How Immigrant English Language Learners Used Internal Fortitude to Utilize Supports and Overcome Obstacles to Graduate from High School

Mark C. Peterson
Western Michigan University, mcpgostate@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations

Part of the Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, and the Educational Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
Peterson, Mark C., "How Immigrant English Language Learners Used Internal Fortitude to Utilize Supports and Overcome Obstacles to Graduate from High School" (2021). Dissertations. 3803. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/3803
HOW IMMIGRANT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS USED INTERNAL FORTITUDE TO UTILIZE SUPPORTS AND OVERCOME OBSTACLES TO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL

by

Mark C. Peterson

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership, Research and Technology
Western Michigan University
December 2021

Doctoral Committee:

Sue Poppink, Ph.D., Chair
Jianping Shen, Ph.D.
Michele Siderman, Ph.D.
Immigrants and English Language Learners (ELL) continue to receive attention in the research literature due in part to the continued immigration of families to the U.S. and the continued increasing number of students enrolled in U.S. schools under the ELL designation. The robust influx of immigrant’s school enrollment is reflected in schools across the country as classrooms are transformed from predominantly mono-cultural and mono-lingual environments to multi-cultural and multi-lingual ones. Unfortunately, the national average graduation rate for ELLs is a much lower than native-born students. The economic, social, and mental health ramifications for failing to graduate high school are dramatic; therefore, it is critical that immigrant ELL students are academically successful in high school.

This study explored the unique experiences of immigrant ELL high school students. Specifically, the research questions guiding the study included how do immigrant ELL students make sense of the supports and obstacles that they encountered during high school and how do they make sense of the internal fortitude needed to overcome any obstacles? A basic exploratory qualitative study was undertaken to answer the research questions driving my study. Data was collected through one-on-one interviews with my participants, which allowed for their experiences to be heard in their own words.
Findings included the importance of having a support network such as agency caseworkers, lawyers, and other types of professionals, loving foster family, and dedicated teachers accustomed to working with the immigrant ELL population. Other findings included the obstacles that were encountered such as the language barrier, familial issues, and the impact of one’s homeland circumstances on their formal schooling. The last finding was the role of internal fortitude and how it was a critical component to the school success of the participants in my study. The specific categories of internal fortitude were called grit and self-efficacy, which allowed my participants to overcome the obstacles that they encountered and ultimately graduate high school.
DEDICATION

Thank you to my parents, Paul and Linda Peterson, who did their best to raise a strong-willed boy and instill in him some work ethic! It might be true that there were times when I could have been more productive and helpful during those formative years, but rest assured, the work ethic caught on…it was just delayed! May you rest in peace, papa…

Thank you to Tonya who took on the brunt of parenting duties when our little guy was still in diapers. At times, this “hobby” demanded hours of attention with very little to show for it. Now I know how my parents felt about raising me…full circle, for sure :)

Lastly, thank you to my son, Charlie. The greatest gift and source of motivation I will ever have or need in my life.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The journey towards completing a Ph.D. certainly requires a village. My village was vast and without each of them, I would have packed away this endeavor a long time ago.

Many thanks to Dr. Sue Poppink, my committee chair, whose eternal patience, guidance, and tutelage, was needed through and through. I am forever grateful for your expertise in helping guide my project to a successful conclusion.

Thank you to Dr. Jianping Shen and Dr. Michele Siderman for taking the time to offer thoughtful feedback on how to improve my research and for your words of encouragement.

I also extend my thanks to the school district and several staff members who allowed and facilitated the recruitment of potential participants for my study. I am grateful for your help and support.

Hugs and handshakes to the many classmates I met along the way who shared this experience with me. Special thanks go to Drs. Gary Versalle, Gregg Dionne, Kevin Macina, and many others for their help, encouragement, and comradery.

A special thanks goes to Mary Ebejer, editor extraordinaire. I can vividly recall getting back an edited draft and it reminded me of a Jackson Pollack painting with the copious amounts of red ink lovingly splattered everywhere. You pushed me to become a much better writer. Thank you for your expertise and friendship.
Lastly, a huge thank you to “Leticia” and “Aamiina.” Both are the personification of grit. I wish nothing but the best for both of you. Thank you for your willingness to share your experiences with me!

Mark C. Peterson
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................................. ii

LIST OF TABLES ...................................................................................................................... x

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................... xi

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................. 1

  Background............................................................................................................................. 2

  Practical Problem Statement............................................................................................... 3

  Research Problem Statement............................................................................................. 4

  Purpose Statement and Research Questions ...................................................................... 6

  Conceptual Framework ...................................................................................................... 8

  Methods Overview ............................................................................................................ 11

  Significance of the Study................................................................................................... 12

  Closure................................................................................................................................. 12

II. LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................................... 14

  Pertinent Studies .............................................................................................................. 15

  ELLs, Immigrants, and Immigrant ELLs: A Brief Discussion ........................................ 17

  Potential Supports ........................................................................................................... 19

    Family/Parent Involvement ............................................................................................ 19

    Family/Parent Expectations .......................................................................................... 23

    School Supports ............................................................................................................ 24
# Table of Contents—Continued

**CHAPTER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Best Practice</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Obstacles</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Obstacles</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Language Comprehension</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-Representation in Special Education/Under-Representation in Gifted Programs</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Standards</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family as a Potential Obstacles</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Grit Needed to Overcome Obstacles</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grit</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Grit</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closure</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**III. METHODOLOGY** .................................................................................. 48

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Design and Rationale</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site, Population, Sample</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER

Sample .................................................................................................................. 53
Instrumentation ..................................................................................................... 55
Data Collection Procedures .................................................................................. 55
Access .................................................................................................................... 56
Participant Recruitment ......................................................................................... 56
Interview Protocol .................................................................................................. 57
Trustworthiness ...................................................................................................... 59
Data Analysis ........................................................................................................ 60
Organizing Material for Analysis ........................................................................ 60
Read-through ......................................................................................................... 61
Initial Coding .......................................................................................................... 61
Theme Development .............................................................................................. 62
Explanatory Schema ............................................................................................. 62
Interpretation .......................................................................................................... 62
Delimitations .......................................................................................................... 63
Limitations ............................................................................................................. 63
Closure .................................................................................................................... 63
IV. FINDINGS ........................................................................................................ 65
Purpose ................................................................................................................... 65
Research Questions ............................................................................................... 65

vi
# Table of Contents—Continued

## CHAPTER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Demographics</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief Background Stories</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aamiina</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of Categories</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Categories Related to Supports</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency Caseworker/Lawyer</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapist</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Priori Categories Related to Supports</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Family</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Category Related to Obstacles: Homeland’s Effect on the Years of Formal Schooling</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Priori Categories Related to Obstacles</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeland Family</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent and A Priori Categories Related to Internal Fortitude</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grit</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closure</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

V. DISCUSSION........................................................................................................................................ 101

Purpose Statement and Research Questions.................................................................................. 102

Methods Overview ........................................................................................................................ 103

Summary of Key Findings............................................................................................................. 103

Original Conceptual Framework .................................................................................................. 103

Revised Conceptual Framework .................................................................................................... 105

Relationship of Key Findings to Existing Studies.......................................................................... 108

Findings Regarding the Initial, Pertinent Dissertations/Studies
Framing the Study .......................................................................................................................... 112

Findings Regarding Family Involvement ...................................................................................... 112

Findings Regarding Family Expectations/Involvement .............................................................. 113

Findings Regarding School .......................................................................................................... 114

Findings Regarding a Lack of Language/Academic Language Comprehension ...................... 114

Findings Regarding Graduation Requirements ............................................................................ 115

Findings Regarding Family .......................................................................................................... 115

Findings Regarding Grit ............................................................................................................... 116

Findings Regarding Self-Efficacy ................................................................................................. 116

Implications for Future Research ................................................................................................. 117

Other Implications ....................................................................................................................... 120

Concluding Thoughts .................................................................................................................. 122
# Table of Contents—Continued

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................................................. 123

APPENDICES ................................................................................................................................................ 136

A. Interview Questions: Interview Protocol for the Participants................................................................. 136
B. Informed Consent Form............................................................................................................................... 140
C. WMU HSIRB Approval Letter.................................................................................................................... 144
D. GRCC HSIRB Approval Letter.................................................................................................................... 146
E. Initial Recruitment Letter for the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 or Other Graduates........................................... 148
F. Initial Recruitment Letter for the 2018-2019 Students.............................................................................. 150
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Participant Demographics</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Categories Table</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Emergent Categories Related to Supports Identified from the Interviews</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>A Priori Categories Related to Supports Confirmed from the Interviews</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Emergent Category Related to Obstacles Identified from the Interviews</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>A Priori Categories Related to Obstacles Confirmed from the Interviews</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Identified Emergent and Confirmed A Priori Categories Related to Internal Fortitude</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Comparison of Key Findings to Previous Research</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Potential Areas for Future Research</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Conceptual Framework ........................................................................................................ 8
2. Original Conceptual Framework ......................................................................................... 104
3. Revised Conceptual Framework ......................................................................................... 106
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The United States’ history is rich with waves of immigrants flooding the borders from many countries around the globe, representing many different religious affiliations and ethnic groups. Historically, these groups have chosen immigration to escape oppressive and tyrannical conditions in their home countries or to find a better life in a distant land. Immigrants also choose to leave their home country for economic opportunities. For instance, an estimated 350 per 100,000 immigrants to the U.S. have started their own business, which is a 30% higher rate than their native-born counterparts (Greenstone & Looney, 2010). Despite the rich history of accepting people from around the globe, U.S. immigration policy continues to be at the forefront of national debate, with one side arguing for fortifying the southern border (Center for American Progress, 2014) and outright banning immigrants from specific religious groups (Executive Order No., 13769, 2017), and the other for offering citizenship to a swath of undocumented immigrants now in the country (Center for American Progress, 2014).

Three decades ago the U.S. population was 80% White, and today that percentage is down to 69% (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). It is projected that by 2025 the “distribution of the population is expected to be 58% White, 21% Hispanic, 12% Black, 6% Asian, and 2% two or more races…” (Aud et al., 2010). This demographic shift, coupled with a robust influx of immigrants, is reflected in schools across the country and seen as classrooms regularly transform from predominantly mono-cultural and mono-lingual environments to multi-cultural and multi-lingual ones. The current number of immigrants living in the U.S. is close to 44 million (Zong, Batalova, & Hallock, 2018), and of those, 26.1 million are Limited English Proficient (LEP),
which is defined as people five years of age or older who report speaking English “not at all,” “not well,” or “well.”

The conception of my research project, however, was borne out of a curiosity to learn how some immigrant ELLs, despite the perceived challenges that confront them when they enroll in school, are able to position themselves graduate high school. Therefore, my research is focused on the use of grit to overcome any potential obstacles that they might have encountered and how they overcame the obstacles.

**Background**

An accepted definition of ELLs is, “students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses” (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). The term that I will use to describe the population of interest for this study will be “immigrant English Language Learner (ELL).” I am interested in students who immigrated to the U.S. and enrolled in 9th grade or later and were classified as an ELL student at some point during their K-12 school years.

As of the 2012-2013 school year, there were nearly five million ELLs enrolled in public schools (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015). It is not clear how many of those five million ELL students also immigrated to the U.S. (i.e., are first-generation immigrants). What is known about first-generation immigrant children under the age of 18 is that their numbers have remained fairly steady at approximately 3-5% of the total number of children in the U.S. (Child Trends, 2014). Some communities and school districts in the Midwest have even seen double-digit growth in their ELL population in a span of a decade (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014).
With the continued influx of ELL school enrollment, a practical problem exists: the low graduation rates of ELLs, who are graduating at a rate anywhere between 58-63% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2016; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014). This is a lower percentage than both economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities (NCELA, 2016). On a positive note, however, the ELL graduation rate is trending positively since the 2010-2011 school year (NCELA, 2016). As the student demographic continues to be re-shaped, the educational challenges presented to teachers will continue to take on more importance as schools struggle to graduate immigrant ELLs at the same rate as their peers.

**Practical Problem Statement**

High school graduation is the culminating experience for students in secondary education. However, the reality for parents, educators, and communities is that there are students who choose to drop out of school prior to graduation. Dropping out of school is a complex decision with reasons including missing too many days and earning poor grades, not enjoying the school experience or even changing schools, to becoming pregnant and having to raise a family (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013).

In the 2008-2009 school year, the Average Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) was 75.5%, 81% for the 2011-2012 school year, and 85% for the 2016-2017 school year (NCES, 2020, 2014, 2011). AFGR is the measure of the percentage of incoming freshman who graduate within four years. The national average graduation rate for ELLs is a much lower 57% for the same school years (NCES, 2014), but has increased to 67% as of the 2015-2016 school year (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Sullivan (2011) recognized how susceptible ELLs are to dropping out, noting that they also have high rates of grade retention. Zaff, Margolius, Varga,
Lynch, Tang, and Donlan (2021) caution that an EL[L] classification is not, in and of itself, a risk predictor for not graduating high school and ELLs are performing academically well. Chiswick and Deb-Burman (2004) and Tsang, Katz, and Stack (2008) reported that graduation rates can be similar to their native-born counterparts the earlier in life their immigration took place; unfortunately, the data also suggests that immigrating during a student’s secondary years is quite detrimental to their education.

The impact of failing to earn a high school credential (diploma or General Equivalency Diploma) is notable. For instance, lifetime earnings are on average substantially lower compared to those who have a diploma or higher credential (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2018). In 2017, the median earnings for adults without a high school credential earned $520 weekly, $712 weekly with a high school credential, and $1,173 weekly with a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2018). High school dropouts are also more likely to be arrested and incarcerated (Amos, 2008; Maynard, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2014) and have higher rates of attempting suicide than high school graduates (Maynard et al., 2014). The economic, social, and mental health ramifications for underachieving are dramatic; therefore, it is critical that immigrant ELL students are academically successful in high school in order to potentially secure higher earnings and be contributing members of their communities and live emotionally healthier lives.

**Research Problem Statement**

Immigrants and ELLs continue to receive attention in the research literature due in part to the continued immigration of families to the U.S. and the continued increasing number of students who qualify for services under the ELL designation. The literature surrounding immigrants and ELLs uses one term or the other even though it can be inferred, depending on the
population being studied, that the population could technically be specified as immigrant ELLs. However, immigrants from foreign countries might hail from English-speaking countries (e.g. United Kingdom, Australia, etc.) and would presumably not be classified as an ELL. Also, there are students who qualify as an ELL, but are born in the U.S. and raised in non-English speaking homes. Therefore, they would not qualify as an immigrant, but might qualify as an ELL student.

My research will specifically focus on immigrant ELLs because the literature does not appear to have an abundance of studies specifically focused on this population of interest, but more importantly, this is a unique population with unique challenges. My area of focus for this study surrounds three broad categories of interest immigrant ELLs might encounter as part of their school experiences, which are: (a) potential supports encountered, (b) potential obstacles encountered and (c) and a concept called grit needed to overcome any obstacles.

The literature does examine many concepts that pertain directly or indirectly to immigrant ELLs. First, Porro’s (2010) dissertation addressed the individual experiences of Spanish-speaking immigrant ELLs (SSELL) who immigrated to the U.S. at various ages and their journey to complete high school in Wisconsin. She found that relationships between SSELLs and the adults in their lives promoted engagement, achievement, and served as motivators, and that self-advocacy skills were important to their school success. Additionally, Enriquez’s (2011) study focused on how undocumented immigrants used social capital to successfully navigate K-12 and pursue higher education. Her findings suggested that undocumented immigrants participate in a concept called “patchworking” as part of their school experiences. Essentially, the undocumented immigrants had to piece together their resources needed to meet a particular goal. In their case, they pieced together the necessary resources to not only graduate high school, but also to pursue higher education.
Other studies of interest include Plata-Potter and de Guzman (2012) who explored the experiences of immigrant Latino parents as they learned how to navigate the U.S. educational system that their children were attending. The authors identified six broad themes/obstacles that the parents encountered, which included: (a) differences in the cost of education, (b) differences in academic and behavioral expectations, (c) complexities of the language, (d) distinctions in procedures lead to difficulties, (e) perceptions of ineptness, and (f) consejos (conversations designed to influence the behavior of their children). Lastly, Turney and Kao (2009) also focused on minority immigrant parents’ school involvement. They concluded that minority immigrant parents’ perception believed that getting involved with school was more difficult than it was for U.S.-born White parents. They were also less likely to become directly involved with any school activities. On a more positive note, improved English-language ability was associated with an increase in school involvement. These studies represent a small sampling of the types of topics in the literature regarding immigrants, ELLs, and immigrant ELLs.

My study will address an apparent gap in the literature by focusing on the experiences of immigrant ELL students and the various types of obstacles they might have encountered while navigating their journey towards high school graduation. This study is unique because it: (a) specifically investigates immigrant ELLs, (b) does not focus on a specific race or ethnicity, (c) explores obstacles encountered, and (d) the importance of grit needed to overcome any obstacles.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to describe and interpret the importance of grit for recent immigrant ELL student high school graduates or graduates within the last few years. The study aims to explore the concept of grit through exploring the potential supports and obstacles that students encountered during their journey towards high school graduation and the use of grit to
overcome any such obstacles. *Grit* is defined as the ability to achieve difficult, long-term goals (i.e. “I am not quitting until I finish what I started”) (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Kelly, Matthews, & Barton, 2014). Obstacles is defined as, “something that impedes progress or achievement” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

For my sample, I will search for participants who are (a) labeled as an immigrant ELL student at some point during their school years, (b) immigrated to the U.S. and enrolled in 9th grade or later, (c) recently graduated or graduated in the last few years, and (d) at least 18 years old.

I am assuming that the students encountered both supports and obstacles prior to graduating high school because as of 2014, approximately 41% of ELL students did not graduate (NCES, 2014), and the percentage of those who are also immigrant ELL students may be lower. Conversely, 59% of ELL students graduated suggesting academic success and possible supports during their journey.

Persistence in overcoming potential obstacles may mean students used external and internal resources. Students may suggest that sources external to themselves helped them to graduate. For example, students may credit a guidance counselor, a teacher, or a school activity that helped them with difficult tasks or through a difficult time. I will make note of these ideas in the interview and analysis process. However, I am most interested in students’ internal resources that might have contributed to their high school graduation.

To develop the notion of internal resource, I will focus on the concept of *grit*. Grit is the ability to achieve difficult, long-term goals (i.e. “I am not quitting until I finish what I started”) (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Kelly, Matthews, & Barton, 2014). A secondary, and parallel concept, that will be considered is *self-efficacy,*
which is the self-judged state of being capable of executing a course of action resulting in a desired outcome (i.e. “I can do this”) (Bandura, 1977).

The principal research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of supports that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

2. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of obstacles that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

3. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the grit needed to overcome obstacles during their journey towards graduation?

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) for this study outlines the holistic approach that was reasoned immigrant ELLs might experience during their K-12 school years. I am exploring supports and obstacles immigrant ELLs might have encountered and how they make sense of the grit needed in order to graduate high school.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*

Note. Potential supports and obstacles immigrant ELLs encounter and the role of grit during their journey leading up to high school graduation (Peterson, 2020).
The conceptual framework depicts potential supports and obstacles on the left of the diagram that immigrant ELLs might have encountered. The middle bubble is grit and what role, if any, it played as the students progressed towards graduation, which is the bubble on the far right. Examples of potential supports include, but not limited to, family/parent involvement, family/parent expectations, and specific school programming or instruction. Examples of potential obstacles include, but not limited to, language/comprehension issues, classroom expectations or other types of school-related issues, to a lack of family support. The internal resources necessary to overcome any trials and tribulations will be explored through a concept called grit. The focus will be on grit; however, other concepts such as self-efficacy, and the lack of grit and lack of self-efficacy will be discussed, too. Lastly, moving left to right, the arrow points to the right, depicting the culmination of immigrant ELLs school journey, which is “high school graduation.”

The conceptual framework is a simple visual, but the concepts involved are more complex and nuanced. For example, possible supports could include the impact of family educational involvement on student’s academic achievement (Crosnoe & López Turley, 2011; Epstein, 2011; Rogers, Theule, Adams, & Keating, 2009; and Sibley and Dearing, 2014). Froiland and Davison (2014), Zhan (2006), and Zhan and Sherraden (2011) explored parental expectations relating to academic achievement. Other potential supports are those specific to school such as instruction or classroom techniques (Echearria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003; Helfrich & Bosh, 2011; Kobeleva, 2012; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010; McCullough & Fry, 2013; Teenmant, Hausman, and Kigamwa, 2016).

Potential obstacles to graduation can also be complex and nuanced. Examples specific to school that immigrant ELLs might encounter could include, but not limited to, issues with
language development and proficiency (Chiswick & Deb-Burman, 2004; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003; Krathwohl, 2002; Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999; Rodriguez-Valls, Kofford, & Morales, 2012; Teenmant, Hausman, & Kigamwa, 2016; Tsang, Katz, & Stack, 2008). Other obstacles might also include overrepresentation of minorities in special education classes (Ford, 2012; Sullivan, 2011) and underrepresentation in gifted classes (Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Ford, 1998; Naglieri & Ford, 2003). Other obstacles to graduation might also include the graduation standards itself (Michigan Merit Curriculum, 2006) or other types of pathways towards graduation such as career and technical education courses (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011).

While school could present a myriad of obstacles to overcome, there could also be obstacles at home with one’s family. For example, Chase, Deming, and Wells (1998) explored a concept called a “parentification,” which is where children assume adult roles in their family. Similarly, Burton (2007) examined the concept of “adultification,” which is the developmental process of children learning adult knowledge and responsibilities. Some responsibilities might include children acting as caregivers for their younger siblings (East & Weisner, 2009).

The internal resources immigrant ELLs might need to continue with their education, despite encountering obstacles, will be explored primarily through the concept of grit, which is the center bubble. Grit helps explain how individuals are able to achieve difficult, long-term goals (i.e., “I am not quitting until I finish what I started.”) (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014; Kelly, Matthews, & Bartone, 2014).

Other secondary concepts that might also explain any internal resources needed to graduate high school include a concept called self-efficacy, which is the self-judged state of being capable of executing a course of action resulting in a desired outcome (i.e., “I think I can
do this.”) (Bandura, 1977). A similar concept, efficacy expectations, which is how much time someone will spend on a task in the face of adverse conditions (Schunk, 1989; Schunk & Gunn, 1986; Zimmerman, 2000), and acquired motivation (Zimmerman & Ringle, 1981) will also be explored.

A lack of grit and a lack of self-efficacy might also have a negative impact on immigrant ELL’s school experiences towards graduation. The lack of grit could mean that difficult, long-term goals are never realized, such as failing to successfully graduate high school. Some immigrant ELLs might fail to meet the graduation requirements or even drop out of school altogether. A possible result of lacking grit, as it pertains to education, is not reaching one’s academic potential and failing to graduate high school.

Likewise, a lack of self-efficacy will be explored through a concept called learned helplessness (Brown & Inouye, 1978; Chambers & Hammonds, 2014; Maier & Seligman, 1976) and influences on self-efficacy (Hendricks, 2013). A lack of grit will be explored by also examining deliberate practice (Duckworth et al., 2011) and the impact that grit has on other life commitments (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). A lack of self-efficacy could act as an obstacle by not providing the belief that they are capable of learning both a new language and academic content. Any strong findings described by my participants will be considered and added to the conceptual framework if they provide a more accurate picture of the types of obstacles and/or internal resources needed to graduate.

**Methods Overview**

A basic exploratory qualitative study was undertaken to answer the research questions driving my study. I had an opportunity, through one-on-one interviews with my participants, to listen to how they described their lived, school experiences in their own words. Their
descriptions captured the essence of their experiences, including the types of obstacles that were encountered and how they navigated those obstacles leading up to their graduation. The data collected from the interviews allowed for first-hand accounts of their experiences. I used an open-ended interview protocol with each participant to do my best to ensure consistent data collection. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Codes, categories, and themes were generated using a six-step process as recommended by Creswell (2009). Lastly, the themes were organized into an explanatory schema that described the essence of the participant’s experiences as they navigated their journey towards high school graduation.

**Significance of the Study**

The identification of potential obstacles could provide interested stakeholders a broader understanding of the types of challenges immigrant ELLs overcome to succeed in education. As importantly, the identification of potential obstacles to ELL’s school success could lead to counter measures being taken to alleviate the obstacles as much as possible. Minimizing identifiable obstacles could provide ELLs the support needed to overcome obstacles during their journey to improve the graduation rates of immigrant ELLs.

**Closure**

The continued enrollment of students from around the globe presents unique challenges, such as ensuring immigrant ELL students have the same access to a fair and rigorous education as their U.S.-born classmates. The education of the burgeoning population of ELLs is critical considering that they are a subgroup with an average graduation rate of 60% (NCELA, 2016; NCES, 2014), while the overall average graduation rate is at 79% (NCES, 2014). However, to say that all or most ELL’s educational experiences are poor, or do not result in graduation from high school, is obviously not the case. I am interested in highlighting a specific population,
immigrant ELL students who are on track to graduate (or recently graduated), rather than focus on the students who are not on track to graduate (or failed to graduate). Learning from successful soon-to-be graduates or recent graduates might provide insight into how educators can better educate this vulnerable population, potentially resulting in increased graduation rates and more participation in higher education and stronger career opportunities.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines studies that explore various school obstacles that immigrant ELLs potentially encounter as part of their lived, school experiences and the grit needed to graduate high school. The importance of understanding how immigrant ELLs experience success in school is rooted in the apparently few studies focused on their experiences. What is also driving this study are the statistics, which are clear: ELLs are graduating at a much lower rate than their U.S.-born peers (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014).

Common terms found in the literature include LEP, English Language Learner (ELL), English Learner (EL), with all referring to those who are not proficient in the English language. The literature uses the term Limited English Proficient as a formal definition for referring to people five years and older that report speaking English “not at all,” “not well,” or “well” (Zong, Batalova, & Hallock, 2018). An older term, English as a Second Language (ESL), is now more associated with programming for ELLs designed with the dual purposes of students to make gains in both fluency and learning academic content (National Center of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2008). Recently, the even shorter term English Learner (EL) is being used for students who lack English language proficiency. While the literature varies in its use of the acronyms, for this study, I will use immigrant ELL when referring to the population of interest, unless I am referring to the literature and the author uses a different acronym. As an important point of clarification, a designation of any of these acronyms does not necessarily mean that the person is an immigrant. It is a designation of language proficiency, and not country of origin, immigration status, or citizenship status.
The current study will build on Porro (2010), Enriquez (2011), Plata-Potter and de Guzman (2012), and Turney and Kao’s (2009) work by offering authentic descriptions and interpretation of the school experiences encountered by immigrant ELL students of any ethnicity as they navigate their journey towards high school graduation (or description of experiences from students who have recently graduated). This literature review will offer brief discussions on these pertinent studies, and ELLs, immigrants, and immigrant ELLs, as well as potential obstacles encountered, and the grit and other potential internal resources needed to overcome the obstacles.

**Pertinent Studies**

Of the few studies interested in the experiences of ELL students, Porro’s (2010) phenomenological study focused on Spanish Speaking ELL (SSELL) students and their ability to graduate high school in the state of Wisconsin. Porro found that strong relationships between SSELLs, parents, and teachers appeared to promote engagement and achievement, that self-advocacy skills are important to navigate a new school, that validation of their cultural roots helped provide a connection to staff, home and school resources helped overcome language and other obstacles, and that parents played a motivational role in high school by encouraging their child to graduate from high school. Porro found that SSELLs learned to manage various supports and obstacles at their home school and within their community to successfully graduate.

Additionally, Enriquez (2011) focused on the educational experiences of undocumented Latina/o immigrants who graduated high school and attended college for a varying number of years. In all, fifty-four students were interviewed between 2007 and 2010 in Southern California with the majority of participants hailing from Mexico. Findings include that family, friends, and teachers provide emotional and financial resources for the undocumented immigrant students to
not only complete high school, but also enroll into college. Also, the students were resourceful by utilizing a concept called “patchworking” as part of their school experiences. Essentially, the students had to piece together any resources needed to meet a particular goal. In their case, they pieced together the necessary resources to not only graduate high school, but also to pursue higher education.

Plata-Potter and de Guzman (2012) explored the experiences of immigrant Latino parents whose children attend school in the U.S. through a phenomenology. Their study highlighted the experiences of the parents as they navigated a new educational system. Plata-Potter and de Guzman found that the parents’ experiences included the following broad themes: (a) differences in the cost of education, (b) differences in academic and behavioral expectations, (c) complexities of the language obstacles, (d) distinctions in procedures lead to difficulties, (e) perceptions of ineptness, and (f) consejos (conversations designed to influence the behavior of their children). They also found that immigrant Latino families’ experiences navigating a new education system is fraught with challenges, but on a positive note, the parents in the study were motivated to learn more about the U.S. educational system in order to better support their children, so they could graduate high school and attend college. The study also emphasized the importance of recognizing and understanding the unique experiences of immigrant Latino parents to bridge the parents’ knowledge gap so that they may better support their children.

Similarly, Turney and Kao (2009) explored minority immigrant parents’ school involvement. The sample included parents from approximately 1,000 schools, representing 100 countries, and included almost 13,000 parents. Parental involvement was measured on attendance at various school functions, such as an open house, PTA [Parent Teacher Association] meetings, conferences, class events, etc. Obstacles to parental involvement to any of these types
of events was measured with reasons being inconvenient meeting times, no child care, not feeling welcomed, etc. Parents indicated if they did or did not experience any of the proposed types of obstacles to participating in their child’s school activities. Additionally, it was found that an increase in English-language ability was associated with an increase in school involvement for minority immigrant parents. Turney and Kao’s findings suggest that minority immigrant parents’ perceive it to be more difficult to get involved with their child’s school activities than U.S.-born White parents, resulting in less direct involvement.

**ELLs, Immigrants, and Immigrant ELLs: A Brief Discussion**

The amount of formal schooling and English language fluency greatly varies among the immigrant ELL population. For example, the most commonly taught second language in the European Union (EU) happens to be English, with many students exposed to a new language as young as three years old (Eurydice, 2012). However, the EU’s priority of language acquisition for its citizens, specifically English, may not be necessarily reflective of the other countries around the globe. Therefore, as a result, new arrivals to this country come from vastly differing backgrounds, including cultural, language exposure, formal schooling, and any other number of identifying characteristics (NCTE, 2008). The result is that a portion of this population will ultimately land another title along with immigrant: English Language Learner, who also constitute a growing segment of the school-aged population.

For the 2012-2013 school year, there were approximately 4.8 million ELLs enrolled in public schools, with California leading the way with 1.5 million ELL students (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015). It is not clear from the data how many of the ELLs are also immigrants. Countrywide, this is an increase of approximately 300,000 ELLs enrolled in schools from the previous decade. The influx of students with diverse educational needs, including the
need to master the dominant culture’s language, presents challenges for educators and interested stakeholders across the education landscape.

What is also trending upward is the number of immigrants moving to the United States, which continues to increase each decade. For example, there were 9.6 million immigrants in the U.S. in 1970 and by 2016 that number had grown to over 44 million (Zong, Batalova, & Hallock, 2018). However, the current presidential administration is reviewing the immigration policy for the U.S. with the possibility that immigration into the country might be curbed (Chishti, Pierce, & Bolter, 2018). With immigrants now constituting 13.5% of the total population, the origins of the immigrants is undergoing a demographic shift, too, with the majority of immigrants arriving from Latin American and Asian countries rather than Europe (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Zong, Batalova, & Hallock, 2018). Forty-five percent of immigrants in 2016 identified as having Hispanic or Latino roots (Zong et al., 2018). Of the 44 million immigrants in the U.S., it is estimated that almost 26 million are Limited English Proficient (LEP) (Zong et al., 2018).

Educationally speaking, ELLs appear to struggle to a degree, with graduation rates that hover around 58%-63%, which lags behind other subgroups of students (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014 [NCES]). Further complicating their education, ELLs are also misclassified as needing special education (Ford, 2012; Sullivan, 2011) to presumably address their perceived deficits, but they might in fact be qualified for these services as a result of a language obstacle in school rather than a true cognitive or emotional deficit. Yet, in spite of lower graduation rates, misclassification into special education services, and other educational issues, it should be noted that the graduation rates for ELLs does appear to be trending upward since 2010-2011 (NCELA, 2016). This suggests that ELLs are beginning to find more educational success, and it would be
advantageous to understand what types of obstacles they overcame to reach graduation.

Not only does it appear that high school graduation is on the rise, so is ELLs higher education success. For instance, 3.1 million immigrants who were 25 years or older in 1990 were college educated (Zong & Batalova, 2016). Contrast that number to 2000 and 2014, and the number of college-educated immigrants rises from 5.9 million to 10.5 million (Grieco, 2004) and rising (Zong & Batalova, 2016; Zong, Batalova, & Hallock, 2018). The number of college educated adults 25 years or older has tripled since 1990 with 15.4 million foreign-born immigrants who have a high school diploma or higher (Grieco, 2004).

**Potential Supports**

External supports such as family, friends, or school personnel, would seemingly play a role in student’s academic success, but especially for at-risk students, such as immigrant ELLs. It can be inferred that immigrant ELLs high school graduation rates are on the rise based on the upward trend of graduation rates for ELLs (NCELA, 2016) and upward trend of college-educated immigrants (Grieco, 2004). It is important to understand the types of potential supports that immigrant ELLs encounter while navigating their K-12 experience for these positive school trends to continue.

**Family/Parent Involvement**

Family involvement can act as a potential external support by providing students with the motivation to continue with an endeavor. The “family involvement” construct is operationally defined differently depending on the author. For example, Epstein (2011) summarizes what she terms “family educational involvement” (FEI) into six separate sub components, which are: (a) basic parental obligations, (b) communication between parent and school, (c) volunteering during school hours, (d) engaging the child at home and promoting a learning environment, (e)
serving on a decision-making board, and (f) collaborating with community partners. Zhan (2006) defines parent involvement as “activities [that] may signal the route through which a parent’s skills and motivations are transferred to children” (p. 963-964). In effect, the assumption is that young students are influenced by their parents’ parenting style by internalizing the importance of and achieving a solid education. FEI and parental involvement are essentially identical concepts in that they refer to how a parent’s or caregiver’s actions influence or support achievement.

Sibley and Dearing (2014) conducted a study that compared U.S.-born and immigrant children to determine if there was any association between FEI and academic achievement. The sample included 9,203 children who entered kindergarten in 1998. U.S.-born Whites, Blacks, Asians, and Latinos and Asian and Latino immigrants were included in the sample. The authors collected data when the students were in 1st and 3rd grade because FEI data was thoroughly assessed at these times and because of the importance of the family-school connections for younger students. FEI was constructed from parent reports from school-based and home-based involvement questionnaires, and a parental educational expectations questionnaire asking how far parents expected their child to go in school. Findings include that White parents had the most school-based FEI in 1st and 3rd grade, whereas U.S.-born Latino and Asian parents had the most home-based FEI in both grades. In regards to academic achievement, FEI was a significant predictor for U.S.-born Whites, Blacks, and Asians and Latino immigrants. American-born White and Black children had greater positive association between FEI and achievement than children of immigrants. Positive associations were also noted between educational expectations and achievement for children of Latino immigrants that were almost as strong as that of U.S.-
born Whites. Higher FEI for U.S.-born Latinos and Asian immigrants was not positively associated with higher achievement.

Crosnoe and López Turley (2011) noted that immigrant parents might not be visibly involved in their child’s education due to a language barrier, e.g. joining the Parent Teacher Association, but they, too, are supportive. For example, Asian immigrant parents show parental support by having high educational expectations and discussing with their children progress towards those expectations and saving for college. It was noted that some Asian immigrant children also benefit from strong, parental attachments, which encourage discussions about progress toward academic expectations. Taken as a whole, parental involvement appears to be positively associated with academic achievement despite its varying degree across different ethnic groups.

Rogers, Theule, Ryan, Adams, and Keating (2009) also provide evidence supporting the notion that parental involvement is an important external support for students. Their study of 231 5\textsuperscript{th} and 6\textsuperscript{th} graders suggests that maternal involvement, e.g., helping with homework or managing the learning environment, was positively associated with a child’s “academic competence.” Academic competence refers to a student’s school-related behaviors that support effective learning, and indirectly influences the student’s academic achievement. Paternal involvement was also found to be a predictor of academic competence, but a father’s academic pressure and engagement in their child’s homework appeared to result in lower academic competence. Rogers et al.’s findings suggest the importance of parents taking a proactive and supportive role in their children’s academic lives. However, the authors noted to use caution when extrapolating these results to other populations as the sample in this study consisted of White, middle-class students who were already higher performing students.
Fan and Chen’s (2001) meta-analysis of 25 research articles specifically focused on the impact of parental involvement and academic achievement found only a moderate association between any number of learning-related skills. Parent involvement and children’s grades were moderately associated, while parent involvement and specific subject prowess in reading or math were even more lowly associated. So the effect of parent involvement may not be seen in specific subject areas, but rather may positively affect a child on a more general level with their schooling. It is also worth noting that a study by El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal (2010) did not conclude parental involvement was associated with gains in academic achievement. On the contrary, in their study of the academic and social development of 1,364 1st, 3rd, and 5th graders, El Nokali and colleagues found that parent involvement was not associated with academic achievement, nor was increased parental involvement related to any standardized test results. The study’s authors explain that “Past findings of positive between-child associations of parent involvement and achievement may be artifacts of selection bias, whereby involved parents differed from less involved parents in a variety of ways, such as in their motivation and beliefs about parenting, education, and their children’s development” (p. 1,001). They did find, however, that potential involvement did predict decreases in problem behaviors and improves social skills.

A recent meta-analysis of 37 studies by Castro, Expósito-Casas, López-Martín, Lizasoain, Navarro-Ascencio, & Gaviria (2015) supports the conclusions of Rogers, Theule, Ryan, Adams, and Keating (2009), and Sibley and Dearing (2014), which suggest there is indeed a positive association between parental involvement and improved academic achievement. The association found by Castro et al. was small to moderate, but depending on the student, the amount of parental involvement may be the difference between success and failure. Taken
together, these studies and meta-analyses suggest that parental involvement is positively associated with higher levels of academic achievement.

**Family/Parent Expectations**

The literature also addresses a similar concept, parental expectations, as it relates to student’s academic achievement. One definition of parental expectations is the “dimension of the home environment that directly as well as indirectly influences children’s behaviors and achievement” (Zhan, 2006, p. 963). That is to say, it is the parents’ attitude and the standards that they set for their children, which might support their children’s academic success. Consider that Fan and Chen (2001) found that parental expectations and aspirations, as a dimension of parental involvement for their children, were most highly related to academic achievement. Similarly, Zhan and Sherraden (2011) concluded that a child’s and their parents’ educational expectations are associated with a higher rate of graduation. Parents’ expectations also appear to influence the performance in specific classes. Consider Zhan’s (2006) study, which suggests that a mother’s expectations was positively and statistically significant in relationship to her child’s math and reading scores, and parental expectations were positively associated as a predictor of college attendance. What is more impressive regarding the results of the study is that parents’ expectations are more strongly associated with their child graduating from college than is their children’s own expectations.

Froiland and Davison (2014) also examined the association between parental expectations and positive school outcomes and long-term educational attainment. School outcomes were comprised of grades, advancing grade levels, and acceptable school behavior. Parental expectations was defined in terms of long-term academic attainment, e.g. earn a high school diploma, earn a certification from a vocational school, earn a diploma from a college, etc.
Their study include examining data from 5,828 families with students ranging from 6th to 12th grade representing a cross section of ethnicities. Parents who participated in the study answered multiple questionnaires that included information on educational expectations of their children, ratings on their relationship with the school, parents’ highest educational level, family structure, ethnicity, etc. Froiland and Davison (2014) found that parent expectations were more strongly associated with school outcomes than other variables such as parent educational level, ethnicity, and family structure. Parent expectations were also found to be moderately associated with long-term educational attainment. Based on these results and the results of Zhan (2006) and Zhan and Sherraden (2011), it is suggested that family expectations can act as a potential external support for students by providing them the impetus to focus on their academic achievement.

School Supports

Schools have the potential to act as supports for all students, but especially for high-risk populations. For example, implementing classroom best practices can also act as a potential external support for immigrant ELLs by ensuring that the teaching methods that they are exposed to are facilitating both language development and content mastery (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003; Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). Therefore, classroom best practice, such as instructional methods, take on importance for deep learning to occur. For example, in the case studies of middle and high school ELLs, Freeman, Freeman and Mercuri (2003) found that they, like their U.S.-born counterparts, benefit from lessons built upon prior background knowledge, scaffolded instruction, and lessons organized around relevant themes. An example of a lesson meeting these criteria would be for ELLs to illustrate and/or write about an important holiday or customs, or other types of projects about their lives. In essence, developing academic language
proficiency and creating confident students might be increased if ELLs can better relate to a lesson and draw from their personal experiences (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003).

**Classroom Best Practice**

McCullough and Fry (2013) provide an example of learning from drawing on personal experiences. They examined the instructional effects of immigrant ELL participation in a Bilingual History Fair (BHF). The purpose of the students’ participation in the fair was to provide them with an opportunity to increase their content knowledge in social studies, but to also develop their English language and critical thinking skills. Students were asked to create a personal presentation, which in part addressed the questions of, “Who am I? Where do I fit in? How did my world get to be this way?” among other questions (McCullough & Fry, 2013). One-hundred forty-nine students from the Midwest participated in the study. Fourteen different languages were represented. Students were from elementary, middle, and high school and varied with the number of years that they have been in the U.S. with some participants less than a year up to 11-13 years in the country. Students were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire before and after participating in the BHF. Results of the data analysis suggest that students’ participation in the BHF increased their learning in multiple areas including their knowledge of immigration, community, research abilities, and presentation skills.

Echevarria, Short, and Powers (2006) examined the efficacy of another classroom technique called the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) on academic literacy development of middle school ELL students. It can be inferred that some of the participants in the study are also immigrant ELLs. The purpose of the SIOP model is to make curricular content comprehensible to ELLs for the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking. To accomplish these tasks, the authors noted that teachers could use any number of strategies,
including (a) engaging in peer discussions or a class debate, (b) reading the textbook, (c) completing a graphic organizer, (d) journaling, (e) or writing an essay (Echevarria et al., 2006). It was also noted that an important component for each sheltered instruction lesson was for the teacher to place an emphasis on building vocabulary and background knowledge for the students. To test the efficacy of the model, three-hundred forty-six ELL students representing grades 6-8, participated in instruction using the SIOP model. The students were taught by teachers who were nominated by their school district and had at least 2 years of experience with sheltered instruction (modified teaching to make the content more understandable to ELLs). The authors found that the model does improve ELLs academic writing skills when compared to the control group, suggesting that the acquisition of academic writing skills could be an important tool for ELLs to demonstrate content mastery in their classes.

Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, and Kelley (2010) also explored classroom best practices by examining effective reading comprehension development techniques. Specifically, their study focused on 6th graders in low-performing middle schools. Of the 476 students participating in the study, 346 were “language minority learners.” Language arts teachers taught an eight-day, text-based lesson focused on developing deep meaning for common academic words (e.g., affect, survey, anticipate) across many academic disciplines to determine if the academic vocabulary intervention improved reading comprehension for low-performing students. They found that by using small snippets of age-appropriate text and identifying key academic words to teach the deep meaning of the identified words generally led to increased comprehension for both low-performing and ELL students. This suggests that ELLs might benefit from being taught by knowledgeable teachers that employ meaningful teaching techniques in their classrooms.
Lastly, another classroom skill and teaching technique that might facilitate immigrant ELL’s learning is the importance of listening comprehension. Kobeleva (2012) reported that listening comprehension is important for developing ELLs’ spoken English comprehension. Her study focused on 110 intermediate to advanced ELL students. They each read a short news text under two conditions: proper names known and proper names unknown. A key finding included that listening comprehension could be negatively impacted by the usage of proper names. The explanation offered is that ELLs do not understand what the proper names refer to in the context in which they are used, which results in a reduction in the understanding of connected speech. For example, students that struggled to understand a spoken passage reported that it was difficult to determine who was who, what role the characters played, and how they related to each other.

Much like the importance of recognizing common vocabulary, proper names, too, play an important role in overall listening comprehension. Listening comprehension coupled with the development of academic word knowledge would appear to be invaluable classroom skills that would better allow ELLs to understand the explicit instruction by the teacher and content in the classroom.

Despite the research suggesting how classroom techniques could support ELL’s classroom learning, there are financial realities to consider when educating ELLs, such as funding for properly training staff, purchasing appropriate school materials or having existing school materials translated, to offering interpreter services to communicate with parents (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011). Nevertheless, ELLs still have the task of mastering academic content so that they meet high school graduation standards, regardless if they are enrolled in a specific program, such as a bilingual or ESL classroom setting that can address their unique learning needs. Therefore, ELLs who are enrolled in schools without specific programs for their population...
might benefit from being taught by instructors knowledgeable in reading and listening comprehension techniques. Schools have a role of determining what is the most desirable and feasible way that they can serve their population of ELLs to ensure their academic success (Linquanti, 1999).

Potential Obstacles

Not only are there a host of potential supports that immigrant ELLs experience, but there must be a host of potential obstacles that impede school progress, too. For example, ELL graduation rates are below the national average (NCES, 2014). It is presumed that there are obstacles that they experience during school that might negatively affect not only their school experience, but also hinder their progress towards graduation.

School Obstacles

Immigrant ELL students are a unique population that have a graduation rate trending positively upward (NCELA, 2016), which might be the result of an increase in any number of supports for this group. They might also encounter potential obstacles as part of their school experience, which they may have needed to overcome in order to succeed. The lower-than-average graduation rates suggest that there might be factors that influence an ELL’s decision to drop out of school. Types of potential obstacles might include academic language comprehension, high-stakes testing, exit exams, and special education/gifted program considerations, or other types of school-related issues that immigrant ELLs could encounter during school.

Academic Language Comprehension

Academic language itself might act as an obstacle to academic success. Understanding academic content typically requires knowledge of academic language, which includes different
types of verbs and phrases that are used more frequently in classroom settings versus conversational language. For example, verbs such as categorize, predict, classify, evaluate, or infer are frequently spoken in classroom settings, but less so in general conversational English. These examples of verbs do not have as much to do with learning subject area content (e.g., language arts, science, math, social studies, etc.), as they do with students understanding their learning objectives and what they should learn after instruction (Krathwohl, 2002). Lacking fluency in academic language could result in an obstacle for ELL students by making it difficult for them to understand the purpose of the day’s lesson.

Bloom’s Taxonomy, or the six levels of higher order thinking (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), and a revised version referred to as the taxonomy of educational objectives (Krathwohl, 2002), is a classification system of statement used to clarify learning objectives for students. Using the taxonomy of educational objectives can be useful for teachers and students by clearly delineating the purpose/goals of a day’s lesson. The cognitive process (thinking) portion of the taxonomy is hierarchical from low to high (simple to more complex): remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Krathwohl, 2002). Examples of using Bloom’s Taxonomy in the classroom might include words/phrases such as, “Critique the implementation of…,” “How do you differentiate…,” etc. Using these types of words/phrases provide students with the information that they should learn after instruction. ELL student’s learning might be impeded without explicitly understanding what is being asked of them during instruction.

Teenmant, Hausman, and Kigamwa (2016) examined the impact of teacher use of higher order thinking on English language development. Participants included the staff and students from an urban elementary school located in the Midwest. Four-hundred twenty-two students
participated with the majority of the students identifying as Hispanic. African-American, White, Asian, multiracial, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students were also represented. Forty teachers participated with the majority being White and female. To determine the impact of teacher use of higher order thinking on the LEP students, the scores on a language arts and English proficiency test were compared pre and post-intervention. Teenmant et al. (2016) found that student’s learning was positively impacted by teachers who designed learning activities around higher order thinking. Further, LEP’s who had teachers who employed more higher order thinking in their lessons grew more in their language arts achievement and English language development than the LEP’s who did not have teachers who were as versed in utilizing higher order thinking in their lessons. The findings suggest that a teacher’s use of higher order thinking, as measured by Bloom’s Taxonomy, does indeed increase academic achievement and English proficiency. Based on the findings, it is possible that ELLs’ education could be impacted by the amount of higher order thinking their teachers utilize in their lessons.

Not only could a lack of academic language comprehension act as a potential obstacle to ELLs, but so could the time required for ELLs to acquire academic language literacy. Consider that Chiswick and Deb-Burman (2004) and Tsang, Katz, and Stack (2008) both concluded that it could take upwards of five to seven years to acquire academic language proficiency. Chiswick and Deb-Burman reported that students who immigrate prior to their secondary school years fair better academically than those who immigrate later in adolescence because they have more time to develop academic language proficiency, which leads to greater comprehension of the content taught and is one less obstacle to their academic success.

Effective teaching strategies might help address the development of immigrant ELLs’ academic language comprehension (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003). ELLs language
ability and exposure to formal schooling all differ. For example, Olsen and Jaramillo (1999) grouped ELLs into three distinct groups: (a) those who have had formal schooling and developed literacy in their home language, (b) those with limited formal schooling and have not developed literacy in their home language, and (c) students who have been in the U.S. for at least 7 years and have not developed literacy either in their home language or in English. Because of these differences in ability, Freeman, Freeman, and Mercuri (2003) espouse that teachers, based on their ELL student’s needs, differentiate their teaching strategies that will challenge, but not overwhelm them. The authors offered 4 teaching strategies for teachers to consider, which included organizing classroom material around themes or topics that are pertinent to them. A second strategy, like the first, are for teachers to develop lessons around the student’s background, such as their culture, language, or holidays. Third, provide opportunities for the student to participate, scaffold their instruction (build upon concepts), and use graphic organizers i.e. Venn diagram, and provide opportunities for feedback and success in the classroom. Lastly, teachers can bolster their ELL student’s learning by creating confident learners, which can be accomplished by teachers utilizing the first three strategies that were highlighted.

The strategies were put into action, maybe not deliberately, by a group of teachers and a faculty supervisor, who were interested in teaching critical and creative thinking and communication skills to migrant students with varying levels of English and academic language proficiency (Rodriguez-Valls, Kofford, & Morales, 2012). The group of teachers designed a curriculum focused on the arts such as poetry, photography, drawing, etc. The purpose of the curriculum was to support “incoming sophomore high school migrant students’ learning processes with a non-traditional, student-centered curriculum that fosters communicative actions between teachers and students by using multidimensional language(s): visual language, written
language, spoken language, and cultural language among others” (Rodriguez-Valls et al., 2012, p. 98). Thirty-six students participated over the course of four weeks to determine if the curriculum supported the students’ language skills, critical thinking, and creativity. Students were asked to complete multiple projects during the four weeks, including writing bio-poems describing who they are, creating “cultural tree collages” with pictures taken with a camera, making drawings called “cultural tags” that depict their cultural identity, and creating a “graffiti wall” of their cultural tags. The projects were an opportunity for the students to express their thoughts and communicate with their teachers through the use of the various artistic mediums. The result of the four-week summer session was the development of students’ critical and creative thinking, which can be useful in all classroom settings. Removing the obstacles to academic success for immigrant ELLs, along with other groups of students, might mean that schools need to find strategies like the described model that focuses on increasing student-teacher communication and student expression.

Over-Representation in Special Education/Under-Representation in Gifted Programs

Another area of concern is the disproportionate number of minority students, including ELLs, who are qualified for special education services (Sullivan, 2011). The latter group was presumably qualified because of low test scores on any number of state or district exams while the former were qualified primarily due to a language deficiency issue. Regardless of the reason behind ELLs qualification for special education services, the misidentification of ELLs as needing special education services could be detrimental to their education by assuming that they have a deficit in any number of academic or cognitive/learning areas. In effect, the potential result is an increased possibility that the students misclassified into special education services will underachieve and have a poorer quality of education (Ford, 1998).
According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997), to qualify for special education services, students must have a condition that adversely affects their school performance by one of 13 conditions (e.g., specific learning disability, other health impairment, autism spectrum disorder, etc.). Sullivan (2011) found that ELLs eligible for special education services were placed in the specific learning disabilities (SLD) or speech-language impairment (SLI) categories. This is concerning because special education might not be addressing their actual academic needs. Ford (2012) argued that a fundamental issue that needs to be resolved is the ability to distinguish between a language proficiency issue that can mask an ELL’s true intellectual ability versus an actual disability. The discrepancy might be due to school district’s lack of specific ELL programs that are staffed by highly qualified teachers who are adept at working with ELLs.

Not only are ELLs misidentified and placed into special education, they also might be underrepresented in gifted classes. Generally speaking, minority students are overlooked as gifted students, despite any number of screening procedures (Ford, 1998; Naglieri & Ford, 2003), with Asian students slightly overrepresented (Erwin & Worrell, 2012). For ELL students, appropriate identification into gifted classes might be even more difficult given that some states’ heavy reliance on standardized aptitude tests to identify gifted students (Ford, 1998). Underrepresentation in gifted classes should be expected if ELLs are assessed in English to determine their appropriateness for gifted and talented programs.

To address this underrepresentation, Naglieri and Ford (2003) found that the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT), when used as part of the process to identify “gifted” students, provides minority students more opportunity to gain access to gifted education programs. White, Black, and Hispanic students who take the NNAT score similarly whereby the groups have
similar percentages who would be labeled as “intellectually gifted.” The NNAT is a non-verbal measure of ability, which does not require students to read, write, or speak; instead, students are challenged to evaluate and choose how shapes and geometric designs are related. The NNAT would appear to be welcome news for ELLs by eliminating any language proficiency obstacles to qualify for gifted programs.

Erwin and Worrell (2012) cautioned that assessment instruments may not be the cause of the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs. Their contention was that the existing achievement gap between many groups of minority students compared to their White peers is the culprit for the lack of representation of minority students. Even with measures such as the NNAT, the achievement gap still exists and should be evident when students complete a test that measures or predicts academic performance, which would still result in the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs.

**Graduation Standards**

Another potential obstacle to success facing immigrant ELLs is one-size-fits-all graduation standards that apply to all students (Michigan Merit Curriculum, 2006). High school graduation standards have toughened across the nation, presumably to prepare as many students as possible for the rigors of college and to compete in the global marketplace. The graduation requirements for the state where my research is taking place requires students to take and pass four credits each of English and math, and three credits each of science and social studies. The state-wide requirements also place an emphasis on the four core classes (English language arts, math, science, and social studies). In effect, toughening the graduation standards means each high school diploma-bound student is on a rigorous college preparatory track. Interestingly, only 40.5% of traditional-age college students were enrolled in college in 2015 (NCES, 2016), so the
current college-preparatory graduation standards arguably set a needlessly high bar for 59.5% of high school students.

Recognizing that not all students will choose to attend a four-year university, some graduation credits can be earned by taking and passing career technical education (CTE) courses, such as agriculture, health science, or hospitality and tourism. (Michigan Merit Curriculum, 2006). CTE courses might be beneficial for those students who are not interested in attending a university, but there does not appear to be a secondary route towards graduation specifically geared to accommodate ELLs. Even if there were an identifiable alternative route towards graduation, it would not necessarily be “easier” because immigrant ELLs would still need to demonstrate mastery of the curriculum to accumulate the credits necessary to graduate (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011).

**Family as a Potential Obstacles**

Even though the literature is well represented with studies supporting a positive association between academic achievement and family/parent involvement (Rogers, Theule, Ryan, Adams, & Keating, 2009; Sibley & Dearing, 2014) and a positive association between academic achievement and family/parent expectations (Castro, et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001; Zhan, 2006; Zhan & Sherraden, 2011), the family of some ELL students could also present as an obstacle to some student’s education, too.

Chase, Deming, and Wells (1998) explored the concept of “parentification” of young adults, with college students who had alcoholic parents and the impact their childhood experiences had on their academics. Parentification refers to children who assume adult roles in their families, such as caring for siblings or parents, cooking and cleaning, etc. for a variety of reasons. Three-hundred sixty psychology students from a southeastern university participated in
the study. African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, and “other” students were represented in the study. Chase et al. were interested in learning if the college students with lower high school grade point averages (GPAs) and lower Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores would score higher on a measure of childhood parentification. The authors found that children of alcoholic parents scored higher on the parentification measure, presumably because the child was tasked to care for the family an inordinate amount of time. This results in less support for the child not having the family support to fully engage in academic activities and therefore, not performing as well in school or on the SAT.

Similarly, Burton (2007) examined the issue of “adultification” in families in poverty through ethnographies. Adultification refers to the developmental processes which children are exposed to adult knowledge and responsibilities. Adultification was broken down into four categories: (a) precocious knowledge (witnessing adult conversations, such as parents fighting about finances), (b) mentored adultification (the child takes on adult-like role in the home with limited adult supervision), (c) peerification/spousification (child has equal status as the parent), and (d) parentification (caring for siblings or parents). While the purpose of the study was not solely focused on how adultification of children impacts academic achievement, Burton does offer insight on the topic. She found that peerification/spousification and parentification can result in some children learning many valuable life skills, developing self-confidence and grit, but at the risk of poorer school attendance and performance due to the demands their family has placed on them.

East and Weisner (2009) took a slightly different tact and focused their work on Mexican American adolescents as caregivers because infant care by a younger sibling is common and often times necessary for this population. The authors sought to determine the effects of family
caregiving on the caregiver. Sixty-six girls and 44 boys participated in the study. The average age of the participants was 14 years old, with 85% born in the U.S. and the other 15% born in Mexico. Participants completed a short interview and multiple questionnaires while at home with a research assistant at 6 and 12-month intervals. The authors found there was an association between the hours it takes to care for a sister’s infant and an increase in school absences and disciplinary issues. The adolescent caregiver also experienced an increase in stress, depression, and anxiety.

**Potential Grit Needed to Overcome Obstacles**

The educational path towards high school graduation for immigrant ELL students is complex and unique. Reaching and achieving the graduation milestone is difficult even for many U.S.-born students. However, the majority of U.S.-born students appear to have several advantages heading into school, such as language development from birth to potentially having parents who are more familiar with the school system. While these and other perceived advantages do not guarantee school success, other populations of students might not have these advantages, including immigrant ELL students. However, immigrant ELLs do find success in school despite encountering various obstacles along the way towards graduation. The primary concept that I am exploring that might be needed to overcome potential obstacles is called “grit.” A secondary concept explored is called self-efficacy. The discussion will begin by exploring grit followed self-efficacy and by the lack thereof of both concepts.

**Grit**

Grit is defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1,087). Grit has the potential to act as an important internal element of by undergirding ELL students’ ability to sustain the effort necessary to learn a new
language and school curriculum over long periods of time. It has been suggested that grit is one of the elements that allows some individuals to excel well beyond their peers in their given profession. To wit, Michael Jordan, Albert Einstein, and Johann Sebastian Bach are a few famous examples that history and popular culture readily accepts as supremely talented individuals who were able to ascend to the highest echelons of their respective fields. But what experiences explain why a rarified few excel to the height of their profession while the majority of us never do?

Typically, the exceptional individuals are thought of as possessing more talent or are more gifted. In reality, talent is cultivated, in some cases, by years of practice to achieve greatness. Gladwell (2007) popularized the notion that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice will result in acquiring the skill-set needed to become an expert in a given field or endeavor. This has been debunked for several reasons that are beyond the scope of this research, but the notion of deliberateness that Gladwell mentions does have merit. For instance, Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, and Ericsson (2011) found that deliberate practice was an indicator of how much success a student would have in the Scripps National Spelling Bee. But, deliberate practice is not enough. Some people also possess a driving force that enables them to experience success beyond their peers. This dogged determinism needed to reach one’s envisioned, long-term goals is attributed to grit.

Grit has practical merits and is useful as a predictor of behavior. For example, Duckworth and Quinn (2009) used a tool called the Grit-S Scale to predict which new West Point cadets would drop out of summer training. Cadets scoring one standard deviation above the average were 99% more likely to complete summer training. These cadets were viewed as possessing more grit and, therefore, more apt to endure the rigors of their summer training.
Similarly, Kelly, Matthews, and Bartone’s (2014) study of performance predictors concluded that grit was indeed a powerful indicator of which cadets made it through Cadet Basic Training (CBT) and went beyond CBT to graduate after 48 months. This aligns with Duckworth et al.’s (2007) assertion that grit is a critical attribute for people to possess concerning accomplishing long-term goals.

In a follow-up study, Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, and Duckworth (2014) took the concept of grit further by exploring how it affects other life domains, such as on the job, in school, and in marriage. All of these represent goals, yet careers change, some drop out of school, and many marriages end in divorce. Their findings indicate that grittier individuals have the ability to maintain their goals, whereas less gritty individuals have a tendency of “dropping out of commitments” (p. 11). Therefore, grit can be viewed as an important quality that transcends cadet retention and spelling bee rank. Grit has the ability to spur a commitment to any number of long-term life goals.

A recent study by Alamer (2021) examined the effects of grit on vocabulary acquisition. A new scaled called the L2-Grit Scale was used to measure Saudi student’s, who were learning English, perseverance of effort and consistency of interest. One hundred fifty-four students with ages ranging from 18-26 took part in the study. Findings included that perseverance of effort was a better predictor of vocabulary learning than consistency of interest.

Self-Efficacy

Bandura’s (1977) seminal work on self-efficacy offered a theoretical framework explaining and predicting behavioral changes due to different modes of treatment. His line of inquiry investigated the cognitive process involved in the acquisition and retention of behavioral change. He defined self-efficacy as the self-judged state of being capable of executing a course
of action resulting in a desired outcome, i.e., successfully completing a task. Essentially, someone who is less self-efficacious in a given situation will lack the motivation and persistence to achieve a particular outcome, whereas self-efficacious individuals will be apt to engage in the required behavior for longer periods of time in order to achieve a particular outcome. In this way, self-efficacy can act as an internal support by providing ELLs the belief that they indeed can learn and be successful, so they are willing to try to master the academic content necessary to graduate.

Bandura’s (1977) parallel concept, “efficacy expectation,” is defined as how much effort and time someone will exert on a task in the face of obstacles or adverse conditions. Efficacy expectations have multiple dimensions including magnitude, generality, and strength, which all have performance implications. Magnitude can be cognitively processed as an easy or a difficult task depending on the person. Generality refers to an efficacy expectation outside of or beyond just the treatment situation. Lastly, strength refers to how long one persists at a task. For example, a weak efficacy expectation is easier to squash if one experiences an early setback at a given task, whereas a strong efficacy expectation will result in persistence at a task despite setbacks along the way.

Bandura (1977) proposes four main pathways for developing an efficacy expectation: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. Performance accomplishments are first-hand experiences with personal success at a task. More successes at a task raise one’s mastery expectations. A vicarious experience is the observation of success at a task by a person who displays an intensified effort at the same task. However, this is susceptible to change because the observer has not personally mastered or accomplished the task at hand, but merely is observing another’s success. Verbal persuasion that they, too, will
experience success on a given task is another pathway used to develop efficacy expectations. Like vicarious experience, verbal persuasion is not rooted in personal success, so it is susceptible to change. Lastly, emotional arousal is “judging their anxiety and vulnerability to stress” (p. 198) and might be informationally important in working through or coping with stressful situations. On the other hand, an excess of arousal may be detrimental and lower performance on a task.

Efficacy expectations, as they relate to learning, can serve as a motivational catalyst (Zimmerman, 2000). That is, students who view themselves as more competent students may in fact establish more difficult academic goals, persist longer, and give more effort in realizing their outcome expectation, e.g., graduation. Conversely, if a student views them self as less competent, than their behavior may not result in initiating learning behavior or persist as long. Importantly, one can feel self-efficacious regarding a specific task, but it still requires one to have the requisite skills to accomplish the targeted outcome expectation (Schunk, 1989). In addition, an individual may produce the desired outcome, but not feel self-efficacious regarding the task because the outcome may be thought of as the product of luck or an extreme amount of effort that is atypical (Schunk & Gunn, 1986). It would appear to be advantageous for students to experience early successes in school to develop efficacy expectations about school considering the amount of effort and persistence to graduate high school takes years. Hence, the development of efficacy expectations can serve as the motivation required to stay on task.

As a result of Bandura’s (1977) theoretical framework surrounding self-efficacy, numerous studies examined his work more closely in the intervening years. One in particular, Zimmerman and Ringle (1981), focused on conditions that developed vicarious acquired motivation. In it, children were given the task of solving both a wire and a word puzzle, both of
which were rigged so that neither was solvable, though it was not obvious to the children being tested. The children observed the experimenter in one of four different conditions: high persistence and confident, high persistence and pessimistic, low persistence and confident, and low persistence and pessimistic. Their results demonstrated that vicariously induced motivations are generalizable across tasks (e.g. wire and word puzzles). In addition, the authors’ results revealed that verbal modeling, more so than the experimenter’s duration spent on modeling either task, had significant influence on the children’s persistence. That is, children’s self-efficacy was lowered if they were exposed to the experimenter who persisted for five minutes, but self-efficacy was unaffected if the experimenter persisted only for the 30-second modeling. The students most likely deemed five minutes as a significant amount of time spent on a task. On one hand, observing failure can lower motivation, and on the other hand, receiving verbal praise can heighten one’s persistence spent on a task.

Soland and Sandilos (2021) also examined self-efficacy and its role on the academic and social-emotional growth of ELLs. The authors used data from a large school district in California. The vast majority of the population were Hispanic with 30% enrolled as ELLs. The ages ranged from 5th grade onward to 8th grade. The data included math and reading achievement scores and a self-efficacy survey consisting of four item Likert-scale items. Findings included evidence that there are gaps between self-efficacy and math and reading scores between ELLs and non-ELLs.

**Lack of Grit**

Grit is defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087). Conversely, lack of grit or possessing less grit would mean that someone does not have as much perseverance to see through long-term goals as
someone who possesses more grit. Therefore, the lack of grit could act as another type of potential internal obstacle for ELLs by not providing the perseverance necessary to successfully see to the end of a long-term goal such as graduating from high school.

There are no studies that explore a lack of grit, but there are studies that explore the effects of lesser grit. For instance, in the prior study by Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, and Ericsson (2011) they explored “deliberate practice” as it relates to spelling bee performance. Deliberate practice was operationally defined as “the solitary study of word spellings and origins” (Duckworth et al., 2011). The authors were interested in grit and the role it played with Scripps National Spelling Bee performance from participants competing in 2006. One-hundred ninety of the 274 finalists participated in the study, with an average age of almost 13 years and a close male to female ratio (53% to 47%). The participants completed several self-report measures including the Short Grit Scale (Likert scale measuring grittiness), the Big Five Inventory (Likert scale measuring one’s openness to new experiences), and a cumulative deliberate practice and quizzing log where participants estimated their time spend on these two activities for the previous four weeks. Performance was measured by their final round in the competition that year. The authors found that deliberate practice was a better predictor of performance than other preparation methods, including quizzing or leisure reading. Further, grittier participants engaged in more hours of deliberate practice than their less gritty competitors. Grit and spelling bee performance appear to be positively associated.

Another study by Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, and Duckworth (2014) explored the effects of grittier people across different life commitments such as completing a 24-day Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) selection course, retention at a sales job, high school graduation from Chicago Public Schools, and the likelihood of remaining married. In brief,
Eskreis-Winkler et al. found that grittier individuals were more likely to complete or remain in their respective commitments. Of the 58% of soldiers who completed the ARSOF training, grit was a significant indicator of retention, even when controlling for intelligence and physical fitness. Results were similar for retention of sales employees. Forty-five percent remained at their jobs 6 months after the initial questionnaires were given. Grittier individuals appeared to remain at their sales job for a longer period of time than less gritty individuals. High school juniors were surveyed in the Chicago Public School system. Eighty-eight percent graduated their senior year and of those who graduated, grit was found to be positive predictor of graduation. Lastly, 80% of individuals in the study who were married remained married if they were grittier (true for men, but not women). While grit is not causally related to retention across the aforementioned life contexts, the results do suggest that grittier individuals might have the ability to accomplish more or stay invested in life commitments.

All in all, the research suggests that less gritty people have less ability to hone in on their goals and complete them than grittier people who will complete their goals regardless of the time that it might take. Less gritty immigrant ELLs could find themselves part of the alarmingly large percentage that do not graduate from high school because they might have lacked the perseverance to learn conversational and academic English, or could not overcome any number of obstacles or challenges resulting in failure to graduate from high school. Failing to earn a diploma could severely limit employment and post-secondary opportunities, which in turn can adversely affect their income potential and quality of life.

**Lack of Self-Efficacy**

Whereas self-efficacious individuals are more apt to engage in required behaviors for longer periods of time in order to achieve a particular outcome, those who lack self-efficacy in a
given situation also lack the persistence needed to achieve the same outcome. Therefore, a lack of self-efficacy can act as an internal obstacle when immigrant ELLs do not believe their efforts in school will result in mastering the academic content necessary to graduate.

There are not any identified studies that have specifically focused on a lack of self-efficacy, per se; however, Brown and Inouye (1978) did complete a study that centered on the types of conditions that developed vicarious learned helplessness. Learned helplessness was defined as “instances in which an organism has learned that outcomes are uncontrollable by his responses and is seriously debilitated by this knowledge” (Maier & Seligman, 1976, p. 4). The concept was tested by shocking different animals, such as dogs, cats, rats, and fish. Basically, if an organism was exposed to inescapable shock, then the result for some of those organisms was a debilitation of response initiation (their ability to escape or avoid shock was reduced).

Learned helplessness also appears to affect self-efficacy and persistence. The study by Brown and Inouye (1978) involved college students observing a model working on word anagrams under four different conditions: (a) participants believed that they were of similar competence to the model, (b) participants believed that they were of higher competence than the model, (c) “no-feedback” condition where the participants were given no competence information to judge their relative competence against the model, and (d) control group who worked on the word anagrams alone. The experiment was setup in such a way that participants in three of the four conditions were able to watch the model work on the word anagrams. The participants and model were each given unsolvable anagrams as part of the experiment. One result of the study was that students who observed the model fail at an anagram had a reduction in their persistence if they viewed their competence as similar to the model. Another result was increased persistence at the task if the student believed that they were more competent than the
model. This result is similar to self-efficacy and efficacy expectations. The higher the efficacy expectations someone has, the longer that they persist at a task.

In a more recent study, Chambers and Hammonds (2014) also examined vicariously learned helplessness and the role that dominance played. Their study was conducted with 215 college students and involved solving anagrams like Brown and Inoyue’s (1978) study. Prior to attempting to solve the anagrams, the participants viewed one of five videos showing a male model attempting to solve a different set of anagrams. The model acted out the following scenarios: (a) dominant success, (b) dominant failure, (c) nondominant success, (d) nondominant failure, and (e) control. Chambers and Hammonds found that participants solved the most anagrams (10.78) if they viewed the dominant success video and solved the least (6.70) if they had watched the dominant failure video. Their study suggests that success or failure at a task might be influenced by the perceived dominance of the person at any given task.

Hendricks (2013) explored influences on self-efficacy; specifically, how contextual influences (gender, orchestra placement, and competitive context) over time affect instrumental performance self-efficacy. Her study focused on 157 high school orchestra students who agreed to participate in her study. The participants were part of a larger group of orchestra students who were recommended to participate in a competitive three-day orchestra festival in the Midwest. The participants in the study represented students who were placed in two distinct groups at the festival: top orchestra and lower orchestra. During the festival, the participants filled out surveys four distinct times, were interviewed, and observed. Overall, Hendricks (2013) found that both male and female participants’ confidence in their ability to play the music increased with increased exposure to it. This finding suggests to educators and festival administrators that participation in competitive music festivals can increase a student’s instrumental performance
self-efficacy. Another finding includes females who were placed into the lower orchestra felt an immediate increase in self-efficacy due in part to the music being less challenging to play and a more relaxed, supportive atmosphere in the lower orchestra. Females in the top orchestra did not experience an increase in self-efficacy until later in the festival when they had more time to practice the new pieces of music and when the top orchestra developed more cohesiveness. This suggests that females’ self-efficacy might be moderated by the amount of peer support they feel.

**Closure**

The types of obstacles that immigrant ELLs encounter as they are navigating their journey in order to graduate from high school appear to be numerous and complex. There might be academic language issues, improper special education placement or exclusion from gifted classes, high-stakes testing, exit exams, or even graduation standards, all of which might impede their educational success. This is also a growing population of students that the educational system as a whole needs to be able to meet their needs. Considering that the educational needs vary for each student, coupled with the sheer number of ELLs enrolling in U.S. schools each year and the varying ethnicities represented, it might continue to be a challenge to increase the graduation rate of this unique population. This study will attempt to determine what role that grit played with ELL students who successfully graduated high school.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my basic exploratory qualitative study was to describe and interpret the importance of grit for recent immigrant ELL students high school graduates or graduates within the last few years. My study aimed to explore the concept of grit through exploring the potential supports and obstacles that immigrant ELL students encountered during their journey towards high school graduation and the use of grit to overcome any such obstacles.

My sample came from a subset of students who made up part of the 58-63% English Language Learners (ELLs) who successfully completed high school (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2016; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014). Within these ELL graduates were students who had immigrated to the U.S., enrolled in 9th grade or later, and were classified as an ELL student at some point during their school years.

The locale for recruitment for my participants was a large, Midwestern high school and the surrounding suburban area. The high school was chosen because of its burgeoning ELL population. The number of ELLs enrolled in the district was approaching 2,000 students who speak over 60 languages (E. Wolohan, personal communication, December 22, 2016). The results of the study could inform educators who (a) are teachers or administrators who work with immigrant ELLs enrolled in their classrooms and districts, and (b) want to ensure obstacles are minimized to promote a more robust graduation rate for this particular population.

The principal research questions guiding my study were:

1. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of supports that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?
2. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of obstacles that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

3. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the grit needed to overcome obstacles during their journey towards graduation?

**Research Design and Rationale**

My study described and interpreted immigrant ELLs’s school experiences specifically focused on the grit needed to overcome any obstacles incurred while navigating their journey towards high school graduation. Their school experiences were captured from their own voice, which provided an authentic perspective on their personal experiences. A semi-open interview was the strategy of choice for data collection considering that the research questions of interest relied on the participant’s recall of events that they experienced. This data collection approach allowed me insight into my research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Similar to Porro (2010), I was interested in the educational success of my participants who are immigrant ELLs. Unlike Porro’s study, my aim was not specific only to Spanish-speaking ELLs, but to participants who might in fact cut across any culture and/or ethnicity. Enriquez (2011) focused on how undocumented immigrants used their social capital to navigate their K-12 education to pursue higher education. My research focused on how immigrant ELLs successfully navigated their education and how they persisted despite encounters with obstacles along the way. My study is also similar to Plata-Potter and de Guzman’s (2012), which focused on immigrant Latino parent’s experiences navigating school, but diverged with a focus on students’ experiences during their K-12 years. Lastly, Turney and Kao (2009) examined minority immigrant parents’ school involvement. While it was not a specific focus of my study, it was possible that my study could provide an understanding of how ELLs stay involved with
their schooling despite the possibility that some students might not have parents who were able or interested in their child’s schooling.

The decision was made to include any culture and/or ethnicity because the participant criteria was stringent. Participant recruitment would have been even more difficult with even more restrictions. The specific focus on the students’ experiences was a departure from the critiques of programs, policy, classroom practices, parent experiences, etc. that appear to be more prevalent within the ELL literature. Exploring immigrant ELL’s personal experiences that they encountered during their journey through a basic exploratory qualitative design added to the breadth of literature concerning this unique population.

**Reflexivity**

I am a male school counselor who works in a diverse middle school in the Midwest. I was adopted from a Far East country when I was eight months old. I am a naturalized citizen who grew up in a white, middle class family in a small, Midwestern town. I experienced a rash of negative, racially motivated experiences growing up that were hurtful, especially in my formative years. I understood that my history and experiences might have influenced how I analyzed the experiences of the participants in my study. Therefore, during the data analysis phase, I was mindful to not over emphasize the struggles or other experiences that my participants experienced during their journey towards graduation.

As a trained counselor, I have a thorough understanding of biases, transference, and counter-transference and understand how these concepts had the potential to influence how the data from my study was interpreted; therefore, I remained mindful of my training during this phase. As importantly, I approached my study as a student researcher who was interested in the experiences of my participants.
Because of my personal and professional background, and because of what I have learned through reviewing the literature, I assumed that each story of educational success was going to be similar in that the participants would be able to describe the types of obstacles that were encountered while navigating their school journey. Further, I relied on my ten years of interviewing adolescents while working as a juvenile probation officer, which provided me with the unique experience and qualifications directly suited for the data collection phase of my research study.

Lastly, I went into my research project believing that my professional strengths and experiences and the basic qualitative design were compatible. Barusch, Gringeri, and George (2011, p. 17) believed that “Relationship and communication skills are vital for the collection and interpretation of qualitative data.” My counseling training and experiences served me well with this design.

My most important professional skill I brought to my research project was the experience interviewing youth from a previous position working as a juvenile probation officer. A major responsibility of that position included interviewing the children and families referred to the court. Typically, interviews lasted 1.5 hours and probed extensively into their private lives. I relied on my previous professional experience to successfully collect the experiences of my participants with fidelity.

Finally, while I believed that I would learn that one’s internal grit was the most salient factor that pushes immigrant ELLs to be able to graduate high school, I was open to the idea that my conceptual framework inadequately explained the types of experiences that they encountered during their journey. When coding was completed, emergent supports and obstacles were
identified from the interviews that better reflected the experiences my participants faced during their high school years.

Site, Population, Sample

Site

My participants graduated from a large, suburban high school in the Midwest. The high school was chosen because the participants that I was focused on were immigrant ELL seniors who recently graduated. The high school is part of a large school district with approximately 8,700 students in K-12. Upwards of 2,000 ELLs are enrolled in the district (E. Wolohan, personal communication, December 22, 2016). Approximately 76 graduated the spring of 2017. The 2017-2018 class had approximately 92 ELLs who graduated (E. Wolohan, personal communication, June 1, 2018). Lastly, approximately 115 ELLs graduated from the 2018-2019 class (E. Wolohan, personal communication, May 10, 2019). The student body speaks over 60 languages. Minority enrollment hovers around 57% with most of those students identifying as African American, followed by Asian and Hispanic.

Population

The definition of an immigrant ELL for my research project was students who had immigrated to the U.S. and “who were unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses” (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). The population of students who were recruited included those who either graduated within the last few year or positioned themselves to graduate the spring of their senior year.
What I could not control, nor did I have detailed demographic information on, were current or past graduate ELL students at the proposed site; therefore, I did not specifically seek participants of any particular gender, ethnic background, age at the start of school in this country, or any other specific attributes other than those specified. My aim was not to complete a study that was generalizable to a specific ethnic ELL group; rather, I aimed to describe a population of immigrant ELL’s school experiences at a suburban high school in the Midwest.

**Sample**

Purposive sampling was chosen because the participants shared common characteristics and best suited the design of this study. Characteristics important to the study included participants who were (a) labeled as an immigrant ELL student at some point during their school years, (b) immigrated to the U.S. and enrolled in 9th grade or later, (c) recently graduated or graduated in the last few years, and (d) at least 18 years old.

The specific criteria for my study were strict; therefore, to better increase the chances of finding willing participants, I had to be open to a “snowball sample.” A snowball sample is a technique in which one person who meets my criteria essentially recruits other participants who also might fit the criteria to take part in the study. It was plausible that graduated immigrant ELL students might know of others because of shared classes in high school, live in the same neighborhood, attend the same college, or possibly work together.

The specific attributes or criteria limited who were considered for my study. Morse (1994) agreed that researchers need to find subjects who have the “the knowledge and experience the researcher requires, [have] the ability to reflect, [are] articulate, [have] the time to be interviewed, and [are] willing to participate in the study” (p. 228). Therefore, I expected to find only a small sample size because of the strict participant criteria. Fortunately, I met a school
employee at the high school of interest, who served as a high school liaison. She had upwards of 15-20 ELLs from the 2016-2017 graduated class as “friends” on social media and indicated that it was possible that some of them might still be in the surrounding suburban area. My liaison also had a list of potential participants from the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 classes (numbers were not known). Further, flyers were approved by a local community college to hang in various locations advertising my study and asking interested students to contact me. Another group of prospective participants included reaching out to a local charter school asking if any of the 2019-2020 graduates were interested in sharing their experiences with me.

I was hoping to attract the interest of 10-12 participants from the pool of graduating high school classes, community college students, and charter school. Lake and Pappamihiel (2003) espoused that adult-aged participants are better suited to articulate their feelings or knowledge concerning questions asked by the researcher, whereas this might have been more difficult working with a younger population. The assumption was that adult-aged students are cognitively better equipped to offer a more profound understanding of situations that they have experienced. The site, population, and sample were deemed appropriate in seeking answers to my research questions by accessing a pool of students who met the criteria needed to participate in my study.

The willingness of the participants to share their experiences was the most important aspect of my study. I confirmed the a priori categories supporting my conceptual framework, which was expected. More importantly, I identified emergent categories related to supports and obstacles that added specifics to my conceptual framework. Consequently, the conceptual framework was slightly revised, which more accurately and specifically describes the supports and obstacles that my participants experienced in high school.
**Instrumentation**

I was the main instrument for this study, and it was my responsibility to collect the data with a level of fidelity that was procedurally consistent as I could with each participant. Secondary instruments included a semi-open interview protocol. I relied on my professional interview experience from a previous career that involved extensive interviewing of clients to efficiently collect and record the data.

Creswell (2009) recommended 10-12 interview questions for qualitative interviews. My study was geared around three research questions. My interview protocol had seven statements/questions that were geared towards eliciting detailed responses. The number of questions in the interview protocol (Appendix A & Table 1) was scaled down because of the age range of the participants. Brevity was chosen for the purpose of keeping the attention of my participants and limiting their time commitment versus extensive, detailed questioning requiring greater time.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The informed consent form (Appendix B) was sent to Leticia and Aamiina (pseudonyms) to review before their interview. We scheduled their interview after they reviewed and signed the informed consent form. Aamiina was interviewed in-person at the high school she graduated from while Leticia was interviewed via Zoom, which is now a ubiquitous “conferencing” platform. Zoom was the platform of choice for her interview as it took place during the beginning of the pandemic in the U.S. while Aamiina’s was before many workplaces went to at-home models. Interview questions and potential prompts for my project were designed to be as conversational as possible considering the relatively young age of the participants. Further, prompts were ready to help facilitate and guide the discussion. I was mindful to not guide the
participants to answer questions how I wanted them to or give the participants the impression that I was looking for specifics in their descriptions of their experiences. The prompts were to help trigger specific recollection of their experiences. The interview protocol was sent to the participants prior to their scheduled interview. This was done to allow the participants to consider the questions and topics and provided an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences in preparation for their interview. It was my belief that having the interview questions and topics in advance might allow for detailed responses to my questions.

Aamiina’s interview was recorded using a standard digital handheld recorder. Leticia’s interview was recorded using Zoom. I also took notes just in case something went wrong with either of the recordings. The instruments needed to collect the interviews include a laptop, digital recorder, notepad, and my semi-open interview protocol template. I did my best to be consistent with my method of data collection.

Access

The superintendent reviewed my documents related to my study to ensure that there was no conflict with any of the Board of Education’s policies on having direct access to the students of interest for research purposes. The superintendent signed my site approval letter, which provided me access to the high school’s students who might have matched the criteria for my study.

Participant Recruitment

I started actively recruiting participants for my study after I received approval from Western Michigan University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix C) and after the superintendent signed the site approval letter. My initial recruitment plan included making contact with my liaison who sent out my initial recruitment email (Appendix E) to the contacts she had for
the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 classes. My liaison invited me to the high school near the end of the 2018-2019 school year to meet five ELL students in person. I discussed with the students my interest in interviewing them about their school experiences and left them a copy of the recruitment information (Appendix F); however, no one contacted me by email to be interviewed.

I was contacted by Aamiina via email who graduated in 2017-2018. She was interested in taking part in my study after hearing about it from my high school liaison.

Leticia contacted me via email, too. She graduated from the 2019-2020 class. Leticia did not attend my recruitment talk. Instead, she heard about my study from one of her ESL teachers who forwarded my introduction letter for me. The process of informed consent was discussed with both and they signed their copy. I received Aamiina’s signed copy in the mail while Leticia emailed her signed copy. All signed informed consent forms have been kept in my home office in my lockable desk.

Leticia and Aamiina were sent an electronic $20 gift card at the end of their initial interviews as a means of thanking them for their time and sharing their experiences. Aamiina earned an additional gift card for her time answering multiple follow-up questions. Leticia, despite several attempts, did not respond to my inquiries requesting a follow-up interview.

**Interview Protocol**

To keep a consistent routine of data collection, I used an interview protocol (Appendix A) as recommended by Creswell (2009). The protocol’s components included: a heading of who is being interviewed, basic background questions, the interview questions, probing or clarifying questions, space for note taking, and thanking the participant for their time with the project. Table 1 outlined the research questions coupled with corresponding interview questions for the semi-open interview.
Table 1

**Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions**

Opening statement: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to talk about your experiences as an ELL student who has successfully graduated from high school. It is not always easy to graduate from high school as an ELL student. Congratulations to you.

First, I would like to talk with you about any supports you had in graduating from high school. Let’s get started.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions/Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of supports that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?</td>
<td>1. Think of a time when you felt that you got support with your schooling and describe it. Please describe the situation and the people who helped. And how they helped.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2: How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of obstacles that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?</td>
<td>2. You just describe to me a time that involved your family. Now, please think of a time when you felt that you got support with your schooling from someone inside the school. Please describe the situation, the people who helped, and how they helped. (or vice versa if they named a time in school the first time). I am also interested in obstacles that you may have experienced with graduating high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3: How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the grit needed to overcome any obstacles during their journey towards graduation?</td>
<td>3. Please tell me about a time when you felt as if an obstacle was in your way in graduating from high school. Please describe the situation, the people involved, and the how you worked through it. I am interested in how ELL students use grit to help themselves graduate from high school. By grit, I mean (insert user friendly definition here). Can you tell me about how you used grit to get through this situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. You just told me about a time when the school itself presented an obstacle. Please tell me about a time when you felt as if an obstacle outside of school was in your way in graduating from high school. Please describe the situation, the people involved, and the how you worked through it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions/Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Again, tell me about how you used grit to get through this situation. (Repeat above only in school or out, depending on the example the student used before.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Since you graduated, despite the obstacles that you experienced, what were your goals in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. What did you want to accomplish?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. What did you tell yourself to keep you working towards your goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. How do you describe any messages that you told yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. What kinds of changes in your grades, or language abilities, etc. did you notice as you have spent more time at your high school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. How do you describe the changes that you experienced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. How do you describe how these changes affected your school goals?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trustworthiness**

I employed multiple trustworthiness strategies during my study to continually assess the accuracy of my findings. For example, prior to data collection, I was forthright in my reflexivity narrative regarding my biases leading into my research. I did my best to remain conscious of my biases and how they might influence how I analyzed the data. During the data collection phase, interviews were conducted at a familiar high school or by Zoom. This allowed my participant’s interviews to be conducted from places of familiarity.

Further, Aamiina was sent my analysis for her review, which is called member-checking. Presenting my findings to Aamiina allowed her to comment or clarify on my interpretation (Saldaña, 2013). She said she did not see any changes she would like for me to make. Leticia was not sent my analysis of her experiences as I lost complete contact with her. Gough and Scott
(2000, p. 341) believed that “analysis of the extent to which respondents agree with the meanings attributed by the researcher is likely to provide a vital test of the credibility of the research.” Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007) concurred that “the participants’ own meanings and perspectives are represented” in the findings further provides validity to the research (p. 356). The accuracy and trustworthiness of my descriptions of the data was crucial in establishing a credible account of each participant’s individual experience. I had not heard back from Aamiina after sending her my analysis.

**Data Analysis**

My study was a basic exploratory qualitative design. My research was mainly focused on acquiring basic information on the types of supports and obstacles that ELLs incurred during high school and the grit necessary to overcome any obstacles. This entailed coding Leticia’s and Aamiina’s interviews by listening for significant statements that answered my research questions. The identification of emergent and confirmation of the a priori categories were used to describe and interpret the essence of their school experiences that they encountered during their journey leading up to high school graduation.

Creswell (2009) recommended a six-step process for qualitative data analysis. The data analysis process involved organizing all of my materials for analysis and reading through the interviews multiple times to develop a general sense of the information. Analysis began by organizing the data segments of each interview, labeling the segments into codes, grouping the codes into specific categories, and lastly grouping the categories into overarching themes that gave life to Leticia and Aamiina’s experiences.

**Organizing Material for Analysis**

The first step was to ensure the audio files were ready for uploading. A transcription
service called Temi (Temi.com) was used by uploading the interviews to the site. Temi automatically transcribed the interviews in approximately five minutes.

**Read-through**

After Temi transcribed the interviews, I read through the interviews to gain a sense of the information offered and to get a basic understanding of how many mistakes might need fixing. After the initial read-through, I listened to the audio recordings while simultaneously reading the transcripts to correct the transcription errors. There were several snippets of audio that were not decipherable by my ear; however, the snippets of audio did not appear to impede category and theme identification. After correcting the transcripts, I read both transcripts several more times. I was reading for significant statements of how Leticia and Aamiina described their school experiences paying particular attention to how they might have described the supports, obstacles, and internal fortitude to overcome any obstacles during high school. The identified significant statements formed the themes and categories of their experiences.

**Initial Coding**

I read and listened for significant categories that helped me answer my research questions. Categories of interest included the descriptions of the types of obstacles that immigrant ELLs encountered and any internal resources needed to continue with their schooling during their journey towards high school graduation. Categories were developed from the transcriptions by reading each transcript many times. After taking time to consider each significant statement, I labeled each statement with a word or phrase (code) that captured the relevancy of the excerpt. This was done over the course of several weeks as the codes changed. The identified codes were further refined and organized into emergent and a priori categories.
The categories were used to construct an authentic description of the essence of immigrant ELLs school experiences.

**Theme Development**

After coding was completed, the codes were organized into significant emergent and a priori categories, which is in line with an inductive analysis approach of using qualitative data (Thomas, 2006). Foss and Waters (2007) suggested making a copy of the coded transcripts and like formatting the literature review, cut out each highlighted excerpt and organize them by their specific category. I organized the categories as suggested by Foss and Waters and literally pieced and taped together the highlighted excerpts by category. The categories were then organized into three main themes. I anticipated there would a an “I don’t know” pile of excerpts. This pile was random conversation and did not offer additional information and was not included in the final analysis.

**Explanatory Schema**

An explanatory schema was created with all of the pieced together excerpts. The purpose of the schema was to organize my codes in such a way that accurately described my findings and give life to Leticia and Aamiina’s experiences. A natural comparison of their responses allowed for the essence of their experiences to be identified (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

**Interpretation**

Lastly, I described what was learned, how the findings confirmed or diverged from the literature, and what new questions of exploration were suggested from the findings (Creswell, 2009). This six-step data analysis procedure aligned with the nature of my basic exploratory qualitative study and was suited to answer my research questions.
Delimitations

The population for my study had stringent criteria that included (a) labeled as an immigrant ELL student at some point during their school years, (b) immigrated to the U.S. and enrolled in 9th grade or later, (c) recently graduated or graduated in the last few years, and (d) at least 18 years old. The criteria were strict because I was interested in a select population. Consequently, the results of my study are not generalizable to the broader population.

The results of my study, because of the delimitations, could inform educators who (a) are teachers or administrators who have ELLs enrolled in their districts and (b) want to ensure that obstacles are minimized to promote a more robust graduation rate for this particular population.

Limitations

One limitation of my study included when the participants arrived in the country. The criteria that participants need to meet to be considered for my study are strict enough without making it even more difficult to find viable participants. Fortunately, Leticia and Aamiina both enrolled in high school their freshman year. Another limitation of my study was not controlling for the ethnicity or nationality of the participants. Attempting to control for this factor would have further complicated finding participants. A consequence of my limitations included not being able to generalize the finding of my study to the general student body. The findings of the study might only be relatable to other students matching the criteria for the study. The limitations did not impact the study because of my basic exploratory qualitative design, which is concerned more with gathering more information about a topic.

Closure

A basic exploratory qualitative design was implemented to answer my key research questions, which were:
1. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of supports that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

2. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of obstacles that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

3. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the grit needed to overcome any obstacles during their journey towards graduation?

The participants were selected from a large, suburban high school located in the Midwest. Age of the participants varied, as well as the number of years in the country, ethnic origin, and other demographic information. Participants shared several of the following attributes including: (a) an immigrant ELL student when they entered the K-12 school system, (b) immigrated to the U.S. after the age of five, (c) senior in high school and on track to graduate (or have recently graduated), and (d) at least 18 years old. The essence of their school experience was brought to light via qualitative interviewing. Their experiences were coded for overarching categories that answered the research questions.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Chapter IV begins with the purpose of my study followed by the research questions and demographic data of Leticia and Aamiina (pseudonyms) (Table 2), followed by brief background information. The remainder of the chapter highlights the identified emergent and confirmed a priori categories from the participant interviews. The three broad themes included supports, obstacles, and internal fortitude that the participants experienced. Table 3 lists all of the emergent and a priori categories related to the themes. The emergent and a priori categories related to supports from the interviews are presented in Tables 4 and 5 followed by a discussion on how they make sense of the supports they received. Tables 6 and 7 present the emergent and a priori categories related to obstacles, which is also followed by a discussion on how they make sense of the obstacles that they faced. Lastly, Table 8 lists categories related to internal fortitude that were coded from the interviews, which are self-efficacy (emergent theme) and grit (a priori theme).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe and interpret the importance of grit for recent immigrant ELL students high school graduates or graduates within the last few years. My study aimed to explore the concept of grit through exploring the potential supports and obstacles that students encountered during their journey towards high school graduation and the use of grit to overcome any such obstacles.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding my study were:
1. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of supports that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

2. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of obstacles that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

3. How do students make sense of the grit needed to overcome obstacles during their journey towards graduation?

**Participant Demographics**

Table 2 presents brief information on Leticia and Aamiina who shared their experiences as immigrant English Language Learner (ELL) students who graduated high school. They both attended the same high school and have other similarities, but graduated two years apart. Their demographic information gives a glimpse into some specifics of their histories and experiences. Leticia’s and Aamiina’s brief background stories coupled with the supports and obstacles that they incurred breathed life into the significance of their high school graduation. The grit necessary to overcome their obstacles was also be highlighted as an essential component to their academic success.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Codename</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Initial Grade Enrolled</th>
<th>ELL Student</th>
<th>Fluent In English at Enrollment?</th>
<th>Graduated High School?</th>
<th>Graduation Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leticia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aamiina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brief Background Stories

Leticia

Leticia was a 2020 graduate of a large, diverse high school located in the Midwest. Her journey towards graduation began in Honduras and immigrating to the United States as a teenager. Her first “families” were her representatives from global organization, which provides many services including foster care, and her foster family. The representatives from her agency included a personal caseworker and lawyer, who were assigned to her, that were always “supporting me to go to school and get them my senior year and all that stuff.” She also holds her foster care agency workers in high regard saying that the agency gave “me the opportunity to go to a school.” What was left unsaid, but deserves recognition, was Leticia trusting herself and having the courage to immigrate by herself to a foreign country to pursue her education.

As a new student in an unfamiliar school setting, Leticia had to rely on others to aid her transition. For example, her caseworker advocated for her by going to the “high school to tell the teachers my situation and everything about me and that’s how she helped me.” Leticia said that it was “great” that her caseworker took that additional step of explaining her situation to one of her teachers because at the initial time of her enrollment because her spoken English was limited to saying “hi and how are you…so I was not able to speak with people and tell [them] my feelings.” Additionally, the caseworker expressed to one of her teachers that Leticia wanted to “complete high school and how education is really important” to her. The teacher in turn “explained everything” that she needed to do to meet her goal of graduating. This initial interaction made Leticia feel “that a lot of people start worry[ing]]” about her and she realized that she has “people who really …take care of you and you are important.” In Honduras, Leticia said that she felt like “nobody really cares about me” so immigrating to America and realizing
people do care about her was “really amazing.” The personal connections she would make proved pivotal in her school success and set the tone for her school experience.

**Aamiina**

Aamiina was a 2018 graduate of the same high school as Leticia. Her journey towards graduation began in Somalia and immigrating by herself to the United States as a teenager, too. She was also placed with a foster family upon her arrival. Aamiina said that she had zero amount of time to even adjust to her new surroundings as she was immediately enrolled in a private school prior to her enrollment at her alma mater. The experience at the private school did not go smoothly as she immediately recognized how problematic not knowing how to speak or understand English would be for her.

> Just imagine you just come from your country and they put you between all this American students. Just sit between them and I don't know [what] the teacher [was] saying or the other students say. I don't know what they are doing, what they're working for…just sitting like that and listen to the teacher about blah, blah, blah, blah…and I cannot even catch up one word, one word. That was the hardest part for my life. Just go home on it, cry, cry, cry, cry, and say, I'm not going to go in that school anymore.

Aamiina was enrolled at the private school for three months prior to transferring to her high school high school alma mater, which will be discussed later. Like Leticia, Aamiina valued the opportunity for an education regardless if her initial experience in school was frustrating.

Aamiina stated that one of the purposes of her immigration was to get to a “safe place…I just want to be in a place that you can go to school.” Attending school in her home country was not an option (she did not go into detail), but she said that she was “not able to learn to read or write, like I can’t even go outside by myself because situation was very…bad.” Despite the
initial frustration at the private school, Aamiina recognized that she had an opportunity to get her education in America.

When I get here, I see everything is good. That’s what I want, like that was my goal to be in like safe country so I can do what I can. So, when I came here, I was like, everything is like I said, we got opportunity. So, what can I do? I can, and I see my, like everything that I cannot do in there in my country and now it’s...here (opportunity to attend school).

After her initial three-month stay at the private school, Aamiina’s foster family enrolled her in 9th grade for the start of the second semester at a public high school. This time the result was different. She said “I loved it. I feel comfortable in this school, like many ESL (English as a Second Language) classes” whereas her previous school did not have staff or classes specifically trained or designed for ELL students. As a result of enrolling at a high school equipped to educate such a unique population, Aamiina said this enabled her to learn “speaking…writing and reading…and speak with the students…So, it helped me a lot.” It was at her new high school where she started to thrive due in part to the established ESL program, but also to the support she received and what she learned about herself, all of which will be discussed.

Aamiina’s effort was rewarded by graduating high school in 2018. She completed 22 credits in three and a half years. Aside from her diligent English practice, Aamiina was fortunate to be enrolled in a school district that has a dedicated ESL program. ESL programs are for students who are new to the country and do not have a fluent command of English. Aamiina’s school schedule included having “three [ESL] classes every single semester.” Even though she now attends a local community college, Aamiina said that her high school was “awesome” and she wishes that she could “come back again” to visit her high school and ESL teachers.
Presentation of Categories

The findings reported in this section include emergent and a priori categories related to the three main themes: supports, obstacles, and a new theme called internal fortitude. Internal fortitude is defined as the combination of grit and self-efficacy and was discovered during the analysis phase. The emergent categories were not directly addressed in the initial research questions and may or may not be related to them. The a priori categories directly reflected the initial research questions; however, the participant responses may or may not actually answer the questions. The Categories Table is presented in Table 3, which lists all of the categories under each theme. I found a total of 10 categories: four are related to supports, four are related to obstacles, and two are related to internal fortitude.

Table 3

Categories Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Leticia</th>
<th>Aamiina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Emergent Categories Related to Supports
- Agency Caseworker/Lawyer  
  Therapist
  - X X

A Priori Categories Related to Supports
- Foster Family
  - X X
- School
  - ESL Program/Staff
  - Tutoring
  - X X

Emergent Categories Related to Obstacles
- Homeland’s Effect on the Years of Formal Schooling
  - X

A Priori Categories Related to Obstacles
- Language
  - Family
  - School
  - Graduation Requirements
  - X X
Table 3—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Leticia</th>
<th>Aamiina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emergent Category Related to Internal Fortitude</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Priori Category Related to Internal Fortitude</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grit</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Emergent Categories Related to Supports**

Table 4 lists two emergent categories related to supports that were identified from the interviews with Leticia and Aamiina. The two emergent categories were coded as Agency Caseworker/Lawyer and Therapist. The categories represent concepts that were not initially considered at the onset of the research. After coding for the categories was completed and Leticia’s and Aamiina’s experiences considered as a whole, it became clear that the identified emergent categories related to supports played an important role in their successes that they experienced. The findings are presented below.

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Categories Related to Supports Identified from the Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emergent Categories Related to Supports</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency Caseworker/Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Agency Caseworker/Lawyer

Both Aamiina and Leticia are legal immigrants who immigrated to the U.S. when they were minors. As a result, their immigration and transition to America was overseen by a multinational, non-profit agency that started in 1944. The agency, Bethany Christian Services is an independent agency that provides a variety of services including adoption, foster care, and refugee services (http://bethany.org). The agency began as a childcare service and then added additional components such as adoption and refugee services. According to the website, Bethany Christian Services is located in 30 states and a dozen countries worldwide. Leticia’s and Aamiina’s local agency is located in the Midwest in a suburban area surrounded by multiple school districts. The number of services provided at the agency has increased presumably out of need including the refugee program. For instance, as a current employee in the district that Leticia and Aamiina graduated from, I do recall asking a colleague about the large number of eastern European names that I saw when I was hired into the district. The suburban area’s Bosnian population grew rapidly due to the Bosnian War (1992-1995). The district enrolls first and now second-generation students from that conflict. Of the 15 locations in the state where my research took place, there is only one agency that is specifically called Bethany Christian Services Refugees and Immigrants. This might be why the Midwest city is a “destination city” for refugees and immigrants as it has professional services capable of working with these unique populations.

Caseworker’s who oversee individuals and families new to the country are assigned anywhere from up to two years to as short as six months (K. Chovanec, personal communication, Feb. 1, 2021). Lawyers, like caseworkers, are also assigned to individuals and families. The role of the lawyer is to assist people with the legalities of their arrival and stay. Aamiina reported
that she had three court hearings her first year, but those ended after it was presumably determined that she was established with her foster family and enrolled in school.

Ms. Chovanec works directly with families who are new to the U.S. She has experience with the various agencies within the community where the research took place, that band together to ensure needs are met for all people who have immigrated or are refugees to the U.S. For example, there is a separate refugee agency that is contracted to help enroll new students. This particular agency employs people who are fluent in many languages, which helps with a smooth transition into school.

The initial support from assigned caseworkers would appear to be crucial and required as Leticia and Aamiina were both minors when they immigrated, spoke no English, and did not have any preexisting family or other support at their arrival to the U.S. For example, Leticia credits her caseworker for the help that was provided to her. Leticia said the following about her caseworker when she knew that she was advocating on her behalf.

Well, when I realized that [others were looking after her well-being] I was really excited because [she felt that] nobody really cares about me [at home in Honduras]. So, when I got here…all these people, you know, realize that you really have people who really like take care of you and you are important for them. So, it was really amazing and yeah, I'm happy. There are all, people are still there, you know, for me.”

Aamiina also recognized the role and importance her caseworker was when she arrived to the U.S. She succinctly stated that her agency caseworker “…was so helpful to me. She helped me with transportation and school supplies and many other personal things.” It might be assumed that caseworker’s responsibilities include the aforementioned, but the initial transition into the community including high school was certainly eased because of her caseworker’s
advocacy and professionalism. Aamiina’s caseworker’s role was that of a “lifeline” who knew the needs of the client even before the client.

Aamiina said her assigned caseworker provided the initial support in her transition into the community and school. Aamiina explained that “Yes, I did have a caseworker back then and she was so helpful to me. She helped me with transportation and school supplies and many other personal things…like taking me to my appointments, school, and to the court.” Aamiina was placed with a foster family so her caseworker would also “visit me at home to make sure everything is going good with me couple times a month.” The caseworker’s professional duties appear to have given Aamiina some assurance that many needs would be attended to since it would have been difficult to communicate due to her initial lack of English fluency.

Aamiina also received support from her assigned lawyer. She said that her lawyer would “visit me once a month and sometimes to the court room. What I meant by court is when we new arrivals, we have to go to the court for 3 times for your first year.” Aamiina’s and Leticia’s social and legal welfare was well attended to during their first couple of years in the U.S. During this time, they were making those personal connections with their assigned workers and their foster families who transitioned into their most important source of emotional support.

Leticia also spoke about the importance that her agency and assigned lawyer and caseworker played after her arrival.

So, when I moved to Michigan, obviously the program who helped me a lot…is [agency name] who support me to give me the opportunity to go to a school and support me…with a lot of people, case worker, lawyers and all this stuff…they, they are always supporting me to go to school.

She went on to explain how her lawyer was of immediate help.
So, she helped me to get all the papers [for enrollment] because…I don't have the access to all my information, personal information. So, she sent it to the high school…for me and my case worker. Obviously, she came to the high school to tell the teachers my situation and everything about me and that's how she helped me.

The advocacy from the adults in her life was not limited to her assigned lawyer and caseworker, but it also extended to other professionals in the community.

**Therapist**

Unlike Aamiina, Leticia sought out additional help outside of school and her foster family. She recognized that she needed the emotional support and help from a therapist. It is unclear how long she had been placed with her foster family before she started working with her therapist. Regardless, Leticia said that the additional support was invaluable.

I got some help from other people, from my therapist. I started looking for a therapist and I was sharing with her about these obstacles [that she was facing in school] …You know, I can list maybe some people, well, they telling me, yeah, you can do it [graduate high school] …My therapist started telling me, you can do it. You can do more than just get done [with] high school.

The private conversations that Leticia had with her therapist created a positive mindset, which allowed her to overcome some obstacles that she faced.

You know, when she started telling me that I was trying to not give up, you know, trying to not let my obstacle who are in my brain, not good things, you know, I started to put in my brain, yes, I can do this. You can, oh, I can do this, you know? So, I started telling myself, I can do it. I'm not going to give up.
There were several factors why Leticia successfully graduated and working with her therapist contributed to her success. Despite the hardships along the way, she said that “…it was hard when I started, but at the end, you know, I get [it] done (graduated).”

**A Priori Categories Related to Supports**

Table 5 lists the a priori categories related to supports that were coded and confirmed from the interviews with Leticia and Aamiina. The knowledge gained from the a priori categories as spoken by Leticia and Aamiina is discussed in full. It is their personal experiences and literal voice that bring to life how they made sense of the a priori categories, which were critical to their academic successes.

**Table 5**

*Table 5: A Priori Categories Related to Supports Confirmed from the Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Priori Categories Related to Supports</th>
<th>Leticia</th>
<th>Aamiina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster Family</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL Program/Staff</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Foster Family**

Foster family placement appeared to be essential lifelines for Aamiina and Leticia. Aside from practical support like providing food and shelter, both foster families offered far more. Aamiina explained her family’s importance to her when it came to her schooling. She said after “at least 30 minutes, 40 minutes” of struggling with her homework she could ask her family for
help. Her family “helped me with it, to explain better and yeah, like a tutor and I brought it home.” Not only did the family support provide time for additional explanation of her schoolwork, but the time with her family also allowed for emotional support, too.

They help me with the homework, explained to me better and every time encouraging me…like, oh my gosh, I cannot do this one is too hard and they said no, no, no, no, no, no, you are smart enough. They see how you did this one. Nobody helped you. So, now you can do it…”

The “tutoring” and encouragement from her foster family was certainly helpful as her straight A’s in high school attest, but the time they spent together helped them connect as a family.

When asked what her family thought of her accomplishments thinking that she would respond about how her family thought about her school accomplishments, Aamiina responded about how they felt about her. “They love me a lot…They [treat] me like, I am part of them.” She went on to say just how important connecting with her family was to her.

Oh my gosh. Awesome. That's the one thing in my life that helped me a lot. Like, I, I have family. Um, I can say I have family, right? I can go with them anywhere, play with the siblings. Like mom and dad, they come to me every time even if I get late, they text me and you okay? Even I'm 21. Now they still just texting me. I have like a whole family. It's not even like mom and dad…grandma, aunts, uncles…they celebrate…my birthdays…I have my whole family.

Ultimately, because of the personal connections Aamiina has made, she “feel[s] [like] one of them.” Likewise, Leticia said that her family were always “supporting me” with anything that she needed help with. She had to heavily rely on and trust her family, especially during the first months upon her arrival. Leticia was completely dependent on them, but “they are there for
me” and now she feels that she has “siblings and mom and dad” and that she, too, is thought of as “a daughter.”

Leticia also received foster family support, which provided her with the tools to succeed, too. She explained that her family put in the time to help her learn English by saying “So, one of the goals, it was like practice my English every day. And, I do every day, I still do…every day with my foster family with my friends, with everyone, you know?” Like Aamiina’s family, Leticia’s family worked with her daily on both her English and schoolwork.

They helped me to bring me every day to a school and you know, and…obviously every time that I need some, some help with homework, always, they are there for me and they helped me with math and English, with everything. They helped me. And I'm glad with that…They…really helped me.

The family support that both received from their respective families was essential to their sense of belonging and the success that they experienced in school. At the time of writing this chapter, both continued to live with their respective families.

School

Aamiina and Leticia were enrolled at the same high school two years apart. Their high school, and the other high schools in the surrounding area, are hubs for new immigrants, perhaps because the overseeing agency is nearby. Leticia and Aamiina were enrolled in their particular school because their foster families both lived in that school’s district. Their high school is one of many throughout the country that has had an influx of immigrants from across the globe enroll and has had to adapt its staffing. At their particular high school, an English as a Second Language (ESL) was staffed to accommodate the unique learners who enrolled from across the globe. The ESL program and the staff provided Aamiina and Leticia the level of support, which
was one of the factors that enabled them to graduate. Their feat is even more remarkable considering that both were not fluent in English when they first enrolled in school.

**ESL Program/Staff.** Making personal connections with school staff was also a vitally important supportive component, which provided in-class help. Aamiina said that her ESL teachers and support staff helped by “checking our homework” and “the staff here, like just encouraging us.” More importantly for Aamiina, staff gave a sense of belonging.

Like they, they don't make us like, feel different like we are all same here. So, you're not different from anybody. So, you can do it, feel free, like feel confident in the school, like the other kids and your ESL kids are the same.

Leticia had a similar experience with the ESL staff that she worked with during high school. Her teachers and caseworker communicated and it fostered a sense of connection with all of them. She said the following about one of her teachers:

I was so glad that a lot of people start worry about me, you know, and start taking care of my language and all that stuff. So, it was really amazing. The thing that she did talking with my caseworker, sharing with her the good things that I was doing at school and what are the things that I really need you know?

Working with the ESL staff was crucial early on in high school as Aamiina remembers that “it was new and like, it was 17 years old and like starting from 10th grade. So, it was everything so hard for me, everything so hard.” Leticia also recalled that “I remember that in my first day, obviously the first day go to school is like, it's really hard sometimes, because for me it was really difficult for my English [because I didn’t understand what was being said.]”

Fortunately, for Aamiina and Leticia, their school had an established English as a Second Language (ESL) program that acted as a buffer. Aamiina said she quickly realized that her high
school had “ESL…teachers here, EL support [teachers] like [staff name] and other teachers.”

The ESL staff, who are accustomed to working with ELL students, played what appears to be a mentoring role. Aamiina went on to explain how her ESL teachers were helpful or supportive.

So, they just, um, guide us and help us a lot, a lot, a lot. Like they can, they give us word after word and explain to us and encourage us all the time and saying, no worries. You guys get there and we will get there and just study, do your best, do not give up and all that kind of support from our teachers. They were so helpful for us.

Leticia also had a positive experience in the ESL program working with the staff.

I got the opportunity to meet Mr. [staff name] …he was one of the persons who I started communicating with…I started asking how I can improve a lot of things that I really want to [improve]. So, he say…of course, we're going to help you. It's like, [I’ll] be here anytime that you need.

She also worked well with another staff member in particular saying that “she was really amazing, she always trying to help me…” and “it was a lot of teachers who really supporting me, you know, to improve my English and my learning and everything.” Leticia also advocated for herself, too, explaining “…when I started talking with them about my situation and all that stuff, obviously they, they told me that I really need help, you know, to do a lot of things that I really want to do.”

It is expected that school personnel meet their professional responsibilities, yet it also appeared that the ESL staff have a unique understanding working with their unique population of students and their immediate needs. For example, Leticia said:
One of the things that my teacher did…was…talk to my casework and telling her, oh yeah, maybe [Leticia], we need…somebody with her…to help her to improve her English…because we know that she's new…and she had to learn English.

As previously mentioned, Leticia did learn English and continues to practice every day with her friends and family. Nevertheless, Leticia’s ESL staff appear to have had her best interests in mind by knowing what immediate skills would be needed to flourish in their program.

Well, the first thing that she did for me and I was like, I was so glad that a lot of people start worry about me, you know, and start taking care of my language and all that stuff. So, it was really amazing. The thing that she did talking with my case, working, sharing with her, uh, the good things that I was doing at school. And what are the things that I really need you know?

**Tutoring.** Another a priori sub-category related to school that played a role in Aamiina and Leticia’s success was taking advantage of after-school tutoring that was offered. Aamiina indicated that she chose to attend after school tutoring sessions for math, which was difficult for her and was not “ESL” math, per se. The after-school tutoring offered her and other students the opportunity for one-on-one help and to ask questions in a smaller setting.

There were teachers and big rooms that you can sit by yourself up there and just raise your hand. And the teacher is coming to you and explain like, not in front of the…other students, but just, just sitting the table by yourself and raise your hand. The teachers was…like more than three, four teachers in the class, just come near you and explain to you.

She recognized most of the students in the after-school tutoring sessions because “most of them were ESL” students in her classes. For Aamiina, attending the tutoring was optional and not mandatory. When asked why she chose to attend, she said that “I don't want to give up [on] my
family.” Her motivation to attend the tutoring sessions was not just driven by a sense of duty. She also saw it as an opportunity to grow as a student. Aamiina explained that “I just want to learn more. So, if I don't understand anything in the class that I have chance to ask the teachers,” which will help “prepare for my test.”

Leticia also took advantage of after-school tutoring. She had the wherewithal to recognize she had to boost her academic performance.

When I was in 11th grade, I started needing, I saw in myself that I, I need more help, you know, so, and obviously a school provides a lot of help for students, for EL students. So, yeah, I took some classes after school.

Even though attending after-school tutoring meant additional time working on schoolwork, she said her experience “was great” as it helped her reach a milestone. Aamiina and Leticia directly benefitted from their high school’s ESL program and availability of after-school tutoring.

**Emergent Category Related to Obstacles: Homeland’s Effect on the Years of Formal Schooling**

Table 6 lists the emergent category related to obstacles that was identified from the interview and follow-up questions with Aamiina. The emergent category, coded as Homeland’s Effect on the Years of Formal Schooling, was not initially considered at the onset of the research. After coding was completed and the totality of Aamiina’s interviews were considered, I determined that the emergent category was a substantive component to her experiences. It could not be determined if the emergent theme played a significant role or not in Leticia’s experiences. The finding from the emergent theme is presented below.
Table 6

Emergent Category Related to Obstacles Identified from the Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Leticia</th>
<th>Aamiina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homeland’s Effect on the Years of Formal Schooling</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the end of the interview as baseline information and happened to ask Aamiina how she learned to work so hard. She said that “It comes from my background and I see like my past life that I not able to go to school, not able to learn, to read, to write.” This statement, coupled with what she said next, helped me better understand her experiences, put into sharper focus how unlikely of a success story she was, and the magnitude of her achievement. Aamiina’s experiences also shed light on how one’s homeland, stated without any judgement, could potentially act as an obstacle. In Aamiina’s specific situation, her homeland did indeed act as an obstacle to her education. Due to circumstances out of her control, Aamiina arrived to the U.S. without any formal schooling, which acted as an additional obstacle to graduation.

Aamiina shared a poignant reflection of being home in Somalia. The situation, which she did not go into detail, was an insurmountable obstacle to her schooling prior to immigrating to the U.S. Back home, she was “not able to go to school, not able to learn, to read to write…I can’t even go outside by myself because situation was very, very, very bad.” Her first formal schooling was when she arrived to the U.S. as a high school-aged student. The circumstances in her country prevented any formal schooling, but like Leticia, she too was placed with a supportive foster family with other support systems like appropriate school programming already intact.
What Aamiina found in the U.S. is that the situation here was “everything was good” and she finally had the “opportunity” to get her education. Now that she did have the opportunity and was in a safer situation, she asked herself, “So, what can I do? I can, and I see my, like everything that I cannot do…there in my country and now it’s offering me in here.” What she chose to do with her opportunity was “to learn.” She is currently pursuing a nursing degree as she wants to be in a position to help others.

Aamiina’s upbringing did provide her with an interesting and powerful advantage called perspective and insight. Her upbringing in Somalia, coupled with her placement with her foster family, allowed her to compare and contrast both situations and take full advantage of her educational opportunities in the U.S. Despite being denied a formal education due to circumstances out of her control, Aamiina said that her past was “like pushing me forward” and she did not want to waste her opportunity to get education and realize her goal to help others. She also had the insight to understand that it was possible if she “was born here, I don’t [develop] all this hard work [ethic].” Both of her experiences in Somalia and here and the U.S. shaped her into the young-adult she is today. At first glance, Aamiina’s homeland situation clearly was an obstacle; however, after considering how it shaped her, what becomes even clearer are how complex and nuanced her experiences are that shaper her.

A Priori Categories Related to Obstacles

Table 7 lists the a priori categories related to obstacles that were coded from the interviews Letica and Aamiina’s interviews. Aside from language, which appeared to be the most significant theme to overcome, this section also analyzes other pertinent categories that were identified. Detailed descriptions of each theme as spoken by Leticia and Aamiina. It is
their personal experiences and literal voice that bring to life how they made sense of the obstacles that they incurred during their journey towards high school graduation.

**Table 7**

*A Priori Categories Related to Obstacles Confirmed from the Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Leticia</th>
<th>Aamiina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Priori Categories Related to Obstacles</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeland Family</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Requirements</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Language**

The most significant obstacle to overcome was the language barrier that they encountered. Neither Leticia or Aamiina were fluent in English when they arrived in the U.S. They both reported that their foster families and the schools they attended only spoke and taught in English. This initial obstacle of not being able to speak or comprehend English permeated the two main facets of their lives, home and school, resulting in immediate complications.

For instance, Leticia said, “It was really hard to communicate with each other (speaking about her foster family). I was trying to talk to them that like how, how I need help [to get] down [to] my school. So…they helped me to bring me every day to school.” Getting her basic needs met was difficult considering that Leticia said the extent of her “English was like just ‘hi and how are you.’ That’s all I know.” The language barrier presented an immediate challenge, but it also presented an opportunity to conquer that challenge, too.
For Leticia, learning to speak English was more than just a challenge. It was looked at as an absolute must because “in this country, if I don’t learn English, how am I going to communicate with other people?” Her fear of not being able to communicate with her foster family, classmates, or school staff resulted in putting a lot of pressure on herself and “…pushed me to learn English and try now. I’m not perfect speaking English, but I try to do my best every time.” Numerous people helped Leticia including “a lot of teachers who really…supporting me, you know, to improve my English and my learning and everything, you know?” It makes sense that teachers were important for Leticia’s English language development since they only taught in English. Leticia was completely immersed and surrounded by English-speaking staff and the majority of students aside from her ELL classmates.

Not only did Leticia learn English in school, she was also fortunate to learn from her foster family, too. She said “…they helped me to learn the vocabulary of the English and all that stuff.” While she learned in and out of school with staff and family, her learning really was ubiquitous. She said:

Yeah, well, because I got like support…everywhere I go, you know, every time, if I go with my friends or we just, their families, they helped me to improve my English. So, one of the goals, it was like practice my English every day and I, I do every day. I still do an everyday with my foster family, with my friends, with everyone, you know?

The constant exposure, practice, and the resolve to improve paid dividends. She estimated that “It took like eight months to understand what exactly was happening in the class. It took 8 months because I, when I started in 10th grade, um, …So yeah, it took eight months to understand what exactly was happening in…class.” Several results of quickly learning English
were the ability to access the curriculum, ability to communicate with her foster family, and form friendships with her classmates.

Leticia’s points to her ability to understand what was happening in class that she is most proud of. Ultimately, her ability to access the curriculum allowed her to graduate from high school, which was “really, really, really special.” Her immigration was in part due to her educational goals that kept her motivated to learn English so she could achieve her goals.

It’s a big, huge deal for me because when…I moved from Honduras to America, that’s one of the goals that I really, really want to get done because based on my past, um, you know, that’s one of the goals always are in my mind. I say, one day I will get done…I will accomplish this and it was not easy to accomplish this goal. It was really hard because it was a lot of things, but it’s a lot of things behind me, you know, and it was really hard, but that’s one of the accomplish because now with, I really got done this goal [graduated]. I feel so happy with me, with myself because now I can go see, look back, you know? And wow, it’s like, that was [Leticia]!

And with her graduation, Leticia was one of the 59% of ELL students who were able to graduate due in part to her constant practice to learn to speak and understand the English language (NCES, 2014).

Aamiina’s lack of English fluency at the time of her immigration to the U.S. resulted in similar struggles as Leticia. Communication issues with her foster family aside, Aamiina’s initial shock with her language deficit was her enrollment at a private school the day after her arrival and knowing that she would not be able to understand her teachers or classmates were saying. Aamiina said she recalls the frustration and that she “need[ed] a translator” when she first arrived because she “can’t even speak [any English]. I just know [how to say] what’s your
name and that’s it.” Initially, basic communication was virtually non-existent let alone understanding any of the curriculum.

Aamiina did not comment on how her English progressed while she attended private school. However, she did share her thoughts on her English-learning once she transferred to public high school. Like many new skills, progression was methodical. Aamiina said that “…the first year, it was kind of hard for me to communicate with like other students or maybe my teachers, like, if I have a question, I don’t know how to ask.” Despite the early struggles, she and her ELL classmates utilized strategies in their classes to strengthen their skills. Aamiina explained that she and her classmates would:

“…use flashcards…at least 20 or 30 vocabulary, we learn new vocabulary. We learn every single day. So, we take those vocabulary, with flashcards on, remember them, what is the meaning and everything and then we practice to use to each other, those vocabularies.”

In all likelihood, that dedicated learning strategy coupled with built-in learning partners maintained an accelerated rate of learning.

Another facet that promoted Aamiina’s continued growth was the security that she felt with her classmates while they practiced their English. She said “…when we practice with the [ELL] students, like you, like for English, not their first language, then you feel more comfortable.” She felt more comfortable because learning any new skill also means making mistakes. She explained that “If you say that word wrong, they’re not going to laugh at you, like the other students, like you will feel like this person is like me. They [the other ELL students] can make mistakes, I can make mistakes.” The dedicated practice and supportive learning environment allowed for progressive learning each day with her classmates.
So, we practice with each other like that and saying the words out loud, like talking in the class, like communicate with the other students, say whatever you want, tell a story, tell what new thing you did this week in like, share with the whole class.

The progression in her learning allowed her to access the curriculum as a direct result of her understanding. When asked how long it took for her to understand enough English so that she knew what was happening in the classroom, Aamiina said, “Not long. Maybe couple months or year.” Her dedication to learning English allowed her to make friends, communicate with her foster family, understand the curriculum, and ultimately graduate high school.

*Homeland Family*

As previously discussed, Leticia and Aamiina’s foster families were and continue to be supportive forces in their lives. Both benefited greatly from the acceptance and support they received whether it was emotional support, partnering to learn English, or any other number of ways families support one another. It does appear that their foster families have morphed into their adopted families as both have graduated and continue to live with their foster families.

However, Leticia described a facet of her family experience in Honduras as less than ideal. She described a familial obstacle that followed her to the U.S.

When recalling her experiences, Leticia reported that she would have “flashbacks” of being home in Honduras. Back home, she would “hear a lot of people telling [her], ‘Hey, you never going to get done [with] high school.” Those types of messages had far reaching affects as Leticia would question her ability to graduate high school even though she learned over time just how much support she would receive from her foster family. “So, that, that was like that flashback came every…what every week and you start getting sad and say, “Oh my goodness, is that true that I never going to do this (graduate)?” Her doubters had an impact on her that took
time for Leticia to reconcile. She was fortunate to be placed in a new situation surrounded by support including sessions with a therapist who also helped Leticia overcome her self-doubt related to the negative messages she was hearing.

Leticia explained that she “started looking for a therapist and I was sharing with her about these obstacles, you know, that I, they put me in my brain that I, I can’t do this (graduate high school). Over time, though “my therapist started telling me, you can do it. You can do more than just get done high school. You know, when she started telling me that I was trying to not give up.” Despite the progress Leticia was making with her therapy, she still had self-doubt about her ability to complete high school. She explained that “in my personal, I was like, no, maybe I can’t [graduate] because my real, my family, my real family told me that I can’t do this. You know, I can’t get done this.” During these moments of self-doubt, Leticia had to choose between forging forward with her schooling regardless of the difficulty and frustration or any other negative emotions that she felt. Or, she could choose to quit on herself and her schooling.

It is known that Leticia and Aamiina forged ahead and there was an internal element, that was either learned or innate, that help keep them on the path towards graduation.

**School**

As previously discussed, Leticia and Aamiina thrived at their respective high school due in part from support stemming from their placement agency, foster families, and program/personnel at their high school among other things. However, school was also identified as an obstacle for both of them. Leticia explained how school was an obstacle from her vantage point.

You know, in this process to get done [with] my high school, because it was like, for me [some] classes, it was so difficult, for example…geology, science, for me, it’s like, I
never seen this kind of class in my life and I was like, oh my goodness, what type of class is this?

Leticia’s struggle in science class appears to be unfamiliarity with the subject material, but also the pace in which her non-ESL classes were moving.

The teachers…just keep, just keep explaining one time and I was like, I got lost. I don’t know what I had supposed to do, you know, and with experiments and I’m like, oh my goodness. It was a lot of moments that I was like, this people, maybe they don’t have patience or something like that.

Before acquiring a stronger command of English, Leticia also said that language was a barrier in her non-ESL classes.

And because sometimes teachers, they speak so fast. Like they talk so fast. And I was like, oh my, how I can’t understand them why did they trying to talk to me? You know, it was really hard.

Aamiina also experienced similar struggles in particular classes, too, and for similar reasons. The classes that were not designated as ESL took on a different flavor for her. She explained that “if I have regular classes from the beginning, I just sit in like my chemistry class. We don’t have [an] ESL chemistry [class]. Its regular chemistry, so when I sit in there, just quiet.” From her observations, many other ELL students also fell quiet in non-ESL classes.

Almost every ESL student. If they go to regular classes like math, say art class, it wasn’t like ESL. So, [I] just sit…quiet. Mostly we just…communicated [with] the others [ESL students]. They cannot understand us [teachers]…I was quiet, very quiet [sitting in non-ESL classes.]
When asked what the difference was between ESL versus non-ESL classes were, Aamiina replied that the “language barrier” was difficult to overcome. She went on to say, “I couldn’t understand American students. But ESL students spoke English like me...I mean broken English, so I feel more comfortable.” The experience in her non-ESL classes mirrored how she felt when she initially started private school upon her arrival and enrollment. Aamiina described her private school experience by saying, “I don’t understand anything from them. I don’t understand the teachers...students...like everybody’s speaking English and I cannot even do it.” It appears that Aamiina and Leticia both felt more comfortable in their ESL classes because they were full of students with common backgrounds and similar English-speaking abilities.

**Graduation Requirements.** Another obstacle that Aamiina and Leticia had to contend with are the graduation requirements that had to be earned in order to reach that milestone. Neither their immigrant or ESL status changed the state’s requirements for high school graduation. On the contrary, they were required to fulfill the same academic requirements as native-born students. Aamiina enrolled the second half of her freshman year, which means she had three and a half years to complete the typical four years of high school. She said that she met with her counselor that helped her understand what she needed to do to complete her requirements. She explained:

> They say to me that they can graduate with three years if I take like…six classes and if I want to do after school class to like…after school class. And if I pass all my classes, I can graduate in three years and that’s what I did. I just take a big schedule and I put every year where I want to attack and what classes is extra that I can take after school. So, I had to take two semesters after school and I had to take summer classes.
By meeting with her counselor and mapping out a plan of attack, Aamiina was able to earn “all 22” credits necessary in order to graduate in 2018. Similarly, Leticia also attended after-school classes and tutoring sessions because “when I was in 11th grade, I started needing, I saw in myself that I, I need more help, you know, so, and obviously a school provides a lot of help for students, for EL students.” Leticia explained that she “took some classes after school. I spend like two or three hours [of doing] homework after school so that was good” as it propelled her towards meeting the goal of graduating high school.

**Emergent and A Priori Categories Related to Internal Fortitude**

Leticia and Aamiina shared how important it was to make connections with their foster families, school personnel, and other vested professionals. The help and support that they received certainly contributed to their academic success. Yet, during the interviews, both shared significant statements, which alluded to both grit and self-efficacy. Collectively, the combination of those concepts is what I term internal fortitude, which I believe was important to their success in school. Table 8 lists categories related to internal fortitude that were coded from the interviews, which are self-efficacy (emergent theme) and grit (a priori theme). Without these qualities, the various supports that they received might not have been fully realized resulting in an even more difficult time graduating high school.

**Table 8**

*Identified Emergent and Confirmed A Priori Categories Related to Internal Fortitude*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Leticia</th>
<th>Aamiina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy (Emergent)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grit (A Priori)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Self-Efficacy**

Leticia and Aamiina’s interviews were listened to many times with all significant statements considered over and over, which was done to understand and present their experiences with as much fidelity as possible. During this process, significant statements that supported the concept of self-efficacy, which was discussed in the literature review, but not part of the initial research questions, were identified. The emergent findings are discussed here in full.

Self-efficacy is the self-judged state of being capable of executing a course of action resulting in a desired outcome (i.e., “I can do this”) (Bandura, 1977). The literature suggested that successful people have this quality; therefore, self-efficaciousness was considered as an internal mechanism to consider as a catalyst for ELL learners. During Leticia’s interview, she made a statement that referenced that self-efficacy might be another factor why she was successful in school

Yes. When I, that was my, and then they switched me to the 11th grade…that’s when I started believing in myself, telling myself, I can do this. I’ve already done 10th grade. I’m in 11th grade. Now I’m a junior, so I can do this and that’s when I started believing in myself, you can do a lot of things, you know?

Leticia was asked if finishing her 10th grade year was what gave her some confidence, she responded, “Yes. That’s what I started getting. I know it’s crazy!” The confidence gained from her progression in school contrasts sharply with her initial reaction to school. Yet, even as she was developing self-efficacy, Leticia, on any given night, was working “2 to 3 hours” on homework. Leticia’s self-efficacy did not decrease the time needed to complete her homework; however, the time she put into her homework increased her self-efficaciousness.
As previously reported, a portion of Aamiina’s success was due in part to the support she received from her foster parents and teachers. But, by ignoring Aamiina’s contribution to her own success would fail to highlight her personal and academic growth. Specifically, in regards to the development of self-efficacy, Aamiina said:

Then, when I see my older work is paying [off], like I’m getting very, very good grades, like I have A all my whole classes, plus A yes, A plus and like, I’m not getting any Bs. I’m seeing that I work hard and my work’s here. I have all As. So, why I’m going to give up? I know I’m going to do it (graduate).

Her hard work coupled with astounding results brought about what I believe to be the development of self-efficacy. Aamiina’s academic success and own words suggest she started believing in her ability, which resulted with her passing all of the required graduation requirements.

**Grit**

The concept of grit was part of the original research questions asking how immigrant ELLs make sense of the grit needed to overcome obstacles incurred during their years in high school. It was surmised that immigrant ELL high school graduates might have had grit or some other internal mechanism at work that allowed them to still reach their academic goals. The interviews confirmed, after several rounds of coding, that grit was one of the internal mechanisms at work. The knowledge gained about how Leticia and Aamiina made sense of the grit needed to overcome many obstacles is presented below.

Grit is defined as the ability to achieve difficult, long-term goals (i.e., “I am not quitting until I finish what I started”) (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Kelly, Matthews, & Barton, 2014). Leticia defined herself with one sentence that
she reiterated throughout her interview, which was: “I’m not going to give up.” Those six words were her mantra and, by definition, grit. Leticia’s grit undoubtedly helped shape her school success.

As discussed earlier, Leticia did not have the support to succeed in school from her birth family. On the contrary, it was reported that she received messages about how she would fail. So, in some respect, Leticia learned her grit with the help of another important person in her life. She gave a window into how she learned grit.

My therapist started telling me, you can do it. You can do more than just get done [with] high school. You know, when she started telling me that I was trying to not give up, you know, trying to not let my obstacle who are in my brain, not good things, you know? I started to put in my brain, yes, I can do this [Leticia]. You can, Oh, I can do this. You know? So, I started telling myself, I can do it. I’m not going to give up. You know, so, and it was great because it was hard when I started. But at the end, you know, I get done.

Leticia initiated the search for a therapist with her foster family because she recognized that she needed additional emotional support. She is the same person who also stayed after school to attend tutoring sessions. Leticia has an advantageous wherewithal about her that allows her to personally reflect on a given situation and seek out a remedy.

Leticia later confirmed that, indeed, she learned to not give up. What helped forge this attitude, though, was her recognition of the importance of an education. She “learned to not give up if you have like a specific goal, just fight for…that and trying to get it done. So, and I learned that I, I am the person that if I want something, I try to do everything to get it done.” She fought for her education and there was also an unintended consequence to her approach to school.

Leticia said “that’s one of the [things that] make me happy and proud of me that I if I want
something that I fight for that. Yeah, I worked hard for get it done (graduate).” Her grit gave her
a sense of pride with what she was able to accomplish in school and her foster family
reciprocated that feeling for her success, too.

The successes that Leticia experienced were not shared by all of her classmates. During
her high school journey, she witnessed some of her ELL acquaintances fail to graduate because
they gave up. Yet, she chose to forge forward with her education when she could have chosen
differently.

I saw a lot of people giving up and I was like, that’s not the right thing. You know, no
matter if you are perfect or not, but you had to try to do your best and…the things that I
put in my mind, I was like, I can do this...

Graduating high school was a goal she would not give up on despite not having the initial
support of her family in Honduras. She had the insight and courage to seek out help from others,
which enabled her to develop grit to make graduation possible. Her development of grit proved
to be worthwhile as she learned immediately how significant of an obstacle her lack of English-
fluency was would be for her in school.

Leticia, like Aamiina, learned English within a year out of necessity as their school
teachers and foster families were only English-speaking. When asked about if she brought that
same type of “attitude” to learning English as she did with working to complete a school goal,
Leticia replied:

I need to do it. I’m not going to give up…because I am one of the persons that I, I learn
every day about me, you know? I can’t believe sometime I do somethings that I was like,
Whoa, I do things that I, I sometime I just get shocked…because…it…put everything
my effort, no matter how hard it is I’m not give up.
Regardless of any challenges encountered in Honduras and the challenges in the U.S., Leticia’s grit kept her learning and growing as a person, which resulted in graduating high school. That in turn has provided the opportunity to attend college.

The next is like, the next goal now is go [to] college. I want to go college and, and see what now. I don’t have a specific thing that I really want to do that. That’s one of my goals, go [to] college and continue working hard. Don’t give up.

Leticia proved to herself that she has the qualities and grit to meet any goals she sets forth and will no doubt be successful in all of her future endeavors.

Aamiina’s success in school can also, in part, be traced back to her grit. Quitting on her education was never considered because it was a priority for her that was not available in Somalia.

I come from my country and I, they get none of education in my country…it started from United States (her educational opportunity). I just want to, to be a person to learn like an, I don’t want to give up, like I have a opportunity everywhere…I can learn. I have home. I have safety. Every single thing. So, I was like on my family was encouraging me, my foster family and just keep going. I don’t want to give up. I have a life to do it. So, no giving up on my teachers.

Aamiina’s brief reference of “to be a person” was rather poignant as it alludes to her feeling less than a person as her country’s circumstances precluded her the opportunity for an education. The value she placed on obtaining an education cemented her “don’t give up” attitude, which is the cornerstone of grit.

What also motivated Aamiina to stay steadfast with her education was both a belief in herself and an enduring sense of obligation to all of the people who supported her during her
journey. She reported that her grit “comes from myself first. If you tell yourself you can do it, then you can do it.” This steely attitude was also supported by the people surrounding her who supported her efforts like her “family, teachers, like everybody’s encouraging me and asking me if I need help…if I need this, I have like, I don’t see the time that I’m struggling with something, but myself. So, whenever I need help, I’m getting from someone from the teachers, from my family.” Giving up on herself, considering her past, and the amount of support she received from others made quitting on school inconceivable.

Specifically referencing her foster family, Aamiina said she did not “want to give up [on] my family.” They provided her the safety, comfort, and emotional support that was needed for her to focus on learning English, making personal connections, and excelling in school. She had one-time strangers that believed in her. “My foster family [were telling me] just keep going” with her education. She also did not want to give up on her teachers who she came to highly respect, too. She said, “Oh my gosh, like the teachers. I loved it. Like, I feel very comfortable in this, in school, like many ESL, many classes that we can learn English, at least three classes. I have in semester just English ELL, three classes, every single semester.” Aamiina’s “don’t give up” attitude and the reinforcing positive messages she received from her foster family and teachers helped foster or reinforce her grit, which resulted in creating an exceptional student. Both made the deliberate choice over the course of four years of high school to continue to learn and push forward despite the many types of obstacles that they encountered.

Closure

Approximately 41% of ELL students did not graduate high school (NCES, 2014) or stated conversely, 59% of ELL students did graduate. Leticia and Aamiina, through their effort, were able to join the latter group. Their journey towards graduation was layered with both
supports and obstacles that required accepting and resolving. The supports included help from agency caseworkers, a therapist, and their respective foster families. They also were supported by their high school that offered an ESL program and dedicated staff to meet their unique educational needs. The obstacles that they incurred included how homeland affected their formal schooling, lack of English-proficiency, graduation requirements, and the negative impact of family.

Leticia and Aamiina were able to resolve the varied obstacles with the help of others and internal fortitude, which was defined as the combination of grit and self-efficacy. Their grit allowed them to accomplish the difficult task of graduating high school even though they arrived to the U.S. with very little ability to understand or speak English. By not dropping out or quitting, they learned English and started to experience success in their classes. The result was a belief that they could meet their goal of graduating, which was the ultimate reason and goal of their immigration.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In conducting this study, I found three main themes: supports (emergent and a priori), obstacles (emergent and a priori), and internal fortitude (emergent and a priori). Further, there were a total of 10 categories under the three themes. The three main themes included supports, obstacles, and internal fortitude. The theme of internal fortitude came about because Leticia and Aamiina (pseudonyms) both expressed a no-quit attitude (grit) and developed a belief in their capability in school (self-efficacy). These two categories, grit and self-efficacy, worked in concert together that undoubtedly were a critical mechanism that allowed them to overcome the various obstacles encountered during their high school journey. Ultimately, the combination of grit and self-efficacy and the supports that they received led to their high school graduation.

Four categories were found under the theme of support. The categories included agency caseworker/lawyer, therapist, foster family, and school. These particular categories, which will be discussed in detail later, were important aspects to Leticia and Aamiina’s experiences living and attending school in the U.S. Lastly, the four categories under obstacles included homeland’s effect on the years of formal schooling, language, family, and school. These categories were stressors and Leticia and Aamiina were fortunate to have support surrounding them and internal fortitude to overcome all of the obstacles. The categories of family and school are prominent in the literature and because of that they were surmised at the onset of the research that they might have a role in Leticia and Aamiina’s experiences.

The literature also examines many concepts that pertain directly or indirectly to immigrant ELLs. For instance, Porro (2010) addressed the individual experiences of Spanish-speaking immigrant ELLs (SSELL) who immigrated to the U.S. at various ages and their journey
to complete high school in Wisconsin while Enriquez (2011) focused on how undocumented immigrants used social capital to successfully navigate K-12 and pursue higher education. Other studies of interest included Plata-Potter and de Guzman (2012) who explored the experiences of immigrant Latino parents as they learned how to navigate the U.S. educational system that their children were attending and Turney and Kao (2009) who explored minority immigrant parents’ school involvement. These studies represent a small sampling of the types of topics in the literature regarding immigrants, ELLs, and immigrant ELLs.

My study addressed an apparent gap in the literature by focusing on the experiences of immigrant ELL students and the various types of obstacles they might have encountered while navigating their journey towards high school graduation. This study was unique because it: (a) specifically investigated immigrant ELLs, (b) did not focus on a specific race or ethnicity, (c) explored obstacles encountered, and (d) the importance of grit needed to overcome any obstacles.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of my study was to describe and interpret the importance of grit for recent immigrant ELL students high school graduates or graduates within the last few years. The study aimed to explore the concept of grit through exploring the potential supports and obstacles that students encountered during their journey towards high school graduation and the use of grit to overcome any such obstacles. *Grit* was defined as the ability to achieve difficult, long-term goals (i.e., “I am not quitting until I finish what I started”) (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Kelly, Matthews, & Barton, 2014). Obstacles was defined as, “something that impedes progress or achievement” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

The research questions that guided my study were:
1. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of supports that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

2. How do immigrant ELL students make sense of the types of obstacles that they encountered during their journey towards graduation?

3. How do students make sense of the grit needed to overcome obstacles during their journey towards graduating high school?

**Methods Overview**

A basic exploratory qualitative study was undertaken to answer the research questions. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the participants, which allowed them the opportunity to describe their lived, school experiences in their own words. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were read several times to determine the significant statements made by the participants that answered the research questions. Significant statements were given assigned a theme that described the essence of each significant statement as accurately as possible. The categories were organized into an explanatory schema that helped bring to life the experiences of the participants.

**Summary of Key Findings**

**Original Conceptual Framework**

The initial conceptual framework (Figure 1) was previously presented in Chapter I. It was a generic graphical representation of the possible interactions between supports, obstacles, and grit with it ultimately ending with high school graduation. I speculated how the concepts interacted and it was those concepts that were the basis of my original conceptual framework.

The types of supports that I reviewed in the literature included family/parent involvement, family/parent expectations, and ways schools can potentially provide support to
students. However, the original conceptual framework has a block simply labeled as “supports” since no data had been collected to fill in any specifics. Likewise, various types of obstacles were reviewed in literature, too. The concepts that could potentially act as obstacles included school, academic language, and family. The block was labeled only as “obstacles” as no data had been collected.

**Figure 2**

*Original Conceptual Framework*

![Diagram of original conceptual framework]

*Note.* Potential supports and obstacles immigrant ELLs encounter and the role of grit during their journey leading up to high school graduation (Peterson, 2020).

The middle block, called grit, is a specific concept, which was a newer concept in the literature and the focus of my research. Grit is defined as the ability to achieve difficult, long-term goals (i.e., “I am not quitting until I finish what I started”) (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Kelly, Matthews, & Barton, 2014). The other concept explored included self-efficacy, which Bandura (1977) defined as the self-judged state of being capable of executing a course of action resulting in a desired outcome, i.e., successfully completing a task. I decided to specifically include grit in the original conceptual
framework because the participant criteria for my study included that participants were immigrants, English Language Learners. Also, both of my participants happened to be enrolled in school as freshman so they had four years to graduate “on time.” Grit was included in the framework because I assumed that my participants would experience additional challenges leading up to graduation that native-born students might not experience and they would need internal resources of some kind in order to overcome any challenges incurred.

**Revised Conceptual Framework**

Completing the interviews allowed for coding, which eventually revealed my findings. In turn, the findings from my study made it necessary to slightly alter the original conceptual framework by adding specific supports and obstacles and moving one obstacle to be a stand-alone “block” in the framework. An additional concept, self-efficacy, joined grit in the revised framework. Those combined concepts are what I define as internal fortitude. Figure 2 reflects the specific additions and alteration based on my interpretations of the data from my study and from my careful analysis of qualitative data.

The findings included two types of themes: emergent and a priori. The identified emergent theme related to supports included two categories: agency caseworker/lawyer, and therapist. The confirmed a priori theme related to supports included two categories: foster family and school program/staff. It was not apparent if any of the categories were more pronounced or important than another so the graphic is not meant to be interpreted as hierarchical; rather, it is merely a list. The importance of confirming the a priori theme related to supports was a beginning understanding of how critical it is for immigrant ELLs to have support systems around them. I have no doubt that Leticia and Aamiina would have been successful in virtually any environment. But, as chance would have it, they both immigrated to a situation
where their legal, emotional, and educational needs were known and acted upon by the adults in their lives.

**Figure 3**

*Revised Conceptual Framework*

Note. Supports and obstacles immigrant ELLs encounter and the role of grit and self-efficacy during their journey leading up to high school graduation (Peterson, 2021).

There was one identified emergent theme related to obstacles with one coded category called “Homeland’s Effect on the Years of Formal Schooling.” The a priori theme related to obstacles confirmed from the interviews included the following categories: formal schooling, homeland family, and school, and graduation requirements. Like the a priori theme related to supports, the graphic is a list without any intended hierarchy. The surprise category was Homeland’s Effect on the Years of Formal Schooling. After long consideration, it was my own ignorance and entitlement that blinded me from considering how one’s homeland’s circumstances
can impede educational opportunities. I am middle-aged who was raised in a middle-class family with middle-class values who understood education as an expectation. I am quite fortunate as there are local and global communities where education might be merely an afterthought due to any number of environmental factors rather than a readily available expectation.

Self-efficacy joined grit as an additional identified emergent theme related to internal fortitude. Leticia and Aamiina both expressed how difficult their lives were initially; however, they settled into their new lives and started learning English. The experiences with their foster families and peers and teachers at school coupled with their growing language capacity allowed them to experience successes. Both expressed how their belief in their abilities grew when they started passing classes with all As (Aamiina) or advanced to their junior year (Leticia). Their determination and belief their self that they would graduate stands in stark contrast to their feelings when they were first enrolled in school. The initial frustration of not being able to understand anything at home or at school slowly melted away as their hard work and support from the adults around them turned into positive results as they realized they were making significant strides towards graduation.

An additional box on the far left of the conceptual framework has the sole obstacle of language with arrows pointing towards the larger aforementioned boxes of supports and obstacles. Language appeared to permeate all facets of their lives at home and at school, especially during the first year of their arrival. Accessing the school curriculum and communication with their foster families, classmates, and school personnel were severely limited for approximately a year. One consequence of living with a foster family and attending a school that only spoke and taught in English was the realization that learning English was a priority. Their grittiness allowed them work daily to quickly learn English resulting in the ability to form
important personal connections at home and at school, but also to access the curriculum at school. It cannot be overstated how all-encompassing and difficult their lives initially were when they lacked any English comprehension.

**Relationship of Key Findings to Existing Studies**

Table 9 presents my findings and how they compare to the pertinent dissertations and studies that helped frame the study. My study adds to the wealth of information regarding how their families acted as a support. Even though Leticia and Aamiina lived with foster families, their foster families acted in place of their birth parents. Therefore, my findings suggest confirmation of how families can act as a support in regards to educational attainment. My findings also confirmed that self-efficacious and gritty individuals can accomplish daunting goals despite many odds against them. The findings in full are presented below.

**Table 9**

*Comparison of Key Findings to Previous Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Findings (Peterson, 2021)</th>
<th>Previous Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships are a substantive support for immigrant ELLs</td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relationships with parents and teachers promote engagement and achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Porro, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The emotional support Leticia and Aamiina received culminated in successfully graduating high school and college enrollment</td>
<td>Adds to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Family, friends, and teachers provide emotional and financial resources for undocumented immigrants leading to high school graduation and college enrollment (Enriquez, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Findings (Peterson, 2021)</td>
<td>Previous Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family involvement supports educational and emotional needs</td>
<td>Suggests confirmation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engaging the child at home and promoting a learning environment can act as a support (Epstein, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggests confirmation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parental involvement is an important support for students (Rogers, Theule, Ryan, Adams, &amp; Keating, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Home environment influences student’s behaviors and achievement (Zhan, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family expectations/involvement supports long-term educational attainment</td>
<td>Suggests confirmation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Association between parental expectations and long-term educational attainment (Froiland &amp; Davison, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggests confirmation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parent’s educational expectations associated with higher rates of graduation (Zhan &amp; Sherraden, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Family education involvement is a predictor of academic achievement (Sibley &amp; Dearing, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disconfirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parental involvement is not associated with academic achievement (El Nokali, Bachman, &amp; Votruba-Drzal, 2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Findings (Peterson, 2021)</th>
<th>Previous Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools play an important supportive role for immigrant ELL students</td>
<td>Suggests Confirmation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom best practices facilitate language and content mastery (Echevarria, Short, &amp; Powers, 2006; Freeman, Freeman, &amp; Mercuri, 2003; Helfrich &amp; Bosh, 2011; Kobeleva, 2012; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, &amp; Kelley, 2010; McCullough &amp; Fry, 2013; Rodriguez-Valls, Kofford, &amp; Morales, 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of language comprehension was a significant obstacle</td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understanding learning objectives and what they should learn after instruction is impeded without academic language comprehension (Krathwohl, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disconfirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It could take upwards of five to seven to acquire academic language proficiency (Chiswick &amp; Deb-Burman, 2004; Tsang, Katz, &amp; Stack, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation requirements acted as an obstacle</td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rigid graduation standards (Michigan Merit Curriculum, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Alternative routes to graduation still require mastery of the curriculum and accumulation of prerequisite number of credits (Helfrich &amp; Bosh, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Findings (Peterson, 2021)</td>
<td>Previous Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grit was an important element of internal fortitude to overcome obstacles</td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Grit is defined as the ability to achieve difficult, long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, &amp; Kelly, 2007; Duckworth &amp; Quinn, 2009; Kelly, Matthews, &amp; Barton, 2014) and having the perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, &amp; Kelly, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Grit affects a variety of life goals (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, &amp; Duckworth, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Deliberate practice was an indicator of success with a specific activity (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, &amp; Ericsson, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy was an important element of internal fortitude to overcome obstacles</td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-judged state of being capable of completing a course of action (Bandura, 1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More competent students might establish more difficult academic goals and persist longer (Zimmerman, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Requisite skills still required to accomplish a targeted outcome expectation (Schunk, 1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Verbal modeling had significant influence on persistence (Zimmerman &amp; Ringle, 1981)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings Regarding the Initial, Pertinent Dissertations/Studies Framing the Study

Findings from my study confirmed that relationships with parents and teachers promotes engagement and achievement (Porro, 2010). Developing personal connections with multiple teachers, their foster families, and friends was a substantive support for both Leticia and Aamiina. Graduating high school, which is a four-year endeavor at minimum, was not accomplished alone; rather, it required developing working relationships, intended or not, with multiple persons. The relationships that they formed allowed them to learn English by practicing each day, bond with their foster family and teachers, and ultimately graduate high school.

Enriquez (2011) found that family, friends, and teachers provided emotional and financial resources for undocumented immigrants leading to high school graduation and college enrollment. My findings tangentially relate as Leticia and Aamiina were lawful immigrants, but the emotional support from the people who they formed relationships with had lasting effects. For instance, both were the recipients of emotional support in the form of positive messages from their foster families, teachers, and in Leticia’s case, from her therapist. Their grit was able to flourish due in part because of the emotional support they received. Other findings from my study that tangentially relate to Enriquez (2011) include how emotional resources translate not only to high school graduation, but college enrollment, too. At the time of the interviews, Leticia was mapping out her next steps, which included enrolling in college. Aamiina was finishing her degree in nursing, which aligns with the upward trend of college-educated immigrants (Grieco, 2004).

Findings Regarding Family Involvement

Findings from my study confirmed family involvement supports student’s education and achievement (Epstein, 2011; Zhan, 2006). Leticia and Aamiina’s academic successes, aside
from their gritty determination, was supported by their foster families’ interest in their well-being, including their education. They both reported how their foster families were always supportive either through actions like helping with homework and practicing English each day or simple words of encouragement. The pro-active role that their foster families played also confirms Rogers, Theule, Ryan, Adams, and Keating (2009) who found that parenting style was positively associated with academic competence, which is a student’s school-related behaviors that supports effective learning. Leticia and Aamiina were influenced by the environment that they were engrossed in, which positively affected their achievement in school (Zhan, 2006).

**Findings Regarding Family Expectations/Involvement**

The combination of Leticia and Aamiina’s grit coupled with the various family support they received culminated in successfully graduating high school. Their high school graduation suggested confirmation that parental expectations were associated with positive school outcomes and long-term educational attainment (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Zhan & Sherraden, 2011). This was suggestive because there was not any direct evidence of “expectations,” but it was possible to infer that Leticia and Aamiina’s foster families might have adjusted and communicated any academic “expectations” as their English continued to improve and began accruing credits towards graduation. The findings of my study confirmed how family education involvement was a predictor of academic achievement (Sibley & Dearing, 2014), which contradicts El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal (2010) who did not find an association between parental involvement and academic achievement. Leticia and Aamiina were the recipients of almost daily tutoring and practicing English that greatly contributed to their growing skill-set, fluency, and overall confidence in their abilities as a student. Family
involvement and possibly expectations, too, played a vital role in their development as students and young adults.

**Findings Regarding School**

Not only did family play a supportive role in the academic life for Leticia and Aamiina, but their school and teachers deserve credit for their successes, too. First, their high school has a dedicated English as a Second Language program (ESL) for students who are not proficient in English. ESL teachers have earned either an ESL or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) endorsement. Secondly, Leticia and Aamiina both mentioned specific teachers and paraprofessionals who were instrumental during their march towards graduation with words of encouragement and developing the feeling of inclusion. Thirdly, both indicated they practiced their English and vocabulary words on a daily basis suggesting that there was time built into their ESL classes for these types of deliberate activities. They were fortunate their high school enrollment was with an established ESL program. Unique students with unique needs require teaching modalities and strategies that differ from working with students who are native-born English speakers.

**Findings Regarding a Lack of Language/Academic Language Comprehension**

Leticia and Aamiina both reported that a significant obstacle they faced was a lack of English comprehension that affected their home and school lives. My study confirmed that the initial lack of English fluency impeded their ability to understand learning objectives (Krathwohl, 2002), but also impeded their initial ability to communicate with their foster families or with their classmates. Leticia and Aamiina also reported that it took up to a year before they started to understand the content in their classes, which suggests they were learning *academic* English, too. What makes their ability to learn English in about a year even more
remarkable was that their accomplishment does not align with Chiswick and Deb-Burman (2004) and Tsang, Katz, and Stack (2008) who reported that it could take upwards of five to seven years to acquire academic language proficiency. Leticia and Aamiina enrolled in 9th grade, which did not allow them the literal time to gradually improve their academic language proficiency. Rather, they both made it a priority to learn English, and they did so rather quickly, which resulted in quite an advantage compared to their ELL peers who might not have made this a priority. Leticia and Aamiina and both reported the importance of regularly practicing vocabulary. This aligns with Alamer (2021) who found that “perseverance of effort was a… predictor of vocabulary learning” (pg. 15).

**Findings Regarding Graduation Requirements**

The findings of my study confirmed, to a degree, that the Michigan Merit Curriculum (2006) acted as an unintended obstacle for Leticia and Aamiina. For example, all public high schools follow the state’s requirements to earn a diploma. One must earn 22 out of 24 possible credits at their high school with the vast majority of the 22 credits representing the state’s requirements. Their alma mater does not list an “ELL graduation track” or other alternative graduation track for the ELL population. Even if there was an alternative route, ELL students would still need to demonstrate mastery of their particular graduation path and accumulate enough credits to graduate (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011).

**Findings Regarding Family**

Leticia reported experiences that confirmed family can act as an obstacle. During her interview, Leticia reported that she experienced a rash of negative comments from her family in Honduras. She reported that her family did not believe that she was capable of graduating high school. The lack of support and belief in her ability was emotionally difficult for Leticia to
accept. It took the help of a therapist and the support of her foster family, friends, and teachers to realize her prowess as a student.

**Findings Regarding Grit**

It was surmised at the conception of this research that immigrant ELL students might incur challenges to their education that native-born students do not face, but might potentially need internal resources of some kind to overcome any obstacles. Leticia and Aamiina’s interviews confirmed they both have a specific type of internal resource called grit, which is defined as the ability to achieve difficult, long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Kelly, Matthews, & Barton, 2014) and having the perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Their deliberate and daily practice of their spoken English and vocabulary allowed them to access the curriculum and meet the state’s requirements to successfully graduate high school all within four years. Their deliberate practice and graduation provided further confirmation to Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, and Ericsson (2011) who found that deliberate practice was an indicator of success for a specific activity. At the time of the interviews, Leticia was still considering her post-high school plans while Aamiina was completing a degree in nursing, which was her goal when she immigrated. This also suggests confirmation that grittier individuals have the ability to better maintain or realize their goals (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014).

**Findings Regarding Self-Efficacy**

Coding of the interviews revealed an additional internal resource: self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was defined as the self-judged state of being capable of executing a course of action in a desired outcome, i.e., successfully completing a task (Bandura, 1977). My findings confirmed
that self-efficacy does indeed result in successfully reaching a desired outcome. Leticia and Aamiina both learned through their successes in school that they were capable of reaching their goal of graduating high school despite the initial challenges in school. Their self-efficacy might also be the result of their school’s ESL program, which provided effective instruction coupled with positive verbal feedback (Soland & Sandilos, 2021). Their graduation confirmed the importance of developing the requisite skills needed to accomplish one’s goals (Schunk, 1989), but also confirmed Zimmerman (2000) that more competent students might establish more difficult academic goals and persist longer. As mentioned previously, both had multiple people who verbally supported their efforts, which influenced their ability to persist, which confirmed the findings of Zimmerman and Ringle (1981).

**Implications for Future Research**

Table 10 lists multiple studies covering a variety of topics that were previously mentioned in Chapter II that framed my study. However, it was determined during the data collection and analysis phases that these studies were not applicable to my study. Even though the studies were not applicable, they topics are viable future research topics as they would add to the complexity of ELL’s school experiences.

**Table 10**

*Potential Areas for Future Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Studies that were not applicable (N/A) in my study but might warrant further investigation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•  Latino parents’ experiences navigating a new educational system is fraught with challenges (Plata-Potter &amp; de Guzman, 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•  Immigrant parents incurred various obstacles accessing how to participate in their child’s education (Turney &amp; Kao, 2009)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Studies that were not applicable (N/A) in my study but might warrant further investigation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Immigrant parents school involvement might not be visible (Crosnoe &amp; López Turley, 2011)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suggests Confirmation:
• Classroom best practices facilitate language and content mastery (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003; Helfrich & Bosh, 2011; Kobeleva, 2012; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010; McCullough & Fry, 2013; Rodriguez-Valls, Kofford, & Morales, 2012)

Not Applicable:
• Higher order thinking activities impact student’s learning (Teenmant, Hausman, and Kigamwa (2016)

Not Applicable:
• Disproportionate number of minority students, including English Language Learners, are qualified for special education services (Sullivan, 2011)

Not Applicable:
• Minority students are overlooked as gifted students (Ford, 1998; Naglieri & Ford, 2003)

Not Applicable:
• Parentification of young adults effects grade point average, SAT scores, and scores on a parentification measure (Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998)

Not Applicable:
• Adultification might put students at risk for poorer school attendance and performance (Burton, 2007)

Not Applicable:
• There is an association between adolescent caregiving and increase in school absences and disciplinary issues (East & Weisner, 2009)

Not Applicable:
• Self-efficaciousness negatively affected if the effort was atypical (Schunk & Gunn, 1986)
Two of the four initial studies that provided background to my study, Plata-Potter and de Guzman (2012) and Turney and Kao (2009), focused on the experiences of immigrant parents. Both studies’ results included that immigrant parents experienced challenges as they attempted to participate in their child’s education. Neither study is applicable to mine as I incorrectly assumed that participants for my study would have immigrated with a parent(s). As chance would have it, Leticia and Aamiina immigrated alone. Future research including immigrant ELLs who immigrated with their parents unfamiliar with the U.S. school system might result in findings different than what I gathered such as learning the level of their parent’s school involvement that might not be visible (Crosnoe & López Turley, 2011).

Other areas of future research that could potentially add more nuance to my findings would be to interview ESL educators to learn about their teaching modalities. While I believe their high school and the personnel play a supportive role, it can only be inferred that Leticia and Aamiina were exposed to classroom best practices as they both earned all of the necessary credits to graduate. During the interviews, neither reported any detailed accounts that pertained to class assignments that could potentially have been analyzed and coded for classroom best practices. Classroom best practice information to consider includes lessons facilitating both language development and content mastery (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003; Helfrich & Bosh, 2011), or learning activities such as field trips (McCullough & Fry, 2013), or other techniques to make curricular content comprehensible to ELLs for the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006), or reading comprehension techniques (Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010), or activities specifically for the development of creative thinking and communication skills (Rodriguez-Valls, Kofford, & Morales, 2012). It would be beneficial for all educators to learn what types of higher order
thinking activities positively affect immigrant ELL learning (Teenmant, Hausman, & Kigamwa, 2016). Another educational angle to include with future research would be to better understand how frequent this unique population are qualified for special education services (Sullivan, 2011) or overlooked as gifted students (Ford, 1998; Naglieri & Ford, 2003).

In regards to the literature that framed family as an obstacle, none of the following studies proved to be relevant for my study, but future research might uncover more information. The studies included Chase, Demin, and Wells, (1998) and a concept called parentification, which specifically focused on the impact of children caring for an alcoholic parent. Similarly, Burton (2007) explored the adultification of children, which is exposing children to adult knowledge and responsibilities and East and Weisner (2009) focused their work on the impact on Mexican American adolescents whose role in the family was caregivers to their younger siblings. None of these concepts were alluded to during the interviews. Lastly, it is not known if either Leticia or Aamiina feel like they gave an extreme amount of effort to accomplish their goals possibly negating any feeling of self-efficacy as a student (Schunk & Gunn, 1986). There are many potential avenues for future research to explore that would add to the continued growth of knowledge pertaining to immigrant ELLs.

Other Implications

Continued immigration to the U.S. is a certainty and so, too, is the rise in number of children enrolling in school with varied levels of English fluency. Initially, the first substantial obstacle incurred was their lack of English fluency. They learned English much quicker than the literature suggested that they would resulting in quicker understanding of the lessons being taught. Leticia and Aamiina reported that they learned English by practicing every day with friends, family, and classmates in school. Neither hinted at attending any type of formal English
classes to facilitate their English fluency. The Michigan Merit Curriculum (2006) includes a 2-year foreign language requirement in order to graduate. As a matter of equity and practical considerations, non-bilingual ESL program’s curriculum should consider offering English as a foreign language for their ELL students. Dedicated English fluency courses would facilitate and potentially quicken access to the curriculum. As importantly, ELL students could also earn credits towards high school graduation.

An additional organizational consideration for high schools, at a minimum, is to offer professional development for all staff concerning specific strategies when working with ELL students. Leticia and Aamiina both said that it was common for them and other ELL students to sit quietly in their non-ESL classes as opposed to feeling engaged with their teachers and classmates in their ESL classes. Teaching and modeling classroom-specific strategies would provide all teaching staff additional opportunities to learn engagement tools and other teaching strategies/modalities when working with ELL students. Much like offering English fluency classes, the purpose of offering professional development geared specifically towards ELL students would be to accelerate their access to the curriculum.

Leticia and Aamiina immigrated alone so they heavily relied on their caseworkers and foster families to help with their transition. Yet, other students will immigrate with their families. While the immediate inclusion of ELL’s with their education is critical, so, too, are creating opportunities for the adults to be part of their child’s school and community. Guidance counselors and other ancillary support staff can facilitate these opportunities by seeking out translation services and community activities, which might help foster a sense of belonging. Other considerations might include offering newsletters, report cards, school registration, etc. in
one’s native language. Ancillary staff could act as liaisons for schools and between any number of community agencies to ensure services are accessible.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The journey for the 59% of ELL students who do graduate (NCES, 2014) is fraught with many obstacles including how homeland circumstances might affect formal schooling availability, lack of English-proficiency, graduation requirements, and the lack of support from family. Fortunately for Leticia and Aamiina, they both received support from agency caseworkers, a therapist, and their respective foster families. They also were supported by their high school that offered an ESL program and dedicated staff to meet their unique educational needs. The support they received from their foster families, teachers, and friends was undoubtedly critical to their overall school success. However, support alone was not what propelled them towards successful graduation. I found that Leticia and Aamiina displayed internal fortitude, a concept created from grit and self-efficacy. Internal fortitude enabled them to pursue their dreams of immigrating to the United States to attend high school. By graduating from school, they found they could pursue life goals once thought unimaginable (Peterson, 2021).
REFERENCES


https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2007.00463.x

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.01.002


Enriquez, L. E. (2011). "Because we feel the pressure and we also feel the support": Examining the educational success of undocumented immigrant Latin/o students. *Harvard Educational Review, 81*(3), 476-499. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.81.3.w7k703q050143762


Executive Order No. 13769, 3 C.F.R. 8977, (2017)


https://doi.org/10.1177/001698620304700206


National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. (2016). National and state-level high school graduation rates for English learners. [Table]. Retrieved from

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obstacle


https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3904_7


https://doi.org/10.1177/001440291107700304


https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748


https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042


https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v16n1.2008


https://doi.org/10.3200/JOER.102.4.257-271


Appendix A

Interview Questions: Interview Protocol for the Participants
Interview Questions: Interview Protocol for the Participants

Date:___________________________________________________
Codename:______________________________________________
Email:__________________________________________________
Location of interview:_____________________________________
Start time:_______________________________________________
End time:________________________________________________

Introduction:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with me to discuss your experiences in high school. I am working on completing my dissertation through Western Michigan University. The purpose of my study is to describe and interpret your school experiences of English Language Learners (ELLs) leading towards high school graduation. I am interested in the types of issues or problems that you might have experienced during school and how you overcame them.

It is important to my research that I capture the true essence of your experience; therefore, I am asking for your permission to record our conversation, which will allow me to have it transcribed so that I may re-read our conversation as many times as needed. You may ask me to stop recording and taking notes at any time. Your participation is strictly voluntary. I anticipate that our interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Interview Script/Questions:

I am interested to learn about your experiences in school as an immigrant and English Language Learner. I want to learn about the types or kinds of obstacles that you encountered as an immigrant and English language learner.

First, I want to talk with you about any school obstacles that made it difficult for you to graduate. By school obstacles, I’m referring to anything about school such as class assignments, tests, teacher requirements, etc.

Interview Questions

1. What was the most difficult school obstacle that you had to overcome?
   a. How did you overcome that?
   b. Did you push yourself in some way so that you would not quit on yourself?
   c. How do you describe that?
d. Or, was there something that happened that convinced you that you could overcome (their response)?
e. How do you describe what happened that you knew you could overcome this obstacle?

2. Was there another difficult time in school that sticks out in your memory that you had to overcome?
   a. How did you overcome that?
   b. Did you push yourself in some way so that you would not quit on yourself?
   c. How do you describe that?
   d. Or, was there something that happened that convinced you that you could overcome (their response)?
   e. How do you describe what happened that you knew you could overcome this obstacle?

3. Anything else about school that was difficult for you?
   a. How did you overcome that?
   b. Did you push yourself in some way so that you would not quit on yourself?
   c. How do you describe that?
   d. Or, was there something that happened that convinced you that you could overcome (their response)?
   e. How do you describe what happened that you knew you could overcome this obstacle?

4. Were there other types of obstacles that you had to overcome to reach graduation?
   a. How did you overcome that?
   b. Did you push yourself in some way so that you would not quit on yourself?
   c. How do you describe that?
   d. Or, was there something that happened that convinced you that you could overcome (their response)?
   e. How do you describe what happened that you knew you could overcome this obstacle?

Thank you for your describing your experiences for me. This will help me better understand the types of obstacles that you’ve experienced during school. Before we conclude our interview, I have just a few background questions to ask.

**ELL Background:**

Background information:
   a. Are you at least 18 years old?
   b. What is your home country?
   c. How old were you when you immigrated to the U.S.?
   d. Who did you immigrate with?
   e. What was your first grade that you were enrolled in?
   f. Were you labeled an ELL student?
   g. How would you describe how much English you understood when you were first enrolled in school?
   h. What year did you graduate high school?
Closing:

Thank you for your time. It is greatly appreciated. Your experiences are important to my research project. I will contact you once I have your interview transcribed. Your comments and any clarifications that I might have concerning my interpretation of your story is important. I want to make sure I have captured the essence of your story. May I contact you by email at a later date to clarify any portion of your story? If so, may I have an email address that you check regularly and phone number?

Email:__________________________________________

Phone:__________________________________________

Again, thank you for your time and sharing your story with me. I will keep all information private and confidential. Please contact me with any questions or concerns.
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form
My name is Mark Peterson and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Technology program at Western Michigan University and the student investigator. Thank you for consideration in taking part in my research entitled “Navigating School Obstacles: The Experiences of Immigrant English Language Learner High School Graduates.”

This consent document is being provided to you to determine if you would like to participate in my study. Your participation is voluntary. You may withdrawal at any time and ask that all of your information not be used in any way. There is no penalty for withdrawing.

What is the purpose of my study?
The purpose of this study is to describe and interpret the lived, school experiences of immigrant ELL students who will soon graduate, or have graduated from high school within the last few years. The study aims to uncover potential school obstacles that students encountered during their K-12 years and the use of internal fortitude, such as self-efficacy or grit to overcome any such school obstacles.

Who are the participants?
I have strict requirements for my study. Students who are eligible to participate are: (a) labeled as an immigrant ELL student at some point during their school years, (b) immigrated to the U.S. and enrolled in 9th grade or later, (c) recently graduated or graduated in the last few years, and (d) at least 18 years old.

How much time will I have to commit?
Participating in my study will include scheduling an interview which will last approximately 30-45 minutes. You may ask to stop the interview at any time since this is voluntary. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Additionally, you may be asked to do a follow-up interview for clarification which may last 15 minutes. Follow-up interviews can be conducted over the phone for convenience.

Will my identity be kept private?
Yes. The only people that will see any identifying information regarding your participation in my study includes the principal investigator (Dr. Sue Poppink), myself, and possibly a transcriptionist. The transcriptionist is the person who listens to the recorded interview and then types the out our conversation. I’m hoping to use a computer program that transcribes automatically, but I might need to hire a person to do this. If that the case, then the transcriptionist will have to agree to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to having access to any recordings of the interviews.
Once the interviews have been transcribed, the audio recordings will be erased. The transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet at my personal home office when I am not working directly with them. The only identifier on the transcripts will be the code name at the beginning of the interview. Lastly, the names of any elementary or high schools attended, names of any teachers, and/or any other type of identifier that may come about during the interview will not be used in any portion of my study.

Who else will have access to any of the recordings or transcripts of my interview?
The principal investigator, Dr. Sue Poppink, and the student investigator (myself) will have full access to all original recordings, notes, and transcriptions, which might include your actual name. There are numerous safeguards put in place, as outlined in the previous section, to protect your identity.

Where will I be interviewed?
All interviews will take place at your high school or another public place that is agreed to. I will work with school personnel to find a private room to conduct the interview. If you’ve recently graduated, then we will conduct the interview at a public place that is convenient for you.

Are there any costs or compensation for my participation?
You will be compensated for your time with a $20 gift card to a popular online retailer. The only cost to participate is your time, which is approximately 45 minutes.

What are the benefits of participating in the study?
There are no known direct benefits from participating in my study. However, there are multiple potential benefits of my study. The identification of potential obstacles and potential supports might provide interested stakeholders a broader understanding of the types of challenges ELLs overcome to succeed. More importantly, the identification of potential obstacles to their success can lead to counter measures being taken to alleviate the obstacles as much as possible and increase high school graduation for this unique population.

What are the risks of participating in the study?
There are no known physical risks associated with participating in this study. One risk might be your identity being made known. To safeguard your privacy, you will be given a codename of your choice at the beginning of your interview. Only this codename will be used in my dissertation. Also, the interviews will be recorded. Once the interviews are transcribed, the interviews will be erased. The transcriptions, when not in direct use by me, will be kept in a locked drawer in my private office at home. Lastly, the transcriptionist will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement agreeing to strict terms of what they do or do not do with any recordings of your interview.
**Is my participation voluntary?**
Yes! You may quit at any time. I will delete and/or shred any recordings, notes, or transcriptions that pertain directly to you. None of your information will be used in my dissertation. There is no penalty whatsoever for withdrawing from this study.

If you have any questions concerning your participation in my study, then you may contact the principal investigator, Dr. Sue Poppink at sue.poppink@wmich.edu or 269-387-3569. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) for one year as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in the study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read the informed consent and have had the opportunity to ask any questions about my participation. I have agreed to take part in the study.

________________________________________________________________
Participant’s Name (Print) Date

________________________________________________________________
Participant’s Name (Signature) Date

Mark C. Peterson Date
Interviewer/Student Investigator
Appendix C

WMU HSIRB Approval Letter
Date: September 19, 2019

To: Sue Poppink, Principal Investigator
Mark Peterson, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 19-09-07

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “The Use of GRIT by K-12 Immigrant English Language Learner Student Graduates: Supports and Obstacles in K-12” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) September 18, 2020 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.

When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at https://wmich.edu/research/forms.

Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.
Appendix D

GRCC HSIRB Approval Letter
October 28, 2019

Dr. Sue Poppink

Dear Dr. Sue Poppink and Mr. Mark Peterson:

TITLE OF PROPOSAL Education Leadership and Research and Technology

This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your request by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Grand Rapids Community College. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study. Your proposal has been classified as "Exempt."

You are responsible for immediately informing the Institutional Review Board of any changes to your protocol, or of any previously unforeseen risks to the research participants.

This approval is good from October 28, 2019 to October 28, 2020. If you wish to continue your research after this date, you must complete and submit an updated protocol.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Donna Kracht
Dean of Institutional Research & Planning
Chair of the IRB
Appendix E

Initial Recruitment Letter for the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 or Other Graduates
Subject heading of the email:

Would You Like To Participate In A Study Concerning Immigrant, English Language Learners?

Body of email:

Dear Former Student,

I am conducting a study on English Language Learner (ELL) students who immigrated to the United States and have graduated from high school.

Immigrants who were ELL students and graduated from high school are a unique group of people who could provide me with important information about what we could do to help this population improve their graduation rate. As an immigrant myself, I want to do all I can to help immigrant, ELL students graduate.

- Did you immigrate to this country when you were younger and considered an English Language Learner at some point during school?
- Did you graduate from high school?
- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Are you interested in participating in a study about students just like you?

If you answered “yes” to all of these questions, then please send me an email on your personal email account to mark.peterson@kentwoodps.org to learn more about my study. You may also call me on my work phone at 616-538-7670 ext. 34206 with any questions.

If you are able to participate in my study, then you will earn a $20 gift card to an online retailer for your time.

Sincerely,

Mark Peterson
Doctoral Candidate
Western Michigan University
Appendix F

Initial Recruitment Letter for the 2018-2019 Students
Subject heading of the email:

Would You Like To Participate In A Study Concerning Immigrant, English Language Learners?

Body of email:

Dear Student,

I am conducting a study on English Language Learner (ELL) students who immigrated to the United States and who are on track to graduate high school.

Immigrants who are ELL students and are on track to graduate from high school are a unique group of people who could provide me with important information about how to help this population more. As an immigrant myself, I want to do all I can to help immigrant, ELL students graduate.

- Did you immigrate to this country when you were younger and considered an English Language Learner?
- Are you a senior in high school and on track to graduate from high school this year?
- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Are you interested in participating in a study about students just like you?

If you answered “yes” to all of these questions, then please send me an email on your school or personal email account to mark.peterson@kentwoodps.org to learn more about my study. You may also call me on my work phone at 616-538-7670 ext. 34206 with any questions.

If you are able to participate in my study, then you will earn a $20 gift card to an online retailer for your time.

Sincerely,

Mark Peterson
Doctoral Candidate
Western Michigan University