been this big." Sally also described underachievement, as "the basics are not there to work with." And further she explained what she meant by basics: "Just basic thinking concepts are not there, what I am actually doing at school, they have no clue."

Fluctuation in performance was another stumbling block for underachieving students. For Ellen, it was difficult to accept that even though students could do certain things, they did not perform them consistently over the time and over tasks:

It is a symptom of learning disabled children that they fluctuate in their performance. So, maybe that's...what is so difficult to accept, that you know that they can do certain things and yet they don't display that behavior or their MASTERY of that skill the one day, and the next day you go there and without even much support, they display that skill, or they display the mastery of that skill.

Sally shared Ellen's experience that working with underachieving is a "very fluid situation," when after intervention students come back to the therapy with new difficulties encountered in the class. She described it: "Once the child has reached the decision ... he is coping again, back to the classroom, there is another problem, and he can be coming again [to the therapist]. So, it is a very fluid situation."

The teachers emphasized that socio-economic conditions made the students' progress in school and the teachers' work particularly challenging. Sally put it: "It is a lot of outside factors that are causing this class not to buckle down and actually do what they could do." The influence of the immediate societal context on learning was particularly prominent in George's description of his work with students from a township: "There is a lack of parks for the pupils to play [in]. There's a lack of sport fields in the area. There's a lack of health departments in the area. One clinic servicing about plus or minus 200,000 people, which is not conducive for living conditions."

And further he stated:

You cannot get material that you really want to get across to a child that comes from a dysfunctional family. ... What I mean is the father is for x amount of years in jail. The mommy is an alcoholic. They must share

two-bedroom house with eighteen people sleeping there. And, then, of course, you have your gangster element and the drug element.

Cathy described how family circumstances and living arrangements interfered in student's learning:

She had reading problems. She...struggled with mathematics. She had low muscle tone, she had everything. ... She had a problem at the lower level of her brain with integration of central information. But she was a child that was deprived... because of her circumstances. She stayed with an aunt in the afternoon, who didn't give her any attention. The mother came home at 7:00 o'clock in the evening and she wasn't prepared to work with this child because she was too tired and also she didn't have the skills to work with the child. So, she wasn't really interested with what was going on with Natalie.

Ellen was aware of the students' home realities and was wondering how her therapy fitted into family's priorities. She described it:

Sometimes one feels that a poor child has to battle against so many OTHER circumstances at home... that you feel that I'm doing speech and language therapy, but is that really what I should be doing... that's not a priority in that house. They're battling to maybe EAT, to maybe get one plate of food, so ... you FEEL that you're giving therapy, but is it really benefiting? It's benefiting, but is it really the priority at this stage? For ME, it's a priority, but it might not be for the family.

Other teachers shared how school underachievement was a result of low expectations and labeling. In Cathy's experience, "She, [the mother], was treating him as a baby and he was actually reacting as a baby and that is why he presented as sort of a retarded child."

While aware of students' "stumbling blocks," the teachers also viewed them as "smart and capable," "clever," and "capable of doing more." This is how Harriet perceived one of her students:

We've got another little boy. ...He is really mentally perhaps mentally handicapped. We're not yet sure, but he is a hard worker. He's always

trying to achieve something. He's always trying to work. Now, perhaps, he's going to school for mentally retarded children next year. But at this stage, I cannot make this recommendation for sure, because I want to see what's he's going to do in our grade one class, because he's a WORKER. He's going to try. He's going to achieve. He's gotten, hasn't got mental abilities but he IS going to do.

Teachers' belief in students' potential was at the foundation of their work. Their intuition and years of experience combined made them confident that any student can achieve. This aspect of the teachers' experience was captured in the sub-theme *They can all achieve!*

Sub-theme 1.2. *They can all achieve!*

Responding to the request to tell about students who were not achieving as much as they could, Cathy said: "Well, it's all my students actually. I think they actually can all achieve! They can all achieve!" She also stated: "But most of the children, who come to me, do well in therapy. I've never had a child to really cancel therapy with me in twenty seven years or withdraw from therapy or who did not want to continue with therapy!" Cathy's belief in student potential was combined with high expectations: "It was a shock to her [the mother] to see how much I was expecting of her little baby (laughing). But she very quickly realized that he was capable of doing all these things that I expected of him."

Describing one of her students, Cathy said that for her it was an "intuitive feeling that he's capable of doing more;" she was "very confident that he could do it well." Later, she described how switching into a more mediational style of teaching helped her see the potential: "I immediately realized that this child was actually capable of doing more than he was presenting."

Harriet's belief in the students' abilities was based on many years of experience. She commented in her feedback on the preliminary findings: "Yes, more than once my learners surprised me. I see it as a miracle. As I get older in the business, I just know that you must never underestimate a child." Harriet saw her role as a therapist "to help them [the students] overcome, to see these stumbling blocks as stepping-stones." Ellen shared that her "biggest task as a therapist" was to "get them [the students] to where they can start to believe in themselves and start believing that they can actually do something right in that they don't have to fear further failure." Harriet emphasized that not only a teacher, but also the students themselves must believe in their potential and put forth effort to make progress: "And our children have to realize that they can overcome a stumbling block. ... It's not something they have to realize, they must really believe in it ... it must make them feel, YES, I can do it."

The teachers' learning about students' "stumbling blocks" and potential took place in the process of teaching or "doing" therapy. They were always aware of each particular student during the lesson and were open to learn more about him or her all the time. This awareness is nicely captured in Harriet's words: "This one boy, he is not an underachiever any more... I hear his voice 'rrrr.' ...I can hear his voice between the two, other children voices." Evelyn's feedback to the preliminary findings is an example of the teachers' awareness of the need to be open to their students:

I know and I firmly believe that children/all learners have different minds, different strength, talents, learning styles, thinking, etc. My job and passion is to find "the key, the magic button or the missing link" to start the change process in every learner. Sometimes you must let go of everything you have learned and used in the past and look at a new referral with totally new eyes. It is very important not to start off with

assumptions and/or reading files/reports of previous intervention that can block you to be open to a learner.

What did the teachers do to help their students overcome stumbling blocks? How did they find “the magic button” to help their students achieve? The theme *Let’s go and find out* answered those questions.

Theme 2: *Let’s go and find out*

The name of this theme came from my interview with Carol:

They say, “What? What? Why?”...and I could come in and say, “This is the reason why, this is what it is. I don’t know what it is. Let’ go and find out. Who, do you think, may know? Where did you see it?”

Five sub-themes emerged as teachers described different aspects of their work with underachieving students: (2.1) *Look at every aspect of his functioning*; (2.2) *Then I start to give them a safe place*; (2.3) *You have to change your direction within a split second*; (2.4) *With Blocks and Tools I see a light!*; (2.5) *You become a mother, father, a policeman ... depending what is needed*.

Sub-theme 2.1. *Look at every aspect of his functioning*

The teachers considered looking “at the whole child” or getting a bigger picture of the learning situation to be a starting point of their work. Evelyn shared: “You know, I have to systematically look at every aspect of his functioning to say what the starting point for us is?” Alice emphasized: “I have to look for whatever the child needs, not only physically, mentally ... all aspects.” Cathy focused on the need to look at the whole picture: “The caring... for the child, not only the instructional way, and getting all this knowledge. A process of looking at the whole big picture.” Carol approached each student individually and was attentive to all aspects of his/her learning:

I firstly think, it is difficult to gauge what level one really wants them to be, because every child functions individually. So, first of all, I would look at the whole child. Is this child really enjoying what she is doing? Because if they are enjoying what they are doing, they are giving the best they can. So, that enjoyment element gives me an indication, Kathy is trying her best.

Looking at students' affect and motivation were the most frequently viewed aspects of a "big picture." Sally shared: "To be involved from the emotional side but also in the cognitive side." The need to know about students' motivation stood out for Evelyn: "I am trying to find out more about the way the child's thinking and also you know about the kind of how the child feels about school... Does he like coming to school? ... What is motivating in class?" And further she added: "In the first interview situation ... you kind of get quite a good indication of what you need to do. And what I kind of pick up what I need to do always includes looking at the child's motivation, and ... his attitude toward school."

The teachers' understanding of the importance of looking at "every aspect of students' functioning" is evident in the following examples. Ellen, for instance, knew that one of her students "had a way of frowning that you knew exactly he is not understanding." Mary was convinced about the need of including a student's native language in the instructional process. She put it:

Add the language to the class. Don't take it away. And learn to greet the child. Just greet the child. Say, "Thank you. Open your book"... learn basic languages of the other learner and give him time to tell you about their culture and their ways of doing things. And rather add it than take it away, excluding the child.

Alice was aware that some of her students come to class hungry. She stated: "if they need food, if they are hungry, I supply food." Ellen was aware of the need to be

sensitive to her students' needs in all levels, including their eating habits. She shared a story about one of her Xhosa students who had a hearing loss and a very poor receptive English language, that is, understanding of English. Ellen believed that it was important to include that students' native food in order to help her feel more comfortable at school. She described it:

She is a hostel learner, she lives in a hostel here.... She has to eat a menu that's a very WESTERNIZED menu.... If she doesn't drink tea, or coffee, or a glass of milk, the other children get that everyday, give her [the name of an Afrikaans drink] if that is what she's used to. Buy that for her and let her have it in the hostel. If [we] must cater for the learning difference ... if we have to differentiate with that, we must differentiate for the eating habits also. Different people. I cannot see it as doing in on the one level and ignoring it on the other level.

The situation that stood out for Evelyn was the one when she helped her student address some practical problems, so that he could make a progress in learning:

And that specific day I ended up giving him a flip file to organize his work....I ended up giving him two dictionaries... I mean it is one way teaching them skills or doing therapy or helping them to think better, but I mean if they don't have what they need, you know, that's a practical problem too.... It is not that you have to give them everything, but in some cases you have to kind of maybe do something in between. Till he can get a dictionary and return mine, you know those kinds of things.

Participants emphasized the meaning of one-on-one interactions. Evelyn shared:

And when he's in individual, one-on-one situation, he's functioning, I mean, I could communicate with him, he responds, he understands me. The teachers are saying he shouldn't be in grade eight, he should still be in primary school. He's not coping but when you, you know, one-on-one individual situation.... I mean he's workable, you know, he's workable and you are getting enough from him.

For Ellen, an individual intervention was critical for initiating changes in one of her students with a hearing loss:

But the first time I saw this child, I thought, “Oh, no, this is difficult!” His expressive language skills were intact, it was limited, but his pronunciation of words was terrible. He had very unclear speech, it made him very difficult for other people to understand.I got all the teachers together that were involved with him and said, “Look, I realize that he won’t be able to follow what you explain in the class. I know that you take lots of trouble, but I think we need individual intervention here.” And I said, “The way you can do it is by letting me have what he has to learn, I’ll explain it to him, I’ll read it to him, and I’ll get the mother involved.”

Looking at the whole child was inseparable from creating a safe atmosphere for learning. The teachers’ experiences of creating a safe place were captured in the sub-theme *Then I start to give them a safe place*.

Sub-theme 2.2. *Then I start to give them a safe place*

This is how Alice described the beginning of her work with underachievers:

I try to find out everything about them to help them, you know, overcome. So, this is the first. ... Even if they need food, if they are hungry, I supply food. And then I start actually to give them a safe place so that they can trust me and if I won their trust then I start working on their academic qualifications or what they need.

The need to create a safe and supportive environment clearly stood out for all of the teachers. Sally described what she does to create an emotionally positive atmosphere in her classroom:

I work a lot with the emotional side of my children. We, in the mornings, we have just a short time of “How are you? Anything wonderful you would like to share with us. ...About yesterday, it was very ordinary, for most it was very ordinary...” But so they come up and say “But I saw this flower. ...It has been getting lighter and lighter every morning since winter.” So, things like that. So, I work a lot of noticing with them as well, of being aware of what is going on around them, discuss those things....So, their feeling of well being in my class is very important. I am very strict on creating a safe atmosphere in my classroom. Don’t allow anybody to laugh at anybody else.

She also felt that the feeling of security is necessary for cognitive tasks: “I want them at all time to feel that they can dare to answer a question and then it is OK, and then we can go into reason.” Alice emphasized that a secure environment is critical for students to succeed: “If they feel secure in my class, they can do anything.” Carol shared how she introduced different aspects of art to help students feel secure: “If I do have a child with a learning problem, the subject matter, the activities that we do here, is therapeutic, so I don’t provide stressful situations.”

This is how Harriet described the support that she provided for her students:

I try everything to motivate them. Give them special attention, go to their desk, react positively when they do something and so I make them realize that I am observing them. ...I do not give up on them. I keep trying, keep motivating them. And when I find that they...do something well, I encourage them to do it again and again.

George emphasized that being positive with students is essential for their success:

I am very positively planned and it spills over to the pupils, you see.... How does it happen? They see that I interact with them.... I am doing the Tai Chi with them, you know.... Children know that I care and that I am positive and they want that.

A safe environment was associated with establishing connection, trust, and relationship with students. Evelyn expressed the need for building a trusting relationship in her feedback to the findings:

My learners at school and in my practice often share more with me than they share with their parents or teachers. When they are in trouble, failing or their parents and teachers are negative, critical, etc. They often only get support from me and they need it! Every child needs at least one person that will always believe in them and their potential to change, develop, and grow.

Paying attention to students and making them feel special were mentioned as the ways of establishing trusting relationships. Alice shared: “I spend a lot of time to let the

child feel that he is special to me ... special person and that he is able to do a lot and that he has the ability and that he has to believe in himself.” Harriet focused on “just that little special attention that they know you noticed them.” The relationship with the student stood out for Mary: “Oh, we have a fantastic relationship because he knew he could open up to me and talk to me.” And further she stated: “I loved, I loved him dearly.” Ellen wanted her students to know she is always ready to help them: “I said, you can come to me anytime.” Sally pointed out to the need for establishing relationships at the beginning of the year:

At the beginning of the year, I’ve got to establish my relations. I’d love to just have them for a day in and a day out and then ... get them onto the level where I want them to be able to work together with each other, to understand each other, to understand how I work with them, and then I can go to another teacher.

Cathy shared how progress in the therapy was grounded in a special relationship with a student:

She loved me, she started hugging me and she was looking for me in the corridors. And ah, when I came, you know, in the mornings when I come to school she would wait for me, for my car to come. And then she would carry my things to a therapy room and she would hug me and she would try and be with me as much as possible. So, she really needed that time that I was giving her and she, I think she feels very accepted in there, in the therapy situation.

Sally emphasized the need to create a safe relationship not only between the student and the teacher, but also among students themselves, where there is “a lot of space for each other to develop, to call on each other, just giving the other person the amount of time that he needs.” To her, a trusting and cooperative relationship creates a support system that is necessary for success:

My picture is a collaborative, cooperative situation, where they are very goal-directed in what they are doing, lots of sharing behavior, collaboration comes through that support system. This is the task we have to do, forget about the competition and let's do the task, and ... it does not matter that you are better than me in drawing - you do the drawing, I'll do the dissection, I don't have to fight about who is doing the drawing, whatever the task is. A lot of space for each other to develop, to call on each other, just giving the other person the amount of time that he needs. They are so judgmental, so quick to put that person down.

The teachers emphasized the time that their students were able to spend in the supportive environment. Sally shared: "I'd love to have my children all day because that would create an opportunity to work at a particular thing until I feel we've reached a level and then go on to something different." Carol, an art teacher and therapist, considered that the length of time that she is able to spend with her students is critical to their progress: "And fortunately, in the art class you have time to mediate every situation."

Time also allowed her to get to know students better:

Because I have students from grade four through grade twelve, I KNOW them. I often make mistakes, because they change as well and I haven't detected the change or I wasn't sensitive to the change, but I have, I have an advantage over many other teachers who don't have them from grade four through grade twelve.

Ellen shared how giving one of her students enough time to express himself and creating success helped the student overcome underachievement:

He was never given enough time in any other place, they just concentrated on his oppositional behavior and didn't give him time to actually express that what he could express ... he was here for two years and he progressed lovely.

Creating a safe place was a necessary condition for encouraging students to take a chance and try to learn. The sub-theme *You have to change your direction within a split*

second provided a description of the teachers' perceptions of the teaching-learning process.

Sub-theme 2.3. *You have to change your direction within a split second*

The name of this sub-theme came from Carols' description of the dynamic in her classroom:

So...you have to be led, if you are working with children with special needs and children with problems, you have to be flexible, you have to think on your feet, and you have to change direction within a split second, and then you see that you are taking everyone with you. That's important to check if you are taking everyone along with you because especially in a group of children with learning disabilities or with problems, remedial children - you need remedial help.

The participants described the work with their students as continuous movement. They started their work on the level where students could experience success and then raised the "ceiling higher and higher," as Carol put it, and changed direction if necessary. Ellen emphasized: "So, everything has to be brought to what he knows in his experience, and then you can actually go from there." Harriet shared that in helping students "see stumbling blocks as stepping stones," she always gives "them something that [she knows] they can do." Alice believed that working in students' zone of proximal development, that is, working with students on a task that they can not accomplish independently but can accomplish in collaboration with others, was critical for helping students believe in their abilities and start working on their own:

I start on their level that they experience success. Just achieve success. In other words, keep going on their own....And this is what is very-very important that you have to start at the zone of proximal development. And even they have to be challenged but the most important thing is the zone of proximal development. It is a lot of work for a teacher. It is a lot of work because you start at a very late stage and a child that is actually

shattered in a lot of small little pieces and you have to get all those pieces together.

Carol expressed her belief in the need to be sensitive to students' present level of development:

I think you as facilitator must be so sensitive to a child's level of development, you must always challenge them, you must put this ceiling a little bit higher and higher and higher, but don't start from the twenty seventh floor, and...if you can manage that you will have far less experience in having a child saying, "I can't do it, I don't know where to start." If you know what level to come in ... you are assessing the same thing and you want a standard, is a standard you want to achieve, but you must know how to approach, when to approach, and ... the reason why you are approaching. This student must know.

The importance of asking students questions for identifying a starting point of intervention stood out for Evelyn. By asking questions Evelyn also conveyed to her students the sense of responsibility for learning:

I normally ask the children that come in, you know, "Look, how are things going? What is happening? You know, what do you need to do right now? Do you have any tests coming up? Is there anything that you feel is a problem at the moment?"... I said, "Look, what do you think we'll have to do now to get going? ...How would you become more prepared to cope with this exam? You know, there are some things I would like to help with, but there are some things you have to do on your own."

While sensitive to students' current level of understanding, the teachers were clearly aware of the need to set up goals for each child and work towards them. Cathy expressed it in the following words:

I've got to see the big picture. I've got short-term goals. I've got long-term goals. I've got visions for this child. ... I know these children not because only of the assessment but of my gut feeling of these children and ...I realize that it is a process of developing and growing all the time that they have got to go through. And even if it is...sometimes difficult for them, they feel so good about themselves if they come out at the end.

The need to extend students' abilities and to challenge them stood out for Carol. She described it: "So, then I structure her thinking, so that she does not assess herself high, on a high level for some other aspect, and then I start moving from what they have done to what I want them to do."

In the process of movement, the teachers, however, stayed sensitive to the student's level of understanding and made sure that learning was meaningful to them. Carol's awareness of a need to be sensitive to students' understanding was captured in the metaphors of being able to read "students' buzz," to be "in sync with your class" and "wide awake," and to have "sleeves up" for a different activity when a planned lesson did not work. This is how she expressed her awareness to change her teaching based on students' understanding:

Something that has happened is a buzz and you must learn to read them, and you are learning from them all the time and from that buzz what is happening at the moment, it is subjective, it has meaning for them. ... So, you've got to take all of the levels all the time and be in sync with your class. Today you are not leaving someone behind or boring Kathy to death by doing this. There always should be an element of challenge, for each and everyone, but then YOU, as a facilitator, must be wide awake and you must be so prepared that when you go into this activity, you have done so much mediation and worked with students for so long that you must know: this is not working, and then have something up your sleeve for the next one.

Evelyn believed in the importance of "being guided by the learners" and described her work as zooming. She put it: "Be guided by the learner, establish where the downfall is and zoom in there." In her view, the therapist's attention to how her students see the process of learning is necessary for helping them develop responsibility for their learning and build personally meaningful strategies. She described it:

“Well, tell me, what’s the problem? And why is it a problem?” And ... he started telling me... I think everything was correct what he was doing at that point in math. And I think, “Where is the problem?” ... He couldn’t put it in words but he could show me. ... And I said, “Okay, now let me see if...I would be able to help.”

Mary’s experience emphasized the importance of giving students time and place to discover their own strategies. She described it:

I feel I didn’t do anything. She discovered her own strategies. We gave her time to work. We never interfered while she thought and she had a purpose why she wanted to do it. It was one of the most amazing success stories.

An incident that stood out for Cathy was when she changed a medium of instruction in order to help her student make progress:

It was quite interesting that...she couldn’t talk but she could sing. ...So, I got her... to talk by, by music. ...By singing and we had a lot of music and rhyming...and music all the time to get her to talk and within three months she, she could talk and...in the new school moved to the top, top level of that school.

The importance of altering strategies was evident in Carol’s story when she switched into using the elements of drama in helping students learn about the layers of the earth:

I came to school one day thinking we are going to do a slice of earth and we are going to see the earth worms and the stones and the roots of the trees, and they are going to be like moles and they are going to draw.... So, these wonderful pictures, lovely drawings. Nothing happened. They haven’t had this hands-on experience and I could not take them there with words. So, I have just to throw out this whole idea and no drawing today. So, now we are moles, and we are crawling around acting like moles and we do moles live in the halls, and what did they see, they didn’t see very well, they are blind, but they smell very well.

The teachers also taught their students how to develop new strategies. Ellen shared a story when she taught a student to ask questions:

The teacher thinks you understand, but obviously when you write the test, you don't understand. So, she [the student] said that she's shy of her use of English language. I said, "Okay. Fine. I can understand that, but there's a way to get around this. You will have to while the teacher's reading, you will at least have to follow in your textbook. I know it's difficult, but you will have to then make a question mark or whatever mark you want to in your book of all the words that you don't understand.".... But at least I wanted to teach her, "You may ask. Okay, you don't want to ask *why* in the classroom... Fine, but then I'll speak to all the teachers, and ask them, they wouldn't mind, you can ask it after the class." And that's exactly what she did.

Participants shared their high value of teaching strategies related to cognitive education, which they believed made a shift in their teaching and students learning. The teachers' experiences of using cognitive education in their work were captured in the sub-theme *With Blocks and Tools I see a light!*

Sub-theme 2.4. *With Blocks and Tools I see a light!*

The participants were convinced that their expertise in cognitive education enhanced their ability to help students overcome underachievement. George was enthusiastic about applying the CEA approach in his school: "I am continuously looking for something so that I can enhance the learning process. ... Your model, Blocks and Tools ... I see a light." In his opinion, the OBE curriculum was difficult to implement because teachers had neither knowledge nor skills for achieving its main objective – to help students become life-long learners. George believed that CEA was an excellent approach that assisted teachers and students in achieving the goal of life-long learning:

When I mean seeing the light, we have the curriculum 2005, which is to be called OBE, outcome based education. And...many of our teachers feel... very frustrated because the OBE was dumped on us. We didn't have enough training....We were trained in the old apartheid era and now with this new model coming up, it was crash course upon crash course. And it's extremely frustrating...if a teacher doesn't understand what to do. How frustrating must it be for the pupils? And through your model, I see

a light because now we can develop strategies for them how to learn and to see how we can enhance the learning process.

George believed that CEA gives students what they need the most - the meaning of the learning process. This is how he expressed it:

But your model gives them their meaning. To me, well, when I look at your model, I just say, "Wow. Excellent. Your Tools, Oh, Motivation. And Self-Regulation and ... your Blocks...." But it's fantastic. I can see it it's going to work. I can see it. I want it to reach all of the pupils but somehow it will all make a difference with your Blocks and Tools.... We can unpack the Blocks with them and the Tools and then they can have meaning from them...the meaning that the learning process is really in being internalized, you see, and not an outside factor, it must influence. Because your Blocks they also give them back to us. It is not just outside factors that influence the meaning that you have inside, you see. So, I will play with it.

Cathy shared how using a mediational style in assessment helped her become aware of the student's potential:

When I switched to a more mediational style, he could actually do the tests, he could actually achieve in the test item....So, that was the assessment, which indicated to me that this child wasn't really retarded as he was being labeled.

Carol described how she used Building Blocks and Tools in her art class to connect students' classroom experiences with the real world:

Because they put it down on paper, they say, "What? What? Why?"...and I could come in and say, "This is the reason why, this is what it is. I don't know what it is. Let' go and find out. Who, do you think, may know? Where did you see it?" Connecting Events....The teacher immediately takes his drawing, contacts a farmer, and says, "You have a dairy. May we bring these students through to the dairy and let them have a look what is going on." And then taking his picture, giving it to the farmer and saying, "He is the guy who wants to know more after seeing you at the show." So, you know, Feeling of Competence, he can't communicate and never gets a good mark [in language class]. But in the art class he identified something that was of interest and it led him to be the leader of this group who visited the dairy farm.

Sally shared how she used Blocks and Tools in helping students address emotional problems: “I just realized that it was more an emotional problem than anything else and [I] have been addressing the Feeling of Competence throughout the year and just working on that with him as much as I possibly could.”

In Alice’s experience, the value of CEA was in its emphasis on the whole person: “It is absolutely, it is everything... it has to be one package. Because emotionally and cognitively they actually develop together, this is the whole person what you need.” She also valued CEA as an approach that provided students with tools necessary for independent life:

This is the one thing that...previously...I did not know what to do with a kid. I could give love, I could give food, I could give anything but I could not, I did not have the Tools to help the kid so...that kids could learn how to learn, to be students for the rest of their lives. This is something that I did not have and this is the difference now.

For Evelyn, CEA changed her vision of students, made her explore how they develop their own learning strategies and how cognition, affect, and motivation work together:

Since I have kind of worked in cognitive education...and specifically done [CEA], I use [CEA] to support my frame of reference....Well, the child has got a spelling problem and this is what I see....I kind of look, you know, at the child with different eyes now...I start trying to find out more about the way the child’s thinking and also, you know, about the kind of how the child feels about school...what is motivating in class.

She described how she applied CEA in a critical situation, when she did not have enough time for intervention:

I mean, there was no time, he had to write an exam....So, I had actually to say, “What is the best thing that would help him at that point of time?” And knowing about CEA, I mean, kind of integrating with my occupational therapy knowledge [I thought]...”What could I do

immediately in a short span of time to help him actually think and learn better?”

Further, talking about the same student:

He’s an example of the children that are underachieving and that actually need ...not just therapy...but inputs on another level too, that I would include...helping him to actually think better, learn better....I started teaching him about ... Self-regulation and self-talk.

Cathy was convinced that knowledge about mediation and Building Blocks and Tools was essential for all teachers and she gradually tried to introduce the concept of mediation to other teachers in the school: “How can we actually do this lesson? What do you think we should do with this child? And, then, I can slowly, you know, start telling them about mediation, suggesting to them to use the Blocks and Tools.” And further:

“When you work with a child, what should your approach be?” And I...demonstrate mediation. I actually get them in for a second session and I demonstrate exactly how they should use mediation with the child while they’re doing the homework task or while they’re working with my therapist task.

Cathy also described how she taught a mother of her student to use cognitive education at home:

Because she spoon-fed him and she told him what to do all the time and I said to her, “Look you must try and regulate your own behavior. Explain Self-Regulation to him. Allow him. Encourage him. Make him feel competent so that he can work, do it by himself.” And I actually told her that, I’ve told him the story about the magic wand that he’s got to stop and think. He can cross the bridge of learning all by himself.

The teachers’ commitment to making a difference in students’ lives led them to continuously seek new ways of teaching. Changing their roles in relationship to students was one of the ways of addressing the students’ needs. This aspect of the teachers’ work

was captured in the sub-theme *You become a mother, a father, a policeman ...depending on what is needed.*

Sub-theme: 2.5. *You become a mother, a father, a policeman... depending on what is needed*

The participants continuously asked themselves what else they could do to be more effective teachers and therapists. According to Evelyn, being an effective teacher means changing roles, switching from being a mother to being a policeman:

So, eventually, you know...you are not a therapist...you become a mother, you become a father, you become a policeman sometimes, you can be either role, you know, depending on what is needed... you have kind...to look at what is needed, you know.

This is how Ellen expressed a search for her role: “It is a challenge, it is a continuous search for what can I still do? What is my role? How can I still help this child?” At the same time, this search was a driving force of her professional growth:

For me, it’s, at least, sometimes very hopeless. But you don’t know what you must do differently. What can I, what else can I do, and what can I do that I am not doing now? What can I do differently? But it’s a good thing, because if you don’t question your own skills and your own doings, how can you ever improve?

For Carol, the relationship with her students stood out as very special, as a relationship between a parent and a child. She put it: “I think I don’t have children of my own and this is why, I suppose, I internalize it more. These children and their creative lives that they are living afterwards are being entangled in mine. It makes it special.”

The journey of learning was exciting for the teachers. Although sometimes they perceived their work as challenging, they all agreed that it was joy and privilege to work

with their students and learn together with them, the aspect of the teachers' experience captured in the theme *It was very challenging – but it is a joy and privilege*.

Theme 3: *It was very challenging – but it is a joy and privilege*

The name of this theme came from my interviews with Ellen and Carol. This is how Ellen experienced the work with the student who did not develop language because of his hearing loss: "It was very challenging. Because of his limited [small sigh] receptive and expressive language skills, one wasn't always sure what he understood. [And] the challenges were in that one had to ALWAYS explain it in a different way." Carol considered it a pleasure and privilege to learn together from her students:

It might sound corny, but I consider it to be an absolute pleasure and privilege because you come to school with these wonderful ideas, you are going to be this and this, and this, and immediately...you do not only teach, you learn.

Two sub-themes were identified. The experiences of challenge were captured in the sub-theme (3.1) *I really struggled*; and the experiences of joy and privilege of working with students were captured in the sub-theme (3.2) *It makes you actually grow with the kids*.

Sub-theme 3.1. *I really struggled*

The teachers experienced situations as challenging when old strategies did not work and they had to look for new ways. Cathy experienced the challenge of seeking new ways to address student's needs as a struggle:

I really struggled with this child because what can I do now for this child because according to test results, he doesn't have a learning problem. And yet he cannot read. He really cannot read. ...The struggling for me was, you know, because all the things I've learned in the past didn't fit in with the picture that I saw here. So, what was I dealing with? What was I dealing with here? And then I thought to myself, but I am just gonna give

it a go. For somebody must help this child otherwise he's gonna get more depressed and discouraged and the parents weren't prepared to work with him.

The challenges were experienced as something taking time, effort, and energy, as working against a lot of things. The experience of working with a hearing-impaired student stood out for Ellen:

But the first time I saw this child, I thought, "Oh, no, this is difficult." His expressive language skills were intact, it was limited, but pronunciation of words was terrible. He had very unclear speech; it made him very difficult for other people to understand. He had this lost feeling on his face....I realized that that is a challenge of a very different kind. I realized that his vocabulary is very limited. It's limited to what is in his world that he experiences....So, everything has to be brought back to what he knows in his experience, and then you can actually go from there....It's is time consuming, it is a challenge to get also again down to what his level of experience is, and to make sure that...because he has got a habit of saying "Yeah, yeah, I understand," and then when one goes into it, or when he has to write the test, then you realize that he...THOUGHT he did [understand], but he didn't, really. And then the challenge is to find YET another way of explaining the same concept.

Working with students from a different culture was another challenging experience that stood out for Ellen:

One is not used to taking an adult child, I mean, this is a girl of seventeen years old, to take her back. If they talk about risotto rice, one of the subjects is hospitality studies, and if they talk about a dish out of risotto rice, I have to actually bring the risotto rice from home, it is totally foreign in her CULUTRE. She eats, I don't know if you know that, what they call meeleez, crushed meeleez. THAT is her big protein. NOT pasta, shell pasta and bowties, and cannelloni. So, if any of these things, I have to bring it from home and introduce that to her. That's the challenge. If I go into any of the other classrooms, I speak about a common vocabulary, and a common REFERENCE, here it's I have to always think, would that be in her world that she's experiencing?

The teachers sometimes described their experience as frustrating. Mary felt frustrated when she lost control over a situation:

The child had many, many behavioral problems. It wasn't as much as the learning problem as it was the behavioral problem. And because this next teacher didn't manage this child in the class, the child started to spit on the other children, hit them, bully them, hurting them...it was just like that. I just felt completely out of the control of the whole thing. ... And then the principal just put his foot down and said, "The child must go out." And it was a feeling of complete powerlessness....Not being able, not knowing what to do.

Sally shared a similar experience of being frustrated when she was not able to manage her students' behavior in the classroom, to get them involved in learning, and keep on track:

And so many times things are broken down because of the smart comment, the laugh, and just getting them back on track again, you just sometimes don't have that energy, you just sometimes say, "Forget it." Maybe, if they had a bit more of cognitive skills that I could have given them, I could have referred back to...getting them back on track faster.

Mary described her experience of not being able to address a challenge as "playing a game":

And the mother couldn't cope with the child and the grandfather and the grandmother, he grew up with them. The mother lived in a completely other town and he lived with his grandmother and grandfather. And he was in my class and the class although didn't have many children, it was three different grades. Ah, most of the children were, their father's were working in the forest and they were very poor, very, very, very poor children. And this little boy was hyper-active and could not sit still at all. ...Always walking around, always doing things that he shouldn't do and because I didn't know what to do, I sent him to the school clinic to be assessed. And he came back with a nice report with two pages of what I should do in the class. And I didn't understand it. And I didn't know what to do. And because I didn't know what to, I played the game as if everything was all right and I put those pages in my drawer. I didn't how to do it. ...It's a bad feeling of just not knowing how to do it.

Cathy experienced frustration when she was not able to complete therapy, to accomplish her goals, and help the student develop and grow:

They [parents] have decided to stop therapy again because he's doing so well and I was so disappointed...he's just stopped the process. He's broken the link in the chain...the chain of developing, of completing the process....Not only my chain, but their chain too, and it's frustrating for me, and it is a disappointment for me.

Many teachers shared that sometimes the student's family circumstances made it very difficult for them to accomplish their goals. Ellen described one of her students, "one little boy, where there are such poor circumstances at home, where not one language is spoken properly" when "whatever he doesn't know in one language, he's substituting with the other language" and "he has not developed any language properly." She described her feelings: "You feel that you put in a lot and that child's actually not gaining because there's no support at home."

The lack of support from the education department and other social structures was a source of frustration for George. He felt that his desire to make a difference was seriously undermined by the existing lack of support from the system:

I felt very de-motivated. ...You feel that you are fighting a system that's being created. You are trying to make a difference but there is not enough support from our education department. It's just not enough support with the various other departments.

The teachers felt frustrated when they did not have support from classroom teachers to help their students do better. Evelyn shared how the lack of support undermined her effort to help underachievers:

That is one of my big frustrations, you know, in helping underachieving learners is that they move back into a class where the teacher maybe not mediational, where the teacher doesn't understand some of the things that she should understand to help the majority of the learners in the class.

Mary shared the same concern about the inability of the system to help underachieving students succeed. She put it: "But our whole system is failing the

learners because the percentage of learners that can not write or read is just getting higher, bigger, and bigger, and bigger.” The resistance of the system to accept all students made participants put more effort in doing what they thought was important.

Evelyn shared:

So, sometimes, some of those children fall through the system because of the system, you know. So, for me, that is one of my biggest kind of things, you know, that it is hard to get more people on board to understand how to help underachieving learners.

Cathy experienced working against the system as a fight. She described it:

I’ve got to fight, really fight so hard sometimes for these children to remove the labels from the children....What I see in the therapy situation is completely different and I could work with the child and I see the potential. But then...to get them to believe in what I say to trust me. So, it’s very limiting in a certain way. There is no place for mediation in the classroom.

George’s experience of working against the system was similar to Cathy’s. He also described it as a fight:

The very next day, it’s sort of it’s gone out the window due to the gangster and drug problem they have in the area. And that really frustrates me because I’ve been fighting the system all the years. I’m a fighter all the years. For my forty years, I’ve been fighting, and I’m still fighting.

Despite the challenging conditions of their work, the teachers considered it to be a joy and privilege to work with their students. These feelings were associated with a sense of personal growth, completing the process, making a difference in students’ lives, being challenged and accepting the challenge. The sub-theme *It makes you actually grow with the kids* captured the teachers’ perceptions of their work with their students as a rewarding experience.

Sub-theme 3.2. *It makes you actually grow with the kids*

Alice's excitement about her work was based on the feeling of growth that she shared with her students. She expressed it:

It is wonderful. It makes you actually grow with the kids. It is a little bit of growth in every child is actually like a huge growth of yourself, actually not only your occupation. The life, the world, everything is worthwhile because you are now achieving something. ...It is wonderful!

The teachers viewed challenge as a positive force that prevented them from stagnation, made them reflect on their practice, and seek new approaches. This is how Carol described her experience:

The challenge is...you have to think all the time, you can't stagnate and work out a wonderful system and say, "Well, it is back." When a new year starts, you get your filing cabinet, full of pack, work sheets and work notes and say, "Right, this is what we have to do this year." You are sitting with a completely new dynamic in this particular grade nine or grade ten class....So, you can't go back and use twenty five years of amassed work. You've got to start over every year. So, every year is a challenge.

For Ellen, being challenged led to self-reflection and made her improve and develop new skills. She expressed it as:

So, if the children were achieving the way I expect them, I would not improve myself. I would be happy with what I am doing. So, it actually helps me to self-reflect, and always think, "Okay, how can I do this differently? How can I do it better? How can I do it, so that I am actually targeting what I want to target?"

The challenge of being open to students and learn about them all the time is expressed in Evelyn's feedback to the initial findings of the study: "One can never predict what can happen from session to session. So, the biggest challenge for me is to be totally open and flexible and to see, hear, and feel 100% all the time."

Carol experienced challenges as something exciting. She put it:

I like change, I like challenges, and I like the fact that I can think on my feet, and I like the fact that the learning area that I have to present or to share with my pupils presents me with all those elements that I have just mentioned now: it is open-ended, the product is not as important as it may be in other learning areas, the process is important, and making the process exciting and different and challenging.

The feelings of satisfaction and joy also came from the feedback that the teachers received from their students and parents. Evelyn shared that a parent's acknowledgement of her contribution to the student's progress was satisfying for her:

It's very satisfying to me....You know, and the fact that this father, kind of came back to me now and said to me, "Okay, you know, I want you now to work with Andy."...It means in some way, he's thinking that in some things, you know, that I could offer help to Andy. ...You know, sometimes, that's more satisfying then getting the money...I mean the parent hasn't paid me a cent.

The students' responsibility for their therapy was another element that was very satisfying for Evelyn:

If a child is underachieving and he's really not in his zone of proximal development and he's actually getting that assistance and he knows he needs that assistance. I find those children actually tend not to miss the appointment...because...they could have a choice, you know, to come to me and say, "I can't come now because I have to do this." ...So, if the child comes and talk to me, you know, it means he is considering and respecting me.

For Harriet, seeing students change and believe in themselves was a "wonderful feeling." She described it: "So, if they achieve, they are quite smart, and I am very proud of them." George described his experience of observing students' achievement as an "Ah ha" feeling. He put it: "And, wow, that really gives me that major 'Ah ha' feeling...to see that...happy feeling deep inside my gut feeling ... when you get that feeling here in your gut...that happy feeling which pulls out." He shared that his ability to help his students is an aspect of his work that keeps him in education:

I felt so great to see this boy [who] was from that gangster/drug element but he made a success. ...That really keeps me in education. And, ah, I love children. I love to work with children. That's my calling.

For Cathy, sharing students' growth was very rewarding. She felt that she helped to develop a life-long learner, that she did something right:

It's extremely rewarding....Because, you know, you feel you've helped, helped sort of develop something in a child that you've developed a life long learner. You've done something right. You know that, that song in *Sound of Music*? ...Somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something right (singing)....You see because then...you know you are still on the right track.

All participants agreed that making a difference in the lives of their students was a rewarding and satisfying experience for them. The belief in their ability to make a difference made the teachers work harder, persist in the face of challenge, look for new ways of teaching, and optimize all of their personal resources. The teachers' perceptions of results of their work were captured in the theme *The results were amazing*.

Theme 4: *The results were amazing*

This theme emerged as the teachers shared their perceptions of students' success and what students themselves had to say about changes that they were experiencing. Two sub-themes were identified: (4.1) *That was a miracle!* (the teachers' reports of student change); and (4.2) *Miss, this is the first time in my life that I feel that I am clever* (students' words about the changes that they experienced).

Sub-theme 4.1. *That was a miracle!*

Carol perceived changes in her students as "a miracle." This is her description of how a student, who was considered to be autistic, changed after he had been granted an honor to participate in a tree planting ceremony:

So, just after the tree planting ceremony we had art. He came back and he didn't even ask what he was given to do. He went to the back of the class, got paper, got his paints and he drew a straight line and a bump for the hole and another straight line and he put this tree in it. And he called me and he started signing. He said, "I planted this tree and when I am old one day I am going to bring my children and say, 'This is the tree that I planted,' but I won't be looking like this, I will be looking up and up and up, and I could see the tree growing." And that was wonderful because he communicated, it was my tree, I drew it, I put it down on paper and he signed it and SOUND even came out with "I .." in African's "woha, woha," high, high the tree will grow high and when my children come, they will have to look up and see this tree that I planted when I was this little as they were. That to me was a miracle, with, with him having that physical experience and then coming back and graphically putting it down on paper and then internalizing it and then signing it, and even trying to connect his voice to some of the signs. That was special!

Carol further shared that students' intention to connect with her made this experience especially memorable for her:

Fortunately, teaching art to deaf children one often has such moments of "Ahha" and this one was especially "Ahha" because he has been locked in his self for ten years, he has been coming to the art class, and this is the first time in ten years he has not only communicated on paper, he's called me to be a part of his drawing and sharing in it. And to me it was very special, that, that the sharing element in it. Special in that, I thought that firstly he had grown and he had opened up and he could communicate and he knows he could communicate. I am sure he'll take the risk again (laughing) of communicating. And after being locked up in ten years watching him just quietly sitting in the class, very often when he was little he'd come into the class and climb under the table, and take his paper, and sit under the table, and work. And from this young man coming into the class within the last ten years, being in his own space bubble, living in his own little world, calling me to join his world and not only showing me, but speaking with a voice, no matter how hard it came out and signing, and using every modality he had to communicate, that communication was so special.

Changes in student appearance and motivation stood out for Ellen:

These children after a few months of being in the school actually blossom, they have a smile on their faces. And you can see those eyes that were just crying a few months before actually lit up and they actually try. ... I won't say they're totally motivated, but...they actually start to believe in

themselves again and actually try and answer something and even difficult questions...or even attempt to do difficult work and start participating in the class.

Ellen also shared a success story about a boy who had a learning disability and limited language skills because of his hearing loss. She felt that giving him time and space to express himself and creating a situation where he could experience success were the key factors in helping this student overcome underachievement. She shared:

And gradually...he made friends and he was accepted into the class, he could get rid of most of his frustrations by starting to LEARN, whereas he was never given enough time in any other place. They just concentrated on his oppositional behavior and didn't give him time to actually express that what he could express....He was here for two years and he progressed lovely...he learned to share his toys and learn to play with other children....I think there was an added...thing that made him light up is the fact that he saw that [he] could actually be one of the better spellers in a class. And that he...grasped things. Once he grasped it, and once... he was...explained in such simple terms that it made it very concrete, certain concepts for him, he just grasped it, and he was actually then ahead of the others in that class. And when he did grasp it, then he used to really light up.

Harriet shared how one of her students progressed from being an “underachiever” to being “a star”:

I think of this one little boy underachieving in grade one, two and three. And he's absolutely a star now in grade five. And I feel so happy for his sake because I knew him where he was and I know him at this stage. So, something happened. So, you can't say they will be underachievers forever.

This is how Sally described one of her students: “These last two years he has done beautifully. To the sense, wow, we've really achieved, he is feeling good about himself, he is not scared to try.” George shared a story of how he encouraged his students to think big and do the best in their lives. This is his story about Brian:

So, Brian was lucky in the sense that he had mommy at home, daddy was working and the family wasn't so big. It's only Brian and two sisters. Now, Brian...he had that hunger to learn. And I encouraged him. He was one of my brightest. And...whenever I gave them a task to do, Brian was the first to complete his task. Always got 100% and I would give him books to read. Ahm, he was very fond of philosophy books and I had philosophy. And I gave him some books. For example, I had...a book that I will never forget, "The Magic of Thinking Big," "Mind power," John Coal....those kinds of books. ...That they can see that people make a success of their lives.

The difference that the CEA approach made in their work stood out for many teachers. Alice was particularly vocal about the difference that the approach made: "It is something that is profound. It makes a difference. It makes a new person, totally new person... kids and human beings that are proud of themselves." And further: "They are gaining a lot, they are behaving like angels, and those are the kids that previously were meant to go to jail."

This is how Alice described changes in her students: "They actually see the sense of doing stuff... for the first time in life they know why they are at school"; "[they were the kids] that never answered anything on paper or answered anything in class ... they changed to kids with self-confidence." Students changed from being "the outcast, being not able to understand anything, to do anything on their own, [when] the only option was either to withdraw, or being the clown in the class" to being "young adults, so confident," "busy bees," "kids, pupils, students," and "everybody else can see it." Speaking about one of her students, Alice noted: "Previously... she never spoke one word in the classroom and at this stage ... she is actually now making jokes with teachers. So, if you are making jokes, you are self-confident."

The biggest difference that the approach made, according to Alice, was preparing students for independent life: “If they have to leave school now, they will go outside and they will be able to make a living.” CEA helped Alice’s students become independent learners and develop ownership of the learning process:

I feel that kids now can help themselves....I can say that even on the very basic level that they will be able to make decisions and to plan and to explore to approach the task...because we bridge a lot, in anything that we do in class, even if it is only a personal problem. They have to sit and take the first step... and set the goal.

Cathy described how the use of mediation, Building Blocks and Tools helped one of her students:

And when I started with Nancy and she was in grade two and I used mediation with her and I used the Blocks and Tools with her. I started using the Blocks and Tools with her and she actually passed grade two and now she’s grade three and she’s not going to fail again. She is not top of the class but she’s average and she’s doing quite well.

The teachers were excited to observe their students become better learners. They were even more excited when their students became aware of the changes within themselves, the experiences captured in the sub-theme *Miss, this is the first time in my life I feel that I am clever.*

Sub-theme 4.2. *Miss, this is the first time in my life I feel that I am clever*

Alice noticed how her students’ self-perception changed as the result of applying the CEA approach in the classroom: “Actually it often happens, but one girl, Amy, after one class she told me, ‘Miss, this is the first time in my life that I feel that I am clever.’

Students’ self-awareness of changes is evident in another example that Alice shared: “Miss, in primary school I had to go to the principal, I was sent to the principal’s office almost everyday because of my behavior. ...Miss, but school is fun for me now.”

Evelyn shared a story of a student becoming an independent learner as a result of learning of how to approach tasks:

I said, "Okay, now let me see if I...would be able to help."...Because I'm not a math teacher, but I was kind of showing how to approach the graph systematically. I tried to identify what the problem was that he had and then how to...look at this problem and look for clues, etc....When he was finished...he said to me, "Actually now I can see, you know. I actually now see what to do and I understand now what to do next time."

Other experiences that the teachers shared provide evidence that not a specific teaching methodology, but the teachers' commitment to their work and genuine involvement in their students' lives were key factors in making a difference. George shared a success story of working with one of his students, who "was from a gangster/drug group," "was very naughty," "wouldn't learn," and "wouldn't do his work regularly." When George met that student several years later, the young man said to him: "Now I'm doing well, sir. Thank you. You gave me hard things those years, but I can see it helped."

Carol shared a story of how her art class channeled students' professional and personal growth. The student that Carol was talking about in this excerpt won a national award for a logo that he created. She described it:

He sent me an SMS [text message]....He says, "Look at...watch TV this evening 9:30 on this and this program, this and this channel. My drawing, my presentation, my logo is on it." And I look at this and it was incredible work. And I look back and Rom sends me this letter, beautiful letter, I wish I had it here to read it to you. "I was mixed up," this is what he writes, "I was mixed up. We had a fight, you and I, about art. You said to me art is important; art is going to help me think. I disagreed, I thought all the other subjects, because I wanted aggregate," which he did, "until after doing - not doing art for a year I had no direction in my life because I had no avenue of getting rid of these creative salts and this energy inside of me, so you and I made friends again and I started art. I want you to think of my little casual man as a dedication to you."

The stories of students' success are the proof that committed and dedicated teachers were able to make a difference in the lives of their students. The four themes that appeared in the interviews with the South African teachers brought to light facets of their experience working with underachieving students that particularly stood out for them. The teachers were perceptive of students' difficulties, yet believed that they could all achieve – *They have so much potential, but they don't know about it*; they learned together with their students and supported them all the time – *Let's go and find out*; they persisted in the face of challenge and enjoyed being together with the students on their journey – *It was very challenging - but it is a joy and privilege*; and *The results were amazing* when students felt good about themselves and could say *Miss, this is the first time in my life that I feel that I am clever*. The four themes in great detail captured what happens in the classroom between the student and the teacher. What about the larger context? What was the teachers' experience of the context?

3.5. Looking at the Bigger Picture

The teachers differed in how they described their work with underachievers in relation to the socio-economic and cultural context of South Africa. In some interviews, its complex realities were reflected in the stories about each individual student. For example, Ellen was wondering how her therapy was fitting family priorities:

Sometimes one feels that a poor child has to battle against so many OTHER circumstances at home.... It's benefiting, but is it really the priority at this stage? For ME, it's a priority, but it might not be for the family.

In other interviews the realities of context were a separate focus of the teachers' narrative. The stories of George, Mary, and Cathy enlarged an understanding of teachers' practices within the larger context of contemporary South Africa.

George was the only non-White teacher who worked in a township. His interview gave an insight on teaching and learning in the conditions of a township school. The township where George worked started as a designated area for people of color when they were forcefully removed from their lands:

M. was created...to have the segregation of our people. Took them away from the immediate center, which was N., and put them on the outskirts. And they took our, all diversity of people...Blacks...Coloreds...Indians, and mixed them together. And there was no structure in place here. For example, it was just flat and people had to live there and start their own structure. They had to fight for what they have today. ...Structure, when I mean structure, there was no concrete in place for them....Such as the basic facilities, the housing, it's not the basic facility as we see. We had no say in those years. And, since it started it, it started in 1966, it's still the same.

Dysfunctional families, gangs, hunger, poverty, early pregnancy, and substance abuse were the realities of the area where George worked.

School conditions

I'm sitting with a class of fifty-seven at this point in time. We are the ones that asking for help. They don't need the help because they've got doctor's and lawyer's children. We've got the man on the street's child here and those are the ones....Gangsters, drugs, unemployment.

Poverty and hunger

Look and they...give for the class of 50, 55 students, [they give] 12 slices of bread and there's about forty...that [are] really hungry. Now you must share 12 slices of peanut butter and jam, they call it chokers amongst 40 peoples. D.L. said the other day that he's thinking of taking the feed scheme away. I said what can happen?...They...look forward to that slice of bread or half slice of bread or quarter because that, the only piece of eating that they'll have for the day that they are at school.... One or two

slices. And that must last that child from 8:00 till 20 past two and if they have extramural which takes up to 4:00, on two slices of bread....What about those, those pupils that don't take bread? Imagine, how can learning take place under those circumstances?

Gangs

We have continuous shots at school....It's so natural for them, when they hear gunshots, they fall flat and we must fall with them. And you can see the fear in their eyes [and they] wonder who's next. It might be their brother. It might be a sister because the gangs don't care today. They've got no respect for life. Absolutely no respect for life! And it's...really frustrating and it...hurts you deep inside to see what's happened to our youth, really, really. And I wonder sometimes "Am I in the right profession? Can't I can go and do some work...privately with my qualifications?" But like I said I love to work with kids and we don't invest in teachers.

You see what is so [frustrating]...that the gangs are just waiting for the opportunity. ...I've witnessed the way they operate. They see the pupil.... Now they come to him and tell him, "Hey, do an errand. We'll give ten bucks." And that is where it starts. Cause now this child's got money. What he is going to do with the money that is his thing. But that money is an incentive now so that he will get into the gang. And that is what they do.

In George's experience, there was a need to work together on all levels to make a difference in students' lives. He described how top-down decision-making hampers implementation of necessary changes and expressed the need to "pull together":

I am always positive and I do believe that someday maybe, I do not know when, but someday, someday will come, maybe not now in my life. I am fighting for....I am fighting for those changes that must come, we really need changes....In the education system as well we have to speak to inspectors that come to visit our schools, talk to the principals, that's it. The way I see the inspector is somebody that must come lead, come directly, and help us. Don't go to a principal office, have coffee, biscuits and must sit here and do the work. They are deceptive. You can [go to] seminars, they go out and those eye closed seminars and come back, come with this new curriculum. We must follow. We've got no input. Where is their democracy there? We have no input, we must just read the curricula, follow it. Don't follow it – out...then you will appear at a labor [market], did not follow instructions. It really makes my heart sour and it is

unnecessary that we must lose all those young kids. That's so hard to believe. And after all, no matter you can be Black, White, Colored, Indian. We are all people...created by the Supreme Being. There is no difference....We are all human beings. And we must pull together. And that is what I would like to see that we must pull together. Especially in South Africa and in communities like I mentioned.

Mary's background and experiences were very different from the ones of George.

She was a White teacher who, at the moment of the interview, held an administrative position in education. Her stories provided a perspective of a White person in the past and present context of South Africa. She shared that she started questioning herself why she didn't know about the separation of people and why apartheid was so easily accepted by many:

I started questioning myself because I don't know where I was when things happened. I was a child then. But I don't know why I wanted to know, why I didn't know about it. And a lot of White people are asking that today. And our parents, I don't know whether they did it... consciously or whether they did...because they didn't know about it. It was hidden away from us. We didn't know about it. ...I've wanted to know.

The stories of removing non-White people to racially designated territories particularly stood out for Mary and were a part of her personal experience that she wanted to share with the interviewer:

What hurts the Brown and Black people the most was when they had to move away from their houses ...to their own settlements. They lived in the town amongst everybody and then they all had to move outside of town, to their own settlements. And...I was brought up by Katherine, she's my mother. ...And, Katherine also had to move from living quite close to us.... And to very far out of G. where she had to ride two buses to get to work at our house. And I knew Katherine had to move but what, why...I, as a child, didn't ask questions. I knew Katherine had to move...and I didn't know why but they just accepted it. They just left. And colleagues of mine now because of...a lot of Brown and Black people are my colleagues now. The most painful time was [when] they had to move from their houses. And that [is] what they keep against us. Against White

people, against us...that they had to move and a lot of old people died of heart attacks. Many, many grandpas and grandmas died the day before they had to move or on the day they had to move. And I think that if you had experiences like that and they all talk of White policemen and the horses with their whips in their hands. I've heard so many stories of that and...of grandfathers and grandmothers going out on the day. ...If you hear things like that ...that person has the right to hate me because I'm White. To hate White people and then again, then they hate you too. It's those that cannot get out of that. And real horror stories of being mistreated are a part of them. And but why it is that I didn't know about it.I'm angry because I didn't ask questions later. I just, we all just accepted it (crying)... We played the game as if nothing was wrong.

Mary's narrative also provided an idea about the realities of many rural schools attended primarily by Black Africans: "Most of the Xhosa speaking schools are 1,500 to 2,000 learners in a school... Not enough teachers. Big classes, 60 to 80 children in a class." She described how the shortage of teachers prevented them from teaching the youth of school age:

At one school the learning support teachers are taking about 80 children and then there were...over a 1000 learners that cannot read in the primary school. And the principal didn't know what to do, so he fetched through retired teachers from their homes and said, "Now you go to teach them." And from 8:00 until 12:00, every single day, five days a week, they take about...between 60 and 70 learners each in little groups from 8:00 until 12:00 half an hour each. And most of those learners are reading now.

In the end of the interview she shared a story of observing a boy who performed a song about the danger of illiteracy:

At one school...I was a guest speaker there....And there a little boy...he said...it's a little rap song that he sang and he said, "It's not apartheid and it's not poverty that's our biggest enemy. Our biggest enemy is being illiterate." He rapped it and danced it.

Cathy's practice was with White children. I already shared a part of her experience of being in schools for Black Africans. Here I will provide the rest of her story:

I'm only working for the privileged and there is masses of children out there that I could sort of play a sort of consulting role - going into those classrooms, educating those teachers how to help those children, looking for solutions, working with ...the teacher so that we can build strategies together. Or how can you get a child to sit on a chair, even though he's got low muscle tone. How can you get him to hold a pencil properly so that he can write? So, I think, you know, the White schools are still very privileged and those children are so neglected in those schools. So, that's very sad.

George, Mary, and Cathy's stories are reminders of the distressing realities of many South African students. Curriculum 2005 (OBE Curriculum) was designed to provide ALL students with quality education. In the current social conditions this task remains difficult to fulfill. George explicitly stated: "See, that's what I'm saying, it's no use, they, the education department come up with fancy models like OBE but the background is not conducive." Mary, although believing in the OBE philosophy, still felt something was wrong:

The teachers blame OBE for what's wrong but they don't realize outcomes based education is a philosophy. Ah, their curriculum can be blank but, but not their philosophy. I love Outcomes Based Education but...there is something wrong with our curriculum. We threw out the basics.

The story from Evelyn's experience is an example of contradictions between instruction and assessment tasks of the new curriculum. Evelyn shared how even her students noticed the difference between instruction and assessment:

But the way he was taught, was more the traditional way, but the exam papers don't look like that. So, what is expected in exam, it expected him to think, at a total different level than learning work in a rote kind of old-fashioned way. But he actually understood that and he said to me, "Maim, they're not asking what's in the book, you know, they're asking it in a different way." So ... he was actually saying that I don't have the thinking skill to do what is expected of me right now.

From the interviews with the teachers it became clear that the challenges of South Africa are tremendous. New policies have been put into place to ensure that ALL students have access to quality education. Yet it is apparent that to bring about changes will take more than just educational reforms. The legacy of apartheid is persistent and the people and the government must pull together to help all students do better. As George emphatically stated, “We must pull together, especially in South Africa” because “people are crying out for help.” Using Samoff’s distinction between instrumental and transformational roles of education, the teachers’ stories offer a proof that true learning is a transformational process. It was only when students developed an ownership of learning that they could do well on the exam. It was only when students developed an ownership of learning that the teachers felt that they could go into life and be successful. Many teachers are already making a difference in the lives of many students regardless of their skin color. Those teachers need support in what they have been already doing to make a difference in many more lives.

Chapter 4

School is the meaning of our lives

School pulls you in, in our time, if you are young and you have a head on your shoulders, nobody wants to work for this money, if you don't have that desire... This work is just for your own interest, not for money. The only people who stay here are those who see the school as the meaning of their lives (Mila, a speech therapist/primary school teacher).

Mila was like many other Russian teachers whose economic and social stability had been shattered in the times of reforms. While many welcomed the fall of the communism, the disarray that it brought in virtually all aspects of social life is hard to overestimate. Mila's words captured two important characteristics Russian educators share. First, the difficulties and challenges that many Russian people face is also an everyday reality for teachers. Secondly, despite the overwhelming and sometimes discouraging context of modern Russia, the teachers' commitment to their work is remarkable.

With change comes an opportunity to see the familiar differently, and a new view on the role of education is emerging among the Russian people and teachers. The words of Nina's friend captured that emerging perspective: "Nina, I want my granddaughter to become successful, it is not important to get A's all the time, it is more important that she becomes successful." Nina commented: "She wants her granddaughter to become an individual." Soviet schools were known for their discipline and high learning ethic; however, initiative was subjugated to the power of authority and individuality was compromised to conformity. Current transformations create an opportunity to evaluate which traditions are worth preserving and which ones need to be re-evaluated and changed.

4.1. Historical Background of Current Educational Reforms in Russia

The population of the Russian Federation is 141,377,752 people and the population growth rate is – 0.484% (negative). The ethnic composition of the country is as follows: 79.8% - Russian, 3.8% - Tatars, 2% - Ukrainian, 1.2% - Bashkir, 1.1 – Chuvash, and 12.1% other or unspecified (World Factbook, 2007, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>).

Russian educational traditions have been noted by many scholars. Hans (1963), describing the characteristics of Soviet schools, noted: “On the eve of the October Revolution the Russian traditions in education were firmly established” (p. 162). Later on, Taylor (1997) noted: “The political and social values of the Soviet era have left a strong legacy in Russia’s schools” (p. 157). State origins and strong state control, the scientific and utilitarian basis of curriculum, strict discipline and the ethic of taking school seriously, have all been prominent characteristics of Russian education throughout its history.

Almost all Russian/Soviet rulers appreciated the role of education in the modernization of the country. Being an enlightened but autocratic ruler, Peter the Great started the tradition of training specialists for the needs of the state. He regarded education as a preparation for state service or service in itself.

After the revolution of 1917 the system enjoyed a period of experimentation. The innovations, however, were short-lived. Stalin’s decrees of 1931 announced “the resolute struggle against frivolous methodical hare-brained schemes.” Democratic forms of school management were banned, a strict unified curriculum was introduced, and direct instruction took over from more active methods of learning. The unified structure of

primary and secondary education that was established during the 1930s' and 40's existed with some minor modifications till the middle of the 1980s. Bucur and Eklof (2003) described the image of Soviet schools under Stalin's regime:

By 1953, whether in Ukraine, Russia, Central Asia, or Moldova, all schools looked alike, all textbooks were the same, and all teachers followed the same lesson plans. In this system, an insidious ideology of bombast, distortion, and untruth corrupted the teaching of history and literature, and it profoundly compromised the singular achievement of unprecedented educational expansion, the other hallmark of Stalinism (p. 389).

Highly centralized and ideologized, the system still produced impressive results: the literacy rate during the period of 1914 through 1954 increased from 33% to 99 % (Canning & Kerr, 2004), compulsory secondary education was introduced in this ethnically and linguistically diverse country by the middle of the 1950's, and enrollment in higher education in the 1980's was among the highest in the world (Bucur & Eklof, 2003).

A scientifically oriented national school curriculum was a prominent trait of the Soviet era. With no electives, a limited number of humanities and social disciplines, it was overloaded with subjects in physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics and students grappled with topics rarely covered in most Western high schools (Canning & Kerr, 2004). Education was free and with striking uniformity the school year started on September 1st in all fifteen republics.

Despite its achievements, gloomy realities were becoming more apparent to the public and political leaders. Some of the problems were the result of the declining economy and a chronic shortage of educational funding while others were the results of an ill-designed system that enforced the interests of the states and violated the rights and

interests of individuals. A demanding curriculum, which overburdened students with an excessive number of required subjects, long hours of homework, and affected their health, was not supported by available jobs in the national economy. Limited and state controlled access to higher education undermined the professional aspirations of many high-school graduates, especially youth from rural areas and working class families; and bribes became an ordinary reality in competition for places in higher education. The system was crying for change.

The first wave of reforms in 1984-85 coincided with Gorbachev's reformation of the society called perestroika. These reforms, however, did not bring about desired results "primarily because there was finally freedom to discuss the proposed changes more openly than had been the case in the past" (Kerr, 2000, p. 135). It was not until the beginning of the 1990s' that big changes came to Russian schools.

4.2. Current Educational Reforms in Russia

Zaslavskaja's (2006) sociological analysis of current transformations in Russia uncovers the essence of present changes and helps one understand educational reforms in connection with a larger societal context. In her analysis, Zaslavskaja pointed out that any society can be described by a "means of three interconnected societal characteristics: the effectiveness of its institutional structure; the quality of its social group structure; and the level of its human potential" (p. 7). The Soviet society, on the level of institutional structure, was characterized by omnipotent control of the state in all spheres of life including public life. On the level of social structure, it was diversified into the privileged class of state bureaucracy and communist party leaders – on the one side, and the rest of the society – on the other.

The level of human potential includes four components: demographic, economic, cultural, and activity components. The demographic potential of the Soviet Union was high – the total population of the country was about 290 million. The economic potential was not that high: on the one hand, per capita gross domestic product was slightly above average in the world; on the other hand, the average quality of life was relatively low. A high literacy rate and high educational level were the conditions of the high cultural component.

The level of the activity component – the viability to initiate and sustain changes - was rather low and its development was impeded by some characteristics of Russian culture and an existing social system that had long discouraged innovations. “The majority of the Soviet people were characterized by the paternalistic type of mentality, by a low sense of the value of independence and personal responsibility” (Zaslavskaia, 2006, p. 10). Historical experiences also held back Russians from active participation in transforming their lives:

Having learned from their historical experiences, people in Russia preferred to adjust to the difficult circumstances of their lives and to avoid becoming actively involved in fighting to overcome them. As time went on, the disproportionately low activity potential of most Russians came to be one of the “stumbling blocks” on the road to society’s development (p. 10).

Long before Mikhail Gorbachev initiated the 1985 reforms, all aspects of the Soviet system signaled crisis. The causes of the crisis, Zaslavskaia concluded, were of a social character. The implication of her conclusion for education is hard to underestimate and led me to quote her words at length:

The roots of its [Soviet system] collapse lay in the in appropriately *low rating of the role of the human factor of societal development* [italics]

added]. The tendency toward the computerization and intellectualization of the economy and society that is characteristic of today's world signaled a serious rise in the role of the individual in societal development. In the Soviet system, on the other hand, the status of the individual was reduced to being nothing but an insignificant small part of the huge "labour resources" of the state, a "manpower carrier" with a narrow range of primitive needs. The disregard of, indifference toward, and even contempt for the "little man" who did not occupy the position of prestige, things that were inherited from the traditional past of Russia, fundamentally conflicted with trends in world development at the end of the second millennium. For this reason, one of the most important tasks of perestroika and the reforms that came in its wake was *to create the conditions necessary for more effective use of the country's human potential* [italics added] and, most important to improve its cultural and activity components. It was the kind of task that could not be accomplished by technical or organizational means; the way to accomplish it had to be through changing the social structure of society, *through liberating and activating the human personality* [italics added], through creating conditions necessary for raising people's levels of education and qualifications and *putting to use the creative strengths of the majority of citizens* [italics added]. And these things, in turn, would require the liberalization of the basic economic institutions and the democratization of social and political relations (p. 13).

The current transformation of Russian society, therefore, involves transformation its institutional structure, its social group structure, and appreciation of human potential. Transformation of the institutional structure is necessary to "improve the rules of the game that are in force in the society" (p. 17) which, in turn, will lead to changes in social structure. "But the most profound, fundamental, and long-term result of the transformation of society is dynamic change of the human potential" (p. 17).

Zaslavskaja's analysis of the current changes in the three characteristics of the Russian society provides a summary of changes taking place in the past ten years and their influences on teachers' work and students' lives. As a result of the emergence of a market economy the society has split in social and economic spheres. "While five – seven percent of all families are earning incomes that were unprecedented in the Soviet

era, between one-quarter and one-third of families are living at or below the poverty line” (p. 22). Increased divorce rates and unregistered and unstable cohabitations, substance abuse, children born to single mothers and children given up for state care, two million homeless children (three million according to Rimashevskaja’s data, 2007) are features of contemporary Russia. The inability of the government to provide even modest wages for teachers deteriorates the situation. The increased dropout rate despite the official lowering of the compulsory education level to nine years is yet another signal that transformation to a market economy took its tolls.

The characteristic of changes in social group structure concerns the prevalence of downward mobility for the majority combined with upward mobility for a few and the gap between the lower and upper strata of Russian society increased dramatically. As a result, “Over the years of reform in the country, a specific culture of poverty formed that reproduced itself in cyclical fashion and failed to instill values and attitudes oriented toward accomplishment in the younger generation” (p. 29). How did people adapt to these uncertainties? “The adaptation has been forced on them rather than being of voluntary nature, and it goes hand in hand with a narrowing rather than a widening of the sphere of individual freedom” (Shabanova as cited in Zaslavskaja, 2006, p. 32). The influence of institutional change on social group structure is ambivalent: on the one hand, responsibility for one’s personal future became a stronger feature of the Russian population and more young people now pursue education as a means of expanding their range of personal and professional options in life. On the other hand, the constructivist active involvement of the majority of citizens in social and political life has actually declined.

Estimates of human potential as a characteristic of Russian society show both positive and negative trends. As for the socio-cultural component, the number of educational institutions has increased dramatically, primarily due to the growth of non-state schools. According to data from the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, there were 502 state institutions of higher learning in 1985. In 2005 there were 1,068 institutions, 655 of them being state institutions and 413 - non-state institutions (www.ed.gov.ru/uprav/stat). The number of students entering higher education has increased; however, the opportunity to study at new institutions of higher learning is only available to young people whose parents can afford to pay the relatively high tuition.

At the same time the situation in science has deteriorated significantly: “in 1990-2000, the number of people employed in science fell from 2.8 million to 1.2 million, and their contribution to world science, according to experts, fell by factors of several tens” (Zaslavskaja, 2006, p. 36). In addition, many young scholars continue to leave the country and rarely maintain contact with their Russian colleagues. On the bright side is “a trend toward the individualization of values on the part of Russians, a decline in paternalistic attitudes and a greater orientation toward their own powers, rationalization of behavior, and increased individual responsibility and independence” (p. 36 – 37).

Two trends characterize the activity component of human potential. On the one hand, transition to a market economy created conditions where many active and resourceful people became involved in new kinds of activities and achieved success. On the other hand, the imposition of changes on the majority of citizens from above made them develop coping strategies such as holding more than one job, looking for ways to

supplement their earnings, and growing food on individual household plots. “Although the shifts in the attitudes and actual activities of this more inert portion of society were, in many ways, forced upon them, objectively they also raised the activity potential of society” (Zaslavskaja, p. 38).

The educational reforms in the 1990s gave more initiative at the local level to participate in school planning and governance. They also introduced changes in curriculum and facilitated the development of private and non-governmental educational institutions. The Law of Education of 1992 introduced a three-tiered system of educational management: 1) federal; 2) regional; and 3) local jurisdictions (cities and towns). The federal level develops national educational policies, works out strategies of their implementation, and designs the core curriculum (language, literature, science, and mathematics). Regional and local levels are responsible for civics, history, social sciences, and non-Russian languages. “A policy of decentralization as well as a sharply reduced Kremlin budget for education contributed to a historic shift in control over schooling to Russia’s regions, as part of an even larger transformation of Russian politics, from a highly centralized to a federal system” (Bucur & Eklof, 2003, p. 393).

Switching control from Moscow to the regions led to changes in budgeting. By 1994, 87 % of funds came from regional budgets (Schweisfurth, 2002). The cut in federal funding coupled with a series of overwhelming financial crisis, significantly affected conditions of schools and teachers. Teachers’ salaries (which ranged from \$15 to \$68 per month and in 2001 still comprised only 55 % of the national average wage) went unpaid for several months, in some cases as long as nine months to one year; and local authorities had to choose between heating schools and heating hospitals (Canning &

Kerr, 2004). “Real public expenditure per school-age child in 2000 was less than two-thirds its levels at the end of the 1980s” (Canning & Kerr, 2004, p. 31) and federal transfers for compulsory education sometimes did not reach their target.

Reforms are characterized in large part by changes in curriculum. The fall of communist ideology led to changes in teaching social studies and literature. Textbooks of the Soviet era were removed; many historical distortions were re-interpreted; and formerly forbidden topics, names, and facts were introduced in the teaching of history and literature. The curriculum became more humanized and led to a “greater respect for students’ individuality, a cutback in study load, improved teacher-student relationship” (Dneprov as cited in Schweisfurth, 2002, p. 53) and “a shift to the humanities, from 41 to 50 percent of the curriculum” (Sutherland as cited in Scweisfurth, 2002, p. 53). The freedom of regions, local districts, and schools to participate in curriculum development contributed to its further diversification and humanization.

Teachers also were given freedom to experiment with teaching methodologies. Some teachers turned to the ideas of Western pedagogues (Montessori, Waldorf’s pedagogy) and to progressive Soviet educators (for example, Davydov and Elkonin’s approach to teaching mathematics). Literature on a variety of teaching methodologies appeared in abundance on the market. At the same time, despite these innovations, the didactic mode of teaching characteristic of Soviet times (even though very sophisticated as Alexander’s, 2001, study showed) was still widespread among teachers. Although many teachers may describe their pedagogy as child-centered, more often than not it means taking individual learning styles and interests into consideration rather than

embracing and exploring the diversity of students' views and of appreciating learning as a constructivist process (Schweisfurth, 2002).

The introduction of a new evaluation system of school graduates, the Unified State Examinations (USE), is among the most debated topics. This initiative was introduced in 2001 with the purpose of replacing admission to higher education on the basis of oral examinations conducted by university faculty. Those who oppose this policy claim that it will lead teaching to tests that, in turn, will affect how one thinks (Kuz'menko, Lunin, & Ryzhova, 2006, p. 17). While Moscow institutions were particularly resistant and slow in introducing the exams, observers report that families outside Moscow favor the policy (Chronicle of Russian and Eurasian Education, 2006, p. 7). According to statistics on the USE for 2006, 36 to 72 regions of Russian Federation participated in these exams in different subjects (Eklof, 2006, p. 7).

The sharp decrease in the children's population and the deteriorating health of Russian youth are alarming realities. According to data from the Institute for Socioeconomic Studies of the Population (ISEPN) of the Russian Academy of Science, "from 1991 through 2003, the number of children up to the age of eighteen has fallen by 9 million, ... in 2015 the proportion of children in the overall population will be 17 percent, and the absolute number will fall to 22.5 million. By the middle of the current century, the number of children will fall to 10 million or 12 percent" (as cited in Rimashevskaja, 2007, p. 72). It is hard to disagree with Rimashevskaja's conclusion, that in the near future "every child will be worth its weight in gold" (p. 72).

The condition of children's health is disturbing. "According to data of the Russian Federation of Ministry of Health, only 32 percent of children in Russia are

classified as healthy, while 52 percent have functional impairments, and 16 percent suffer from chronic diseases” (p. 74). The 2003 cohort of 30 million children (age zero to 17) was characterized as follows:

About 5 million children suffer from chronic diseases and 620, 000 are handicapped; 9 million children are living in poor families, in which the level of income is below ... that necessary to ensure physical survival; about 3 million children are homeless or neglected; about 5 million people are being brought up in incomplete families; about 1 million children exhibit antisocial behavior, including alcoholism, narcotics abuse, and crime (Rimashevskaya, 2007, p. 82).

The work of Russian teachers, therefore, takes place in challenging social and economic conditions. Not only is the world of some of their students unstable and fragile, their own financial and social stability is constantly being challenged. Although the education system does not lag behind other areas of Russian life in the pervasiveness and complexity of innovations, if and how these changes influence the level of human potential, especially its active component, is an important question for Russian educators. A brief overview of recent educational policies showed that certain conditions within institutions have changed to promote the growth of human potential. The rhetoric of current educational reforms stresses the importance of preserving the Russian educational heritage and of providing equal access to quality education even under present conditions of increasing inequity. The task of raising individuals who can take an initiative to transform their own lives and the future of their country remains a critical issue for

4.3. Participants of the Study

The teachers that I interviewed for the study worked in two different settings – a private school and a state funded boarding school. The teachers from the private school work with families who became affluent in the market economy. It is important to note,

however, that the teachers from the two schools shared a similar past in respect to their education, conditions of work, and social status. The private school was relatively new and many teachers had worked in typical schools before coming there.

Both schools were located in metropolitan areas. The first site was a boarding school for children with speech impairments, age seven through 17 or 18. I interviewed two primary school teachers/speech therapists and one psychologist. I knew them as successful practitioners from my experience of working with them. In the interviews they reflected the qualities of expert practitioners. Tina, a school psychologist, had a degree in special education and at the time of the interview worked for a different school.

The participants of the second site included one primary school teacher, one teacher of English, one speech-therapist, and one teacher of Russian who was also the school's principal. I used a snowballing technique in recruiting participants in the second site. I knew the school principal as a highly experienced teacher and asked her to recommend other expert teachers for my study. Overall, seven Russian teachers participated in the study: three teachers - speech therapists, one psychologist, and three classroom teachers. In Russian primary schools, teachers work with the same group of children throughout primary school. Also at a middle and high school level, teachers stay with the same group of students for several years. A description of the participants of the study is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Description of the Russian participants

Names	Areas of expertise and experience
1. Mila	Primary school teacher and speech therapist in the boarding school Responsible for whole class instruction and individual lessons Number of students – 12 – 15 Years of experience – 37
2. Alina	Primary school teacher and speech therapist in the boarding school Responsible for whole class instruction and individual lessons Number of students – 12 – 15 Years of experience – 17
3. Tina	Psychologist in the boarding school. Conducted psychological assessment, individual and group therapy sessions. Mainly worked with primary school children. Years of experience – 4
4. Olga	Primary school teacher in the private school Number of students – 10-15 Years of experience – 15
5. Svetlana	Speech therapist in the private school Conducted one-on-one lessons in primary school or individual and small group lessons in kindergarten Years of experience – 14 (7 as an instructor of psychology at a community college and 7 as a speech therapist)
6. Rita	English language teacher in the private school Grades – middle-high school Number of students – 10-15 Years of experience – 4

Table 3. Continued.

Names	Areas of expertise and experience
7. Nina	Teacher of Russian language and literature. She was the founder and principal of the private school. Grades – middle-high school Number of students – 10-15 Years of experience – 30

4.4. Russian Teachers' Experience of Working with Underachieving Students

Despite the different educational settings from which the participants came, a common psychological essence and thematic structure of the teachers' experience emerged.

4.4.1. Psychological Essence

You know all our teachers love our children. When we get together, it seems that we should forget about school. Instead we talk about children all the time, we talk about our students.

Every child is a story, but children with difficulties in learning and behavior are more memorable. Underachieving students are not confident in themselves and their strengths. They have difficulties everywhere. Many of them are hyperactive. But all of them are good. You cannot give up on a child. Every child can learn. The teacher who can give a lot, the child will take a lot. I know that they can achieve and my knowledge comes from experience.

With each child you have to think and find an approach. A trusting relationship is at the foundation of my work as a teacher. Trust is when the child gives me his hand and we go together to the heights. I know that the child will take the height. You can do anything when a good relationship is at the foundation. You have to love children and support them. Children know that I am always here for them, their teacher, their friend and sometimes their mother to help them overcome their difficulties and become better learners. If they have questions or need help - class is their second friend, I am next to them too. When I prepare for the class, I unfold the map of the class. I think about the best way that each child can learn. I can change my direction during the lesson ten times. I will try as many ways as possible, I don't know, stand on my head to help my students learn and bring out their potential. I never give up on my students. I raise the bar higher and higher, but when it is necessary I go to the students' level.

Teaching is a give and take situation. It is a huge educational work to make students successful. When I leave the class my back is wet (metaphor, "working hard"). You give a lot of energy, but you also receive a lot. I love my work because people listen to you, love you, want to listen to you and see you, and maybe feel you. I want to do it and give more and more. I can say the work can bring you joy and satisfaction. The satisfaction is that it was you had helped.

And your students bring you all these good surprises. When students succeed they get wings, they can fly, they can fly even higher than I could predict. They become smarter, they control themselves; they become more attentive, more interested, and more mature and opened up. They become a whole person. When I see these changes, I realize that my efforts are not in vain and that my voice does not go into emptiness. School pulls you in. In our times nobody wants to work for this money, if you don't have that desire. The only people who stay here are those who see the school as the meaning of their lives.

4.4.2. Thematic Structure

The thematic structure of the experience of Russian teachers working with underachieving students includes a ground theme and four global themes.

Global Theme: *School is the meaning of our lives*

Theme 1: *Everybody is a special story*

1.1. They have difficulties everywhere

1.2. All of them are good

Theme 2: *We go together to the heights*

2.1. With each child you have to think and find an individual approach

2.2. A good relationship is at the foundation

- *I am always here for you*
- *Class is your second friend*

2.3. I can change my direction ten times

2.4. Your friend, your brother, sister, mother – all roles together... you are his teacher

Theme 3: *Our backs are wet – the work can bring you joy*

3.1. It is a huge educational work

3.2. You get a lot of energy from them

Theme 4: *They bring all these good surprises*

4.1. He got wings!

4.2. It is so good that I had you at that moment in my life

Ground Theme: *School is the meaning of our lives*

The name of this ground theme came from my interview with Mila, a speech therapist in a boarding school:

You know all our teachers love our children. When we get together, it seems that we should forget about school. Instead we talk about children all the time, we talk about our students.... It is like a disease. It seems that we don't have other interests.... School pulls you in, in our time, if you are young and you have a head on your shoulders, nobody wants to work for this money, if you don't have that desire.... This work is just for your own interest, not for money. The only people who stay here are those who see the school as the meaning of their lives.

As is evident from Mila's words, teaching is an all-consuming experience, it is "love" for children, "disease," "desire," it is an "interest" that is stronger than money. These teachers' engagement with their students transcended the borders of school; school "pulls you in" and teachers "talk about children all the time." The teachers' engagement with students is evident in Alina's experience: "You can take any child and just talk and talk about her."

Svetlana summarized her experience, "I love and like my work" and this love was associated with wanting to "give more and more." Alina was convinced that love for children is the foundation for working with students who particularly struggle at school because of a severe speech disorder. For her, love was associated with a desire to understand the uniqueness of each student: "You have to love them because children are very different here ... you have to understand them, to understand their difficulties..." The all-consuming power of love was expressed in Alina's perception of her students as "her own." She put it: "And you think, we love them, they are ours... So, this is first. You have to understand them, to understand their difficulties, because who else will help them?"

The teachers' commitment to students is evident in their willingness to "fight for them" when students experienced difficulties and the teachers were "the only ones" to provide social and emotional support. This is how Nina described it:

We have just talked about a child in our teachers meeting, he is standing at crossroads and we are doing all that is possible to fight for him. He has very little support, his father is by himself, his mother is doing her best, but she is at work all the time. So, we are the only ones left for him.

The teachers' inability to help some students was associated with "hurt" and "aching." This is how Tina expressed her experience of working with students whose family and socio-economic conditions did not allow them to achieve their best: "What hurts the most is when you see that something can be done and that it is possible and how the child can benefit from it, and you understand that you can't do it, it is not up to you." And further she added: "I am aching for children, because you can see that if the child had a chance he would have a different life."

The teachers' commitment to take responsibility for their students' learning and future is summarized in Nina's words:

When you come to school, it is not only that parents entrust their child to you, but when a child trusts the teacher, trusts, after all, his life, himself, his development and when ... you trust your mom ... and you know that your mom will do everything for you. So, this is the attitude of our teachers.

While all the teachers worked with a class, they also focused on each individual student. The theme *Everybody is a special story* captured their perceptions of students.

Theme 1: *Everybody is a special story*

The name of this theme came from Alina's interview when she shared: "I remember everybody. Everybody is a special story. Our children are very difficult. You know, we work with each child." The uniqueness of each student clearly stood out for teachers. Nina perceived each student as a "unique story." She put it: "Each day, starting from eight o'clock in the morning till eight in the evening, we have all these stories." Olga's experience was similar: "There are a lot of stories, because each child is a story, there are a lot of interesting stories. You think of each child and you see the whole portrait of the class." This is how Mila expressed her focus on individual students: "I can't say that I did not have difficult students. I had a lot of difficult students and I remember them. I remember those difficult students by their names."

Two sub-themes appeared while the teachers talked about their perceptions of underachieving students. The sub-theme (1.2.) *They have difficulties everywhere* captured the teachers' understanding of individual characteristics of their students; and the sub-theme (1.2.) *All of them are good* captured the teachers' belief in student potential.

Sub-theme 1.1. *They have difficulties everywhere*

A comprehensive understanding of students' difficulties was prominent in the experience of the teachers. This is how Mila described her students with severe speech disorders:

Because their speech is not developed, because they have severe speech impairments, that is why they have difficulties everywhere. Everything is impaired...they have difficulties with visual memory, auditory memory, their activity is impaired.

Alina's description of her first-graders was similar to Mila's:

My first graders were very hyperactive. They could not even sit. ...They would drop everything from their desks. They could not sit in one place. They would fall over themselves. They would try to reach the book that dropped and they would fall over with that book, or even with the chair. When they had a break, they would bump into each other, into each corner. Their coordination was probably impaired...Of course, with this background they had difficulties in learning.

A breakdown in the sequence of children's development was another characteristic that stood out for Alina:

When they come...not that they play, they cannot even play. What they do is grab toys from each other and that is how they play. We don't have time to teach them to play because we start schooling. That is why they skip over this play phase.

Tina, a psychologist in the same boarding school, had a clear understanding of the clinical characteristics of her students and used this knowledge to initiate changes. She described it:

Most of the children there had perception problems; phonemic perception most of all, and many of them had very good visual perception. And based on visual perception we tried...knocking, repeat it. Most of the time I was trying to have them do a task and control each other: one person does a task and another person controls it. That is how I worked.

Not only the special education teachers, but also the teachers in regular schools tried to understand the reasons for underachievement. This is how Olga perceived the causes of underachievement:

There are a lot of children, some of these children have difficulties that are connected with a psychological side of the child, his genetics, how he was born, here parents are responsible. Other difficult children are those who are not ready, who are not prepared by [the time they go to school], they haven't been taught. That is why there are two categories of difficult children.

Lack of confidence was the quality of underachievers that stood out for Rita. This is how she responded to the researcher's initial request to tell about her experience: "I spend a lot of time, like probably any teacher, with students who need help, because they are people who are not confident and not confident in their strength."

The breakdown in relationships with others was a characteristic of underachieving students that stood out for many teachers. This is how Olga perceived students who came to her from other schools: "When they come here, they are very reserved, prickly, with a lot of problems," they are "shut down." Working with orphaned students was the experience that particularly stood out for Mila. They were students who "were all very angry at the world." Her story of working with Alex demonstrates that the difficulties that the student experienced in learning stemmed from the breakdown of his relationship with others. She described it:

I remember one boy. His name was Alex. He was from an orphanage.... And he would be transferred from class to class. He could not stay anywhere. He was constantly running away. His protest manifested in getting away from here, "I don't want to see anybody." He was running away, he did not know where he was running, he had completely insane eyes. The impression was...when he was taken back, he was so hyperactive... he laughed.... I understand that there were no drugs at that time, but the way he looked, he looked as if he smoked drugs, though for sure he did not. That is how he looked. That is how ... he was. And he was aggressive to everything. He did not love anybody; he did not have any attachment...to anybody. No matter how anybody tried to approach him, he would still run away.

Student loneliness was another characteristic of underachievers that stood out for Rita. She described her experience of trying to reach one of her students:

And till seventh grade he was...not that he seemed hopeless, there was no progress, or his progress was so little that you could not see it. And all that was confirmed by his attitude towards teachers and students. All his negative emotions that he has inside of him, he is very reserved, he would

get them out in little annoying things. And then, it happened absolutely accidentally, we had a conversation with him....After that conversation, he was quiet for a long time and then, when I myself was out of patience, I said, "Okay, I am not going to do anything, if you don't try to communicate, I can't try to pull it out of you." Then he said, "Nobody talked to me before." Then I got scared because the person till that age (he was thirteen) was holding everything inside of him. Then it changed to longer conversations and I know that other teachers were trying to talk to him, about school subjects and other problems that he was concerned about and his attitude towards himself changed.

In Tina's experience, the lack of a supportive environment is one of the reasons that students feel lonely and do not want change:

When they come to see me they say, "I am tired of everybody, I hate them." And the child has no desire to change anything and he says, "What is wrong, I am okay, and I am alright..." When the emotional atmosphere in the class is conducive to the child, he blossoms.

The students' need for love and relating was very noticeable for Rita: "The characteristic of these children is the lack of attention from their parents. Each of them is an individual...but at the same time they are yearning for love, just simply relationship." The breakdown in student relationships with others is evident in their inability to communicate and ask questions. Rita described it: "They cannot communicate and this is their biggest problem, because they do not know how to ask for help." In this situation the teacher might be the only person who tries to reach students and help them overcome underachievement. This is how Nina described her experience: "As a school principal and a teacher I am very sad when I see that a student is able to achieve a lot but very few people help him."

Unfavorable family circumstances were clearly seen by the teachers as one factor that particularly influenced students' learning. This is how Nina described the family situation of many of her students:

Very often our stumbling block is that parents either don't understand what to do with a child or they do understand but they don't know how to do thatThey have goals, but they don't know how to achieve them. Very often parents do not have time, because everybody is busy with making money these days. So, people do not see that we are missing some important moments when the child would be able to achieve that much.... Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer "right" families, complete families, with moms and dads and so that everything would be going well there. If you look at our children and they are children of well-to-do parents, approximately only one fourth of them have a mom and a dad and they pay attention to their children. Can you imagine how many of them are children of divorced parents, with step-parents, sometimes a fourth and fifth step-parent?

Tina described the challenging conditions of working with some students from a boarding school:

The problem with boarding schools is that children spend all their time in school and when they come home, no matter how hard you try to work with them at school, when they come home it is an additional stress for them, because most of the time the families of these children have problems....No matter what you have done during the week, after spending two days at home they come back to school in a very different condition. And it takes two days to get them back to their normal condition.

Despite the challenging circumstances and difficulties in learning "children are good; all of them are good... [and]... they are capable of many things," as Nina put it, when beside them there is someone who wants to help and support them. The teachers' belief in student potential was captured in the sub-theme *All of them are good*.

Sub-theme 1.2. *All of them are good*

The teachers' awareness of the need to convey to students that they are good was captured in Olga's words:

So, I teach them what is good in them, children do not notice it. So, I tell them, "Have you noticed, for example, that he is good at drawing? How

good he is at singing, or what a wonderful hair clip that girl has, or that that student always comes on time, he is never late.”

Alina described one of her students: “But despite all of [his difficulties] he is an excellent student, he turned out to be a very smart student. He has an excellent memory. Very good boy!” Olga saw her main goal to raise individuals who believe in their potential. She put it: “But the main task for me as a teacher is to raise an individual who believes in himself, in his abilities and being able to find out what you can be good at for yourself and others.”

This is how Mila expressed her belief that any child can learn: “You can teach any child. You cannot give up on any child; no matter how hard he is.” Alina’s belief that students can learn and change was grounded in her experience:

Alina: On any level the child will become better, compared to what was at the beginning. ...Certainly.

Interviewer: What makes you so confident about that?

Alina: Experience, I think. I have taught a lot of children. Difficult and very difficult and that is what I have seen.

Belief in student potential was clearly connected with the teachers’ responsibility to provide a supportive and caring environment. This is how Nina expressed this understanding:

I think that the most important thing in the work with underachievers is to make students confident, to make them believe that they can achieve and then during his progress to support them all the time, to cheer them up all the time, to praise even for little success, to teach them not to be discouraged when they do not succeed. And when children have this confidence, they cannot be unsuccessful.

Olga's experience was similar. She believed that students, who grow into confident adults, would make the world a better place. She did all that was possible to instill that confidence in students:

So, one of my slogans is, "Don't be afraid to tell children kind words. Don't be afraid to tell them that you believe in them and don't be afraid to tell them that they will succeed." That he is the best, don't be afraid to pet the child, don't push away. This child will grow a kind person, maybe not a professor, but the fact is that kindness will stay in his hearts, maybe he even won't remember you, but people who surround him – will feel it.

Tina believed that approaching the student as a human being, "who is all good," is critical for helping students develop a desire to change:

When I see that somebody approaches the child as a human being, who is all good...you will have a different result. Because when the child sees that you approach him as a human being, he feels himself a human being.When the child sees an interest towards him, he responds to you, you have a response and the child has a desire to change and to do something.

With an understanding of students' individuality and believing in their potential the teachers started the journey of learning. How that journey happened was captured in the theme *We go together to the heights*.

Theme 2: *We go together to the heights*

The name of this theme came from my interview with Nina:

It is trust, respect, it is when he gives you his hand and we go together to the heights that I determined for you today and tomorrow that height will be even higher. I trust you too, I know that you are not going to fail and you will achieve that height.

Four sub-themes deepened the understanding of how the teachers experienced their work with underachievers: (2.1.) *With each child you have to think and find an individual approach*; (2.2.) *A good relationship is at the foundation*; (2.3) *I can change*

my direction ten times; and (2.4) Your friend, your brother, system, mother – all roles together... you are his teacher.

Sub-theme 2.1. *With each child you have to think and find an individual approach*

Finding an individual approach the teachers described as the first step in working with underachievers. The specific phrasing for this sub-theme came from my interview with Alina who considered an individual approach to be the most important aspect of her work: “The most important thing is to use an individual approach to each student. That is the most important.” Further in the interview Alina explained what she meant by an individual approach:

An individual approach is taking into consideration all difficulties that the child has. At the beginning we assess the child and find out the difficulties....So, we have children with comprehensive speech impairment. So, here we can have the level of phonetic impairment, sound differentiation, or syllable structure, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehensive speech. So, we determine our work depending on the level of impairment. Individual lessons help us a lot.

Olga perceived an individual approach as a path for helping her students achieve curriculum goals as well as a necessary condition for creating a safe environment for each student in her classroom. This is how she responded to an initial request to share her experience of working with underachievers:

First of all, it is an individual lesson with the child. I try to determine the degree of their underachievement in different subjects and start collecting material that would work for this particular child and start gradually to lead the child to the results expected in our school so that the child will learn the curriculum and will feel comfortable during the learning process. So, individual lessons designed for a specific child – first of all.

An individual approach as a starting point for therapy was clearly expressed by

Alina:

You know, it is important to find out here what the problem is; if it is his deficiency that can be overcome or just certain knowledge that he can acquire. If it is knowledge that he should acquire, he might even do it by himself, he might be taught where and how to ask, in the library, reference desk, etc. If it is deficiency, then it can be overcome with the help of the professional.

The distinction between whole class instruction and individualized instruction based on knowledge about each student was prominent among the teachers. Alina was vocal about how she tried to meet the needs of each student even during whole class instruction: “Every child is interesting and you have to think about every child, how to approach him, how to teach. Not the whole class, just read and retell, answer questions. No, but every child individually.” Taking into consideration the learning needs of each student during her preparation time stood out for Nina: “I unfold a ‘map’ in front of me. I think that this student needs this, and that student needs that, or prepare different hand out material for different students, or prepare different questions for different students.” Svetlana took into consideration not only students’ needs, but also their individual learning styles:

I start with the individual characteristics of the child, his personal qualities. One child needs to have more dynamic games. For example, when we do sound differentiation, some children have to do it through motorics, other children can learn just from listening, maybe they even don’t want to participate in other activities. So, starting from the individual characteristics. Also you look at the rate of learning, some children need a variety of exercises, other children do not like this change of exercises, they get used to one kind of activities, they learn it and only after that, based on what they learned, can they do other tasks.

In Alina's opinion, the need to think about the individual characteristics of each student was a creative aspect of her work. She described it: "It is creative everyday and every lesson" while she was looking for "the best way to teach, so that the child will learn the best." She expressed it:

First of all, each lesson is a preparation. Every lesson is new. Even if I have taught several times, yet for each class you get to prepare anew. You think, what is the best way to teach? How? So that the child will learn the best, so that it would be interesting for the child. That is why I look for new material, for new techniques, some times I have to come up with new techniques, a lot of visual material, and I read a lot. I read a lot of literature, I study it....There are a lot of new things, interesting, especially now.

The teachers shared with stories how individualizing instruction brought success.

This is how Olga geared her teaching towards the student's need to learn how to listen:

For example, Sophia. She is very loved in her family, she is quite knowledgeable, she was able to read when she came to school, but she was not able to work in a group of children, she did not listen to other children, she would listen only to herself which was an impediment for learning. Although she was very knowledgeable, she could write, but she was not able to work during class. It was very difficult for her. Tears were at the end of almost every class. So, what we taught her, "Listen to me and repeat what I said." That was the first thing that we taught her, "Did you hear what your friend said?" Very often we noticed that she did not hear, and it became a game for us, "What did your friend say?" So, gradually we taught this girl not only to repeat what her friend said, but also to become aware of what her friend said. She learned how to listen and afterwards she started helping other absent-minded children who were not able to listen, she was using the same phrases, "Did you hear what he said? Did you pay attention?"

The story that stood out for Alina was when she helped two brothers learn how to read through an individualized instruction. She shared:

This year I had two brothers who could not read and write. They were good at sound analysis, but as soon as we switched into letters, they could not read. They did not connect letters with sounds. I came with my own ways of teaching them reading. I collected reading material for them, a lot

of sounds for differentiation. I made up the whole album on that. As a result, they could read very well...but their writing is not good yet, they mix up letters. But it is a very interesting story. There was a moment when I was thinking that I was not going to make it. The end of the first grade, the beginning of the second grade - not one letter, not one letter. They could not recognize even one letter. I think they had some sort of a visual perception impairment. So, but it is okay now, somehow we came up with ideas and now they can read.

While the teachers emphasized the need to approach each student individually, they also stressed the need for comprehensiveness in teaching. This is how Svetlana described her speech therapy sessions:

So, it is a comprehensive development, you cannot limit it only to a speech development. ...everything goes simultaneously, and your result is more obvious when you do things simultaneously. Because you work on memory development or logical thinking development, the child has to explain his actions, to tell everything. How is he going to talk about it if he is not able to? That is why while we develop logical thinking, we simultaneously develop their phrase speech. We pay attention to his pronunciation in order for him to pronounce sounds clearly.

Mila's experience of teaching children with severe speech disorders was similar to Svetlana's experience. She emphasized:

In every lesson we have to develop our children... to work on their visual memory, auditory attention....So, we work on their comprehensive communication, so that...they have to communicate all the time, they have to communicate with their teacher, with other children.

Nina shared how she deliberately introduced memory exercises in Russian language classes to help students become better spellers:

And I have a lot of students who during exams, when they can not leave the room, I tell them, "If you unsure - write down the word in two different ways," for example if they are unsure between o or a, "and pick the one which you like better." In 99 percent they pick a correct spelling. They do not remember the rule, but they can decide - this spelling is better. So, visual memory, I think, is much more important than to learn all the rules. It helps not only with Russian....I ask children, you live across from the school, your way to school - describe it. The child begins

remembering. It turns out that he does not remember a tree, what else is on his way. So, I ask him to go that way one more time and tell me what is on his way to school. So, the child goes and then he tries to remember.

For Olga, it was important that her students develop a more comprehensive approach to learning. This is how she described it.

Interviewer: Can you tell more about this higher level of consciousness of learning, what is it like?

Olga: Well, if the child is in class all the time, he has an idea what material he has to learn. Also there is a moment in lessons, a problem, you approach a problem, and how you can resolve it. The child starts looking for ways, consciously to look for ways what he already knows how he can resolve the problem and what he is missing and where he can find out what he needs to do, being aware of the problem and how he can approach it. And here the child analyzes himself, what he knows, what he does not know, what he has to find out, and he starts working here as a personality, not as a student in whom you put this material in and he gives you a result at test time.

The need for a comprehensive understanding of students was captured in Alina's belief that knowing a whole child is essential to her work: "You just simply have to know these children, to know their character, everything. Knowing these children is first of all." For Tina, an individual approach meant seeing and accepting students as they are. The following excerpt from the interview exemplifies Tina's perception:

Interviewer: You said a human approach to the child. Can you tell me more about that?

Tina: Children are people too.

Interviewer: What does that mean?

Tina: It means that adults approach children not like human beings, but like they are not yet human. It has a long history, the way we treat children.... Actually this is how children have always been seen. Until you grow up - you are nobody....But when the child is born, he is already somebody. He exists. The attitude is until you turn a certain age, you are a nobody and nobody is going to treat you seriously. What can I talk to you

about if you are a nobody? And when they are taught, that is the attitude taken about children. Knowledge is just poured into them. Why bother talking to them? It is like me telling the student, “I give you this knowledge and you are supposed to receive it and that is that. There is no time for me to interact with you. Why should I bother to communicate with you?”

Olga’s perception echoed Tina’s experience. This is how she expressed her belief in creating an environment where the students can have a positive perception of him/herself: “It is not necessary that they immediately achieve the results that I want them to achieve as a teacher, but the fact that the child feels herself somebody.” The sub-theme *A good relationship is at the foundation* emerged as the teachers talked about creating a safe environment for students and establishing a trusting relationship with them.

Sub-theme 2.2. *A good relationship is at the foundation*

The name of this sub-theme came from my interview with Nina who believed that the relationship teachers establish in class is the key for student success:

So, you have to build up a relationship....Parents say, “We did not know about you [about your school]....Why? It is so good to be here, children want to come to school again, it is so good here.” You can build up anything when a good relationship is at the foundation. You can teach, do anything.

Two forms of relationships stood out for the Russian teachers: the relationship between the teacher and the student was captured in the words *I am always here for you*; the relationship among students was captured in the words *Class is your second friend*.

I am always here for you. In Olga’s experience, it was very important to help students understand that their teacher is always there for them:

I always tell children, “I can always offer you my help, you know, as your older friend, if somebody cannot help you at home, I am always here for

you; I am your older friend. Maybe you do not feel it right now, but you will understand it later.” And the child opens up and he looks at his work with different eyes.

The intention to create a safe environment for learning was characteristic of all of the teachers. As Tina put it: “When the child comes to school it is very stressful and you, as a teacher, have to work hard to make the child feel good. And of course, this interest in learning comes later; they have this motivation.” Mila described how she consciously controlled and changed her behavior in order to provide continuous emotional support for students with difficulties:

That is why sometimes despite what I want to do, which is to reprimand...instead I try to decrease my tone and say, “Look, you have done a great job! Look how successful you have been today,” although the child at the same time would be scratching on his notebook, I would keep saying the same. So, the child gradually calms down, he starts getting back to work, starts working, as if nothing happened.

She sometimes felt that by praising students she was breaking the rule “of doing it right”; her choice, however, was determined by the goal of keeping the student emotional stable, which she considered more important than following prescribed rules of classroom management. Mila’s focus on “being ahead of the student” demonstrates her desire to create a safe environment:

That is why I think that the teacher in this sense should not be on the same level with the child, you should always be a little bit ahead of the student and sometimes it is not very educational for other children, because they see that the child behaves that way but the teacher still praises him. But children are very sensitive, they understand, they see that sometimes I am doing it wrong by praising him, but they understand WHY I do it, to calm down the student, to stop him from throwing notebooks and tearing books apart.

If underachievement stood out for the teachers as the cause of a breakdown in relationships of the student with others, overcoming underachievement was perceived as

establishing a relationship with students. Building relationships with orphaned students Mila experienced as “getting them to our hands” (metaphoric expression that means “to build rapport”):

They were VERY difficult children. They were so pedagogically unattended, so traumatized and during their first year before we had to teach them, we had to get them in to our hands (to build rapport).

Mila’s awareness of the need to adjust her own behavior to establish rapport with a student is evident in her story about Alex:

Okay, we took him. We washed him, dressed him ... all these things. Half a year, yes, half a year he would keep running away and we had problems, but gradually, you know, only by gentleness, you can take these children with gentleness. You know, close your eyes, at the moment I feel that he can react badly, so you have to go away from that somehow, praise him... I don’t know, pet him on his head one more time, I don’t know, maybe bring him a toy-car, or something... somehow to make him feel special. And, you know, little by little he got attached to us, like a puppy. He could feel his master, so to speak. He was the first helper with the other teacher. She would say, nobody can, playing for him (idiom), nobody can help me with that except Alex.

As a result of Mila’s effort to create a safe environment and establish a relationship, Alex changed from being “aggressive,” someone who “did not love anybody,” and also “did not have any attachment” to a person “who got attached” to his teachers, who became like a “puppy [who] could feel his master”; he became “needed” and like “everybody else.” This is how Mila described these changes: “Gradually, he was coming to understand that somebody needed him, that he could help and that he was like everybody and anybody else.” The need to maintain a positive tone in a relationship with Alex stood out for Mila:

You know, only dwell on positive emotions, only on positive emotions. Because if at some point you do it against his fur (you rub his fur the wrong way), at that period of time, and that is it ... he would have a break

down, he would throw everything and he would run away and we would be looking for him at all railway stations.

The teachers reported that creating a safe and supportive environment made students “blossom,” “open up,” and “want to say and do something.” This how Tina described her experience of creating a safe environment in the classroom together with a classroom teacher:

With another teacher we made a chart, wrote students’ names and divided the chart into weeks. We introduced red and blue ribbons: red for good work and blue for bad work. Our criteria were not only grades, but also behavior and emotional condition. And based on the results of the week children would get a prize. At the beginning we were giving candy, than we [changed it]: all other children would applaud and then every child would come in front of the class and say something good about this child [the one who won that week]. When children got this motivation for learning, grades changed and their learning changed. Everybody wanted to say and do something. And when the teacher listens to every child, despite his impairment and listens to what the child has to say and corrects everybody and they repeat it again to say it right and then they are praised, then the whole class changes and their underachievement changes. They opened up differently.

The difference among students who learned in different learning environments was noticeable for Tina:

The difference, in my opinion, was huge. Because children in the first class [where the teacher purposefully was working on creating a safe and motivating environment], maybe they covered less material and maybe they did not learn a letter, which they were supposed to learn, but their eyes were shining, they were confident, they were happy and everything went well. In the other class, they had constant stress and ... they wanted to hide behind their textbooks, just not to be called, and [were thinking], “I am so afraid of this teacher.”

Nina talked about her principles of building a relationship with students:

Respect to students, friendliness, nobody is allowed to raise their voice in our school. Good mood, an interest that the teacher has to cultivate in students and an interest that students have to cultivate in themselves to become a personality. Softness, going from heart to heart, eyes to eyes.

Svetlana described how a trusting relationship between the teacher and the student was evident in a physical contact between the two: “The child can hug you and lean on you, give you his hand and... that physical contact.” For Olga, it was important to be on the same physical level with her students, to sit with them. She described it:

Rita came later to school today and she started crying because she was not able to do something, because math is difficult for her. I sit with her, I am like her support, I am with her and she feels it and she feels better.

And further:

Why do children sometimes shut down? In my classes they talk and answer questions, because I sit in the middle of the class with them. I sit with the children and they see my eyes and it is like a moral support, they see the eyes of their friend.

The teachers viewed support and an emotionally safe environment as the essential conditions for creating in students the desire to learn and change. This is how Olga described her effort to support underachieving students:

I try to find what the child is able to do and focus the other children’s attention on that positive that the underachieving student is able to do. Always to find something to praise the child for so that the child would grow in the eyes of his classmates and I do it in front of the whole class and I say, “Finally, you were able to do that; it is so good. Children, have you noticed that?” So, the child gets wings, he does not feel so down to earth and less capable than others and he develops an ability to work, he wants to work; he develops a desire, which is important.

Tina’s experience was similar:

Due to the atmosphere in the class, motivation goes up and when the child has an obstacle, not being able to do something... he does not get discouraged, he understands that he has this obstacle, but he keeps trying and trying. ... When the child has a need, there is this positive moment and the child being on this wave, he starts developing. Because he gets this impulse at the beginning of learning, it helps him develop and when he leaves that class and that teacher, then that desire stays with him.

Some teachers talked about establishing a relationship with students as tuning in on their moods, as establishing mutuality or as a dance with the student. This is how Rita talked about mutuality in a relationship with students:

They feel your mood when you see them. When they see that the teacher is in a good mood, it means you can make a joke, sometimes change the subject - and they will use it. But if they see that the teacher is not in a good mood and you'd better not play with that....They definitely feel it. The same from my side: if it is cold outside and all they can think about is how to warm up and eat - I can't tell them, "I told you that we are doing it this way today." So, you see, there should be mutual respect.

Svetlana described her readiness to adjust to students' emotional conditions as a "dance":

Svetlana: First grade, the adult is everything for them. For the second grade, they are experienced; you had to dance a little bit. Well we have danced a little bit, now it is more or less clear what happens in the class.

Interviewer: When you say "dance" what do you mean?

Svetlana: To go down to their level ... to go down to their level.... He comes with the attitude, "I don't want to do anything, I won't do anything.... And I am not going to ... listen to you." "Okay, if you are not going to work, let's just talk." I even don't ask what is wrong. I ask, "Where you were, what you saw, what was the last movie that you watched ... a computer game." ... Ten minutes is enough for that, or five, after that little by little, "Let's do this or let's do that."... So, that is what I mean by 'dancing,' go down to their mood.

Communication with students emerged as a powerful tool for establishing a relationship with them. The students' need for connecting with others through meaningful conversation stood out for many teachers: "They are yearning for love, for simply a relationship, they don't know how to ask for help" (Rita); "I forget about my problems and give my time to the child-he just needs to talk to somebody" (Olga). It is

important to emphasize, however, that the talk the teachers considered as helpful was personal. This is how Tina described it:

Well, there are many things that can help, but the first thing is just to sit on the level of the child so that the child can see and talk to you, because they are all tense. So, at the beginning just to set up a friendly relationship with the child, you can use any conversation or action. You should do something so that the child can open up and relax.... It is very important to talk about something personal, because all children have problems and they have something to share.

Olga's experience was similar:

Another aspect of my work with underachieving students is when I have an individual conversation with a child. I ask the child, "It did not work out. You can see it yourself. Why were you not able to do that? What was in the way? Can you tell me?" ... And the child has to analyze himself...what did not work and WHY it did not work....Children like this trustful conversation.

Establishing a relationship with students and encouraging them to ask questions was an aspect of the therapy that stood out for Alina:

So, the most important thing here would be to build relationships with students so that students would not be shy with their teacher, they would not feel tense, that they would be able to ask their teacher at any moment anything that they do not know. So, the most important thing is that - if I do not know, I will ask. And the teacher's role is that, if you do not know - I will help you. So, I think this way. You are his friend, his mentor.

Personal conversation with students stood out for Olga as a venue for maintaining relationships with her present students as well as for supporting students who have already graduated and gone to middle school:

If the child gets sick, one girl has been sick for two months now, she has a very serious illness; so, these phone calls, maybe they need my help with anything and when the child picks up the phone she says, "Oh, it is so good to hear you. It is like news from far away. We are studying with mom at home." "Okay, you know that if you have problems, you call me."

Fifth-graders, they are all in different schools and they call in the evening, not so much, maybe, they need to find out something, I can't do this, I don't know. Can you tell me? ... So, you pick up dictionaries, explain and it is probably that this connection, they don't want to break it up, that first teacher and next teacher....So, if something does not work out in their school, they need that emotional support of the person with whom they started.

A free flow of conversation between the teacher and the student was a sign of an environment where students "blossomed" and wanted to learn. This is how Nina described the environment in the primary classes of her private school:

You smile at everybody when you see them; ask them about their weekend. So, when I come here (primary school), they tell me who fell in love with whom, what songs they know. One girl tells me, "I want to tell you a secret. You know, Julia got a new purse and she is showing off with that purse, I just can't stand it" (laughing)....So, all these little secrets, what happens at home? So, they have a very heartfelt environment here, maybe sometimes too much. But they are little children. So, it is a little bit different [from middle/high school].

This is how Tina described two different classrooms and the quality of interactions that take place in each one:

In the first class that I was describing lessons were turning out into something unbelievable, because they all were yelling, "Can I, me, me, I want to respond" and the child could come to the board and tell everything that he wanted. They had a discipline problem, because we could not hold them back, because they had such a great passion....That desire to tell everybody what I know and what I am able to do. They can repeat it twenty times and they don't get tired of it. In the other classes, no desire, nothing, just apathy... they don't have, "Can I, me, me, me ..." No, they don't have it.

Conversation with students as a sign of being connected with them stood out for Olga:

And the MOST important – friendly relationships with the child. Friendliness, warmth that sometimes children don't get from their parents. They know that at any moment they can come up to me, tell me what is on their hearts, we can have a private conversation if they want to tell me

something and this is safety that the child later feels in the class when he sees me in the middle of the class teaching....They can lean on my chest sometimes, this female beginning (laughing).... I think it is a huge factor, that kind, friendly word and the child immediately, not that he grows up, but he feels more confident in the lesson.

The importance of a relationship, being connected with others and being seen as an individual was succinctly captured in Rita's words: "The main thing here is not teaching a subject matter, but interaction with each other and perception of each other as personalities. As for learning, it comes easier if there is a good relationship."

The class is your second friend. The Russian teachers were vocal about the need to create a supportive environment in the classroom among students. This is how Olga expressed this awareness:

It might happen that you do not know something, but you don't have to be afraid of it, the class is your second friend. So, from the very first day when children come to our school, we help them understand that these are their friends here, not their enemies. They feel safe and we are ready to help them.

Rita shared how she used learning activities to build a relationship among students:

We use stronger students to explain to other students, because children sometimes can explain to each other better than the teachers. So, it is sort of switching from the teacher to the students and they learn to listen to each other. Their authority goes up and they see each other not as people who just sit separately, but they become a group.

Mila shared a story how children helped teachers understand a student who had very severe speech impairment:

She did not have any sounds and no language structure and when she wanted to ask about anything...children even learned to understand her faster than teachers or educators did, and any time children could translate for us what she wanted.

Rita was aware how the class attitude towards learning influences an attitude of individual students. She observed:

Again... there are students who come here from different schools. You have an impression ... that they believe it is not prestigious to learn; it is not trendy to be a good learner. It is bad and in other schools it is being scorned. What is accepted is to miss class and to be different, but not to learn hard. Here, in this school, things are different. [Studying hard] is supported and it takes sometimes two years for some students to understand that. If the class attitude is that they understand the value of studying hard, then it takes less work.

Olga emphasized that learning how to work with other students is one of the ways of overcoming underachievement:

I think, this opportunity to work with a group of peers is also a big support for those children who feel themselves weaker, but in fact are weaker in overcoming some learning difficulties. If you want to learn the material – you will never be able to do it by yourself.

Alina had the same belief that other students can be a source of help for those who struggle. She put it: “If [the child] has difficulties – of course you should help, I will help or other children will help.” For Olga, it was a conscious task to build a relationship among students in and out of classroom:

Again, if one of our children is sick, everyday, of course I initiate it, “Your friend is sick. Do you know why? How sad that he is sick, how we can help him? Who calls today, who calls tomorrow.” I give them a phone number of that child and call parents in advance to apologize if they receive a lot of calls, “I am sorry, but I want that it is not only me who is attentive to your child, but also his classmates who he will work and live with ...” So, he has to know that his friends are there for him. That feeling of a friend. I develop it in the learning process as well.

Rita shared a story about how the change in the dynamic of a relationship during a trip positively influenced the student’s position in the class and eventually his own attitude towards learning:

Rita: He got a chance to start anew.

Interviewer: What happened during the trip?

Rita: Several times he helped. In fact he is a very kind person, he does not remember being offended, we played several times, he lost several times and he had to give compliments to everybody. He told everybody such wonderful things, that everybody said, “Wow, George.” You know little by little, but in general it worked as a good thing. They were all equal there; there was no school there. He came in a new group when all positions were already taken, he was not able to become a leader and he does not have strong leadership skills. But he has other good qualities. That helped him find support from other students, support from students in learning. If everybody supports it, it means all class supports it.

The teachers were sensitive to the students’ understanding and their cognitive and affective needs and were ready to change direction of the lesson “ten times” if needed.

The dynamic nature of teaching was captured in the sub-theme *I can change my direction ten times*.

Sub-theme 2.3. *I can change my direction ten times*

Olga’s readiness to change direction was determined by the need to achieve her teaching goals and the goals of developing the students’ personalities. She expressed it: “Being ready for the class is my responsibility. I can change my direction during the lesson ten times, but I will achieve my main goal, the learning goal, first of all, and also the goal to develop personality.”

Nina believed that it was the teachers’ responsibility to put all of their efforts in finding an approach to their students and changing direction if necessary. Her belief was grounded in a high sense of self-efficacy, which she tried to instill in her colleagues and her students. The following words captured her belief:

At the teachers’ meeting that we just had, I said, “If you had problems with your students, first, look what you could have done differently and do

not blame anybody around you.” Because if I did not achieve something, I look back on my actions and think what I could have done, said, thought differently. ... It is only your own fault if you live the life that you do not like – it is your fault. If you do not achieve something – you have not thought through thoroughly enough or put your goal which you did not want to or you did not need to, when your plans did not coincide with what you really needed. So, everything comes from you. If you want to have a different life, to have different friends, to have a different house – this all is in your power, if you want it a lot – you will be able to get it.

Many teachers expressed the importance of starting work on a level where students can experience success. Tina described how she kept looking for a task that would help students experience a sense of accomplishment: “I try one thing, second thing, third thing and the thing that goes well, that is where we start.” Mila described her work as “raising the bar”:

Gradually we raise the bar and maybe at certain level the bar will stop and you can’t do anything, but still you have to do your best to raise the bar, you have to work with them. “Okay, you can’t do it this way, let’s do it another way.” Maybe the child will do it another way. Maybe the child is not able to do it visually, but if you add auditory aids he will be able to.

Svetlana emphasized the need to determine short-term goals and work towards them:

So, this is the program minimum, you define your goals for three months, to give concepts, to teach this, this and that. You don’t move any further, I am not saying that it should be narrow, because even teaching colors you can use different materials and enrich the child’s speech at the same time. When the child gets it, then you go to the next goal.

Nina noted that she changed in her approach to teaching. Her own experience and experimentation led her to believe that challenging students and helping them perform the task that exceeds their current level of performance is one of the ways to make students believe in their potential. As a result, “they can fly even higher” than the teacher could predict. This is how she described that change:

When I was thinking for this interview I realized that I went through major transformations in my teaching. If before ... I thought that for a person to be successful he should succeed in learning, that you should give him a small task that he could go up the ladder, step by step. Now, especially in this school [private school], I work differently. On the contrary, I give difficult tasks that sometimes can be difficult even for strong successful students and of course I create conditions that the student would accomplish this task, maybe with my help. When the student accomplishes something very difficult, something that before he thought he would never be able to do, and then after that, he thinks that anything else is easy.... And this is an easier way. First, you have to let students feel their potential, to show them that high level that they can achieve and after that they can fly, they can fly even higher than I could predict.

The following story from Nina's experience is an example of this approach. She described how she worked with a student who had difficulties in Russian language:

Sometimes I would put him in a class of younger students. A teacher got sick there and asked him to check dictations. And urgently before the lesson I would give him the textbook for the fifth grade so that he can get ready for the class. Sometimes you spontaneously come up with solutions, you know that you have to support, but most of the time it is a systematic work. I could not approach that student differently. If I suddenly start doubting and say, "You know, I am not sure if you can do that" – then everything collapses. I try to pull higher, higher, and higher.

The teachers shared with us how they adjusted their teaching to the dynamic of the class and to the tempo of students' learning. This is how Svetlana experienced that adjustment:

I am quite emotional and I want to give BUT I have to slow down, because it is difficult for the child. So, you have to go down to his level and give him what he can take. When the child takes it, then we can go further.

Nina adjusted her tempo to the students' emotional and cognitive needs. She experienced this adjustment consciously as well as intuitively. She described it:

You cannot enter the same river twice. A river is different, when I go to a different class, of course, I look ... I can't say that I do it not being aware of it, but intuitively – yes....The mood of the class...the mood of the

children....In one class you might have excitement and everybody succeeding, and in another class – maybe we won't even cover one half of a lesson, because one has a problem, another has a problem, the whole atmosphere, and then you don't have a united class. So, you have to get them together, to get them ready to learn and yet you have already lost time. So, you do just one half of a lesson. ...The next lesson, my goal would be to organize them and motivate them from the very beginning. It is different. Sometimes the difference is very big, even though you teach the same lesson.

Although aware of her goals, Rita described her work with underachieving students as guided by her students: "I give them a starting point, where to begin and as for the further direction, they show it to me themselves, how I should teach them." She also shared that working with underachieving students pushes her to look for new ways of teaching. Being committed to continuously search for strategies that will work, she was also sensitive to her students' interests and how she can use them. Rita experienced working with her students as continuous growth. This is how she responded to the request at the end of the interview if she wanted to share anything else:

I am growing together with them. They also teach me a lot, even simply in relationships. As for teaching methodology too, because they help me teach them better. Especially underachieving students push me; make me keep looking for ways to teach them....If I know only three ways how to explain "Present Indefinite" and the child does not understand these three ways, it means I have to find a fourth way, I don't know, to stand on my head, to show it visually or something else, so that he would understand. Or they help me through their interests, what I can teach through. For example, one boy is very interested in computers, why not use it, so that he would work with that computer and get information from there. It is okay, that it is not me who is the source of information; let them find it by themselves.

Rita was aware of the need to adjust her teaching to her students' learning styles and interests. She was teaching English as a "living thing" and used in-and out-of-school

situations to facilitate students' learning. The following quote captures the dynamic character of her teaching:

Some students have mathematical thinking. So, you explain to them through some formulas; other students have more abstract thinking, so, you have to give them more associations, with words, with what will work. Some students are older and they are interested in something new, with girls I will communicate through magazines, movies, to show them that the language is a living thing.

Svetlana and Rita talked about learning as play. This is how Svetlana described it, "When we have our therapy we don't say 'Let's work,' we say, 'Let's play.' Rita echoed to Svetlana: "They do not notice that they are learning when they play."

Changing the medium of instruction was another strategy that stood out for the teachers in their work with underachievers. This is how Tina used drawing in her classroom:

He was VERY good at drawing ... [and] starting from that we started math in a visual way....He had to draw those apples...there is a truck...there are apples in the truck. How many apples are in the truck? Draw them. So, that is how he started math. He did reading because there were pictures there and because I was telling him, "Read and draw it."

Olga's experience was similar. She shared a story how using drawing as a learning strategy helped one of her students make sense of the learning experience and overcome emotional distress associated with a failure to understand:

"I do not understand, I don't know, I can't do it," she was saying quite often. "Okay, Let's draw what you were imagining when you were reading it." She was excellent at drawing; she could draw for hours. She would start drawing and in her drawing we would address a learning problem. So, through drawing we would resolve a problem that made her cry and she was saying, "I don't know, I don't understand." In this drawing process she would gain insight, "Everything is clear," she would conclude it herself. The things that she could not perceive in abstraction, she would see it in her drawing. So, "What do you need to do in order to understand?" "To draw."

Olga considered that her main goal is to teach students to learn how to learn. While other teachers also expressed the need to help students become self-regulated learners (Nina) or to acquire strategies that will facilitate learning (how to work with a textbook, how to organize learning material – Rita), Olga was the most explicit in understanding the need to help students become independent learners for the rest of their lives:

Our main goal is to teach students how to learn, not to teach them how to spell this or that...you have to learn to resolve your problem and the adult is next with you. If you can do it by yourself – do it by yourself. If you feel it is difficult – ask for help your teacher, parents, and your friends. Somebody has to be with you and we are.

She shared the strategies that she used in the classroom to help students become independent learners. The following quotes capture some of them:

I always tell them, “Where can you find an answer? You have books, you have a phone, call your friend; your friend will help you in a difficult moment.” And the child himself, “How can you help yourself, what can you do?” And assessment of results, what you achieved, what you were able to do and what still needs some more work. It gives them wings and they change. They become more mature, more open, and you can see results.

We have this question that comes up often in the fourth grade, “Why do you need that?” We have just learned a rule. “WHY do you need that?” To write or to count without mistakes. “Why do you need that?” To choose a profession that I would like. “Why do you need that, a profession that you would like?” To get some comfortable life conditions ... We teach the child to see herself in the future. “Why did you come to primary school?” On each level the child learns to do something. “WHY do you need that?” This is the main question. And the child tries to find out – why does he really need that.

I direct and guide my students, but don’t dictate.... It is fifty percent my role and fifty percent the role of the child. We have a learning dialogue. We start discussing with each other in order to find a proper goal. And by the end of primary school the child can see the goal that he has to achieve, he knows that the teacher has taught him that. He knows that if it is very

difficult the teacher is with him and he can even lead a learning monologue, defining the main goal that it is important for him.

I always teach students, always start your response, what you are going to say with the words, “I think this is the way,” and try to prove your point of view, and we will accept your point of view. You cannot let the child believe that he thinks in a wrong way, that his thought is wrong. Maybe there could be different thoughts and each thought will be right in its own way. We think differently. My most important goal is to teach the child to think and be able to explain your point of view, your logic so that another person would be able to understand you.

The teachers’ understanding of how critical the role of a teacher is in students’ learning made them fulfill multiple roles in relation to their students. The sub-theme *Your friend, your brother, sister, mother – all roles together ... you are his teacher* emerged as teachers talked about all of the roles they had to undertake in order to help their students learn and grow.

Sub-theme 2.4. *Your friend, your brother, sister, mother – all roles together, you are his teacher*

Olga considered that displaying multiple roles is particularly important in teaching underachievers:

Of course, when they are come here, they are very withdrawn and touchy, with a lot of problems. What do you do with these children? “You have to learn to go along with friends, you have to work with your teachers, someone who is not your supervisor, but who is your friend, your brother, sister, mother – all roles all together, you are his teacher.” ... Our teachers will never push away and will help, and children gradually, not that they thaw, but they learn to live and work in a group. It is not necessary that they immediately achieve the results that I as a teacher want them to achieve, but the fact the child feels like he is somebody.

Olga believed that by taking up the role of a mother she helped first-graders in their transition from the home to the school environment: “Some children cry because they miss something ... they feel so lonely in our society, especially during this transition

from home environment to school environment. ... So, transition from one mother to another mother.” Alina described her relationship with students as collaborative and her role as one of mentor:

The most important thing here would be to build relationships with students so that they would not be shy with their teacher, they would not feel tense... that they would be able to ask their teacher at any moment anything that they do not know. The most important is that – “If I do not know, I will ask.” And the teacher’s role is that “If you do not know – I will help you.” I think this way. You are his friend, his mentor.

Changing roles in order to find a common ground in relationship with students was a facet of teaching that stood out for Rita. She was aware that it is important to raise her students to the “level” of adults, as well as sometimes to ‘go to their level:’

I cannot say that they are children and I am an adult. I am also a child and they are adults. And as soon as you start raising them to your level of communication but not go down to their level, they also take it differently, though sometimes you need to go down to their level. Not that I am talking to them from above. No. Just to show them that we are on the same side and so it won’t be confrontational.

Going “to the heights” is not always an easy task. The theme *Our backs are wet – the work can bring you joy* captured the teachers’ experiences of challenges and rewards of teaching.

Theme 3: *Our backs are wet – the work can bring you joy*

The name of this theme came from my interviews with Nina and Svetlana. Nina used the metaphor “our backs are wet” (which means *to work hard*) to describe the efforts that teachers put into teaching under the conditions of smaller classes at the private school:

Our teachers say that in the past they worked with forty students and they thought that when they would come here to teach, only ten students... what a relief. No, when we leave the class – our backs are wet, because if

you want all ten students to get as much as possible – it is very different. You have to get ready for the lesson, sometimes you have to stay after the lesson, and finish what you did not finish.

Svetlana compared her experience as a speech therapist with her previous work as a psychology instructor at a community college. It was only in the position of speech therapist that she experienced her work as joy: “You know, you hear a lot that your work should bring you joy, I was thinking, well work is work, what joy? ... But now I can say, yes, the work can bring you joy.” Two sub-themes captured the experiences of challenges and rewards of teaching: (3.1) *It is a huge educational work* (undertaking); and (3.2) *You get a lot of energy from them*.

Sub-theme 3.1. *It is a huge educational work* (undertaking)

This sub-theme captured the teachers’ efforts to create meaningful learning opportunities for all students. Teachers and students at Nina’s school also had a lot of out-of-school activities that were intentionally designed to bring students and teachers together, to create situations where students could experience success in an out-of-school context, and to learn to live and work together. This is how she described the experience of organizing a camping trip:

And then it is a huge educational work (undertaking) to make them successful....During holidays we go to different cities or go camping. When we go camping we don’t do it just for fun....We have a program. We usually go camping twice a year, in September and May. In September we meet new students and one more time make our group closer. In May we say farewell to those who graduate. Those two days of camping ... at the end kids fall down from tiredness and say, “Let’s stay one more day.” We do a rope course, team contests and other things and in the evening we, the teachers, fall down from tiredness and the students come and ask, “What are we going to do in the evening? Are we going to have any contests?” (laughing).

Teaching as an emotional practice was a noticeable thread in the teachers' stories. Svetlana expressed it: "I am emotionally so involved. Maybe for some people it is hard to understand me emotionally, because it is hard these days to 'burn' at work (laughing), you have to 'burn' in a different place." Excitement and emotionality for Svetlana also came from professional development:

It is just a fountain of everything. ... It happens after workshops, seminars; if I learned something....I have to share it with somebody and see what you think about it. Maybe it is exciting for me, but maybe it is just absurd if you consider it from the outside looking in.

Sometimes the teachers reported experiencing their work as emotionally exhausting. Olga experienced her hours after school as time to restore her energy and reflect:

And when I come home I am glad that the family is not back yet. This time of being alone helps me accumulate energy.... I come home and realize, "Well, not everything is actually so bad." Yes, and constant analysis, constantly being unsatisfied with yourself, "I did not do this or I did not do that, I am a bad teacher. I am a bad person. I have plenty of flaws." But recently I heard a phrase on the radio, "A person who says 'I am all right' and 'I am able to do anything'- that is the one who has problems." This self-analysis – it is a sign that you exist as a person.

Svetlana told how her emotional involvement took her attention away from her daughter:

I come home, sometimes I think, I feel sorry, I give to other children, but as for my own....That is it....Nothing. ...It is gone...."Please, don't touch me for forty minutes, for an hour," because, I just, "Don't talk to me" ... an hour... in one hour everything would change inside of her, she did not see me for the whole day. So, I say, "Okay, tell me." But it is too late, in that one hour she has changed and does not want to tell me anything, maybe she doesn't even want to see me.

The experience of professional doubt and discouragement was familiar to the teachers. In such moments Olga, for example, turned to her older colleagues for support:

I...always turned for help to more experienced teachers, whom I respected as teachers, not the ones who were teaching for As, but wise teachers. Natalia Victorovna. Sometime I would tell her, "I don't know, I get discouraged." She would tell me, "Do what you do, every day, a little bit, when you put a seed in the earth and if you water it and take care of it, it grows. If you keep taking care, this seed will grow into a good sprout." "Olga Sergeevna, what am I to do? Not only can I not handle the child or parents, it is just hard." She would say, "If you plant something good, it will grow."

Learning together with students, however, was the most significant source of energy and renewal for the teachers. The sub-theme *You get a lot of energy from them* captured working with underachieving students as a satisfying and rewarding experience.

Sub-theme 3.2. *You get a lot of energy from them*

This is how Rita described her experience:

I love my work a lot. Sometimes I get discouraged and think, "That is it. I am not a teacher. I myself have to learn, learn, and learn." And at such a moment children are usually a source of energy, because they feel it too. And when you get that feedback, you think, "No, it is not in vain, there is hope." You get a lot of energy from them.

Svetlana described her work as "this is mine" and the reason for such personal attribution stemmed from her connection with students, other people, and with her ability to give:

After working here for some time I realized that this is mine. Because people listen to you, love you, want to listen and see you, maybe feel you. That is also when we work in front of the mirror, the child can hug you and lean on you, give you his hand and this physical contact, you get this energy ... of course you also give your own energy ... you give a lot of energy. But after some years I realized that's what I want. I want to do it and give more and more.

Svetlana's sense of joy in her work was associated with being able to help. The following excerpt from the interview demonstrates this willingness to help:

Interviewer: What about joy...what is it like?

Svetlana: Satisfaction...when you are ABLE to do something and other people can see it.

Interviewer: You are able to....What do you mean “you are able to”?

Svetlana: To teach, to HELP – that is more important ... to teach – well, life will teach you, parents teach you..... To HELP. Before you nobody helped that child...maybe they tried, but eventually it was YOU who helped. That satisfaction.

Alina, similar to Svetlana, was aware that she could be the only one who could help the child. She talked about her work as interesting and creative. The students’ achievement made her work particularly special:

It is interesting to select [teaching] material, the way you can teach it, to think what is better to do and how better to do it. Well, it is very creative work. That is why.... And of course children who return the favor. They understand that you will help them; maybe nobody else will help them, nobody will teach them to speak and to write. That is why.

Rita’s satisfaction came from learning about her students and helping them:

It is also interesting to work with these students, because you have the results of your work.... English is communication and you learn more about a person who might not be able to talk about his problems in a big group of people, but will tell you, possibly, in one-on-one lessons. It is interesting, because you help a person.

As a result of the teachers’ persistent and “meticulous work” (Nina), students changed, they “blossomed” (Tina), they “got wings” (Olga) and could “fly even higher than [teachers] could predict” (Nina). The theme *They bring all these good surprises* captured teachers’ perceptions of student change.

Theme 4: *They bring all these good surprises*

The name of this theme came from my interview with Rita, who shared her experience of discovering strength and potential in students in the environment of a trusting relationship and open communication:

I like to play and they like to play.... Say, for example, we were on a trip. "Let's play cities!" So, we played cities. "Let's play words." We played in Russian, but it is too simple. "Let's play English words." One boy ... one whom I did not expect, (because in the class ... he was shy and did not want to be thought of in the wrong way) he gave the greatest number of words, which I thought he did not know. So, they bring you all these good surprises.

Two sub-themes emerged as teachers talked about changes that they observed in their students, (4.1) *He got wings!*; and (4.2) *It is so good that I had you at that moment of my life.*

Sub-theme 4.2. *He got wings!*

This sub-theme captured teachers' perceptions of student change. Olga shared a story of overcoming underachievement, which in her experience happens quite often. The metaphor she used to describe changes in one of her students, "He got wings!" means to feel empowered. In addition, the vignette to follow briefly captures all of the other themes that appeared in teachers' narratives about their work with underachieving students:

There is one boy; he is in fifth grade right now.... I met him in the third grade. So, he was only with me for one year. The boy almost could not write, his letters were not readable; he could not listen, could not read or think aloud. He was so pedagogically neglected so that teachers just gave up, he was just present in the class, and his parents did not know what to do.... How did we start? Of course, individual lessons every day, we started learning to write from the very beginning. So, I must say, that the child was a hard worker, he was so hardworking. He was not interested in learning, but he was a hard worker and he was used to finishing all tasks. So, due to his hard work he learned how to write and to count. We would do a verbal warm-up at the beginning of each class, tell us about today, and tell the most interesting episodes of your morning, what happened. So, we went from the simplest tasks to more complex tasks. The boy learned how to write, to think. Not as much as we would want to, but he was satisfied with his results. He got wings! he believed in himself and now learning is easy for him, and he does not say, "I don't want to go to school." He goes to school with joy, he sees his friends and he learns

something. I was not the only one who noticed changes in the child. All teachers noticed. There are many stories like this one.

Changes in the student appearance stood out for Tina as indicators of change in their motivation: “Their eyes are shining, how would you say, they look like puppies, little puppies that are happy about everything, and they have curiosity and everything is interesting to them.” Tina described changes in students as a “snowball” when experiencing success in one task transferred to others. Responding to the interviewer’s request to explain what she meant by the word “to develop” she said:

To discover something new in yourself. When I show the child you can do it this way, the child is glad that he can do it. Later you can show them how to do it in another way and the child can see....Then he has this desire to try to do in a different way and when the child tries to do it and he can see results. So, it becomes as a snowball. You showed the child only one example, you demonstrated on only one movement – and the child will have a chain and it will transfer to other things that at the beginning had nothing to do with the first task.... And when the child gets this impulse, he continues to develop and he has a desire. That is what is important.

Olga’s perception of student transformation was similar. She shared with us a story of how a student’s success in one area helped him become confident, willing to approach other learning tasks, and eventually become a valuable member of the class. Not being afraid to communicate was also a part of that change. This is Olga’s story:

So, working individually I concluded that it was difficult for him to get even basic knowledge and skills.... But the fact that we had individual lessons, and when he was talking in front of the class, I was always next to him and he repeated after me like an echo. And I could say, it was him who said that and the children would believe me. So, the child began believing in himself and he was not afraid to be in front of the class, he was not afraid to communicate with the other children.... [Children] did not want to work in pairs with him, because he would slow them down... and at such moments I would say, “He is a very hard worker, look, he had fixed a lock in the door or he made a pointer.” I would say, “Look, without his help we wouldn’t be able to do anything.” The children would

say, “He couldn’t do a problem.” I would say, “Not everybody is going to be an engineer; there should be somebody who is able to make a chair...” So, that quality and hard work and plus his ability to build something with hands. I always tried to explain to the children and...to encourage the boy that he would become a talented and capable worker in this specific direction. Because not everybody works in universities, banks or is a businessman, some people bake bread. So, that boy believed in himself so much, he became very passionate about what he could do, he fixed a Christmas tree for us ... probably he developed respect for me because I saw that ability in him. He would watch my desk, my chair, would take care of them and repair them if necessary. He realized that he could do something; that he is not an empty place in this class, and that there is something in him that he should be respected. He could work with his hands. It gave him wings and in a difficult moment I would remind him about that, “We can’t do anything without you.” He would come to school with great joy and his parents could not figure out, why. Not only that he got some knowledge, he started reading books that he did not read before. Why? Because in books he could learn what he could do, what he is able to. And sometimes when I had a task, I would say, “You know, I can rely only on you. Because you are the only one who can read this part and tell us.” So, he would become so responsible, because he was the one who was able to do the task, so he would believe in himself....So, to make a child believe that he is capable, to make parents look at his child from the teachers’ point of view and make his parents ask for help from other professionals, so that they would do their work.... So, the boy is learning.

This is how Alina described changes in students with severe speech disorders:

“Four years passed and they became very different children.” Changes in student behavior, as well as in their motivation, were noticeable to her:

They became smarter, they can control themselves, and they can sit and if something falls down, they get out of their places, pick it up and put it in its place. That is for their behavior aspects. Of course, they became more attentive, more interested.... And now they are very interested in learning, they became interested in reading books. That is what I like a lot.

Mila described changes in students with severe speech disorders as becoming “no different from the others”:

Nevertheless, all children, ALL children leave and they can speak. All can speak. Maybe one or two children who have difficulties that are noticeable to others, but all are no different from the others. Their speech

is clear and they look normal. If somebody knew where they went to school, what problems they had, nobody would ever say that they had those problems.

Inspiring students to improve and develop themselves was an aspect of work that was important for Olga. She shared: “I give them a desire so that they would try to improve and develop themselves, to learn, learn, and learn.” Her story about Sophia is an example of a student becoming an independent learner:

Again, that girl Sophia.... The girl had to live in a different town and she was not able to go to school there. But she had a set of textbooks and she would call me, learning independently and being a student from a different school, she would call me...not to find out how and what, but to ask if she was doing it correctly. She would say, “I am doing it this way because I need to find out that.” I would say, “When you come back to your school, the teacher would help you.” “No, I don’t want to be behind. I have to know it and I will know it and if it is okay, if I don’t understand something I will call you and ask you.” But again, she was not asking about the material. She was asking where she could find and how she would find.

Parental acknowledgement and appreciation of changes were the sources of a belief in her professional expertise for Svetlana:

When we finally got “L”...I can’t tell you that feeling.... At the end of the year I have a questionnaire, asking about the progress...in the questionnaire [the parents] wrote “significant changes.” I thought to myself, “Thank God.” Because you see for yourself and you are happy and you want to tell parents, “We made a progress, we can say ‘la – la – la’ four times correctly.” Parents sometimes don’t understand it. So what, “la-la-la” four times? For me and the child, this is something huge, we put so much effort, but for parents – it is like nothing. And suddenly they wrote “significant changes.” After that I realized that I was able to do something.

Although the teachers experienced joy when their students became better learners, it was the students’ ability to be successful and confident individuals that they valued the most. Nina’s belief that being an independent adult is more important than academic achievement is expressed in the following story:

Last year we got a student, she is a granddaughter of one of my friends... She said, "Nina, I want my granddaughter to become successful, it is not important to get A's all the time, it is more important that she becomes successful." She wants her granddaughter to become an individual.

The difficulties in adjusting to life for orphaned students stood out in the experience of Mila. She described it:

Still when they graduated from school, independent life was very difficult for them. They would get an apartment to live in and the school would give them money and some things to settle down. Nevertheless, independent life was very difficult for them, for all children. Some of them were able to adjust, to start a family and continue education, but others were not. They...you know, they would stay here till they were seventeen, they felt that continuous care. Even in the family it is not the same way, you can go anywhere you want, when you are fourteen, sixteen, to a disco. Not here. So, what do you want? You have weekend boarding school teachers – and you will go where they will take you. ...Everything is decided for them, you know, and we could not dismiss that, you know, we could not let them go to a disco or somewhere else. We are responsible for them, that is why everything should be here, in front of our eyes. When they suddenly leave and have to make their own decisions – they can't do it. They can't, they don't know how, and quite often they just don't want to. They got used to that, that everything is decided for them, that they are given advice. Now, you are by yourself...you have some money, you have opportunities, but quite often they don't want to use these opportunities, they don't want to work. So, they have to change their lifestyle. So, many children can't take that stress....At least here they have certain boundaries, we would tell them what is good and what is bad and show them and raise them. Still life unfolds in its own way and I am telling you...yes, some boys have settled down very well, they have families, they can support their families and can support their children. Many girls settled down quite well too, got married and graduated from different community colleges, still some children...(pause)...it was already clear at school that it would be difficult for them. They start constantly changing jobs; because they cannot establish relationships with people, they always have conflicts, they always think that others offend them and take advantage of them....Boys start drinking when they have stress, they just start drinking. I can't say that it applies to everybody, but some of them. But...I have worked in this school for so many years and not one child has gone to jail. So, nobody became a thief or a burglar. Yes, there are problems, but nevertheless these problems are resolvable and not horrible, but nevertheless we have these problems and I think we will have them until the system of raising orphans changes.

The relationship between the teachers and students took on a life of its own. The sub-theme *It is so good that I had you at that moment in my life* captured the teachers' experiences of meeting their former students and hearing from them words of gratitude for helping them learn and endure in difficult moments of their lives.

Sub-theme 4.2. *It is so good that I had you at that moment in my life*

Alina observed changes in students as becoming a “whole person,” who can go “into life.” Students, in turn, were grateful to her for contributing to their success. She shared:

With our help and with their efforts, of course, they become a whole person. When they leave, they go to continue their education or they go to work....That is the most important thing. Then they come back and tell us ...they are very grateful to us. Children who already graduated from school come back. Tell us about their difficulties, of course, but also what they learned here...they are very grateful for their teachers. ...They go out into life, which is the most important, and they get professions.

Nina's effort to “fight” for students was based on her previous experiences:

It would be easy for us just to let him go and throw away all our responsibilities, but we very much want him to stay, because we had cases when later our students told us, “It is so good that I had you at that moment in my life and I did not go crazy.”

Rita's story demonstrated how her desire to reach students and to connect with them was returned as students expressed a need to reconnect with their teacher:

This year with my ninth graders I had the whole ritual, when each of them would run up to me and give me a hug. Everybody is standing and looking at us. I can't do anything, because somebody came up with that idea and they had that impulse.

Becoming a part of a community and a part of each other's lives was one of the signs of overcoming underachievement. It was also a sign that the teacher's voice did not “go into

emptiness” (Olga), that it was heard and the teacher was able to make a difference in the students’ lives even in the very challenging circumstances of modern Russia. Indeed, the teachers’ commitment to their work and their students was evident in the ground theme - *School is the meaning of our lives* – and further permeated all other facets of the teachers’ experience: *Everybody is a special story* – while describing their students; *We go together to the heights* - while describing their work in the classroom; *Our backs are wet – the work can bring you joy* - while talking about their efforts to teach and help all students. The teachers’ commitment and perseverance brought results - *They bring all these good surprises* – as the final theme of the structure indicated. The teachers perceived their work as the meaning of their lives. How did they see their work in relation to a larger context?

4.5. Looking at the Bigger Picture

For the Russian teachers, the lives of their students reflected problems of their society that lingered from the past, as well as challenges that appeared with the transition to a market economy. Tina, for example, was vocal about the challenges of working with students who have difficult circumstances at home:

Families mean a lot in our work, because they don’t want to change anything, to do anything, nothing. I think we would be able to accomplish much more, if we could work with the whole family. School is school, but family is family. If it were only impairment, we could correct it. But you cannot correct the family.

Other teachers talked about how the transition to a market economy took away parental attention from their children: “If parents work somewhere and they think that if they bring money home and their children will be happy – we lose them sometimes” (Nina). In her feedback to the findings, Svetlana re-emphasized the importance of the family in work: “If there is no support from the family, it is very difficult to reach the best results.”

I described the Russian educational context as characterized by a combination of several features. First, Russian teachers experience the same social and economic difficulties as many of their students' families. In these circumstances, however, they still demonstrate a strong commitment to their work and look for "the best way to teach so that the child will learn the best." Indeed, school is the meaning of their lives. Second, while Russian educational traditions reinforce high expectations for learning, it becomes more and more evident that facilitating the development of an active component of human potential – the viability to initiate and sustain changes – is also an important challenge for contemporary Russian teachers. As the study showed, some teachers are aware of that challenge. Nina put it: "If I did not achieve something, I look back on my actions and think what I could have done, said, thought differently.... So, everything comes from you." As Russian teachers experiment with new educational approaches and curriculum, it is critical to think how these innovations explicitly facilitate the development of their students' desire and determination to transform their own lives and the lives of their society.

Chapter 5

I DO care about them

I DO care about them and I care about them in other ways other than schoolwork because I certainly...worry about my scores...we all worry about that (Sandy, a middle school teacher).

Sandy's words nicely captured the two realities of the American teachers: their worries about scores and their caring for students. Considering the long-standing tradition of local control of education and the high value placed on individualism, the emergence of a standard-based movement marks a huge shift for American education. At the same time, an increasingly diverse student population presents teachers with the challenges of teaching and caring for students whose family cultures, languages, traditions, and past experiences are very different from their own. The tension between the increased demand for uniformity of curriculum and tests, on the one hand, and the diversity of the student body, on the other, is a prominent characteristic of the American educational context.

5.1. Historical Background of Current Educational Reforms in the United States

Until recently, a high degree of decentralization in governance, funding, and curriculum development were salient characteristics of U.S. education (Smith & O'Day, 1990; Valverde, 1994). Traditionally, the role of the federal government was to provide legislation to ensure that individuals of diverse abilities, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds had equal access to quality education. Each of the 50 states has been responsible for their own system of education and a large degree of control was conferred on the local school boards that operated local schools districts. Curriculum development was traditionally under the control of each state or a local school district. In 1994, when

there were 15,358 school districts in the country, Valverde (1994) wrote: “Local school districts are in some way so different that it might be said that the United States possesses 15,358 distinct school systems” (p. 6540, 1994).

Established as a country of immigrants, the U.S. continuously experiences new waves of immigration. According to current data, the total population of the country is nearly 296 million: 81.7% - White, 12.9% - Black; 4.2% - Asian, 1% - American Indian and Alaskan Native, and 0.2% - native Hawaiian and other Pacific islanders (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html#People>). The waves of reforms of the last three decades significantly reshaped the American educational landscape and brought about changes in teacher practices.

5.2. Current Educational Reforms in the United States

The most recent educational reforms date back to the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* [National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983]. This report stated that the deteriorating system of American education was responsible for the economic problems of the 1980s and only by raising student achievement could the United States compete with other industrialized nations. Although many challenged the Commission findings, K-12 education became the focus of increased public attention and the arena of state and federal government participation in its improvement.

To raise achievement, the reforms in the middle of the 1980s’ (1983 - 1985) led to the intensification of the teaching-learning process (longer school day, longer school year, higher requirements for graduation) and an emphasis on teacher and student accountability as reflected in standardized tests (Baker & Stites, 1990). The implementation of these policies, however, did not bring desirable results and instead

gave rise to malpractice such as teaching to the test and narrowing of curriculum (Baker & Stites, 1990).

The failure to influence student achievement with high-stakes tests channeled scholars' and policy-makers' attention to individual schools as sites of restructuring. Purkey and Smith (as cited in Vinovskis, 1996) identified several characteristics of school effectiveness; it was not clear, however, which characteristics were most critical and in what order they should be implemented. Moreover, generalization of effective models from one site to another was problematic given the diversity of schools from district to district and from state to state (Smith & O'Day, 1990).

The standard-based approach to education marked educational policy in the late 1980's and early 1990s. The goal of this approach was two-fold: to overcome the achievement gap between historically disadvantaged students (low-income and minority students) and their middle class peers; and to raise achievement expectations for all American students (McClure, 2005). On the political terrain, the beginning of the standards movement is associated with the 1989 National Summit on Education, a meeting of the National Governor's Association with President Bush, which laid the foundation for establishing National Education Goals. From Tucker and Coddling's (1998) book on the standards movement in the U.S. it appears that the idea of standards did not come from educational scholars, but from political leaders. They described how the first chair of the Goals Panel, Governor Roy Romer of Colorado, "undertook a one-person crusade to persuade the American people that his country needed explicit education standards and a new form of assessment to go with them" (p. 41).

In the literature on reforms, Smith and O'Day's (1990) work is discussed as a framework for the standards movement (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Resnick, 2006). According to Smith and O'Day, the failure of American schools to produce sound academic results was explained by a "fragmented, complex, multi-layered educational policy system in which [the schools] are embedded" (p. 237). They believed this fragmentation affected all components: curriculum, pre-service and in-service teacher development, assessment system, and support services. The quality of education, in their view, could be improved through (1) the development of a coherent system in which all parts - curriculum, teacher preparation and assessment - are aligned with each other; and (2) increasing role of states in the development of such a system.

The design of a curriculum framework was the starting and central point in this approach. Standards, however, were not a part of Smith and O'Day's approach; instead, flexibility and sensitivity to local needs were favored. The idea behind the development of a framework was to overcome drastic differences in school curricula within states and to provide access for all students to the same core curriculum.

The beginning of the 1990s saw the development of standards by most national disciplinary societies, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Science Board, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1993 provided federal grants to develop state curriculum standards (McClure, 2005). By the end of the 1990s' all but one state established a standards and assessment system. Resnick (2006) explained the standard initiative within the U.S. context: "The idea was that a standard-based system could combine the positive aspects of centrally guided

curricula, as seen in most of the highest academically performing nations of the world, with the individuality and energy of the American local control system” (p. 34).

Standards and standardized curricula, however, have become a controversial issue across the nation. For example, Rutherford and Boehm (2004), analyzing the first standards in social sciences noted that geography standards “were favorably received by the academic profession but had little usefulness for schools”; and history standards “launched ideological debates within the profession and political assault from the outside” (p. 232). In Sleeter and Stillman’s (2005) view, the California standardized curriculum works as a means of structuring racial, ethnic, language, and social relationships in that state. In their evaluation, Reading and Language Arts Curricula prevented students who speak a language other than English from developing higher-order literacy skills. The curricula in both disciplines, Reading/Language Arts and History-Social Science “rests most comfortably on historically dominant groups’ perspectives, language, and ways of seeing the world...[and] in the top-down curriculum-making structure... teachers and students have little recognized power” (p. 43). Schmidt, Wang, and McKnight (2005), scholars in science and mathematics education, pointed out that the long-standing American tradition of decentralization, local control, and emphasis on individualism makes establishing coherent standards in the U.S. a challenging undertaking. “What other countries take for granted is problematic in the U.S.” (p. 526).

In an effort to raise achievement among disadvantaged students, the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 - a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 - made development of standards and accountability assessment a stipulation for receiving Title I funds (federal funds for improving schools

in low-income areas). All Title I schools were required to assess student achievement. When such improvement was not evident, a series of remedial measures was to be applied (McClure, 2005).

A 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA, known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act, went further and this time required *all* schools to be held accountable for their yearly progress (as reflected in standardized-based assessment) towards a proficiency level of 100% which is to be achieved by the year 2014 - 2015. The four pillars of NCLB include:

- (1) increased accountability for results;
- (2) increased freedom for states and communities in managing federal funds;
- (3) increased use of education methods that have proven effective through rigorous scientific research;
- (4) increased choices for parents to provide quality education for their children in low-performing schools (adapted from www.ed.gov/print/nclb/overview/intro/4pillars.html Retrieved November 11, 2005).

The requirements for states under NCLB include:

- (1) defining a set of standards for core subject areas at each grade level;
- (2) creating a system of assessment to monitor student progress towards meeting these state-defined standards;
- (3) publishing report cards by schools and districts identifying academic achievement of students in aggregated forms and disaggregated by ethnicity

and other subgroups (e.g., racial minority students for whom English is a second language (ESL) and special education students);

(4) creating a system of labels that communicate to the community how local schools and districts are performing;

(5) creating a plan (i.e., Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP) that would ensure 100 % of its students will reach academic proficiency by the year 2014 – 2015; and

(6) creating a system of accountability that includes rewards and sanctions to schools, educators, and students that are tied to whether they meet the state's goals as outlined in the AYP plan (adapted from Nichols, Glass, Berliner, 2005).

The mandate seems to rest on the assumption that the pressure of high stakes will make students and teachers work harder by holding them accountable for results. The diversity of views within the scholarly community on the effectiveness of NCLB varies dramatically. For example, the implementation of the accountability system across the nation was the focus of a special 2005 issue of *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*. The overall tone of the issue was positive and topics discussed included: (1) successful use of multiple measures in evaluating schools effectiveness in the state of Ohio (Chester, 2005a, 2005b); (2) consistency of states policies (their alignment) and their supportiveness (authority) to institutions in need as factors contributing to student improvement (Desimone, Smith, Hayes, & Frisvold, 2005); (3) a relationship between accountability system and student progression, graduation, and retention rates (Carnoy,

2005); (4) the influence of an accountability system design on judging schools as achieving or failing (Porter, Linn, & Trimble, 2005).

Those who question the effectiveness of NCLB consistently voice their discontent. For example, Amrein and Berliner's (2003) study explored the influence of high stakes tests on student performance in other tests that measure the same curriculum domain, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the American College Test (ACT), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and Advanced Placement (AP) assessment. The study included student progress in twenty-eight states and concluded that "nothing much happens on other measures of the same domain" (p. 31). The two explained that implementation of high stakes policy does increase results on state administered standardized tests; this increase, however, does not have positive carryover in student achievement on other independent measures of achievement.

Amrein and Berliner's (2003) study of unintended and negative consequences of high-stakes testing in sixteen states revealed that adoption of high stakes policies led to increased drop-out rates, decreased graduation rates, and higher rates of students taking Graduate Equivalent Diploma (GED) exams. Among other consequences, the two researchers identified a higher retention rate of low-performing students; excluding low-performing students from testing on the day of examination; a higher rate of students being referred to special education; teaching to the test; narrowing the curriculum; teachers leaving public schools for private schools which are exempt from standardized testing; and cheating by teachers and administrators.

The growing research on the negative impact of high stakes testing reveals similar results. For example, students who were retained in grade three and grade six under

Chicago's high-stakes policy did not show a greater achievement and were more frequently referred to special education (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). The critiques of high-stakes policies in the State of New York pointed to (1) the poor quality of constructed standardized tests; (2) changing the degree of test difficulty depending on whether the State Education Department (SED) was trying to increase the graduation or to be more rigorous; (3) significant changes in the original passage used for English examinations; (4) a discriminatory policy of school assessment towards schools serving disadvantaged students (Hursh, 2005). The years of implementation of the high stakes policy in the state led to an increased drop out rate by 17% from 1998 to 2000; changes in English language learners' progress – from the “highest diploma-earning minority in 1996 to the highest drop-out minority in 2002” (Monk et al., as cited in Hursh, 2005, p. 616); and increased drop out rates in students with disabilities from 7,200 in 1996 to 9,200 in 2001 (Hursh, 2005). New York now has the lowest graduation rate of any state with only 35% African-American and 31% Latino students of these ethnicities graduating (Ortfield as cited in Hursh, 2005). Darling-Hammonds' (2004) overview of unintended consequences of high-stakes policy repeats the findings of others: narrowing curriculum, increased grade retention and referral to special education, and a discriminatory school ranking system that punishes schools for accepting and keeping students with special needs and rewards schools for attracting high ability students.

Hart and Winston (as cited in Hess, 2005), provided data on how the public views the accountability movement. According to the 2005 Educational Testing Service (ETS), 55% of adults believed ‘all students, teachers, and schools should be held to the same standard of performance,’ (Hart & Winston as quoted in Hess, 2005, p. 56) while 34% of

adults disagreed with that statement. The poll also revealed that 45 % of adults supported NCLB and 38% did not. The same poll, however, identified a gap between teachers' views and views of the public. "While adult views of the law were mixed, 50% of high school teachers held a strongly unfavorable opinion, and just 2% held a strongly favorable one" (Hart & Winston as cited in Hess, 2005, p. 56).

As mentioned earlier, one of the rationales for introducing standardized examinations and an accountability system was to ensure high expectations and access to quality education for disadvantaged students (low-income, racial, ethnic, linguistic minorities, and special education students). Garcia and Cuellar (2006) provided an extensive overview of the current immigration trend and its influence on American schools.

In 35 years, these two authors claimed, White students will be a minority in public schools. However, "these emerging majority ethnic and racial background students continue to be 'at risk' in today's social institutions" (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006, p. 2220). According to the data of the National Center for Children in Poverty (1998), out of 21.9 million children under the age of six, 25% were living in poverty. Non-White children represented only 30% of all children, and over 50% of those children living in poverty were non-White.

In 1998 the high school or equivalent completion rate was 81.1% for 19-year-olds, 86.5% for 24-year-olds, and 89% for 29-year olds. For Blacks and Hispanics, however, the completion rate in all age groups was close to 60% (based on data of the U.S. Department of Education). In 2001, 30% of 13 year-olds were one grade below the

norm on standardized achievement levels: 27% of them were White; 40% were Hispanic; and 46% were Black.

According to the U.S. Census 2000, with the U.S. population of 5 years and older now being over 263 million, almost 47 million people speak a language other than English at home. The greatest bilingual population is Spanish speaking, followed by Indo-European, Asian and Pacific Island language speakers. According to the 1999 data of the Current Population Survey, close to 8 million people in the age range of 5 – 17 (with a total population of this age range close to 49 million) speak a language other than English, and 93% of these bilingual individuals were enrolled in schools. According to the Council of Great City Schools, a national organization of large urban districts, significant absolute and relative numbers of English language learners are found in urban districts and over half of these districts are in California.

Bilingual and minority students are also over-represented in special education. The rate of increase in students diagnosed as learning-disabled between 1980 and 1990 was 6% among European Americans, 53% among Hispanics, 13.2% among African Americans, and 107.8% among Asians (data of the U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, and Higareda (as quoted in Garcia & Cuellar, 2006) studied the overrepresentation of English language learners in special education in California. They found that students that are limited both in their mother tongue and English are most likely to qualify for special education. In fact, the school districts that they studied considered 49.5% of English language learners to be limited in their first language as well as in English.

Immigration is the leading factor in population growth. According to the U.S. Census data of 1970, 4.7 % of the total U.S. population were foreign born, among them 18.7% were Hispanics, 25.9% were Asian, and 59.6% were Europeans. The data of the U.S. census 2003 revealed that 11.7% of the U.S. citizens were foreign-born, with Hispanics - 53.3%, Asians – 25%, and Europeans – 13.7%. According to Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix (as quoted in Garcia & Cuellar, 2005), in the year 1997, “20% of school-age children in U.S. schools were children of at least one immigrant parent” and “40% [of them] were bilingual” (p. 2243). Based on the data of the U.S. Census 2000 Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix reported large differences in education level among immigrant groups. Among Asian immigrants in the age range of 25 – 29, 43% had a bachelor degree or higher and 12% had less than a high school diploma; among immigrants from Mexico, 4% of young people had a college degree and 62% did not complete high school. Garcia’s data (as quoted in Garcia & Cuellar, 2005) showed that 12% of Hispanics had a college degree and 33% did not have a high school diploma.

Ever increasing multiculturalism is the reality of American society and, therefore, of American schools. As is evident from Garcia and Cuellar’s work, poverty, limited language proficiency, and home culture different from school culture – is the world of many children that come to American schools. At the same time the world of a teacher includes an increased demand for standards, tests achievement, adequate year progress, and accountability for student learning. The merging of student and teacher realities happens in the classroom and the challenge presented by this merger to both groups is hard to overestimate. Will teachers choose to respond to diversity and individuality or will they respond to standards and predetermined achievement levels? What impact will

it have on students? Will students have a chance to grow and develop or will they choose to withdraw and alienate?

Interestingly, the standards and accountability movements were both born out of concern and care for each individual student and his/her learning. Noddings (2005) described current educational reforms as a “shallow educational response to deep social changes” and Apple (2006) urged the U.S. to stop demanding “quick fixes” and to treat “education with the respect it deserves” (p. 96). Within the context of these conflicting issues and on-going reforms, the American participants of this study dedicate themselves to helping their most underachieving students succeed.

5.3. Participants of the Study

Two groups of U.S. teachers participated in the study. The first group included five doctoral students in the college of education at a major U.S. research university. These doctoral students were all former teachers with four to 21 years of experience. The second group of the participants consisted of four current teachers, two special education teachers and two regular classroom teachers. A snowballing technique was used to recruit participants. A special education specialist of a local school district recommended the two special education teachers as expert special educators. Those two teachers then recommended two classroom teachers in their schools whom they considered successful in working with underachieving students. Overall, I interviewed nine American teachers: five special educators and four regular classroom teachers. Table 4 provides a description of the participants.

Table 4. Description of the U.S. participants

Names	Areas of expertise and experience
1. Karen	Special education teacher. Experience in classes for children with learning disabilities and emotional behavior disorders (resource and pull-in classroom); and team-teaching regular classroom high school Years of experience - 8 (4 years middle school, 4 years high school) Number of students taught – from 12 to 15 in resource classroom; from 25 to 35 in a regular classroom
2. May	English teacher in a private school for children with emotional disabilities Taught middle through high school Years of experience – 17 Number of students in class – 10
3. Linda	Special education teacher Years of experience 21 of experience Number of students in the class – 10 or one-on-one
4. Angela	Middle school science teacher Years of experience - 4
5. Dawn	Regular classroom teacher. Taught in high poverty urban schools Years of experience – 7 (4 years in middle, 3 years in elementary school)
6. Rachel	Special education teacher in elementary school Years of experience – 10 Number of students in the class – from 12 to 15 students
7. Gina	Elementary classroom teacher Years of experience - 12 years Number of students in the class – 25

Table 5. Continued.

Names	Areas of expertise and experience
8. Joanne	Special education teacher in middle school Years of experience – 27 Number of students in the class - up to 13
9. Sandy	Middle schools Science teacher Years of experience - 25 years Number of students in the class – from 24 to 30

5.4. U.S. Teachers' Experience of Working with Underachieving Students

The participants of the study worked in different educational settings and with a highly diverse population of students. Despite this diversity I could easily hear them talking in one voice and sharing the essential aspects of their experience of working with underachieving students.

5.4.1. Psychological Essence

I enjoy working with my students. You have to care so much that you're thinking about them after school hours, that you are constantly thinking about how to help them reach their full potential. And I care about them in other ways, other than schoolwork.

You know, you have a class of twenty-five, but you have two that are not performing like the rest. What is it about those two? It is frustrating for them to look around and see others having abilities that they don't have. They are shut down, just want to quit, and they don't want to learn. Kids are very complex. You know they are capable of so much more. They have to know that.

Working with a group you are looking at individuals. Each kid is different. What is important? I guess building that trust that you are not going to throw them without a rope, you are going to be right there, with them. So, taking children where they are and pushing them further. Let's work together on those concepts!

I try to teach the kids in methods that they are able to learn, visually, tactically, kinesthetically. But it is my responsibility to find out why that child is not reaching that potential. I am not just going to pass a kid through; I want to have some success. And I have learned to just sit and listen to the kids. And it is amazing where they put connections together.

My teammates are great. My success is the success of the whole department that is working here. Eventually, you become someone else besides just that teacher in the classroom. Sometimes you are a mother, sometimes a guidance counselor, sometimes you have to take almost a savior role.

Teaching underachievers is not easy. It is a day-to-day battle, going at it again and again, experiencing failure, experiencing success. But it is worthwhile. Finally, pay off! That is neat. It is a good feeling for you as a teacher, because, finally you got through. And success breeds success. They want to do it more.

Teaching feeds me, it feeds me like nothing else. I don't remember as many things from my administrative duties as I do from teaching. It is amazing to be part of someone's life, especially with these kids that didn't think they could do it before.

I think with a proper atmosphere in my room, they are allowed to take off. One a child came to me and said, "I think I can do them all!" I can see most of the children here growing up and getting a job and being, yes, a useful citizen. Rebecca... she's going to take some honor classes. That was above and beyond what her parents expected from her. So, Jimmy still to this day emails me; his number is programmed into my phone. It

is kind of exciting to see kids who did not really want to be successful and then turned it around. It is powerful!

5.4.2. Thematic Structure

The thematic structure of the experience of the American teachers includes a ground theme and four global themes.

Ground Theme: *I DO care about them*

Theme 1: *If you see their humanity*

1.1. Kids are very complex

1.2. You KNOW they are capable of so much more

Theme 2: *The whole journey of working with them*

2.1. Working with a group, you are looking at individuals

2.2. Build that trust

2.3. Just trying different ways

2.4. My teammates are great!

2.5. You become someone else besides just that teacher in the classroom

Theme 3: *Day to day battle – it finally makes you feel good ... finally pay off*

3.1. It is NOT easy, it is hard

3.2. Teaching feeds me

Theme 4: *... really, really neat to see that*

4.1. He really, really improved!

4.2. Hey, Mrs. Williams, just wanted to say hello!

Ground Theme: *I DO care about them*

American teachers experienced their work with underachievers as involving care. The name of the ground theme came from my interview with Sandy. She talked about caring as an all-encompassing action that transcends concerns about students' academic progress and includes concerns about their growth as individuals. For Sandy, caring went beyond the present and extends into the future:

I enjoy working with them, I enjoy that ... there is a little bantering back and forth, teasing them and...again just to let them know that I DO care about them and I care about them in other ways other than school work because I certainly.... I worry about my scores ... we all worry about that, but on the other hand I think about them in five or six years and where they will be and what happens to them and that they at least have a good foundation, how to deal with adults, how to talk to adults.

Caring as an act of all-encompassing involvement in students' lives was also captured in Karen's words:

Alex is a good kid, but she is ... she is mine. And like I said, Angela still calls and Ted....I just care about kids like that. It is my mission statement, to invest in the lives of students, and academically is part of that, but also socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Caring was expressed in different ways: directly – when teachers talked how they experienced care; and indirectly – when the meaning of caring was expressed in metaphors of being genuinely involved in their students' lives. For Angela, caring transcended spatial and temporal boundaries of school. She experienced caring as thinking, talking about her students all the time, and wanting to offer them help and support whenever they needed it:

I'm here to help. I care about you....They weren't just objects in a classroom to me. I want um, having them everyday, I learned about them as people. I could tell when they were having a good day...when they

were having a bad day. I wanted to support them on the bad days, encourage them on the good days.

Another aspect of Angela's caring was her attempt to convey to her sixth-graders that they are "hers" and that she is going to care about them no matter where they are:

If anything ever happens to you in school, I'm going to care. So, if something bad happens to you in the lunchroom, I want you to know that you're Mrs. Williams' and she's going to care about you specifically, because she's going to know you.

Dawn talked about the whole school caring for students who were coming from disadvantaged families: "The administration got up there and said, 'These are our kids. Give them everything you've got, because this is the one place where they feel safe and they feel they have some consistency in their life.'

"Being a part of them," "pouring your life into them," "you're there for them" are other metaphors teachers used to express caring for students. Karen stated: "The only reason you need to be going into education is because you care about your kids and you want to pour your life into them." Dawn's words were: "I am here for these kids, for these amazing little minds that want so much to learn." Joanne's experience was similar: "You can also help them feel that, you know, you are there for them."

May's caring was manifested in her remembering of little details about her students. Comparing her teaching and administrative experiences she noticed:

I don't remember as many things from my administrative duties as I do from teaching. I can remember in like very minor detail the students that I had... I remember their names and I remember the pieces of literature that they read and things that touched them....But if you ask me to describe in that much detail the meetings that I went to and things that I did as a manager, I could not, I could not do that. I don't remember it in that much detail, I guess, because it wasn't as important to me, you know...I don't remember it as fondly as I do teaching.

The act of caring was also evident in the teachers' worry about their students' future. Angela shared: "I couldn't make everything better for this student. So, this student still stands out to me because I wonder how he's doing and how he's coping and getting along and if he's successful or not." Rachel worried about her primary school students who moved to middle school:

It sometimes scares me when I see my fifth-graders leave as far as what will become of them when they get into middle school and high school, you know. You try to prepare them as much as you can, but, you know, you never know, which way they will go....I do try to keep in contact with them, with my kids.

The teachers experienced working with their students as caring about them within and beyond the classroom. Caring was evident in virtually all other aspects of their work with underachievers. When teachers entered a classroom, it was the individual student who caught their attention. The teachers' perceptions of underachievers were captured in the theme *If you see their humanity*.

Theme 1: *If you see their humanity*

Similar to their South African and Russian colleagues, the American teachers first talked about their students. The name of this theme came from my interview with May who described her students "as very complex," "very supersensitive inside" while very "tough and obnoxious from the outside." The understanding of that complexity, in May's view, was essential in her work:

Probably that stands out the most for me is that people are very complex and kids are very complex in that sense too. That there is a lot more to teenagers and to young kids.... I think because teenagers when they are hurting and when there is something bothering them, they put up such a really awful veneer, and they are very tough and they are very surly and kind of obnoxious. So, a lot of people don't see past that veneer to realize that somebody can be very-very sensitive. And a lot of times kids that are

toughest on the outside...they are so supersensitive on the inside.... If you are aware of that and then...kind of tap into that, it is a lot easier to reach them as human beings, you know, and see their humanity.

Two sub-themes emerged when the teachers talked about their students: (1.1)

Kids are very complex; and (1.2) *You KNOW they are capable of so much more.*

Sub-theme 1.1. *Kids are very complex*

This sub-theme emerged as the teachers talked about educational, psychological, and social manifestations of underachievement. Angela shared that though students hide their underachievement well, she was always able to spot struggling students early in the year:

The students who don't appear to be performing up to their ability or are just underachieving when compared to the others....that comes out very early in the school year. It doesn't always take weeks and weeks, from my experience, to notice. Sometimes they hide it well, but it can be frustrating.

For Angela, teacher and student frustration stood out in her experience of working with underachievers. The source of frustration for students was their inability to keep up with the learning pace of the class, for teachers – not always knowing how to help:

It is frustrating for them because...you know, students compare themselves to one another and it is frustrating for them to look around and see others having abilities that they don't have or everyone else is much faster at a task or can complete it much faster and when it's completed, it's correct...and they are going much slower and it's not correct. That's very frustrating to them the majority of the times. For me it's frustrating in that I don't always have the exact answer that's going to help them solve their difficulty immediately. And so it's frustrating sometimes when I would feel like I didn't know the strategy that was going to meet their need and I was frustrated because they had to be frustrated.

In Angela's experience, underachievement led to behavioral problems. This is how she described the complex connections between academic progress and student behavior in the classroom:

And the students who struggled the most, typically I would have more outbursts from them. So, I knew if we could help them experience success in the classroom; every day could become smoother for them....They would be motivated and they could feel internal success from being able to finish a task or to finish it correctly. That wasn't always something to be achieved everyday. So, that was frustrating.

Behavioral problems of underachieving students stood out for Linda:

Some of our kids have behavior problems that interfere with their learning and for the most part...they don't know the right behaviors. And maybe they are frustrated with their academics ... or they abused behavior in the past to be able... avoid the task at hand.

Gina described her underachievers as "shut down," "just want to quit," and "they don't want to learn." She explained: "And you see kids that want to give up and they want to quit, you see them not trying and that is frustrating."

Lack of motivation and variability in performance were the characteristics of underachieving students that stood out for Rachel. She described them:

You know, there are times when I think that some of my students are not motivated as much as they should be....It can be very frustrating...no matter what you do (laughing), no matter how hard you work with them, they still don't work up to their potential on that particular day. They may come in next day and they are little angels (laughing). A lot of times our kids have other issues...they may have medical issues or emotional....that plays in sometimes with the students that I work with as well.

Variability of performance stood out for Joanne. This is how she described her work with a student:

There's one girl in particular that one day she'll understand and know and do exactly what you ask her to do, but then the very next day she can't remember. She has a working memory problem. So, I have to go back and say 'Let's review what we did yesterday. Show me that you remember how to do it.' And we will and we'll re-teach and then we'll go to the next step and she'll be okay.

Karen shared that many of her students did not have a supportive learning environment before they came to her classroom. The emotional damage of underachieving students stood out for her: “Sometimes by the time they get to your classroom, they have been told so much that they are stupid, that they are incapable of learning, that...they are slow.” In Gina’s experience, many of her students never heard words of support and praise:

Many times I tell them, “You are such a good reader! You are so good in math! You are the math machine!” And a lot of times they come to second grade and they haven’t heard that....They’ve been labeled: “That’s the child that can’t read.”

In Joanne’s experience, years of failure and being “beat down long enough” affected student’s motivation for learning:

There’s one student that I have now that’s an eighth-grader who as a sixth grader did not like school, did not want to be here and would do about anything he could not do work. And, of course, the bottom line is that it’s a lot easier to not do and not have to worry about being successful. Because he had tried so many times and worked so hard and he wasn’t successful. So, you know, when you’re beat down long enough, it’s just easier to give up.

The personal complexity of underachieving students stood out for May. She emphasized the need to see in students “more than the stuff that they did.” This is how she perceived them:

I...think of the students that I had from that time...by the books they found interesting or the things they liked to read and it always seems sort of...did not always fit the personality of the student, which made me see...especially kids that have problems with the law or problems with behavior, they are more than that behavior, they are more than the stuff that they did.

This is one of the stories that stood out for May as an example of students’ complexity:

One time I had a student who was a junior rodeo, he was a bull rider... And he really enjoyed reading "My Fair Lady" (laughing). Isn't that funny ... It started out as an assignment for his English class they had to read....I told him if you read it, that I would rent the movie and that he could watch it during school time and that would be his reward....And so he read the whole thing and then he watched the movie and he thought it was the best movie that he had ever seen. He thought it was fantastic and he asked me if he could keep it for the weekend so that his friends could watch it. That is how much he liked that movie. And he was from way out in the country and spoke with a real heavy drawl and kind of walked like John Wayne, he kind of looked like a cowboy and he thought, he thought "My fair lady" was just right....So, that really taught me to not judge kids by what they look like or the things that they had done or even that sort of...tough veneer they put up when you first meet them because of that behavior problem and stuff...you know, inside the kids there is a very sensitive person who responds...and a very sweet story.

The teachers were particularly sensitive to students' home environments and observed how that environment played out in students' school progress. The environment of poverty stood out for Dawn. She shared:

I always worked in high poverty settings. That's always in the back of my head. Just what role does poverty play in these kids' lives? School life, personal life, future, and I can't separate the two. I can't separate poverty from my underachieving kids because all my underachieving kids were in poverty....It's amazing to me that in a country as wealthy as ours, we have so many kids walking into our schools that have no food at home, that have no heating or electricity or don't have any books in their possession...and yet we expect them to walk in and do the same thing that somebody three miles away who lives in a half-million dollar home can do when they walk in....It is shocking.

Working with immigrant students was another aspect of Dawn's experience. She shared a story about a "bright student" who did not "exist according to the United States":

I guess the stories you hear from these kids is that his family isn't here legally and everybody always talks about "you have to do this if you want to go to college" and college isn't a reality for him because...this sounds terrible...but he doesn't exist according to the United States....It's hard to continue to motivate yourself and have people telling you that "you have

to get ready for college” and that’s not practical for him. So, for him it would be really successful if people started recognizing like “Well, here are things you can do,” you know, but you never want to take that away, but life’s circumstances.

The need to understand students within their context was succinctly captured in

May’s words:

[A lot of times students] bring their own things, their own baggage to the classroom with them. And a lot of time it did not have anything to do with the teacher, you know, and understanding that is a powerful thing. When you know a little bit about your students, and it is so helpful, it helps you create a classroom environment that they can go along in, that they are comfortable in, you are comfortable in, and it makes a big difference.

Dawn emphasized the need to have high expectations for students while taking time to understand their home circumstances. This is how she expressed it:

I always take that [poverty] into consideration. But I don’t approve of, so to speak, of making that an excuse for them. I think it’s all the more reason we have to have good teachers in those schools who can... take the time to listen to the stories and put it all together and then still raise those expectation for those kids.

The underachieving students that the teachers encountered in their classrooms were frustrated, shut down, emotionally damaged, did not believe in themselves, and often came from an impoverished environment that offered little support. Despite those challenging circumstances the teachers had high expectations for their students and believed that they were capable of so much more. The teachers’ belief in student potential was captured in the sub-theme *You KNOW they are capable of so much more*.

Sub-theme 1.2. *You KNOW they are capable of so much more*

The name of this sub-theme came from Karen’s description of her underachievers. She emphatically stated: “You KNOW they are capable of so much more.... It makes you

hurt. How can I pour enough self-esteem into this child that they believe that they can be successful so that they care to be successful.”

Dawn believed that it is the lack of quality educational experiences and high expectations, not the lack of potential that was the reason of many students being unsuccessful. This is how she perceived it:

A lot of times teachers, because kids are not at the level they expect them to be, they drop down their expectations as opposed to differentiating instructions....So, my experience is that the students who would be considered underachieving might be a little reluctant at first to have someone that has high expectations for them, but after a while begin to appreciate it....I think it's just experience rather than something being wrong with the kids, which I hate even to say.

This is how Rachel expressed her belief in the role of expectations: “And just having high expectations for them....I expect a lot from them, because they may not be able to set the world on fire academically, but they can act appropriately.” Gina’s high expectations were expressed in her call for students to do their personal best. She perceived high expectations as a necessary condition for student effort. She emphasized, however, that the personal best is different for each student:

Something that I do is a morning message to my students...I end my message with “do your personal best”....I think...that personal best is not the same for everybody. They may be doing their best and miss four on the math paper. Effort I think would be more of a success, if you are trying it. Kind of like that kid that was scared to death to rip out of his math book at the beginning of the year. And the success was not ripping out flawlessly, it was ripping it out. If I rip it, go get tape fixing it and doing that smoothly. That was success, you know.

For Linda, taking time to work with students was necessary to help them reach their potential:

I guess the biggest problem with not being able to get the child to reach their potential is the time and the management issues in the classroom....If

I am able to spend one-on-one time with them, for the most part I feel like I can get what they are capable of.

Together with the belief in student potential the teachers expressed the need to instill in students the responsibility for learning. This is how Gina expressed that belief:

I push that it is their responsibility to learn it, that I am not going to work harder than them and pour it in their head....And so when you are sitting there individually with a child and they take responsibility and they are digging in to figure out something that they can't figure out and you are not just pouring in their heads, then you walk away and you feel good as a teacher.

While the teachers often observed how the home environment impeded students' learning, the story that Linda shared was opposite. She described how a parent's belief in his son made a significant change in the life trajectory of a student:

I had a kid...and his parents were divorcing and it was painful...and he had a lot of emotional problems and had the attachment problem with mom and just all manner of things that contributed to his whole world falling apart. And I had him for two years....His dad said something in the meeting one time and his dad was a policeman, so he had that real strict, "You will do this. You will do it when you are told." And I had been talking to dad about trying to lighten up on things because there were things he was not capable of doing just yet. And dad looked at me very helplessly and he said, "Everybody else has given up on this child and I am just not ready to give up on him."...And that just about made me cry, because here is this man that has been in the military and has been a policeman, and is tough and mean. And you know that he is tough and mean on his child only out of love, that this is the only thing that I can do to save him and so.... Every time I would think about that child, I would think about his dad's words, "Don't give up on him, don't give up on him". And now we knocked heads every day...every day. But I kept saying, "You can get out of here, you can get out of here. You can go to a regular school." And he would do things...he could be good for two days, but beyond two days, he would do something that would fall apart, at home, maybe not even at school....So, I started working with dad. Finally mom got out of the picture and that is what truly changed everything for the little boy. But I started working with dad on what dad could do. And last year we moved him back to middle school and dad was real apprehensive about it and everything and we talked about it and we really worked hard to prepare the child. And last year at the end of school, the

last day of school, I got a phone call from dad and the child had gotten all A's and B's and had made the football team for the next year. And dad was ecstatic, and I think I was happier to hear that dad was ecstatic because dad wanted to believe in him, but he had so many reasons not to.

The teachers' belief in student potential made them look for ways of helping their students achieve. The theme *The whole journey of working with them* emerged as teachers talked about what they did in the classroom to help their underachievers become successful.

Theme 2: *The whole journey of working with them*

The name of this theme came from my interview with Angela:

I can see the need in students and I will try as many tactics or strategies as I can think of to help meet those needs. And the journey to meet those needs, it takes time. It takes several weeks or it may take several months. It can take several years....The whole journey of working with them.

Five sub-themes captured different aspects of teachers' journey with students:

(2.1) *Working with a group, you are looking at individuals;* (2.2) *Build that trust;*
(2.3) *Just trying different ways;* (2.4) *My teammates are great!;* (2.5) *You become someone else besides just that teacher in the classroom.*

Sub-theme 2.1. *Working with a group, you are looking at individuals*

The title for this sub-theme came from my interview with Joanne. As other teachers, she felt the need to know the individual needs of her students: "I'm teaching a group, but within that group you're looking at individuals." All teachers expressed belief that "you cannot teach a whole group as a good teacher" (Gina) because "everybody in here is not the same" (Sandy). Karen's words succinctly captured that belief: "I found that if I learned what worked for my students that I related to them better and... that is a key thing... If I tried to treat them all the same then I would not reach any of them."

The teachers described finding an individual approach as “figuring out,” “finding out,” “getting to know kids,” and “reaching” them. This is how Karen expressed that process: “I spent extra time and got to know what works for this one and what works for that one and try to figure out ...” Joanne’s experience was similar: “... you know it is trying to figure out how to reach him, and that’s the key. Each kid is different.”

Finding an individual approach was associated with “relating to kids,” “adjusting” to their ability levels, and “responding [to] how they learn.” Karen emphatically expressed her belief that it was the teachers’ job to be flexible in order to help students learn:

I think you HAVE to know those kids and be willing to bend in areas and not be so rigid about the way that you expect them to give you feedback. If you can give them an oral test, please, give them an oral test....If they need to stay after school and take a test with you one-on-one...You just get to figure out what your goal is. Is your goal to be able to put A, B, C, or D, or is your goal to get them to be able to understand concepts.

This is how Joanne described her experience of thinking how to teach each student:

So, it’s kind of a process that you go through individually with each student to figure out, okay, if they’re not learning, is it me? Am I not teaching right? Or do I need to go back and see if I’m working with them on things that are too difficult...or I need to change.

In Rachel’s experience, individualized instruction allowed students to experience success in the areas that they were strong at and address the areas where they experienced difficulties: “I try to find what they are good at, I try to foster that as much as possible and still work on the things that are more difficult for them.” Karen shared Rachel’s view that it is essential to look for areas where students can experience success to create the

sense of “self-worth.” She described the search for an individual approach as finding out “what works for our students” and “tap into that”:

I hadn’t researched Gardner enough ...but I know that there is something to the multiple intelligence and I like his basic question, “It’s not how SMART you are, but HOW smart you are.” That everybody has a level of intelligence that we as teachers need to find what works for our students and tap into that....Because they have that ability, use that as a mechanism not only to build relationships, but build that self-worth, build that, “Hey, this is great!” and try to make connections between that area and the area that you are trying to teach.

Dawn experienced finding an individual approach as “an art” of teaching, as something that is “a balance in trying to figure out the right thing.” She noted that this experience might sometimes be frustrating:

And sometimes it’s hard to balance....there are a few of those kids that really just need you to say, “What’s going on? You can do this. There’s no reason for you to be sitting here doing absolutely nothing.” But there are other kids where if you were to say that to them, you’d completely alienate them and ...I think everything is just such a fine line in teaching and there’s such a balance in trying to figure out the right thing to say and the right thing to do and it’s such an art. And it’s interesting that policy is trying to turn it into such a science because it just isn’t.

Finding an individual approach Sandy described as finding “different pathways.”

This is how she talked about it:

All of those kids are different for me. And some of them respond to me being very strict with them and on the other hand some of them respond to me...sitting down with them, being quiet with them...those different pathways. We are all different personality wise and I think it helps to find...how those students respond....And I think that comes from maybe getting to know the kids.

Thinking about individual students during planning time stood out for Dawn.

Preparing a lesson that meets the needs of each student and at the same time addresses the content and develops necessary skills, Dawn described as raveling “a nice little ball”

which brings “an incredible feedback.” This process, in Dawn’s view, takes time and effort:

I don’t think it’s realistic to say we’re going to reach every single kid every lesson every day. But to plan so that I know Jimmy’s interests and I know Tony’s interests and I know Jessica’s and I know Mary’s and if I know their interests then somehow I can pull them into the lesson. That’s awesome, but it takes a lot of planning, because, it’s like, how can I take all these interests plus the content I have to teach plus the skills I want them to learn and ravel it into this nice little ball and make it work and it takes a lot more time. It means that you go home late at night and you come in early in the morning. And you have to find a lot more materials but the payback is just incredible.

Thinking about individual students during planning time was an example of caring for Karen. She acknowledged that it was not easy to think about everyone while preparing the lesson. Mindful planning, however, created a motivating environment for her students. She put it:

A lot of that is just not caring enough to think through what you are doing, to make sure you MAKE that lesson relevant, sometimes it is just easier to just follow the script in the teacher’s manual than to sit down and think, “Okay who is in my class and what are their interests and how can I reach that kid and what can I say today in this lesson that’s going to make Melissa excited or make her interested because she is not really interested in math or whatever.”

May expressed appreciation of her school environment where she had freedom to “play around with how ... you approach the teaching process” to meet students’ needs:

I think really the goal that we had for those students was to teach them the things they needed...in order to cope when they got back to their regular school....We did have things we had to accomplish, but we could go about accomplishing those things in a very creative way...sort of based on what the students’ needs were.

Helping one of her students learn how to read by reading “Love Story” was an example of an individual approach that stood out for May. She shared:

One particular student that I had, he did not read... he probably read on about a second grade level....I let him sort of browse around in the books in the back of the room one day...and he found this book called "Love Story"... This kid who had been, you know, he smoked pot, he had been stealing cars, he found that book and I guess because the language was very accessible in that book, I used that book to teach him to read, because he wanted to be able to read that book. So, we would take sentences from that book and go through it. We did all kinds of things with that book..... It took months and months, and you know it is a very short novel but eventually he read that entire book. And then we had the sequel... then he read the sequel "Oliver's Story" or something it was called. I remember telling him, later on, we were talking about Oliver's Story, and I said, "You know, they made a movie out of this one too." And he said, "What do you mean this one too, there is a movie?" And he was really mad at me (laughing), he went through all that trouble to read that novel and I did not tell him there was a movie.

Angela's story about her work with an exceptional student Chris is an example of the teacher's awareness to "meet Chris's needs the way Chris needed them met":

If someone was unwilling to take the time for those things, and just treated him like every other student, Chris isn't going to respond to those things. You know, there maybe some students where you could say to them across the classroom, "Get to work" or "Stop that"...the way, the manner in which you spoke to Chris, I had to alter that. I couldn't talk to him just like every other student. He didn't respond the exact same way. So, if other teachers weren't compassionate, they chose not to meet Chris's needs the way Chris needed them met, they chose not to modify the work, make it a less work load or pair him with a peer who can help him, motivate him, give him positive comments, be careful how you phrase your reprimands to him, make sure he understands them.... It took you being patient, because he wasn't one of those students who was going to come back and say thank you.

Not being able to find an approach Dawn experienced as not being able to "figure out the right formula":

I think the hardest thing is that I can look back at Jimmy and Tony and I can see things that I did well. And I can look back at other kids and see things that I could have done better....But there have been a few kids who you know I just never figured out the right formula and who left my class...probably, not a whole lot better off than they were when they came in....In a lot of cases it was because too many days I pulled the textbook

down or too many days I didn't think enough about what they as individuals needed. So, to me it's being able to look at each kid and figuring out what that kid needs. And, you know, unfortunately, I didn't get around to it for everybody.

Individual approach was a part of looking at the whole child, finding out and addressing the needs of the students. This is how Gina described it:

The thing with the low achieving students sometimes you have to meet those needs too first, before they are ready to learn. A lot of those kids have so much baggage and things that you have to be willing to meet those needs or they won't even attempt to learn. You know the hierarchy of needs, if they don't have those low needs met, those basic needs met and you have to be willing to do that.

Karen used the concept of a "teacher as a phenomenologist" when talking about the importance of addressing the whole person in the educational process. This is how she perceived the connection between phenomenology and teaching:

One thing I love about the whole phenomenology concept is that you address the whole person....Because I think that you HAVE to address the whole person and that [if one] of the student comes to you and their mom is dying of cancer and you don't address that, you are not going to be effective as a teacher, because that is part of who they are. ...And if you don't address that whole person, you miss your purpose.

The knowledge of students' individual qualities was essential for building an authentic and trustful relationship in the classroom. The teachers' experiences of creating a supportive learning environment were captured in the sub-theme *Build that trust*.

Sub-theme 2.2. *Build that trust*

The name of this sub-theme came from my interview with Gina:

I guess that trust, building that trust, that you are not going to embarrass them, you are not going to throw them out without a rope you are going to be right there, with them, help them through their work.

Angela experienced creating a supportive environment as her “whole reason for being there.” This is how she responded to the interviewer’s request to share what stands out for her in her work:

The relationships....I recognize that in all parts of my life which may be why I landed in education. ...It’s very important to me that...that I form a bond with them at the beginning of the year. That they learn quickly my whole reason for being there is to support them. I want them to experience success.

Angela described her support for students as being ready to “take up” for them, “to back them up,” and “to be the next best thing” when their parents were not there. She was willing to put effort into establishing bonds and connecting students with each other. This is how she described it:

If they’re ever scared or if anything ever happened to them at school, I wanted them to feel comfortable. I’m going to take up for them; I’m going to back them up. If they’re doing the right thing...they’ve got support. Your mom and you dad aren’t here, but I’m going to try to be the next best thing. I gave them my email address. They could email me at home if they had questions about homework. I gave them my home phone number....All these things were little efforts of mine to bond the students with me, but also with one another.

Other teachers talked about the need to create a “neutral setting” for their students (Linda), a “non-threatening atmosphere” (Gina), or “a satisfying environment” (May). Teachers expressed an acute awareness of the need for a supportive environment and were willing to put effort in establishing it. This is how May experienced it:

I cannot help but notice, what somebody’s emotional and affective state is in the classroom, you know whether they are motivated and what kind of things I can do to motivate them and make the classroom learning environment, like a really satisfying environment....That is really a big issue.

Creating a non-threatening atmosphere was one of Gina's main goals. She described it:

The thing that I have come to in these few years is that it is an atmosphere. I think that it is one of my main goals as a teacher that my atmosphere in my room is very-very non-threatening. That the underachiever knows that they are not going to be on the spot, they know that they are not going to be in trouble for not knowing the answer....Non-threatening is so important to me, because it seems that they just shut down and they just want to quit and they don't want to learn.

At the end of the interview, when asked if she wanted to share anything else, Gina again emphasized the importance of atmosphere in her classroom. For her, it was more important than programs and ways of teaching:

Over the twelve years we have been offered so many programs, so many ways that were going to meet those lower achievers needs and the thing.... I know it sounds too simple to be true and it does not always work, but it helps, is creating that atmosphere that they are successful....That is where the success has been. It's not been a program; it's not been the mixing that I learned in college. It is having that relationship with them that they are not going to shut down and they will try. Like I said, they will do anything you ask them to.

Creating a supportive environment and establishing a relationship with students is what Joanne experienced as "that's just a part of who I am." This is how she described it:

I think just letting them know that you're there to listen, kinda talking their talk a little bit, having a classroom that's inviting, where they don't mind coming. You know....there's a stigma attached to resource kids and they don't want their peers to see them coming to the resource room. But just to...laugh with them, cry with them if you need to, and just be open to them and what they're feeling and I think that helps.... You can't be their friend, but I think you can also help them feel that...you're there for them and you want to be a positive influence for them. And I don't know what I do specifically to do that. I think that's just a part of who I am.

Sandy perceived herself as a “warm fuzzy” teacher. She believed that her relationship with students and a caring environment contributed to students’ progress, but they were some of those things that “you can’t measure”:

I think a lot of things that you can’t measure.... For example, connecting with students, for them to know that you...ARE sympathetic, empathetic....They need to know that I care about them and I CARE that they did half of the work or three of the problems and that I support them in what they are doing. I am one of those warm fuzzy teachers.

“Being with the kids where they are at” was important for Rachel. This is how she described it:

But it does take a lot of patience, a lot of understanding, sometimes the kids will come in and say they had a hard night...and something happened at home, dad left that night, you know, you can’t force the child to learn that day, if they are so worried about mom or daddy being safe.

Making students feel that “they counted,” that “they mattered” was “a real secret” of Karen’s relationship with students. She believed that those relationships made her “like teaching better”:

Just building those relationships with students and getting to know them and respect them and treat them like they counted, that they mattered. And I think that that was the real secret...it made me like teaching better and I think that is always significant.

Establishing and maintaining a relationship with students was connected with the dimensions of time and space. Angela was aware that the relationship is made up of time. This how she described it:

It was just for them to know that no matter what their question was...no matter what time of day, if they wanted to come in forty-five minutes before school started, I was there. I made sure I was there every day at that time with my door [open]....Just let their parents know and they could drop them off early. I would go get them from the cafeteria which they weren’t allowed to leave....I would go get them to let them come have that extra time....I guess this bond and relationships are all made up of time.

And I tried to communicate to them..."I'm here, I have time, I'm willing to give it to you. I'm willing to find a time in your day to help you in whatever it is."

Rachel believed that teachers "can get a whole lot more out of [students]" when they take time to establish relationships and get to know their students:

I mean just relationships with the kids, you can get a whole lot more out of them, if you have that relationship to take the time, to really get to know them and what they like and what they don't like and share with them.

Taking time to listen to students and validate their experiences stood out for Angela:

Taking the time to hear their stories and develop them as people, not just curriculum or objects in my classroom. We had deep conversations....I think for them to see that I was interested in the thoughts going on in their head. I validated, valued their thought processes. I valued what was important to them. And I think that created a bond.

Karen expressed the need to look for "the ways to interact" with students: "I think we have to look for opportunities, whether it is going to their basketball games, attending their art shows, whatever... Find those ways to interact with them." The story of working with David stood out for Karen as an example of building relationships based on student's interests contributed to student academic progress:

For example, I am a math teacher. David is one of my favorites...he is a fantastic artist, not really good in math, not at all; he had trouble getting basic concepts together. I mean, and he will be the first to tell you.... In order to build the rapport with David, I went to his art shows, we talked about photography, you know, I started sponsoring the photography class because it was a mutual interest that we had....I actually I had a piece of his art work signed because I am convinced he is going to be famous one day. But we developed rapport first. Then, out of the relationship, then he had come and said, "You know, I need help with this." But there was rapport there, so there was a safe environment for him to come and say, "I am really stupid in math." And then I can say, "No you are not stupid in math, you just haven't been taught some of foundational concepts; let's

work together on those.” Like, you know, like if I am doing geometry, I can’t draw at all, so, “David, can you come draw this for me.” And building at least some degree of esteem related to something that he is really not good at, but at least finding areas where he is good and keying in on that and allowing that to be a platform to build up other things.

Communication with students, when teachers and students shared back and forth, came out of a caring and supportive environment in the classroom. Sandy’s story is one of those examples:

Just trying to find some way that he would realize that I cared about him and I have seen great results out of him. He came through earlier today and he said, “Hey...I’ve got my work for today,” and he said, “I am coming to the ball game.” So, you know, I am a basketball coach, so he knew that it was important to them when I made an appeal to all of them to come to the game. He knew it was important to me that he comes to the game and he wanted me to know that. And he also knew at the same time I needed to know ahead his work. So, he has done great for me, he is making progress, a little bit of steps at a time and wonderful, he is not a problem for me. At first he was a problem, he wanted to argue with me, fuss with me so I tease him, he’s got long hair and I tease him, “You know, I can cut your hair for you if you want me.....I cut hair on the weekend, you know,” and he says, “Oh, no,” I say, “But if you want to, you let me know.” You know, I have a good relationship with him and I think it made a difference.

Joanne’s experience of sharing was: “Part of it is sharing yourself, you know. I don’t hesitate one bit to share experiences about my family and my students and my kids with my students...to a certain degree.” The experience of sharing with kids her life experience stood out for Rachel:

And I don’t mind sharing stuff with my kids as far as, “When you were little did you get in trouble?” “Yes, sometimes I did.” “What did you do?” “Well...” And there are certain things you share and certain things you don’t. But I think it is good for kids to know, that no teacher is perfect and when they were little they did stuff wrong too (laughing). And it helps with the interaction with them, and to build that relationship.

Creating a supportive environment and relationship with students helped teachers establish mutual trust with them when, in Joanne's words, "They trust you and you trust them." The American teachers experienced their work with underachieving students as a dynamic process when they constantly adjusted their teaching to students' learning needs. The teachers frequently described changes in their teaching as trying to find "a way" so that their students could learn better. This aspect of the teachers' work was captured in the sub-theme *Just trying different ways*.

Sub-theme 2.3. *Just trying different ways*

The name of this sub-theme came from my interview with Rachel who described her effort of finding what works for each child as "just trying different ways":

That is not giving up, you know, even if they are biting you, throwing stuff at you, you still have to remain calm and know that there are other issues besides what's being done at that particular moment, like I said, just trying different ways.

Linda described her search for a strategy that works as "I have to find another way":

If I try one way and I really feel like I have tried and tried and tried and that it is not working, then I have to find another way. Maybe I would turn to sight words, maybe I would turn to work chunks, but it is my responsibility to find out why that child is not reaching that potential and what tricks can I give them to help them reach that potential.

Rachel's description of finding "other ways" is very similar to Linda's:

I am having trouble with the group, then we kind of go back and forth with each other [teacher's assistant], you know, what else we can do. We try to brainstorm other ways, so that we try to teach the kids in methods that they are able to learn, whether it is visually, tactically, kinesthetically, whatever, instead of just traditional method.

Rachel perceived that in some instances finding the way of teaching that works is a “trial and error” process, when “sometimes it works and sometimes it does not, fifty-fifty sometimes” but usually she would “find the way at some point ... to get them to learn.” Working in a round-about way stood out for Linda: “So, with those students you just have to kind of go and reach them like this, instead of going the traditional way.” Sandy used a lot of special education strategies in her regular classroom. She described those strategies as a “different means to get into their brain.” She shared:

Because Special Ed. students are really not any different. Just a different means to get into their brain, you know, with different techniques, but why should it not work....For me to repeat directions – other students need that, for me to have a peer tutor - other students need that....And it gives them a means for success...I am not going to just pass a kid through and say, “Okay, send you through,” but I want to have some success.

Rachel emphasized the importance of “taking the children where they are” and “pushing them further”:

Basically taking the children where they are and learning what they are capable of and pushing them further.... Most of our kids are couple of years behind academically... so, really looking at where they are...instead of putting them into a program.

The dynamic nature of the teaching-learning process was evident in the teachers’ readiness to change assignments so that students can experience success. This is how Gina described her experience: “And I finally learned that with him, lots of time just backing up and giving him at each second, giving him first grade work, giving that success, then he would attempt the second grade without even knowing it.”

Another way of reaching students was making learning experiences relevant to their experiences. Karen described that process as creating connections so that students

“have a reason to want to learn.” She shared how she attuned her teaching to students’ worlds:

I am known for singing in class, for relating everything to a movie.... I try to go and watch, especially when I was teaching literature and we were working a lot with themes and, you know, conflicts....I tried to make sure I was up on the most recent teenage movies, so that I could make reference to them. When I am teaching a particular type of internal-external conflict, I could say, “Did you see such and such movie?” and it was a movie I knew they saw...So that I could bring that in and use it as an example, it really helps with just crazy abstract things, like Faulkner...Faulkner is not easy to teach.

May shared how she used a student’s interest in poetry while working on his spelling:

He did like to write poetry and so I was giving him assignments where he would write poetry and then we would use his poems and talk about it in terms of communicating his ideas. And we would use his poems to correct his spelling and he would look for the words and try to correct them and then re-write the poem.

The dynamic nature of the teaching - learning process is evident in Joanne’s description of good questioning as “going that next step”:

I think the biggest thing that I’ve learned through teaching...is developing good questioning techniques for kids. Because you’ll present something and they don’t understand it....Then you need to ask questions to see what it is that they understand and what it is that they don’t....You kind of have to learn to go that next step and that next step again. And just keep asking and asking and asking the right kind of questions...I think through teaching by experience, you learn better how to question kids.

In Gina’s experience, taking time to listen to students and to observe their learning process was a way of finding out where the breakdown was and how she could help:

I’ve also learned just to sit and listen to the kids....I’ll say, “Show me what you did, let me hear you what you are doing.” And then I’ll ask them questions where they are getting things and sometimes, it is amazing

where they put connections together and they are wrong connections...and you can just easily take it apart and fix it and it is so fixable. But you've got to take that time to sit down one-on-one and really see what they do, you are not going to get that from grading your paper at night....You are gonna get that that problem is wrong, but you don't know why. And just sit and listen helps. And I think I've learned to do that more as I've taught a little longer.

Teaching students strategies was another way that the teachers used to help their students overcome underachievement. This is how Gina expressed her strong belief in the effectiveness of general learning strategies:

Another thing that I've learned over the years is strategies, teaching them strategies that will work like in math. If you teach them a strategy and it will work with any numbers, than getting them to learn that strategy so that they can use it in everyday life....So, we've learned the strategies and then they take it to their work.

The experience of developing strategies together with a student stood out for May. She shared:

I had a conversation with him one day, "You know, the reason I know how to spell words...I can see the word and if it is the word I am not really familiar with, I can see the word on a page somewhere." And I asked him, "Do you see something before you are supposed to spell or you are trying to see something?" And he did not, he said he just did not have really anything there to sort of draw from....So, we tried to develop some strategies like that because he was such a good reader and it seemed odd to me that he could read all these really complex words in history books, but could not spell.

The teachers expressed acute awareness of the need to change their teaching goals and methods in response to students' learning needs and interests. This is how that awareness impacted Joanne's planning:

I test kids every day, not pencil and paper tests, but I'm testing what they know through what we're doing and what they don't. And you know it's always come back and regroup and figure out where you are. I've never planned by the week. I plan day to day and I won't plan tomorrow until today is finished. Because invariably, when I try to plan for a week, it will

go amiss. Now I have a big picture in my mind, but I have to wait until the end of the day to plan because it will just depend on the class and the students in the class and what they've learned.

Angela shared a story of changing the plan of working with a student depending on his new interests:

Bill is going to be a different student next year. He is going to have different things going on. Different things are going to motivate him. He's going to be somewhere different developmentally and socially. This plan may have worked this year, but let's change it as Bill changes ... to what motivates him. It does not need to be the exact same plan.

In their work with underachievers the American teachers relied not only on their own knowledge and experience but also on the experiences of their colleagues. The teachers' experiences of working with other teachers were captured in the sub-theme *My teammates are great!*

Sub-theme 2.4. *My teammates are great!*

This is how Sandy responded to the request to share what stands out for her in her work of a teacher:

For me, it is dealing with the kids and the second thing is dealing with other teachers, because I really enjoy that....I could not come in and teach in a vacuum...my teammates are great, they are just great.

Joanne, a teacher that worked together with Sandy, also emphasized the importance of having a rapport with school staff. In her view, it was students who ultimately benefited from teachers collaboration. This is how she expressed her view:

Part of being good in Special Ed. is rapport with the staff. The staff has to know that you are there for them....You know there are a lot of days when teachers will send kids down to me and say, "Can you help me with this problem?" whether it's an academic problem or a behavior problem. And you just do...you just help. I think the students see you as a team and that makes a difference too.

Rachel described her experience of working with other teachers as “pulling together.” She shared:

It takes a lot of patience and a good team. And I think that is one of the reasons that our Special Ed department here at this school is so successful... we all really work hard together, you know. Perfect example, this morning our other teacher was having a problem with one of our students. She hollers my name and I go across the hall and I do the same way. We are really supportive of each other. So that, that makes a big difference with our kids, because they know that it is not just me or Jenny...Every one is together, pulling together.

In Angela’s work with underachievers, “she wasn’t just pulling from four years of [her] experience, but from all [other teachers’] experiences”:

I was surrounded by lots of teachers with many, many, years of experience. So, they were always quick, you know, when I had questions or asked for advice, to give advice. So, I wasn’t just pulling from four years of experience, but all their experiences....I was very big on asking questions from those who had more experience than I did.....“What strategies do you know that might fit Carol? Carol just isn’t performing to what I think he or she can.”

Support from administration stood out for Dawn. In her view, she wouldn’t be able to survive at her work if not for that support:

But I think one of the most powerful things about the kids I worked with and the settings I worked with was the administration that we had. I mean they were so supportive of whatever methods we used to teach these kids and as long as we could back ourselves up with it and you know explain why we were doing what we were doing and I don’t think I could have survived in those schools had I had poor administrators or administrators who didn’t grasp the culture we were in. I can’t remember the song, but I’ll never forget that my first day at the school that I most recently worked at. We were at 95% free and reduced lunch. And I would guess the other 5%, about 3% of them their parents just didn’t fill out the paperwork. But he played this song the first day when all the teachers were together. It was about this kid who’s just sitting in his room because his parents are fighting and it’s cold because they don’t have any heat. It’s an amazing song. It was a popular song at the time. I mean our kids knew it. Our students knew it. And I didn’t know what I was getting myself into at that

school until he played that song and said, “These are our kids.” And it was powerful because you sat back and said, “Whoa.”

As Dawn’s quote suggests being the teacher of underachievers requires something more than just being a teacher in the classroom. The American teachers were aware of the need to take on other roles in order to help their students start believing in themselves and to grow as individuals and learners. The experiences of performing multiple roles were captured in the sub-theme *You become someone else besides just that teacher in the classroom*.

Sub-theme 2.5. *You become someone else besides just that teacher in the classroom*

In Joanne’s experience: “You see them at the movie or, you know, you see them out and about and you become someone else besides just that teacher in the classroom.” Karen emphasized that in her work with students who had a lot of emotional baggage she had “to do so much more, than just be the academic person who teaches math.” In Karen’s view, teachers sometimes have to take on a “savior role” when their students go through a lot of struggle:

Being a teacher of students who have emotional baggage that you really almost have to take on...I hesitate to use this phrase, but ... almost a savior role, you know, and that kind of pressure, I don’t know, I think if you are a good teacher, you feel that to some degree.

A story of helping one of her students deal with a serious illness of her parent stood out for Karen. She became “another mom at school” for that student:

It was six months after my dad had died of cancer, so Angela was constantly in my room, you know, talking about what her mom was going through. Well, I had been there very recently and so it was really raw and we cried together and laughed together, and I went to see her mom in the hospital, and sometimes you know, I gave her a ride home and, and her

mom almost died that year, and came very-very close to dying, but when I would go see Angela, her mom, we would talk together and pray together andI became a part of that family....Angela started calling me mom, you know, my another mother at school.... She is just one of my children and again we still keep in touch. She is one of MINE. She did as much for me as a teacher as I was able to do for her, just because I learned so much about empathy and compassion as a teacher.... I am thankful that I had the opportunity to invest in her life. I am just really thankful for that. And she is going to graduate next year ... and she is going to go to college and yet she was a Special Ed. kid, she is not in any Special Ed. classes anymore. I don't know if I had a lot to do with that, but I know I got to pour who I am into who she is. And not just for her, but her family.

Joanne felt that she sometimes fulfilled the role of a guidance counselor. She emphasized the importance of being honest with students and seeing the world through their eyes:

There is a student who doesn't come from a very good home life and whose mother is not involved with him at all and he's very bothered by that. And he came to me after Christmas and said, "You know, my mom didn't even want to talk to me over Christmas," and he said...what he said was, "That sucks, doesn't it?" and I said, "You know what? It does." And he looked at me and said, "You know, you're the first teacher that's ever said," "Yeah, it does" instead of just trying to slough it off and say, "Oh well, she'll come around. Don't worry about it." And he said, "You really do understand, don't you?" and I said, "No I don't because my parents aren't like that. My mom and I are very close, but I can see how that bothers you and I'm sorry because, yea it does. It is bad." And um you know that's one particular story this year that you know, just saying, "Yeah, it does. That is bad" instead of trying to sugar coat it or not give credence to his anger and you know his disappointment. It's what makes the difference. You have to acknowledge, I laughed, you know when you see the finger pointing in the words, "never" and "should" and "shouldn't" and "ought to." Those are the worst words to use for kids because they just create defenses for kids. And so, just to sit and kind of to agree with what they're feeling and say, "I understand. I'm sorry." And not try to fix it, because that's not what they want. They just want to share with you what's going on. And you know that creates trust in that other person. You feel like you're a guidance counselor all the time...I'm not trained in that, but a lot of times you feel like that's a part of what you're doing.

Rachel felt that she fulfilled the role of a parent when she was thinking about where she would want to see her students in life:

I really try to look at them as if I were their parent. What I would want them to do, what I would want them to learn. And I want them to be pushed as far as they can be to be successful.

The journey of working with students brought its challenges and frustrations as well as its rewards and satisfactions. The American teachers expressed a strong commitment to their work and therefore put much effort in helping their students learn. The theme *Day-to-day battle – it makes you feel good ... finally pay off* emerged as teachers talked about their own lived experience of working with underachievers.

Theme 3: *Day-to-day battle – it makes you feel good ... finally pay off*

The name of this theme came from my interviews with Joanne and Rachel. This is how Joanne described the challenges of teaching:

There's another student who's very difficult to reach.... He has a learning disability in all academic areas...more often than not, refuses to work....Disrupts the class, and it's a day-to-day battle. It's a fresh start each day with him, because if you're not positive with him on the onset, it's going to be a difficult day.

Rachel shared how she experienced the progress of her students:

Here at our school we have a really good team of special ed teachers and when the kid does something for the first time, we make a big deal out of it. We high-five, we dance, we do whatever...but it makes you feel good, it makes you feel like what you are doing is worthwhile and all those times of frustration, "Are they ever going to get it?" Finally pays off. That is neat.

Joanne's words briefly summarized the experience of teaching. She put it: "There are a lot of rewards in it. There are a lot of frustrations in it. There's a lot of preparation in it....The longer you teach, some aspects of that get easier to do. You know each day is

different.” Two sub-themes emerged as teachers talked about their own lived experience of teaching (3.1.) *It is NOT easy, it is hard*; and (3.2) *Teaching feeds me*.

Sub-theme 3.1. *It is NOT easy, it is hard*

This sub-theme captured the teachers’ experiences of challenges and frustrations. In Joanne’s view, working in smaller classrooms considerably contributed to her success with underachieving students; however, “it is not easy,” she emphatically stated, “it is NOT easy, it is hard.” She sometimes experienced her work as “emotionally exhausting.” This is how she talked about it:

You know, there are days when I leave here and I’m emotionally exhausted. It’s not so much the physical, but you just feel drained because of needing to stay...or trying to stay positive...and there are days when I can’t, and I don’t, but that’s another part of it.

The hardest part of work for Joanne was not being able to reach some of her students. They were the students who “need so much more than what a school can do.” Joanne’s frustration came from the inability to work with other students when she was trying to address the needs of the most challenging students:

So, I think the hardest part for me is the kids that are just so difficult to reach that what you provide at school is almost just a bad day...that they need so much more than what a school can do. They need intense therapy and things that parents need to pursue and those are the most difficult. And what happens ...you tend to become complacent towards those kids because you work so hard to find a way to work with them. And when you can’t, you have to think about the rest of the class....And at some point and time you have to say, “These [other kids] need me and I’ve done all I can do.” And that’s real hard for me to say that. I mean, I’ve never been one to believe that there’s not something you can do to reach a kid, but when you work and work and work every day and there’s that struggle day in and day out or hour in and hour out with that one particular kid and at some point in time, you have to say, “Enough is enough. You’ve made your decision and I now have to deal with and help these kids” and that’s real hard for me to do that.

Sandy was also sensitive to instances when she was not able to reach her kids.

She described that awareness as “a level that says, ‘You did not do a good job today’:

There are some days I know I did not reach a kid, I just know they did not get it and I have to sit and think, “Okay, how do I change it around or how do I reach where I get most of them.” And I know there are those little pockets that I did not reach and there is this for me...a level that says, “You did not do a good job today.” And so you’ve got to come back in tomorrow and start over or pick up where you left off and try to build something and try to make sure that we get those concepts.

Linda experienced working with students as a “challenge.” She emphatically stated that it was her “duty to spend a little bit more time” and “put an effort” to help her students achieve their potential:

But my experience has pretty much been that if I take the time, I put in the effort and I really – really look and do some reflection on the things I have done...“Today, you know, when I got frustrated was it really me not feeling well or was it the child not participating and cooperating?” If this is a behavioral problem that is interfering...then I need to go back and look what is causing the behavior. Are they nervous? Does reading make them scared?...Then it is my job to go back and do something about that....My biggest learning as a teacher has been that you get out of that what you put into it.

In Dawn’s experience, making a difference in children’s lives and connecting with them is a very “powerful” experience; however, “it is not easy,” “it is taxing,” and “that’s why it did not happen everyday in your classroom.” She shared:

You know, it’s taxing. It’s taxing on your mind and on your time and...you know, like with the kids I worked with, their stories...it taxed your heart sometimes. And sometimes you just need to step back and say, “I can’t, I can’t listen to all this today. I need one break.”...Because you can definitely just kinda get feeling down and take a day to reflect on it all.

Karen shared a “screw up story,” when she really “like blew it.” She felt that in that incident she was not able “to CONNECT with this kid” and she called that experience her “darkest moment in education.” She shared:

I think at the half-way point in the semester, he had 20 something zeros in my class. I mean he would just never turn anything in, we got to end of the semester and I think he had...a 15 average in my class, and every day ...right at the end I would say, “Now, don’t forget, you need to get me that make up work.” I mean I was going to take it, you know, right up to the last week of school. And I gave him a deadline and said, “You know, everything needs to be turned in by this date.” Well, I gave him a list of all twenty something assignments that he still had missing from me and I had given him several of those sheets, and he never turned anything in...During the week of final exams, he comes and says, “Miss Karen can I still turn in that make up work?” And I said, “Yes, I will take it right up until the very last day of final exams,” you know, well, no the day before, because grades had to be in on that date. Well, the day of our final exam came and, which was the day before, and he said, “Can you print me another list of that make up work” (laughing). Again, I mean, it is this very last day and ... I just kind of lost it. I did something that I am most embarrassed about. I berated him in front of the entire class. I said, “Absolutely! I will print you a list and you can bring it to me sometime next week during post-planning, but you know even if you don’t feel like doing it next week, you just go ahead and bring it whenever you want. I will go ahead and turn in the grade, and even if it is an F. You know, bring it to me next week. Whenever you feel like doing it, next week, next month, heck, next semester, if you feel.” And I just went off on the kid (laughing), in the middle of the class, in front of everybody ... He just sits there with this mortified look on his face and then I added injury to insult and kicked him out of the class. Okay. It was my darkest moment in education, you know, and I went to apologize later to him.

Angela shared that her inability to help all the kids was very frustrating for her.

In this situation she experienced teaching as a “struggle.” This is how she described her experience of not being able “to be the best at handling every student who comes in”:

I taught four years, but I still think...I don’t know how many years it would take of experience to be the best at handling every student who comes in. You know, yes, I differentiated my teaching, but differentiation doesn’t cure all problems. It does help. It does help you meet the needs of all your varying students, but it’s frustrating to me that I couldn’t make it all better...I couldn’t have the magic words and they’d have that “aha moment” where they’re like, “ah, that’s how it is...that’s the way to do it.” And they could then repeat that behavior from then on and... so that struggle. You know, I don’t know if I went into teaching thinking I would always have the answer, but I learned you don’t. So, that’s frustrating.

Rachel had a “hard time” with not being able to show students’ progress on test scores:

Everything has to be black and white test scores and I have a real hard time with that....Because, you know, they can make progress in a year, make a huge amount of progress, but it is not going show on their test scores....Maybe it is, like I said, the kid that will go in the classroom and participate in the class, that is huge progress, but it is not going to show on your test score, it is really frustrating for me.

Rachel’s reflection on those instances when she was not able to help some of her students summarized experiences of many teachers of the study. She wondered if she had done everything possible to help her students and what she could have done differently. Her acceptance of not being able to help all the time, however, did not take away her dedication to her work:

There is always a downside...and we’ve had kids that we haven’t been successful with. And sometimes you wonder if you’ve done everything you could do, but ... you know...some kids have had to go to the alternative programs for behavioral issues, just different things like that, and you know, but you can’t be successful with all of them, you know, you try your best....But you know, I love my kids, they are really good.

Teachers’ “darkest moments” and incidents that caused frustration were outweighed by feelings of excitement, satisfaction, and reward that they experienced in their work. The sub-theme *Teaching feeds me* captured the rewards and satisfactions of teaching.

Sub-theme 3.2. *Teaching feeds me*

The name of this sub-theme came from my interview with Angela, a graduate student at the time of the interview: “I didn’t leave teaching because I didn’t like it anymore. I still enjoy it ... thoroughly. It feeds me in a way that nothing else does.”

Linda's enjoyment of her job came from the sense of accomplishment. She shared: "But I also realize that my whole reason for liking my job comes with the way I feel when I go home in the afternoon.... I just couldn't enjoy a job I didn't get some spurts of happiness from." In response to the interviewers' request to share what stands out in her work, Linda shared: "I think the thing that stands out the most is how good you feel when I get over that hump."

In Karen's experience, similar to Linda, "a good feeling" about teaching came from student understanding, from "getting through." This is how she described it:

But I think there's also something incredibly exciting when a student gives you that look....that "ah ha" look when there's something that they've been struggling with for a long time and you finally explain it in a way that they get it and they give you that look, "Oh!"...that look that says, "Finally, I understand something that I've never understood." And it's a good feeling for you as a teacher. It's exciting for you because, you know, you finally got through. But it's a really good feeling for them because they understand a concept that up to now maybe they had never understood and so they get the joy of learning...of grasping something. And you know that when they get that joy, that promotes even more learning because success breeds success and when they start to feel that success it creates a desire to be successful more.

Sandy's feeling of accomplishment came from her awareness of doing something right for her kids, from "moving them forward." She described it as a "great feeling":

There is a sense when you DO it right, there is a sense of accomplishment, that you think you DID something right for that kid. So, there is a great, there is a great feeling, you know, THAT....You actually are moving that student forward, which is what you want to do.

Sandy felt that she had done a "really good job" when she observed student understanding of concepts and bringing that back to her:

As a teacher there are days when I think that I have done a really good job, you know....I've tried to reach students and tried to look at concepts in not just one way, but turn it around and put it in a different context and have

students bring that back to me, to see if they understand, not just memorizing or spelling.

Rachel viewed her work in the complementary development classroom (CDC) as “a unique situation” because of the time that she could spend with her students. It was “little things” that made her work “exciting”:

I may have a unique situation from some of the other teachers....For example, I have a couple of fourth graders that I've had for five years. So, I've seen them from kindergarten all the way to where they are now and how much they improve, and it is little things sometimes that...stand out. It is a huge accomplishment and maybe not for someone else, but for us when they can finally...read this word, after working on it for four months, Yeah! That is a big thing! It is little things that keep it exciting and keeps me doing that, more than anything else.

Joanne saw the rewards of teaching in seeing “that spark” in students, “when [they] were asking more questions,” when “they were more interested.” This is how she talked about the rewards of teaching:

Well, when you know they're making progress, when you see that spark and when they're asking more questions of you and you know they're interested in what they're doing...then that's what it's all about. Then I can go home and say, “I feel good about what happened today.” And that's a reward. And I think it goes back again to having my students the whole time they're in middle school.

Further, Joanne explained that the feeling of reward came from the sense of accomplishment “and not just academically, but in other ways as well.” Joanne's reward was in seeing her “kids wanting to better themselves”:

When they leave me I can feel like we accomplished something and that's a reward in itself....It's just seeing that you've made a difference and not just academically, but in other ways as well. When you see kids wanting to know...well let me put it this way. We don't have a whole lot of inner city kids here, but we have kids that are kind of stuck in the socioeconomic cultural box. I don't think you can change kids, but I think you can help them see what's different out there...and then that change comes from within them. And when I have kids that will say to me, “How

did you get where you are?” “I wanna be this.” “I wanna move from where I am. I don’t want to keep my world as it is.” ...I’ll never forget a guidance counselor [in a different school] telling me, “You can’t change them. You have to help them see that there’s something different out there that they can attain.” And that’s the reward for me, when I see kids wanting to better themselves.

For Dawn, it was “amazing” to be a part of someone’s life. This is how she described her experience:

But it just feels amazing to me to know that these kids still four years later, or three years later, trust me enough and want to know my opinion and want me to be a part of their life and that’s what I think it’s all about. Especially with these kids that didn’t think they could do it before. It’s powerful, but it’s not easy.

May appreciated teaching as a transformational experience. She shared a story of working with a very difficult group of students. May was the second teacher in that class. The first teacher left the school because of the students’ behavior. The experience of working with that class changed both May and her students:

Because one of the students told me...actually through the room leader in the class...that was the most challenging, he told me one day, “You know, we chased that first teacher off and we are going chase you off too.” And I don’t know why, but all of a sudden that made me mad. And I felt with this group of students, sometimes I would come home and cry and tell my sister, “I really made a big mistake, I should never, ever, I don’t know why I thought I could be a teacher.” It would be awful. And that day when he said that to me, he made me mad. I said, “Let me tell you something. You don’t decide what it is I am going to do, I decide.” And I said, “If I want to chase you off, you know, I can.” And then he said, “Oh, I was just kidding.” And I said, “Well, you were not funny.” And he said, “Okay, I am sorry.” And that sort of moment made me realize that I want to be a teacher and that I could stay there and that I could change things in that classroom and I did. I did change them.

This is how May summarized the transformational power of teaching:

Every student I’ve ever taught has taught me something, you know. For example, like I said the students that chased the teacher off in public

school before I got there....They really kind of made me clarify to myself what it was I was doing there.

Though the teachers shared in the interviews their own lived experience of working with underachievers - that experience was not about them. As Karen stated in the focus group, "It is not about me" and Dawn echoed her, "It is about the results of my work." Indeed, the teachers' feelings of "fun," "reward," and "happiness" came from academic and personal changes that they observed in their students. The theme ... *really, really neat to see that* captured their descriptions of student change.

Theme 4: ... *really, really neat to see that*

The name of this theme came from my interview with Rachel when she talked about the progress that her students made:

One boy...when he first came in, he is a little child with cerebral palsy and he has lots of medical issues, and physical issues, that type of stuff....It has taken several years, but he is able to do addition and subtraction in his head, and granted we are only working on minus ones, twos and threes. But it is a big thing for him. I have another student, who when he came to me in first grade, he could not read, and now he is about on the second grade reading level, so...really, really neat to see that.

Two sub-themes emerged as teachers talked about results of their work (4.1.) *He really, really improved!*; and (4.2) *Hey, Mrs. Williams, just wanted to say hello!*

Sub-theme 4.1. *He really, really improved!*

The name of this sub-theme came from my interview with Angela who shared how one of her students improved after implementation of a behavior modification plan:

After this plan was set up, he would be in tears, or almost in tears....Lots of anxiety if he didn't have his homework done, which was a good pressure for him to feel. He'd never felt the need to finish a task before. He was very conscientious and he came to be very proud when I came around to check for completion... to show me with both hands with a smile, "I've got mine." And his grades improved. When it came time for

report cards or progress reports, even though I gave him the grades, he would come to me and go, “Look, Mrs. Williams, I got an A in science.” And I’d go, “I know, Bill. Isn’t that’s great? What do you think the difference is? Last nine weeks, you had a C. ...Remember how tough it was... You almost had an F in this class. Look where you are now. What’s the difference Bill?” “Well, I’m doing my homework more. I studied for all my tests. I paid attention in class.” It was a family and school effort to help him to become aware of what his role was as a student, that he really did have a role of paying attention, of keeping track of his assignments and of following through with them. And the pride that comes with that. That he didn’t have to feel bad on progress report days anymore...or scared of going home, that he was going to get in trouble. He really, really improved! He was a success story.

Many teachers noticed that as a result of success their students became more confident and were willing to approach more difficult tasks. The beginning of the progress Gina described as “taking off”:

I have a little girl in my class that was really-really struggling when she came to me...very-very slow and had trouble reading and doing anything. And I think with the atmosphere in the room, she’s been allowed to take off and giving her lots of individual support, meeting with mom and having a plan together...she’s made great progress in her reading and we are working on the writing individually.

The story of the first success of one of her students stood out for Linda. She described finding the way to explain a concept to that student as the “most miraculous thing” that “struck the nerve”:

I do a lot of things that are really off the wall, like left and right, left and right, and we had tried using things like that. And for some odd reason one day I told him a story or I did something that did it. And it was just the most miraculous thing, because whatever it was, struck a nerve I’d not been able to strike and he knew it.... I used to tell my kids I was taking them to the principals’ office. Well, they only went to the principal’s office when we had something good to tell her. And so we made our trip to the principal’s office and well, he went in and told her [the principal] and she asked him a question about how did you know this? Well, he could not tell her, he could not explain it to her how he knew. He just knew it every time he heard it, it might have been a fact or something like that... and I had really good relationship with the principal and I was

sitting here giving her all these dirty looks, about, you know, just be excited, you don't have to know why, you don't have to know how, just be excited that he knows it....Because that is what is going to give him confidence to try to learn the next step and that was...a turning point for that child. Not that he learned a whole lot, but I always got a hundred percent out of him. No matter what it was, I always got the best he had to offer. But it took that success to get the best that he had to offer.

For Rachel, a student's ability to be successful and independent in a social setting was more important than "being able to read on a grade level":

Because social interaction is a big part of what our classroom does, we teach socially how to act appropriately so that they are not being stared at or made fun of when they go out into a regular setting or you know out in a community. And I think that's huge, you know, I can see most of the children in here growing up and getting a job and being, yes, a useful citizen, you know, later on. But are they going to be academically on grade level? Probably, never. And that is OK with me. You know, if they can get a job and take care of themselves. To me that is more important than being able to read on a grade level.

Gina observed that together with success comes responsibility for learning. She put it: "There is a point that you can do it, and there is a point, that you say, gosh, and they take the responsibility of learning themselves, because they are not afraid any more." Stories that other teachers shared were examples of Gina's observation how students take responsibility for learning. This is a student that stood out for Sandy:

What he does for me now is better work, one day he said, "I think I can do all of these," instead of just the partial amount that I gave him, "I think I can do all of these!" So, I am seeing some work, achievement wise, and I think confidence wise he is feeling better too.

The students' success was not accidental. It was the result of the teachers' persistent work to meet students' need and to establish a personally meaningful relationship with each student. Student progress was also accompanied by developing a special connection with their teachers. The teachers' stories about their students staying

in touch with them were captured in the sub-theme *Hey, Mrs. Williams, just wanted to say hello!*

Sub-theme 4.2. *Hey, Mrs. Williams, just wanted to say hello!*

While students were changing academically and socially, some also developed a special bond with their teachers. The teachers' stories were full of examples of when students expanded the boundaries of space and time to maintain a relationship with their teacher. Angela shared a story about Rebecca:

Every Friday she made an effort to come back to my room as she was leaving school for the weekend just to say, "Hey, Mrs. Williams, just wanted to say hello!" you know, "have a good weekend." She'd bring her buddies by and they'd all leave through my room, which wasn't the normal path. But I truly feel that taking her need and not scolding her for it, but trying to help her adapt it to different subjects, it created a bond. And I've heard reports from her sister recently that Rebecca is going to be a senior in high school and she's going to be taking some honors classesWhen she came to us in the sixth grade, that's not where any teacher had projected her to go and ... that was above and beyond what her parents expected from her.

Karen talked about one of her students:

Again he still keeps in touch, his number is programmed into my phone, he has been calling me frequently. He called me couple of weeks ago and he's got a job working...with computer programs...he is making good money and he is really happy and he loves his job and he graduated from high school last year. So, again it is kind of exciting to see kids who had very low motivation issues and not want to be really successful and then turn around.

In Dawn's experience, the support that she provided for her students was the most meaningful things to help them become successful:

So, Jimmy still to this day emails me and calls me and sends me letters because I think that's the important thing about working with kids that are underachieving is making sure that we're giving them enough support that they can succeed even if it's not at the sixth grade level, but at the level

that they're at. And then there's Tony who calls me about three times a week.

Teachers' support and guidance of their students was grounded in their care for them, as learners and as individuals. The stories of the American teachers brought to light that care is an essential act in helping students become successful adults. The four themes and sub-themes helped demonstrate the different aspects of caring: caring as trying to understand the kids - *If you see their humanity*; caring as being on a journey together - *The whole journey of working with them*; caring as not giving up and going at it again and again - *Day to day battle – it makes you feel good ... finally pay off*; and students' success as a result of caring - *... really, really neat to see that*. Inside the classroom, teachers created a caring relationship that made a difference in students' lives. Care was the teachers' response to students' needs; what was the teachers' response to the context?

5.5. Looking at the Bigger Picture

Similar to their South African and Russian counterparts, the American teachers experienced the larger context in two ways – as reflected in the lives of their students and as it affected their professional lives. The environment of many students was dramatic. Joanne remembered talking to a student whose mother was not participating in his life: “And he came to me after Christmas and said, you know, my mom didn't even want to talk to me over Christmas, and he said... ‘That sucks, doesn't it?’ and I said, ‘You know, what? It does.’ Dawn, a teacher from an urban school, talked extensively about the effect of poverty on her students: “I can't separate poverty from my underachieving kids because all my underachieving kids were in poverty.” May worked with teenagers who

had problems with the law and observed how the dynamics of their environment affected their future:

We really did have to understand that we could do something for them and give them some skills to take with them when they left, but there is only so much we could do after they got home and got back into the same dynamic.

The teachers responded to their students' needs. They created a safe environment – “I enjoy being that person to them, that can be positive and structured, where home is not structured and it's crazy” (Gina). They showed them who they can become - “I think you can help them see what's different out there...and then that change comes from within them” (Joanne). From their experience the teachers knew that “inside the kids there is a very sensitive person that responds” (May) to a caring teacher.

In my interviews, the teachers did not talk a lot about the demands of the context of their work. When they did, they talked about it either as frustrating or as unimportant. Gina noted:

In the twelve years I taught [teaching] has evolved huge, huge. When I first started teaching we taught what we wanted and there was not a curriculum that you were sticking to....You want to teach Johnny Appleseed? You taught Johnny Appleseed, you know. And it's evolved to where I am scripted now and our day is almost scripted to it and I think that some of the kids have almost turned into little robots. So, I am not really sure that it is a good thing....I love what I do when I am in my room. My teacher friend, we laugh, we say that room 210 is good. I love what I do when I am with my children and I am teaching. But there are a lot of things around us that have made teaching frustrating.

Karen, talking about teaching as a purpose and a call, noted:

I've also got to write lesson plans, grade papers and jump through all those administrative hoops and sometimes those things just don't seem very important, you have to do those to keep your job.

When I conducted the focus groups, however, the teachers in the two groups (those who were practicing teachers, not graduate students) discussed at length how the current demands of high stakes testing affected their work. Looking at the thematic structure of the experience, Joanne commented:

Unfortunately in today's times...we are accountable to test and we have to stick to the subject matter and we have to get so much covered in a short amount of time. And to me it takes away from what middle school is all about.

I described the educational context of American teachers as characterized by a tension between the need to respond to standards and achievement – on the one hand and the diversity and individuality of their students - on the other. The thematic structure of the experience of American teachers working with underachievers revealed that individual students in their humanity are the focus of teachers' work - "I Do care about them." The four themes explicitly demonstrate what really made a difference in students' lives. While a series of mandates have been created to ensure that all students achieve to the best of their potential, listening to the teachers, it appeared that in "teaching ... there has to be a relationship there. You have to care ... care so much that you are thinking about them after school hours, that you're constantly thinking about how to help them reach their full potential."

Chapter 6

It is ...a relationship with a child that makes a difference

A comparison of the thematic structures of teachers' experience
of working with underachieving students

Existential phenomenology views an individual's existence as a being-in-the-world. The participants in all three countries lived and worked in very different cultural environments, were trained in different teacher education programs, and used different teaching methodologies in their work. A comparison of the phenomenological findings from the three studies gave an opportunity to learn if drastic differences in teachers' contexts influence the thematic structure of the experience or if there are certain similarities in the experience of expert teachers from the three countries that surpass the boundaries of cultures. If so, what can be learned about teaching from expert teachers?

I compared the themes of the three structures to each other in terms of four categories: (1) the teachers' perceptions of their students (first themes of each structure); (2) the teachers' perceptions of their work in the classroom (second themes of each structure); (3) the teachers' perceptions of their lived experience in the classroom (third themes of each category); (4) and the teachers' perceptions of their students' transformations (fourth themes of each category). The results of this comparative analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. A comparison of the thematic structures of the South African, Russian, and U.S. teachers' experience

Ground Themes		
South Africa	Russia	United States
I want to make a difference in their lives	School is the meaning of our Lives	I DO care about them
Category 1: The Teachers' Perceptions of Underachieving Students		
South Africa	Russia	United States
They have so much potential, but they don't know about it	Everybody is a special story	If you see their humanity
1.1. They've got to handle so many stumbling blocks	1.1. They have difficulties everywhere	1.1. Kids are very complex
1.2. They can all achieve!	1.2. All of them are good	1.2. You KNOW they are capable of so much more
Category 2: The Teachers' Perceptions of Their Work in the Classroom		
South Africa	Russia	United States
Let's go and find out	We go together to the Heights	The whole journey of working with them
2.1. Look at every aspect of his functioning	2.1. With each child you have to think and found an individual approach	2.1. Working with a group you are looking at individuals
2.2. Then I start to give them a safe place	2.2. A good relationship is at the foundation <i>I am always here for you</i> <i>Class is your second friend</i>	2.2. Build that trust
2.3. You have to change your direction within a split second	2.3. I can change my direction ten times	2.3. Just trying different ways
2.4. With Blocks and Tools see a light!		2.4 My teammates are great!

Table 5. Continued.

Category 2: The Teachers' Perceptions of Their Work in the Classroom		
South Africa	Russia	United States
2.5. You become a mother, a father, a policeman ... depending on what is needed	2.4. Your friend, your brother, sister, mother – all roles together ... you are his teacher	2.5 You become someone else besides just that teacher in the classroom
Category 3: The Teachers' Perceptions of Their Lived Experience in the Classroom		
South Africa	Russia	United States
It was very challenging – but it is a joy and privilege	Our backs are wet – the work can bring you joy	Day to day battle – it makes you feel good ... finally pay off
3.1. I really struggled	3.1. It is a huge educational work	3.1. It is Not easy, it is hard
3.2. It makes you actually grow with the kids	3.2. You get a lot of energy from them	3.2 Teaching feeds me
Category 4: Teachers' Perceptions of Transformations of Underachievers		
South Africa	Russia	United States
The results were amazing	They bring all these good surprises	... really, really neat to see that
4.1 That was a miracle!	4.1. He got wings!	4.1. He really, really improved!
4.2. Miss, this is the first time in my life that I feel that I am clever	4.2. It is so good that I had you at that moment of my life	4.2. Hey, Mrs. Williams, just wanted to say hello!

6.1. A Comparison of Ground Themes

A comparison of the ground themes brings out a similarity in their meaning - teaching as a relational act. The relational aspect of working with underachievers is evident in the focus on both the student and the teacher in the titles given to the ground themes. Consider: *I* want to make a difference in *their* lives (SA); *School* (can we say students?) is the meaning of *our* lives (RU); *I DO* care about *them* (US). In all three studies the emphasis on *life* rather than *learning* or *achievement* is prominent: their lives - our lives.

This relational aspect of working with underachievers is reinforced by the words *meaning* for the Russian teachers and *care* for the American teachers. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1974) provides the following definitions for these words: *meaning* is a synonym for *sense, acceptation, signification, and significance* (p. 712). *Care* is a synonym for *concern, solicitude, anxiety, and worry* with the shared element *a troubled or engrossed state of mind or the thing that causes it* (p. 168). In other words, school and students signified the teachers' lives and caused an engrossed state of mind.

Teachers' care and significance of school in their lives can also be seen by the fact that the teachers talked and thought about their students *all the time*: "When we get together, it seems that we should forget about [our work]. Instead we talk about children all the time" (Mila, RU); "My roommate at that time used to joke because I would, just in casual conversation, talk about my kids. This, this, this, my kids" (Angela, US); "Say, in the summer holiday when I am lying on the beach, thinking up all these ideas, I have paper and pencil with me and I jot down these ideas" (Carol, SA). Relational aspect of working with underachievers is also evident in other quotes: "You have been a part of

that child developing and it is not accidental, it is your work” (Alice, SA); “I grow together with them” (Rita, RU); “It’s fun to be a part of that because I think we were created to be a part of ...something that’s big” (Karen, US).

The similarities in the meaning of the ground themes suggest that teachers from diverse socio-cultural and political contexts focus on their students in their work and are guided by their care and desire to make a difference in students’ lives. A comparison of the four themes across the three studies will reveal both similarities and differences in the structure of teachers’ experience of working with underachieving students and will further extend the shared meaning of that experience.

6.2. The Teachers’ Perceptions of Underachieving Students

The first theme in each structure captured the teachers’ perceptions of their underachieving students. In all three studies students were the first topic that the teachers talked about in their interviews. The names describing these themes demonstrate that the teachers perceived each student as a unique and complex individual – *They have so much potential, but they don’t know about it* (SA); *Everybody is a special story* (RU); *If you see their humanity* (US). The sub-themes that emerged reflect the teachers’ dichotomous perception of their students. On the one hand, they were very perceptive about students’ difficulties – an experience captured in the first sub-themes; on the other hand, they believed that students could overcome those difficulties and achieve their potential – an experience captured in the second sub-themes.

Sub-themes 1.1. *They've got to handle so many stumbling blocks (SA)*

They have difficulties everywhere (RU)

Kids are very complex (US)

Underachieving students stood out for the teachers in all three studies as not motivated and emotionally damaged, as having difficulties in social relationships, and as experiencing challenging circumstances at home. The motivational and affective problems of underachieving students were described in the following terms: “insecure,” “very negative,” “shattered into small pieces” (SA); “hopeless,” “lacking confidence,” “prickly,” “with no desire to change,” “traumatized” (RU); and “not wanting to learn,” “wanting to quit,” “beat down long enough,” with “emotional damage” (US). Although the description of the South African teachers was more detailed than the description of their Russian or American colleagues, the same categories of underachievement emerged in each country. This difference could be explained by the South African teachers’ expertise in the CEA approach that provides a more precise vocabulary for describing learning problems.

Difficulties in relationships were another characteristic of underachievers that stood out for the teachers. The teachers perceived students as “shut down” (all three countries), “locked up” (SA, RU), “reserved” (RU), “angry at the world” (RU), as “hitting everybody” (SA), and “having behavioral problems” (US). While the special educators, speech therapists, and occupational therapists in all three countries used more specific terms in their descriptions of underachievers, the classroom teachers rarely used the terminology found in the textbooks to describe underachievers. Surprisingly, the description of students’ academic problems occurred very few times in each set of data.

Understanding the students within the context of their families and the larger socio-economic and political contexts was another commonality across the three studies.

Life in impoverished townships was the reality of some South African students:

And you cannot teach a child whose mommy is forever drunk. And you cannot teach a child whose daddy is in jail. ... We give them homework. They can't do their work ... they have the gangs around and the shooting is going on and on (George, SA).

The transition to a market economy affected family life in Russia: "Very often parents do not have time, because everybody is busy with making money these days" (Nina, RU). The poverty of inner-city life was the reality of some students in the United States: "But it's amazing to me that in a country as wealthy as ours, we have so many kids walking into our schools that have no food at home, that have no heating or electricity" (Dawn, US). While the teachers clearly noted stumbling blocks for their students, they consistently shared their strong belief in their students' potential – the aspect of their experience described in the second set of sub-themes.

Sub-themes 1.2. *They can all achieve!* (SA)

All of them are good (RU)

You KNOW they are capable of so much more (US)

The following excerpts communicate the confidence the teachers in all three studies had in their students: "I think they actually can all achieve! They can all achieve!" (Cathy, SA); "Children are good; all of them are good... [and]...they are capable of so many things" (Mila, RU); "You KNOW that they are capable of so much more" (Karen, US). For Cathy (SA), a belief in her student potential was an "intuitive feeling." Alina's and Harriet's beliefs were grounded in many years of experience. "I

have taught a lot of children, difficult and very difficult and that is what I have seen” (Alina, RU). “As I get older in the business, I just know you must never underestimate a child” (Harriet, SA).

For Cathy (SA) and many American teachers, high expectations were the characteristic of their classrooms. Dawn’s (US) words captured the experiences of the other teachers about the role of expectations: “My experience is that the students who would be considered underachieving might be a little reluctant at first to have someone that has high expectations for them, but after a while [they] begin to appreciate it.”

The teacher participants in the three studies agreed that helping their students believe in themselves was their biggest task as teachers and therapists. Ellen (SA) stated: “The biggest task that a teacher and a therapist has for these children is to just get them to where they can start to believe in themselves.” Olga (RU) emphasized: “But the main task for me as a teacher is to raise an individual who believes in him/herself.” Karen (US) expressed: “How can I pour enough self-esteem into this child that they believe that they can be successful.” Knowledge of their students and belief in their potential was the foundation of the teachers’ work. How these teachers worked with their students was captured in the second set of themes.

6.3. The Teachers’ Perceptions of their Work in the Classroom

The second theme in each study captured the teachers’ descriptions of what they did in the classroom to help their students achieve. The teachers perceived working with underachievers as “moving together.” The names of the second themes captured that meaning: *Let’s go and find out* (SA); *We go together to the heights* (RU); and *The whole journey of working with them* (US). The emerged sub-themes provide a detailed

description of what teachers did to initiate and maintain that movement. First, they looked at every child individually and tried to find a “starting point” for “moving together,” the meaning captured in the first sub-themes.

Sub-themes 2.1. *Look at every aspect of his functioning* (SA)

With each child you have to think and find an individual approach (RU)

Working with students, you are looking at individuals (US)

The teachers in all three countries started their journey of learning by trying to find an approach towards an individual student. The experience of finding an approach was evident in many aspects of the teachers’ work: (1) addressing a variety of the students’ individual needs; (2) finding what the problem is; (3) planning their lessons based on the students’ needs and interests; (4) fine-tuning the teaching to each student even during classroom instruction.

Examples of the students’ individual needs differed in the teachers’ stories, but common across all three studies was the teachers’ attention to those needs and their realization that without addressing them, the students would not be able to take the next step in learning. Alice (SA) noted: “If they need food, if they are hungry, I supply food.” Mila (RU) talked about raising orphans: “Of course, we tried our best to re-create that home-atmosphere....We had very good week-end boarding school teachers, they showed them a lot.... not only did they do their homework [with them], they tried to adapt them to life.” Gina (US) was considerate of the needs of those students who came from difficult home environments: “The thing with the low achieving students sometimes you have to meet those needs too, first, before they are ready to learn.”

Determining what was the problem was expressed as “Establish where the downfall is and zoom in there” (Evelyn, SA); “You know it is important to find out what the problem is” (Alina, RU); “So, it’s kind of a process that you go through individually with each student to figure out [why]” (Joanne, US). Based on the students’ learning needs and interests, the teachers then planned their instruction: “I unfold a ‘map’ in front of me. I think that this student needs this and that student needs that” (Nina, RU); “But to plan so that I know Jimmy’s interests and I know Tony’s interests and I know Jessica’s and I know Mary’s and if I know their interests then somehow I can pull them into the lesson” (Dawn, US).

Even when teaching the whole class, the teachers were aware of the individual needs of their students: “So, you’ve got to take...all of the levels all the time and be in sync with your class. Today you are not leaving someone behind or boring Mary to death by doing this” (Carol, SA); “You have to think about every child, how to approach him, how to teach. Not the whole class, just read and retell, answer questions. No, but every child individually” (Alina, RU); “If I tried to treat them all the same than I would not reach any of them” (Karen, US).

Being able to provide an individual approach was associated with smaller classes and teaching the same group of students for a long period of time.

Because I work with the same learner from grade four through to grade twelve, I start recognizing after so many years behavioral patterns, emotional patterns, not wanting to do anything and not being able to do anything – is different facets (Carol, SA).

I can give that to my kids [developing them as a whole person] because I’m with them for so long (Joanne, US).

The Russian teachers, however, did not emphasize the issue of time spent with students because teaching the same group of students for a prolonged period of time (more than one year) is a common practice in Russian schools. The issue of smaller classes also was emphasized less, because the teachers in both a private school and a boarding school worked in smaller classes (10 – 15 students).

Being open to students and approaching them as a whole person, was also a part of the individual approach: “You know, I’ve always looked at middle school as you’re developing the *whole* student, not just from the academic standpoint, and unfortunately, middle school’s gotten away from that” (Joanne, US). The teachers’ openness to their students and their acceptance of them in their totality made the research team think that “teacher as a phenomenologist” is a possible metaphor to describe the participants of all three countries. The following two quotes support this description: “One can never predict what can happen from session to session. So, the biggest challenge for me is to be totally open and flexible and to see, hear, and feel 100% all the time” (Evelyn, SA). Karen (US), a graduate student at the time of the interview, described herself as a phenomenologist:

I am thinking I was born to be a phenomenologist. ...Because I think that you HAVE to address the whole person and that if the student comes to you and their mom is dying of cancer and you don’t address that, you are not going to be effective as a teacher, because it is a part of who they are.

From the experiences of these teachers it appeared that time, place, and the desire to learn about the whole student were essential for finding an individual approach. Creating a safe and supportive environment where students would try to learn was also a

part of the teachers' experience of a journey of learning and was captured in the second sub-themes for all three studies.

Sub-themes 2.2. *Then I start to give them a safe place* (SA)

A good relationship is at the foundation (RU)

Build that trust (US)

The teachers in all three studies were explicit that not a specific teaching technique or methodology, but *a safe environment and a rapport with students* were the most important *pre-requisites for learning*: “I start actually to give them a safe place. So that they can trust me and if I won their trust then I start working on academic qualifications” (Alice, SA); “You can teach anything when a good relationship is at the foundation” (Nina, RU); “Building that trust...you are going to be right there, with them, help them through their work” (Gina, US).

The teachers in all three studies were clear that the need for safety, support, and connection with the teacher was a *basic need* for students; they stated that only by satisfying that need could their students make good progress. “Every child needs at least one person that will always believe in them and their potential to change, develop and grow” (Evelyn, SA); “Children know that I care and that I am positive and they want that” (George, SA); “I forget about my problems and just give them my time to the child – he just needs to talk to someone” (Olga, RU) “My whole reason for being there is to support them. I want them to experience success. I’m here to help. I care about you” (Angela, US).

The teachers from the three countries did not differ in *what they did* in the classroom *to create the safe and supportive environment*. The three aspects of the safe

and supportive environment were identified in all three studies: (1) the teachers were always available for their students - they were “there for them;” (2) the teachers took time to get to know students, talk to them, and build a relationship; and (3) the teachers noticed even small successes and created situations for success.

This is how teachers talked about being “there for their students”: “Your classes are always open, at break I do not go up to a staff, I am here in my classroom during recess” (Carol, SA); “I said you can come to me any time” (Ellen, SA); “I sit with her, so I am like her support, I am with her and she feels it and she feels better when I am with her” (Olga, RU); “I am here, I have time, I am willing to give it to you. I am willing to find a time in your day to help you in whatever it is” (Angela, US).

Talking to students and sharing with them back and forth was a way of getting to know them and of building a relationship: “My learners at school and in my practice often share with me more than they share with their parents or teachers” (Evelyn, SA); “In the morning we have just a short time of ‘How are you, anything wonderful you would like to share with us’ (Sally, SA); “Our children, what they are missing, nobody asks them ‘How are you’ (Svetlana, RU); “Just sit at the level of the child, so that the child can see and talk to you” (Tina, RU); “You can get a whole lot more out of them, if you have that relationship to take the time, to really get to know them and what they like and what they don’t like and share with them” (Rachel, US); “I think just letting them know that you are there to listen, kinda talking their talk a little bit, having a classroom that is inviting, where they don’t mind coming” (Joanne, US).

Trust, connection, and relationship that teachers established with their students were the signs of an environment in which students could learn: “Oh, we have a fantastic

relationship because he knew he could open up and talk to me” (Mary, SA); “The main thing here is not teaching a subject matter, but interaction with each other and perception of each other as personalities. As for learning, it comes easier if there is a good relationship” (Rita, RU); “and just building a relationship with students and getting to know them and respect them and treat them like they counted, that they mattered and I think that was the real secret” (Karen, US).

Creating situations where students could experience success, noticing and supporting their “small victories” (Rita, RU) was another “secret” of creating an environment where students would dare to try. Harriet (SA) shared: “Immediately, when he grasped that, I would say, ‘You are thinking very well.’ And then I get a positive response and I could actually see how the child was actually capable of doing more than he was doing initially.” In Olga’s (RU) experience, “I try to find that positive that the child is able to do and focus other children’s attention on that positive.”

While the teacher participants from all three studies emphasized the importance of relationships as a prerequisite to success in learning, the Russian teachers were more vocal about the role of relationships among students. This is how Olga described the relationship between students: “So, from the very first day when the child comes to our school, we help the child understand that they are your friends here, not enemies.” Rita described the impact of peer interactions in learning on the students’ perceptions of each other: “Their authority goes up and they see each other not as people who just sit separately, but they become a group.” Alina also shared how children help each other in the classroom: “If [the child] has difficulties – of course, you should help, I will help or other children will help.” Nina described how out-of-school activities helped to build

trust among students: “So, it is very creative, very developing and at the same time bringing together activities.”

The South African and American teachers also shared experiences of building trust among students: “My picture is a collaborative, cooperative situation... lots of sharing behavior, collaboration comes through that support system” (Sally, SA); “All these things were little efforts of mine to bond the students with me, but also with one another” (Angela, US). In the South African and American interviews, however, fewer teachers (and in fewer instances) talked about the relationship among students. That did not allow us to include teachers’ descriptions of building up relationship among students in the thematic structure of the experience of South African and American teachers.

In a safe environment, students could “take off,” experience success, and fly higher than even teachers could initially predict. The dynamic nature of the teaching-learning process was captured in the third sub-themes for the three studies.

Sub-themes 2.3. *You have to change your direction within a split second (SA)*

I can change my direction ten times (RU)

Just trying different ways (US)

Four aspects of the teaching-learning dynamic were found in all three studies: (1) being on the level of the child; (2) raising the bar; (3) being flexible during the lesson; (4) looking for the best ways to teach each child. Being on the level of the child had two meanings: first, the teachers started where students could experience success; and, second, they made sure that learning experiences were relevant and meaningful to students. Here are some examples of creating success for students: “I always give them something that I KNOW they can do” (Harriet, SA); “I try one thing, second thing, third

thing, and the thing that goes well that is where we start” (Tina, RU); “Basically taking the children where they are and learning what they are capable of” (Rachel, US). The meaning of making the learning experience relevant to students is captured in the following quotes: “So, everything has to be brought to what he knows in his experience, and then you can actually go from there” (Ellen, SA); “they help me through their interests, what I can teach. For example, one boy is interested in computers, why not use that” (Rita, RU); “I was up on the most recent teenage movies, so that I could make reference to them” (Karen, US).

Having started on the level of their students, the teachers “put the ceiling a little bit higher and higher, and higher” (Carol, SA) or “gradually raised the bar” (Mila, RU) or “pushed them further” (Rachel, US). Two teachers, Nina (RU) and Linda (US), however, expressed a different approach. They believed that sometimes it is necessary to challenge students and present them with a difficult task to help them experience success: “First, you have to let students feel their potential, to show them that high level that they can overcome and after that they can fly, they can fly even higher than I could predict” (Nina, RU); “Because I’d much rather ask a question that is too hard for them to answer, than one that was so easy that they did not get anything out of it” (Linda, US).

Such differences indicate that there is no one right way of teaching. As Alina (RU) put it: “With each child you have to think and to find an individual approach.” Dawn (US) succinctly stated: “I think everything is just such a fine line in teaching and there’s such a balance in trying to figure out the right thing to say and the right thing to do and it’s such an art.” Carol’s (SA) words are another example of the teachers’ efforts to find an approach that is specifically attuned to each student: “But you [as a teacher]

must know how to approach, when to approach, and ... the reason why you are approaching.”

Being sensitive to students’ affective-motivational states, levels of understanding, experiences, and interests made the teachers be flexible during the lesson and change direction ten times if needed. Carol (SA) stated: “You have to be led... you have to be flexible, you have to think on your feet, and you have to change direction within a split second.” Olga put it: “Being ready for the class is my responsibility. But I can change direction during the lesson ten times, but I will achieve my main goal.”

When I try to plan for a week, it will go amiss.... I have to wait until the end of the day to plan, because it will just depend on the class and the students in the class and what they have learned (Joanne, US).

The teachers’ desire to reach each student made them constantly look for the best ways of teaching and try a variety of strategies and techniques: “She couldn’t talk but she could sing... So, I got her to talk by music...” (Cathy, SA); “You think, ‘What is the best way to teach? How?’ So that the child will learn the best” (Alina, RU); “If I try one way and it is not working, than I have to find another way” (Linda, US); “We try to teach the kids in methods that they are able to learn” (Rachel, US).

The South African teachers were expert-users of the Cognitive Enrichment Advantage (CEA) educational approach and they frequently referred in their interviews to the teaching strategies based on this approach. This experience of the South African teachers was captured in a separate sub-theme for the South African structure 2.5. *With Blocks and Tools I see a light!* Carol (SA) described how she used Building Blocks and Tools in her art class to connect students’ classroom experiences with the real world:

Because they put it down on paper, they say, “What? What? Why?”...and I could come in and say, “This is the reason why, this is what it is. I don’t know what it is. Let’ go and find out. Who, do you think, may know? Where did you see it?” Connecting Events...

Evelyn (SA) shared how she used CEA in a critical situation, when there was no time:

I mean, there was no time; he had to write an exam....So, I had actually to say, what is the best thing that would help Andy at that point of time and knowing about CEA, I mean kind of integrating with my occupational therapy knowledge [I thought]...what could I do immediately in a short span of time to help him actually think and learn better?

Cathy (SA) shared how shed used CEA in her work with a parent:

Because she spoon-fed him and she told him what to do all the time and I said to her, ‘Look you must try and regulate your own behavior. Explain Self-Regulation to him. Allow him. Encourage him. Make him feel competent so that he can work, do it by himself.’

Some Russian and American teachers also introduced strategies that helped their students become more metacognitive, self-regulated, and independent learners. Olga (RU) expressed that her main teaching goal is to help students become independent learners: “Our main goal is to teach students how to learn, not to teach how to spell this or that ... you have to learn to resolve your problem.” She used a variety of strategies to achieve that goal and described, for instance, how she developed goal-orientation in her students:

We have a learning dialogue, we start arguing with each other in order to find a right goal and by the end of the primary school the child can see the goal that he has to achieve, he knows that the teacher has taught him that... and here he can lead even a learning monologue, defining the main goal that it is important for him.

Gina (US) expressed the need to help her students become strategic learners:

Another [thing] that I’ve learned over the years is strategies, teaching them strategies, that will work like in math... and that makes it less fearful for

your strugglers, because if they can have success with a strategy, then they are not afraid to use it with anything else.

It is evident that expert teachers highly valued knowledge that helped their students become independent learners in and out-of-school contexts. The South African teachers successfully integrated the CEA approach in their work and some American and Russian teachers clearly showed the need for explicit systematic knowledge about how to help students become independent and self-reliant learners.

Only the American teachers emphasized the collaborative effort of school personnel in overcoming underachievement – the facet of their experience captured in the sub-theme 2.5. *My teammates are great!* Rachel (US) summarized: “[working with underachievers] takes a lot of patience and a good team, and I think that is one of the reasons that our special education department is so successful because ... we all really work hard together.”

For the two South African occupational therapists, Cathy and Evelyn, the resistance of other teachers to see the potential in an underachieving student and to learn educational approaches that would help to bring this potential to light was a frustrating experience. Evelyn (SA) expressed it:

That is one of my big frustrations, you know, in helping underachieving learners, is that they move back into a class where the teacher may not be mediational, where the teacher doesn’t understand some of the things that she should understand to help the majority of the learners in the class.

Among the Russian teachers Olga expressed an appreciation for her collaboration with a school psychologist, “Another aspect of my work with underachieving students is my close cooperation with a psychologist. ... She explains the problem from a psychological point of view, WHY the child is like that, what I can do... as a teacher.”

Tina and Alina expressed the need for collaboration with each other, but this collaboration was not yet a reality. (It is also important to note at the time of the interview Tina was not working at school). “What hurts the most is that nobody takes a psychologist seriously. It does not matter what you say or what you do. I am seeing these children and tell teachers, but there is very little feedback” (Tina, RU). “It would be great if we had a psychologist in our school....I would take a child to a psychologist, here we have impaired memory, attention, and perception, so please work with him” (Alina, RU).

Differences in the degree of collaboration of school personnel probably reflect differences in school cultures that are characteristics for the teacher participants in each of the three studies. Established differentiation of professional expertise led to more cooperation in American schools. The emergence of new areas of expertise, that of a school psychologist in Russian schools, led in some occasions to some collaboration and more effective efforts in addressing underachievement (as in Olga’s experience); in other instances, the collaboration between the teachers and the psychologist was not yet a part of school culture (as in Alina’s and Tina’s experiences). In South Africa, the expertise of some teachers in alternative approaches to learning, such as CEA, created a tension between those teachers who used CEA and those who adhered to conventional methods. In these instances, the teachers who used CEA and the other teachers perceived the students differently.

The teachers’ efforts to help their students succeed not only made them change the direction of the lesson as often as needed, but also take on many different roles, and

be more than just a teacher in the classroom. This aspect of teaching experience was captured in the fourth (RU) and fifth (SA and US) sub-themes.

Sub-themes 2.5. *You become a mother, a father, a policeman... depending on*

what is needed (SA)

Your friend, your brother, your sister, mother – all roles

together...you are his teacher (RU)

*You become someone else besides just that teacher in the
classroom (US)*

It was the individual needs of students that prompted the teachers in all three studies to change their roles and “become a mother, father, a policeman ... depending of what is needed” (Evelyn, SA). As described in the first themes for all three studies, many teachers encountered their students when they were “shattered in a lot of pieces,” “traumatized,” and “beat down long enough.” These conditions required the teachers to become “a doctor” (Alice, SA) or even “a savior” (Karen, US).

At least one participant in each study associated her work with the role of a mother or a parent. This association had several meanings: (1) the meaning of all-encompassed care, “Your mom will do everything for you – so this is the attitude of our teachers” (Nina, RU); (2) the meaning of a life-long connection, “These children and their creative lives that they are living afterwards are being entangled in mine” (Carol, SA); (3) the meaning of anticipation of their future, “I am really trying to look at them as if I were their parent, what I would want them to do, what I would want them to learn” (Rachel, US).

For many students, the classroom was the only place where they felt safe and a teacher was the only person who communicated to them the sense of stability and consistency in their lives. Dawn (US) shared how the administration of her school worked with inner-city children: “These are our kids. Give them everything you’ve got, because this is the one place where they feel safe and they feel they have some consistency in their life.”

The teachers’ descriptions of the students’ lives in Russia – where even in a private school for children from affluent families “approximately only one fourth of them have a mom and a dad who pay attention to their children” (Nina) - and in South Africa - where in townships “the child ...has got to share a home with seventeen other people” and where the “shooting is going on and on” – don’t leave any doubt that Dawn’s words captured the realities of many children in the three countries. For many students, their teacher is the only one who gives “friendliness and warmth that sometimes children don’t get from their parents” (Olga, RU).

Other roles that the teachers took had a meaning of partnership - “And the teacher’s role is that, I think, if you don’t know – I will help you. ... You are his friend, his mentor” (Alina, RU) – or going through life together – “They just want to share with you what’s going on. And you know that creates trust in that other person. You feel like you’re a guidance counselor all the time” (Joanne, US). Searching for and switching roles was a common experience of the teachers in all three countries. Ellen’s words nicely captured that experience: “It is a challenge, it is a continuous search for what can I still do? What is my role? How can I still help this child?” (Ellen, SA).

The teachers in the three studies talked about how the school-family partnership influenced their work. The examples to follow are particularly interesting since they demonstrate different approaches that the teachers chose to involve families in helping students overcome underachievement. Cathy (SA), who was practicing the CEA approach in her work, helped the parents develop a goal-orientation; Olga (RU) emphasized the need to create a supportive environment at home; and Angela (US) together with the family used a behavior modification plan to help one of her students succeed. The similarities, however, were noticeable too. The teachers made it clear to the parents what happened in the classroom and suggested possible ways the families could support their efforts to help the students.

The parent is a major factor in my therapy....When I speak to [parents], I've got very specific goals and I try and get my goals so that they understand where I'm going with the child and slowly I help them to develop their own goal, goal orientation for that specific child (Cathy, SA).

I ask parents to come for a conversation and explain what the problem is and try to give them an understanding of WHY the child was not able to do that ... The most important point ...is to explain to parents that now it does not depend on them, that they don't have to explain what he does not understand ... this is my goal... the main goal for parents is to notice positive changes in the child and tell him/her about that (Olga, RU).

His mother came in and we showed her his progress....And we told her we needed her support. What support could she offer at home? And she cried. ...She said she'd tried. She'd tried to tell him to do his homework and he just wouldn't do it. And so we had a mother who was very frustrated and scared. She wanted the best for her son, but ...she didn't know of anything else she could do....So, we set up a plan...[and]...He really, really improved....And his mother...you know each time we had meetings throughout the year...we'd look forward to them because she was so excited and so happy, and it felt that...through this plan, their whole family was doing better (Angela, US).

When the teacher participants were given a formal opportunity to give feedback to the findings of the studies, some South African and Russian teachers again re-emphasized the role of the family. Cathy (SA) stated: “The lack of parent involvement is always frustrating. If a learner’s behavioral component is severe, then it is always a stumbling block in his learning and in your therapy.” Svetlana (RU) expressed it: “The family support is necessary. If parents don’t have the necessary attitude, it is challenging to reach the highest results.” All the teachers perceived their students in the context of his/her family and, as quotes suggest, put much effort to involve the family in their educational process.

Even when the teachers experienced the lack of support from the family – as was evident in the interviews and further feedback of some South African and Russian teachers - they still persisted in helping their students. The teachers experienced a variety of feelings and emotions while searching for the best way to teach each student – the facet of their experience captured in the third theme of each structure.

6.4. The Teachers’ Perceptions of their Lived Experience in the Classroom

The third theme of each structure captured the teachers’ perceptions of their lived experience of working with underachievers. The themes - *It was challenging - but it is joy and privilege*, (SA); *Our backs are wet – the work can bring you joy*, (RU); *Day to day battle – it makes you feel good ... finally payoff*, (US) - show that the teachers experienced their work as a combination of challenge and satisfaction, as a give and take situation. Carol (SA) put it: “It is a very give and take situation all the time. And that’s why it is such a joy.” Nina’s (RU) experience was similar: “A teacher who can give a lot, the child will take a lot.” The teachers in all three studies invested their energy and effort

in helping students achieve – the experience captured in the first sub-themes. At the same time the teachers felt that work with students was feeding them and brought joys and satisfaction of helping and growing together with students – the experience captured in the second sub-themes.

Sub-themes 3.1. *I really struggled* (SA)

It is a huge educational work (RU)

It is NOT easy, it is hard (US)

The teachers in all three studies shared the feelings of a challenge, struggle and almost physical effort when they tried to reach their students or were facing the unknown: “I really struggled with this child ... because all the things I’ve learned in the past did not fit the picture that I saw here” (Cathy, SA); “When we leave class – our backs are wet, because if you want all ten students to get as much as possible – it is very different” (Nina, RU); “So...that struggle. You know, I don’t know if I went into teaching thinking I would always have the answer, but I learned you don’t. So, that’s frustrating” (Angela, US).

The experiences of frustration or sadness were most often associated with the sense of a lack of support, either from the system or the family. Ellen (SA) shared: “I felt if I had support from home ... then he would have a chance of developing something and in my therapy would not just be thrown into a bottomless pit...”

You can give them something now, but what you give them will be helpful only for one year. The child will have a good feeling in his heart. But you cannot take away mother and father at home and you cannot do anything with that environment and it is very upsetting (Tina, RU).

I think the hardest part for me is the kids that are just so difficult to reach ... they need so much more than what a school can do. They need intense

therapy and things that parents need to pursue and those are the most difficult (Joanne, US).

Although the students' personal circumstances were context specific, it was the teachers' perception of the lack of support that made them feel challenged and frustrated.

That is one of my big frustrations, you know, in helping underachieving learners, is that they move back into the class where the teacher may not be mediational, where the teacher doesn't understand some of the things that she should understand to help the majority of learners in the class (Evelyn, SA).

Nevertheless we have these problems [raising orphans] and I think we will have them until the system changes. Because we want to do our best, but it turns out ... (Mila, RU).

Everything has to be black and white test scores and I have a really hard time with that with my kids because you know they can make progress in a year, make a huge amount of progress, but it is not going to show on their test scores (Rachel, US).

Gina's (US) words probably best describe the teachers' perceptions of the relationship between their work and the context: "I love what I do when I am with my children and I am teaching. But there are a lot of things around us that have made teaching frustrating."

It was the teachers' perceptions that the challenges they encountered in the classrooms led them to reflection, self-analysis, and searching for new ways. Ellen (SA) talked about challenges as a necessary condition for improvement: "But it's a good thing, because if you don't question your own skills and your own doings, how can you ever improve?" Self-analysis stood out for Olga (RU): "And constant self-analysis, constantly unsatisfied with yourself." Sandy (US) described self-reflection as "there is this for me ... a level that says, "You did not do a good job today," and so you've got to come back

in tomorrow and start over or pick up where you left off...” Emotional investment caused Dawn (US) and Svetlana (RU) to report the need to “step back” and “reflect on it all”:

I come home sometimes I think, I feel sorry, I give to other children, but as for my own ... my own That is it....Nothing....It's gone ... “Please, don't touch me for forty minutes, for an hour,” because, I just, “Don't talk to me...” (Svetlana, RU).

You know it is taxing. It's taxing on your mind and on your time.... And sometimes you just need to step back and say, “I can't, I can't listen to all this today. I need one break.” One day that you know because you can definitely just kinda get feeling down and take a day to reflect on it all (Dawn, US).

The teachers' perceived that their struggles were not in vain. The experiences of learning and growing together with their students and seeing the results of their work brought the teachers feelings of joy – the facet of the experience captured in the second sub-themes.

Sub-themes 3.2. *It makes you actually grow with the kids (SA)*

You get a lot of energy from them (RU)

Teaching feeds me (US)

This is how the teachers perceived learning from students: “You come to school with this wonderful idea, you are going to be this and this, and this, and immediately ... you do not only teach, you learn” (Carol, SA); “I am growing together with them. They also teach me a lot ... Especially underachieving students push me; make me keep looking for ways how to teach them” (Rita, RU); “Every student I've ever taught has taught me something. ... They really kind of made me clarify to myself what it was I was doing there” (May, US).

The teachers' satisfaction and reward appears to come from being able to help their students and grow together with them: "A little bit of growth in every child is actually like a huge growth of yourself" (Alice, SA); "To HELP. Before you nobody helped that child ... maybe they tried, but eventually it was YOU who helped. That satisfaction" (Svetlana, RU); "When they finally can read that word, after work on that for four months, yeah, that is a big thing, it is a little thing that keeps it exciting and keeps me doing that more than anything else" (Rachel, US).

Teaching as receiving was also a shared meaning among Russian and American participants: "I didn't leave teaching because I didn't like it anymore. I still enjoy it ... thoroughly. It feeds me in a way that nothing else does" (Angela, US, who at the moment of the interview was in graduate school). Rita (RU) shared:

Sometimes I get discouraged and think, "That is it. I am not a teacher. I myself have to learn, learn, and learn." And at such a moment children are usually a source of energy, because they feel too. And when you see that feedback, you think, "No, it is not in vain, there is hope." You get a lot of energy from them (Rita, RU).

Although in the interviews the teachers in all three studies shared their feelings about their work, it was their students' successes that they considered the most important. Karen (US) in response to the findings of the study, particularly emphasized, "it makes me feel good to be able to see those successes." The teachers perceived that on their journey, students changed, they "got wings" and "could fly higher" than even their teachers could predict. The teachers' perceptions of the students' transformations were captured in the fourth theme of each structure in all three studies.

6.5. The Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Transformations

The fourth theme of each structure captured the teachers' perceptions of students' transformations that they observed in their students. The names of the themes - *The results were amazing* (SA), *They bring all these good surprises* (RU), ... *really, really neat to see that* (US) – communicate the feelings of excitement and joy that the teachers experienced when observing the results of their work. The first sub-themes in all three studies captured the teachers' observations of the students' change. The second sub-themes captured the instances when the students got back with their teachers and shared with them the awareness of their transformations, appreciation of the teachers' efforts to help, or simply wanted to stay in touch with their teachers.

Sub-themes 4.1. *That was a miracle!* (SA)

He got wings! (RU)

He really, really improved! (US)

The changes in the student's appearance, motivation, and social relationship stood out for the teachers in all three studies. The teachers reported that students who experienced success looked differently: "They have a smile on their faces and you can see those eyes that were crying a few months before actually lit up and they actually try" (Ellen, SA); and "Their eyes are shining ... they look like little puppies, little puppies, they are happy about everything, and they have curiosity, and everything is interesting to them" (Tina, RU).

Changes in the students' motivation and increased consciousness of their responsibilities of being a student stood out for the teachers in all three studies: "They even attempt to do difficult work, and start participating in the class" (Ellen, SA); "He

got wings, he believed in himself and now learning is easy for him, and he does not say, I don't want to go to school. He goes to school with joy" (Olga, RU); "There is a point that you say, gosh, and they take the responsibility of learning themselves, because they are not afraid anymore" (Gina, US).

The beginning of progress was often described as the beginning of movement or movement up: "he progressed lovely" (Ellen, SA); "he's absolutely a star now in grade five" (Harriet, SA); "he got wings" (Olga, RU); "she was allowed to take off" (Gina, US). The teachers also described achievement as a change in the whole personality of students, as becoming a "whole person": "Now she is actually now making jokes with teachers. So ... if you are making jokes, you are self-confident" (Alice, SA); "They become whole persons" (Alina, RU). Rachel shared:

I can see most of the children in here growing up and getting a job and being, yes, a useful citizen, you know, later on, but are they going to be academically on grade level – probably never and that is okay with me (Rachel, US).

According to interview data in all three studies, the teachers clearly expressed intent to create a special place in their classrooms, to take time to build a relationship with students, and to find what can help their students learn. In all three studies, the teachers' intent appeared to be closely related to the transformations in students.

He made friends, he was accepted into the class, he could get rid of most of his frustrations by starting to *learn*, whereas, he was never given enough time in any other place ... he was here for two years and he progressed lovely...(Ellen, SA).

But the fact that we had individual lessons, and when he was talking in front of the class, I was always next to him and he repeated after me like an echo. And I could say, it was him who said that and the children would believe me. So, the child began believing in himself and he was not afraid

to be in front of the class, he was not afraid to communicate with the other children.... (Olga, RU).

And I think with the atmosphere in the room, she's been allowed to take off and giving her lots of individual support, meeting with mom and having a plan, together, that mom is working on it at home, and she's made great progress in her reading and we are working on writing individually (Gina, US).

Most importantly not only teachers but also students themselves became aware of the transformations. The second sub-themes captured the teachers' stories how students talked about those transformations.

Sub-themes 4.2. *Miss, this is the first time in my life that I feel that I am clever*

(SA)

It is so good that I had you at that moment of my life (RU)

Hey, Mrs. Williams, just wanted to say hello! (US)

These sub-themes captured stories of how students noticed their progress, appreciated the teachers' efforts to help them, and maintained connection with the teachers when the formal teacher-student relationship was over. The examples of how students noticed changes were a part of Evelyn's (SA) experience, "He said to me, 'Actually now I can see... I actually now see what to do and I understand...how to do it next time.' A similar experience stood out for Sandy (US), "One day he said, 'I think I can do all of these,' instead of just the partial amount that I gave him, 'I think I can do all of these.'

The experience of hearing the words of appreciation stood out for George (SA). He remembered one of his students: "Now I am doing well, sir. Thank you. You gave me hard things those years, but I can see it helped." In Nina's (RU) experience, the

words of one of her students “It is so good that I had you at that moment of my life” gave her strength in working with students whose circumstances were particularly challenging.

The instances when students tried to connect and stay in touch with their teachers were shared in the interviews from all three countries. In the end of a text message to Carol (SA), one of her students said: “I want to think of my little casual man [logo that he created] as a dedication to you.” Olga (RU) shared how her students do not want to lose contact with her, their first teacher: “Sometimes Sophia just wanted to talk to me, ‘I wanted to hear your voice. I want to know that you are here, I am used to having you nearby...’ Angela (US) thought of Rebecca who would stop by to say hello, “Hey, Mrs. Williams, just want to say hello!” The experiences captured in this sub-theme demonstrate that the teachers were able to reach their students, bring about changes in their lives, and build up special connections that surpassed the temporal and spatial boundaries of schools.

6.6. The Culture of the Classroom

The comparison of the thematic structures of teachers’ experience in the three countries revealed more similarities than differences in how the teachers perceived their work with underachievers. The similarities in the thematic structures suggest that within the diverse contexts of South Africa, Russia, and the United States, expert teachers carve out a safe place and establish a special relationship with their students. This special place of the classroom and what happens within that place can be described as the “culture of the classroom.”

The characteristics of this culture of the classroom can be found in the themes and sub-themes that emerged in the interpretation of data. These characteristics can be

summarized as: (1) holistic approach to students - “If you see their humanity”; (2) creating a safe place for learning and taking time to establish a relationship with students - “You can teach anything if a good relationship is at the foundation”; (3) teachers’ focus on students learning - “Let’s go and find out!”; (4) helping students become independent self-reliant individuals - “It is not important to get As all the time, it is most important ...[to] become successful”; (4) teachers’ involvement in students’ lives – “You become someone else besides just that person in the classroom”; (5) teachers and students growing and changing together - “You actually grow with the kids”; and (6) teacher knowledge in their respective disciplines and high sense of teacher efficacy – “They can all achieve!”

The culture of the classroom revolves around individual students. As Angela (US) put it, “Coming back every day and doing whatever it takes to experience success, to experience failures, but doing all that within the context of children ...” In all three studies, the teachers reported focusing on students as human beings within their individual contexts rather than the demands of the larger socio-political and educational context. This is how Gina (US) commented on the findings of the comparative analysis: “It is not a publisher or a program but a relationship that you create with a child [that makes a difference].” In the teachers’ experience it was through these relationships that they helped students overcome their difficulties and changed together with students. I borrowed Ellen’s (SA) words - “you and me” - to describe teacher-student relationships that are at the center of the culture of the classroom. Were the teachers oblivious to the larger context of their work? No. They responded to the demands of the larger context uniquely as they were manifested in each individual student.

Chapter 7

It must be you and me, together

I tried to teach her that, ‘You **MUST** ask, it’s not question if you *may*, you **MUST**. That’s what the teacher is there for. And you have a right; you have a duty, to ask. Otherwise... it can’t be all me. It must be you and me, together (Ellen, SA, a speech-therapist).

In the research project concerning the experience of teachers of working with underachieving students, I did what Husserl urged; I went “To the things themselves” (Ihde, p. 29, 1986). By listening to the unreflected stories of expert teachers from South Africa, Russia, and the United States, I was able to identify and describe in the teachers’ own words the invariant themes of the experience of working with underachievers. As a result, a non-dualistic view of teaching emerged; in which teachers perceive themselves in the relationship with students, where thoughts and actions are blended with intuition and emotions, and where the investment of time and the creation of a safe place are as important for overcoming underachievement as teacher expertise and knowledge of their students.

7.1. An Existential Phenomenological View on Teachers’ Experience of Working with Underachieving Students

7.1.1. The Teachers’ Experience of Others, World, Time, and Body

The description of the experience of teachers working with underachieving students shed light on the first-person meanings of the four major grounds of human existence – others, world, time, and body. Despite the dramatic differences in socio-political contexts, teacher preparation programs, and foundational philosophies of teaching, the world of others – students - stood in the center of the teachers’ experience.

Guided by their desire to help and make a difference in students' lives these teachers tried to connect with students and establish a relationship with them. Their students responded, "They really want that caring and love" (George, SA) and "inside the kids there is a very sensitive person who responds" (May, US).

The teachers perceived the world as divided into the world inside the classroom and the world outside the classroom. Their perceptions of their classrooms were associated with the feelings of happiness for themselves and security for their students. Gina (US) put it, "room 210 is good" and Karen (US) stated, "...in my classroom I am able to give them a little bit of self worth." In different socio-political and cultural contexts, the teachers carved out a special place, where they established special relationships and "treated [students] like human beings" (Karen, US). The classroom appeared as a special place for the teachers, even when the world outside sometimes appeared "frustrating." The experience of working with underachievers was often associated with extending the boundaries of the classroom and being with students at other places: trips, art shows, football games, and even at a grocery store or at Walmart. Extending the boundaries of the classroom always created a special bond between the teachers and the students.

The teachers' focus on students combined with their professional expertise helped them create a powerful culture of the classroom and to avoid being overwhelmed by the problems of their socio-political contexts. These findings support Todd and Mason's (2005) conclusion that the immediate factors of learning had a tremendous impact on student achievement even in very dramatic socio-economic conditions. It is essential, however, to hear the voices of the teachers who noted that education alone cannot resolve

the dramatic difficulties that many of their students encounter in their lives. As the teachers in the three countries perceived, it was the lack of support from the system or demands imposed by the system that distracted their attention from the learning needs of their students and hampered their efforts to help them. Therefore, an understanding of the teachers' lived experience is essential for developing policies that support the culture of the classroom and recognize and honor teacher professionalism and the commitment to their work.

The teachers' stories provided an insight on the meaning of the existential ground of time in working with underachievers. These teachers valued situations in which they had enough time to spend with their students. It gave them an opportunity to get to know their students and to build up special relationships. Not having enough time was perceived as a constraint. When that was the case, the teachers experienced a sense of urgency to "undo" the years of emotional damage that their students had brought with them and to initiate changes so that the students would start believing in themselves. Working with underachievers was perceived as giving time to their students and teachers often were the only ones who were willing to do that.

The teachers' experience of body was associated with their efforts to reach their students and to bring about changes in them, "Our backs are wet" (Nina, RU). But more often the experience of body was associated with joy and vitality, "Wow! That really gives me that major 'Aha' feeling" (George, SA). Establishing a special bond manifested itself as physical contact, "She would hug me and she would try to be with me as much as possible" (Cathy, SA).

The world of others, however, was prominent in all of the descriptions of the teachers' experience. The teachers' focus on students and their relationships with them turned out to surpass differences in the teachers' cultures, values, and knowledge and was the essential thematic aspect in the teachers' descriptions of their experience. Another way of talking about teachers' focus on students is teachers' "aboutness." Indeed, the teachers said it themselves: "I do care *about* you" and "We talk *about* our students all the time," and "What is it *about* those two?" The finding of this research project about the power of teachers' focus on students and the relationship with them has the strongest implication for teacher educators. If we, teacher educators, want future teachers to genuinely care about their students then it should be our first goal to model caring relationships in teacher preparation programs.

7.1.2. The Teachers' Experience of Others (Students)

Students in all their humanity stood out for the participants in all three countries. The research team was struck how often the teachers started their stories about their students with the words, "He is a smart little boy" or "She was a very smart girl." The students' abilities and potential rather than their deficiencies stood out to the teachers. In some ways the teachers' descriptions of underachieving students were similar to descriptions of underachievers in the literature: the lack of motivation and not believing in one's abilities (Carr, Borkowski, & Maxwell, 1991; McCall, Evans, & Kratzer, 1992; Lau & Chan, 2001); the lack of persistence in the face of challenge (McCall, Beach, & Lau, 2000); the tendency to disruption in social relationships characterized by loneliness, withdrawnness, alienation, or aggressiveness (McCall et al., 1992); and underachievement as a way of life (McCall et al., 1992).

The teachers' descriptions, however, were very different from ordinary descriptions of underachievers in one important way: the teachers were aware of the students' abilities and strength as well as of their learning needs. Deficit-based descriptions might be helpful in understanding what is the problem; at the same time such descriptions have a danger to blind teachers from "the mines of gold," as Vygotsky (1987) described human potential. The teachers of the studies presented here emphasized approaching the students holistically and focusing on their strengths as a necessary condition for facilitating learning as a transformational process, the idea developed in the works of Vygotsky (1987) and Feuerstein (Feuerstein et al., 1980).

The teachers' belief in their students' potential was a sign of their strong sense of efficacy. The research on teacher efficacy (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998) has persistently shown that highly efficacious teachers are less critical when students make mistakes, spend extra time with strugglers, are less inclined to refer struggling students to special education, and persistently seek teaching strategies to meet their students' individual needs. Indeed, the interpretation of these teachers' unreflected stories revealed the above qualities and characteristics of their work.

The teachers' emphasis on motivational and emotional manifestations of underachievement was somewhat surprising to me. My assumption in the beginning of the research project was that teachers would describe their underachieving students in terms of academic deficiencies. Instead, these students appeared to the teachers as "traumatized," "beat long enough," and "emotionally damaged." The teachers responded to the students' "appeal" for care - in Van Manen's (2000) words - by creating a safe place and establishing a special relationship with the students.

The finding of the project on the importance of teacher-student relationships in overcoming underachievement is supported by the increased attention current research gives to the role of relationship in learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2001; Murray, 2002; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Raider-Roth, 2005; Juvonen, 2006). While these studies have focused on the effects of teacher-student relationships on student achievement and learning behavior, the present project offers in teachers' own words a description of what the teachers did to establish and maintain the relationships with their students. By "being there for them," "listening to them," "talking their talk," "validating their experiences," and "spending time with them," they created conditions in which their students could "take off" and "fly higher" than even the teachers could have predicted.

Learning in the classroom appeared to the expert teachers as "a moving together," as "going up to the heights" or as "going and finding out." For expert teachers, learning not teaching was the focus of their work. As Olga (RU) put it, "I learn for my kids, I learn from my kids, and I learn together with my kids." Guiding and being guided by their students, the teachers were involved in learning with understanding, the kind of professional growth described by Franke, Carpenter, Levi, and Fennema (2001). Learning with understanding is characterized by the qualities of: (1) generative growth – when teachers continue to add to their understanding; (2) reorganization of existing knowledge to integrate new knowledge; and (3) teachers' involvement in their own inquiry and perceiving knowledge as their own; as constructed through practice. The teachers' learning with understanding emerged out of the relationship with students.

Caring teachers who wanted to make a difference in students' lives became "more than just a teacher in the classroom." In all three studies the teachers' perceived themselves as being a part of their students' lives, or as being involved in their students "life projects," speaking in Lave's terms (1996). The teachers' observations of student change and reports of their own, teachers', professional and personal transformations support a view of learning as an ontological process, as "the historical production, transformation, and changes of a person" (Wenger & Lave, 1991, p. 151). The changes in teachers and students identities were the results of learning together. "Teachers are probably recognized as 'great' when they are intensely involved in communities of practice in which their identities are changing with respect to [other] learners through their interdependent activities" (Lave, 1996, p. 158).

In contrast to the Russian and American teachers, the South African teachers were introduced to Feuerstein's mediated learning theory, a model that explicitly focuses on the qualities of teacher-student interactions that are essential for transformational learning. Additionally, the South African teachers were experts in the Cognitive Enrichment Advantage (CEA) approach and largely relied on this approach in addressing the students' learning, affective, and social needs.

While this research project did not support the assumption that the South African teachers' expertise in mediated learning theory altered the thematic structure of the experience of these teachers, it did support the idea that introducing teachers to the explicit knowledge about mediation and metacognitive regulation made them more resourceful and articulate in diagnosing students learning difficulties and in developing strategies for overcoming them. As it became evident from the interviews, some Russian

and American teachers intuitively knew that empowering students with strategies that helped them regulate their cognitive and affective-motivational needs was an important aspect of helping them become more successful.

It is important to remember here that most of the teachers in this project (24 out of 25) were women and this fact may influence the value that these teachers placed on the relationship with their students. It is important to explore the possibility that interviews of male teachers of underachieving students might yield different results. Therefore, generalization of the findings should be limited to female teachers.

7.2. The Study of Teachers' Experience of Working with Underachieving Students Comparatively and What Accounts for Similarities

The research project supported the assumption that there are many similarities among expert teachers in different countries. The similarities were much greater than I anticipated and even the teachers' native languages did not seem to influence in how they talked about their classrooms. These results, however, were different from the findings of Alexander's (2001) study, *Five Cultures*, which revealed noticeable differences between Russian and American schools, teachers' and students' behaviors, and pedagogy when studied in an ethnographic manner.

Schweisfurth's (2002) study of South African and Russian teachers' perceptions of reforms identified that the teachers' actions and words did not match each other as when the teachers said one thing but did another (for example, the teachers expressed commitment to the democratic relationships in the classrooms but did not establish such a culture). The results of the research project presented here did not reveal any contradictions between the teachers' words and actions simply because I analyzed the

teachers' unreflected stories and did not observe their teaching behaviors. We do not know if a comparison of the teachers' stories and observations of their behaviors would have produced results similar to Schweisfurth's.

The teachers' perceptions of the larger socio-political contexts were similar to Schweisfurth's study for the Russian participants and somewhat different for South African participants. Similar to Schweisfurth's participants, the Russian teachers talked about the influences of the transition to a market economy on students' lives. The South African participants in this research project did not share the experiences of a breakdown in the culture of teaching and learning so characteristic of former township schools which was prominent in the teachers' perception of reforms in Schweisfurth's study.

Why did the findings of the research project of the teachers' experience of working with underachievers yield more similarities than differences? What could account for similarities in the structures of the experience of teachers in the three countries? I think that two factors can explain the results. First, the focus of this study on invariant themes of human experience allowed us to explicate a common thematic structure of the experience of teachers working with underachievers. Second, I suggest that expert teachers in the three countries provide a high quality Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) for their students (Feuerstein et al., 1980) and possess the qualities of teacher-mediators (Feuerstein et al., 1980; Greenberg, 2000). As noted in Chapter 3, MLE takes place when "stimuli emitted by the environment are transformed by a 'mediating' agent... This mediating agent, guided by his intentions, culture, and emotional investment, selects and organizes the world of stimuli for the child" (Feuerstein et al., 1980, p. 16). It is important to emphasize that MLE, as Feuerstein and

before him Vygotsky (1987) noted, is a natural quality of caregivers including teachers and parents.

The teachers in all three studies were excellent mediators. The cultural patterns of behavior and the values that they transmitted could differ from country to country as was evident in the study of Russian and American primary education in Alexander's (2001) study and could be only identified from the third person perspective. When involved in a dialogue about a phenomenon, that is, taking a second person perspective, the teachers revealed the essential qualities of successful mediators - reciprocity, intentionality, meaning and transcendence - that we believe explain the similarities in the descriptions of the experience. The quotes from the participants support the conclusion that they displayed the qualities of teacher-mediators.

Reciprocity – establishing a positive connection of acceptance, trust, and understanding between learner and mediator (Greenberg, 2000, p. 36).

Svetlana: Second grade, they are experienced, you have to dance a little bit...

Interviewer: When you say dance, what do you mean?

Svetlana: To go down to their level ... to go down to their level ... (Svetlana, RU).

Intent – the teacher mediator should be well organized and have thought about how to catch and focus attention in advance of the learning experience (Greenberg, 2000, p. 36).

He came in ninth grade and he was reading at a 2.7 or 2.8. reading level... and this is a language class, [and I thought to myself] stop worrying about the literacy, and whether he could or could not read. And just start engaging them in stories. We started reading Faulkner and we started reading Hemingway (Karen, US).

Meaning – energizing awareness and making the experience personally relevant (Greenberg, 2000, p. 38).

Something has happened...is a buzz and you must learn to read them, and you are learning from them all the time and from that buzz, what is happening at the moment, it is subjective, it has meaning for them (Carol, SA).

Transcendence – expanding understanding beyond the current level (Greenberg, 2000, p. 39).

She did not listen to other children, she would listen only to herself, which was an impediment for learning. ...So, we taught her, "Listen and repeat what I said." That was the first thing that we taught her. ... She learned how to listen and later one day she started helping other children...she used the same phrase, "Did you hear what he said? Did you pay attention?" (Olga, RU).

As mentioned earlier, the South African teachers were explicitly introduced to mediated learning theory as a framework of the CEA approach and, therefore, in their stories, explicitly talked about the use of mediation in their work. The Russian and American participants demonstrated the art of mediated learning, that is, demonstrated the necessary quality of successful mediators without being exposed to a formal theory and explicit knowledge about mediation. The differences in the precision and character of the teachers' descriptions of underachievers between the South African teachers – on the one hand - and the Russian and American teachers - on the other hand - as well as differences in some learning strategies that the South African teachers performed (being expert users of the CEA), suggest that explicit knowledge about mediated learning theory and metacognitive regulation can be a powerful tool in the hands of dedicated teachers to enhance their ability to facilitate student learning.

7.3. Teacher Professionalism

The teacher participants in this study displayed the qualities of both the science and art of pedagogy. Being expert teachers they displayed all the requisite characteristics of teacher professionalism: (1) commitment to their learners; (2) the ability to make decisions in complex and ill-defined contexts; (3) reflective practice; and (4) a body of specialized knowledge (Ingersoll, 2003). Being excellent mediators they were responsive to their students; intentional in their practice; provided educational experiences rich with meaning; and honored learning that goes beyond the classroom.

The experiences of these participants showed that expertise alone does not make a successful teacher. It is the blend of the art and science of teaching, as well as the teachers' mind and heart that yield a teacher who can make a difference. Honoring both the art and science of teaching is essential for helping one be a good teacher and to use their expertise for the benefit of their students.

7.4. Implications of the Study to Research and Practice

The philosophical stance that I took in this research project and the research methodology that I used offered an alternative way of addressing the problem of compartmentalized research (Berliner, 2006). A number of research methodologies have been developed to address the fragmented and atomistic research on teaching. An approach close to the phenomenological method is narrative research. The growth of narrative is particularly associated with the possibility of describing the teaching experience in subjective terms and in the language of teachers.

The narrative tradition developed by Connelly and Clandinin (1985, 1988, 1995, 1999) is particularly close to the understanding of teaching subscribed to in this study.

The two researchers chose teachers' personal experience as the focus of their studies. Similar to phenomenology, they view the practice of teaching in relationship to the world. In their tradition they explored how one's personal teaching experience and knowledge is influenced by the past, present, and future; by one's relationship with others and one's identity; and how place affects one's personal narrative and knowledge about practice. By listening to teachers and further engaging them in exploring their practice, Connelly and Clandinin significantly enriched the understanding of teaching.

At the same time, narrative description remains a description of a person or group of people who are involved in constructing the narrative and it doesn't necessarily provide access to an invariant description of the experience of teachers. In the three studies of the experience of teachers, the similarities in the thematic structures could be easily overlooked if we did not focus on the experience as lived by teachers or did not look for invariant themes of the experience. The use of an existential phenomenological methodology, paraphrasing Valle, King, Halling (1989), made it possible to "elucidate the fundamental themes with which [teachers] invariably struggle" (p. 6) and to provide a holistic description of teachers' experience.

The holistic description of the experience of working with underachieving students has important implications for teacher education. The teachers' unreflected stories provided access to the field of practice and the discourse of practice – two important conditions for successful learning (Wenger & Lave, 1991). Indeed, during the four years that I conducted this research project, the research team and I intensely discussed how the teachers' stories could help pre-service and in-service teachers appreciate the complexity of teaching and learning and learn from the experience of the

participants. Most teacher education programs provide adequate immersion of pre-service teachers in real life classrooms. Not all aspects of practice, however, are explicitly available even in field experiences and reflection on real life experience may or may not occur at a level necessary to develop expertise. Pre-service and in-service teachers may benefit greatly from the description of the experience of expert teachers as it is presented in the psychological essence and thematic structures.

The characteristics of the culture of the classroom that were identified in this project have implications for improving teaching practice. The knowledge of these characteristics is helpful for teacher educators to prepare future teachers empowered in the art and science of teaching. To create the classroom culture similar to that described by the participants in the study, it is important to emphasize the following factors in teacher education programs:

- viewing students holistically, that is, considering their affective-motivational factors, social relationship, and life situations;
- creating a safe place for learning and taking time to establish a relationship with students;
- focusing on students learning rather than teachers teaching;
- helping students become independent and self-reliant learners;
- knowing students in and out of school situations and being available for them even when the school hours are over;
- being open to students and ready to learn and grow with them; and
- developing expertise and professional knowledge in respective areas.

It is my hope that the findings presented here will help other researchers develop appreciation for existential phenomenology. More importantly, I hope that these findings will help current and future teachers become more successful in addressing the needs of underachieving students and lead more satisfying and fulfilling professional lives.

7.5. Personal Reflection

My engagement in a phenomenological project made me appreciate listening to and learning from experiences of others. Giving my participants an opportunity to talk about what stood out for *them* in teaching underachieving students rather than asking predetermined questions helped me better understand what it means to be a teacher of underachieving students. It made me appreciate some aspects of teachers' work, such as considering the emotional well-being of students, the power of the teacher-student relationship, and the meaning of time and place in teaching, that I regarded as important but not essential in helping students reach their potential.

The power of the teacher-student relationship in overcoming underachievement is the finding that particularly stands out for me as a teacher and a teacher educator - "It must be you and me, together." It seems that the teachers' investment of time and energy to engage the student comes first. The experiences shared by the participants helped me and I hope will help other teachers not become discouraged at a seeming absence in some instances of visible results. Changes do come, sometimes after several years of a teachers' investment. I learned from this project that teaching is about not giving up, about "going at it again and again and again." From the stories that the teachers shared I learned that the teachers' voice "does not go into emptiness." Students come back and "bring all these good surprises" of their successes. Now, as a teacher educator, I am

especially sensitive to the relationship that I develop with students in the classroom and emphasize to my students the significance of the teacher-student relationship in the teaching-learning process.

My deepest personal insight from this study is that by listening to the teachers' stories, I could hear the students' voices. Indeed, many students of the teachers that I interviewed were going through very dramatic life situations. We did not have the opportunity to hear from them and only by listening to the teachers can we truly understand that for many students childhood is not as carefree as it should be. When students felt lonely often teachers were the only ones to say, "I am here for you, your sister, brother, father, mother. I am your teacher."

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Appendices

Appendix A

As a transcriber of the interviews conducted for the study “The experience of teachers with underachieving students: A phenomenological study” by Dr. Katherine Greenberg and Maria Orechkina, I agree to guarantee confidentiality to subjects who participated in the study. I will not publicly divulge information that I learned.

Signature_____

Date _____

Appendix B

As a member of the Applied Educational Psychology research team under the direction of Dr. Katherine Greenberg at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I agree to guarantee confidentiality to subjects who participated the study “The experience of teachers with underachieving students: A phenomenological study” conducted by Dr. Katherine Greenberg and Maria Orechkina. I will not publicly divulge information that I learned.

Signature_____

Date _____

Appendix C

You are invited to participate in a research project. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of teachers with underachieving students. To complete this study, a faculty member and a doctoral student from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, U.S.A., are conducting interviews with teachers. The researchers have a wide range of experience in education and research.

You are asked to participate in an audiotaped interview that will last approximately one hour and be conducted in a place of your choice by one of the interviews. You will be asked to share your lived experience of working with underachieving students. The interview will start with a general question regarding your experiences with underachieving students.

This interview will be audiotaped so that researchers can use your exact words to understand your experience. The interview will be transcribed into written form for analysis. Your name will not appear on the tape or the transcript. Your transcript will be read aloud, analyzed and discussed by members of the University of Tennessee Applied Phenomenological Studies Group. A transcriber and members of the research group will sign a confidentiality agreement that guarantees they will not publicly divulge any information that they learn during taping sessions or during transcription of tapes. You may contact the researchers following the interview and during the analysis to clarify the interpretation of your experience.

Tapes will be destroyed upon the completion of transcribing. Transcripts and the signed Consent Forms will be kept in separate locked files at The University of Tennessee, College of Education, and retained for three years after the completion of the study and then destroyed. No incentives are offered to you for your time and effort in participating; however, you may personally benefit by talking about your experience. The nature and direction of the interview will be determined by you and the researcher and will unfold as the interview progresses. You may experience some stress as a result of the interview related to the potential sensitivity of disclosure of your feelings or the emotions the interview may evoke. You are free to choose not to participate in this study or you can withdraw from this study at any time by notifying Professor Katherine Greenberg or Maria Orechkina. Your audiotape and/or transcript will be destroyed upon your request.

Any and all information you provide will be kept in confidence. Neither your name nor any identifying information will be used in any reports although your words may be used to support the interpretation and analysis and appear in presentation and publications related to the research. At no time will your words be linked or traceable to you.

Katherine Greenberg, Ph.D. or Maria Orechkina
The University of Tennessee
A 517 Claxton Complex
Knoxville, TN 37996 – 3452, USA
865-974-4157
khgreen@utk.edu or mariajul@utk.edu

Participant Signature: _____

Date _____

Appendix D

TO: THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE IRB COMMITTEE

FROM:

DATE:

RE: LETTER OF PERMISSION TO CONDUCT THE STUDY “THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS WITH UNDERACHIEVING STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY”

I grant permission for teachers of the school to participate in the study “The experience of teachers with underachieving students: A phenomenological study” conducted by professor Katherine Greenberg and doctoral student Maria Orechkina, principal investigators from The University of Tennessee. I understand that the researchers will ask the teachers to share their lived experience of working with underachieving students. I am aware that these interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed by the researchers and read aloud, analyzed and discussed by members of the Applied Educational Psychology research team. I also understand that teachers’ words and sentences that represent their experience might be used in presentations in conferences and publications. I am familiar with the measures to protect confidentiality of information and the content of the Consent Form. I grant permission for interviews to be conducted in schools facilities.

School Administrator _____

Date _____

VITA

Born and raised in Volgograd (Stalingrad) Russia (formerly the U.S.S.R.), Maria Julianovna Oreshkina completed her *Specialist degree* (Russian term for Masters Degree) in Speech and Language Therapy/Special Education at the Moscow State Pedagogical University in June 1994. She completed her *Kandidat Pedagogicheskikh Nauk degree* (Russian term for doctorate) at the same institution in the field of Speech and Language Therapy/Special Education in June 1999. Her dissertation was entitled, "Self-esteem and Level of Aspiration of Primary School Children with Severe Speech Impairments." She spent 1999-2000 at The University of Tennessee as a Junior Faculty Development Scholar, funded by the United States Department of State before beginning her graduate studies towards her doctorate in Education in 2001.