A PHENOMELOGICAL STUDY OF RECLASSIFIED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH

LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

by

Fernando Betanzos

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Brian C. Yates, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Heather J. Schoffstall, Ed.D., Committee Member

Kristine Nicholls, Ph.D., Committee Member

Scott Watson, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Advanced Programs

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to provide an insight into how former English learners' educational experiences allowed them to attain English language proficiency and meet grade level standards in English Language Arts.  This study was informed by the theoretical frameworks of Albert Bandura's social learning theory, and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, as they pertain to English learners.  The data collection procedures included student semi-structured interviews, elementary school principal semi-structured interviews, and review of site documents such as student work samples, report cards, attendance records, discipline records, state standardized test scores, Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment scores, and English language assessment records.  Moustakas' 7 Steps model was employed to analyze the data.  The findings from this study revealed that RFEP students who are reclassified during their elementary school years have clear opinions as they relate to their educational experiences. Their collective perceived ideas painted a picture of strong, confident students who value their education, and their parents' involvement in their school activities.  The findings also found that RFEP students encountered language and academic barriers while striving to reach reclassification status.

*Keywords:* English learners, reclassification, perceptions, English language proficiency, English language acquisition, reclassified English fluent proficient.

**Acknowledgements**

This journey began to take form years ago. First as a dormant idea that from time to time nudged at me to begin the process, and later as a reality when I finally took my first step. As with most challenging journeys, the road to the final destination was not always a smooth one. Along the way I encountered a few obstacles, pot holes, and detours. But although these obstacles may have slowed me down from time to time, they never deterred me from reaching my goal. Quitting was simply never an option.

Throughout my journey there were individuals who supported me, encouraged me, mentored me, and at times put up with me. Without their enduring support, this journey would not have been possible. I would like to acknowledge them and thank them below.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

American Institute for Research (AIR)

Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs)

California Department of Education (CDE)

California English language development test (CELDT)

California Standardized Test (CST)

English as a Second Language (ESL)

English language development (ELD)

English language mainstream (ELM)

English learner (EL)

English-only (EO)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Local education agency (LEA)

Long-term English learners (LTEL)

Measure of Academic Progress (MAP)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Reclassified fluent English language proficient (RFEP)

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)

Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE)

Structured English immersion (SEI)

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

**Overview**

California has the largest number of English learners of any state in the nation with approximately 1.4 million ELs enrolled in its public school system (California Department of Education, 2014). On average, only 12% of these students annually meet the academic and English language criteria to be reclassified as English fluent proficient (California Department of Education, 2014). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perceived educational experiences of former English learners from Southern California low income area elementary schools, and how their perceptions may have assisted them in achieving RFEP status. By gaining insights into the perceptions and educational experiences of RFEP students, educators may have a better understanding of how to implement best practices and programs aimed at supporting language acquisition and academic achievement of English learners. In this chapter, a framework for the study is provided that includes a background of relevant literature on English learners, the problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, the four research questions, the delimitations and limitations of the study, and a brief summary of the research plan.

**Background**

In California, English learners (EL) are K-12 students who have not developed sufficient listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English to take part in the regular school program, and their home language is one other than English (California Department of Education, 2006). ELs account for 23% of the total student population, making California the state with the largest percentage of ELs (California Department of Education, 2014). Of the approximate 1.4 million English learners in California, 85% come from Spanish-speaking homes

(California Department of Education, 2014). In an ongoing effort to ensure that these students become English language proficient, the California Department of Education sets annual goals for schools to move students from English learner status to Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP). These goals, called Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs), under Title III of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), are designed to hold school districts accountable for implementing effective EL programs that will help ELs close the achievement gap. Most EL students struggle and do not reach RFEP status before leaving high school. According to the California Department of Education, approximately 12% of ELs are reclassified annually, while the overwhelming majority continue to struggle with English language acquisition (2014).

ELs who have not reached the level of English proficiency to be reclassified by the sixth year of enrollment in a US school and score in the area of far below basic or below basic in the English language arts section of California's standard-based assessment become what are known as long-term English learners (LTEL). LTELs are generally characterized by low academic achievement, a limited academic vocabulary, difficulties with reading and writing, and non-engagement classroom habits (Olsen, 2010). Overall, ELs have shown to be a student population with a high risk of not completing a high school education. In California they have the highest dropout rate of any student subgroup at 21.9%, and their graduation rate of 63% is significantly below the state average of 80.4% (California Department of Education, 2014).

A key indicator to ELs' low graduation rates can be found in their passing rates of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). The CAHSEE, consisting of a math and English language arts sections, is administered to all 10th grade students. Students cannot receive a high school diploma unless they pass both sections. In the 2013-2014 school year, only 38% of 10th grade ELs across the state passed the English language arts section of the CAHSEE, and only

54% passed the math section (California Department of Education, 2014). During the same school year 92% of RFEPs passed the CAHSEE English language arts section, while 93% passed the math (California Department of Education, 2014). Although students are allowed to take the CAHSEE multiple times, these numbers serve to remind educators of the wide achievement gap that continues to exist between ELs and their RFEP counterparts.

Given this poor outlook on ELs who do not achieve reclassification status, there is a great deal of value in gaining a better understanding of the experiences that support a small percentage of EL students to RFEP status. While much of the current literature on ELs focuses on the acquisition of English, or lack thereof, little research has been conducted on the educational experiences of the students who have reached RFEP status.

**Problem Statement**

The problem of this study was that only a relatively small percentage of EL students achieve RFEP status each year in California, given that they represent one quarter of the state's student population. A study of RFEP students' educational experiences may yield valuable information to help educators have a better understanding of how and why these students achieve English proficiency and academic success. ELs who are not able to achieve RFEP status continue to struggle academically and eventually become LTELs. ELs who have been enrolled in US schools for more than six years and have not made English language development progress during two or more consecutive years on the CELDT, and scored a far below basic or below basic on the English language arts section of the state's standards-based achievement test are considered to be LTELs (California Legislation Information 2012). It is estimated that 59% of ELs enrolled in California high schools are LTELs (Olsen, 2010).

There is a wide achievement gap between ELs and their native English-only (EO) peers. In 2013, the California Standardized Test (CST), administered to all students in grades 2-11, showed that only 39% of EL students scored proficient or above in English Language Arts, compared to 79% for native English speakers (California Department of Education, 2014). According to CDE (2014), this achievement gap was consistent across California school districts. It also highlighted the need to improve EL instruction, as well as English development programs (ELD) that deliver instruction to ELs during a portion of the day separate from the core content, and is focused on the development of English language skills (Saunders, Goldenberg, & Marcelletti, 2013). As a whole, however, ELs are a fluid group. Almost all ELs who achieve proficiency on the CST's English language arts section will eventually reach RFEP status and no longer be included in EL data.

Nationwide, the achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs is even greater. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) concluded that only 3% of 8th grade ELs scored at proficient in the reading assessment, compared to 34% for EOs (2009). Underscoring this data, a 2013 study published by the American Institute for Research (AIR) found that achieving literacy by the 3rd grade was a major predictor of post-secondary success (Hein, Smerdon, & Sambolt, 2013). A key challenge for ELs is that while they are learning English, they are required to take high stake assessments, such as the high school exit exam and the state's standards-based assessments that have significant impacts such as class placements and graduation status, especially at the secondary level (Echeverria, Richards-Tutor, Chinn, & Ratleff, 2011).

Being reclassified as RFEP is significant in that it implies that an EL has met the minimum criteria to be able to perform linguistically and academically on par with native

English-speaking peers.  Although each school district in California has the ability to increase the rigor of their reclassification criteria, the CDE has set minimum guidelines.  The current CDE reclassification guidelines include: comparison of performance of basic skills against EO students, overall score of Early Advanced in the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), teacher recommendation, and parent consultation (California Department of Education CELDT Information Guide, 2015).  In terms of basic skills criteria, school districts have the option to ". . . identify local assessments they are going to use to determine whether English learners are meeting academic measures that indicate they are ready to reclassify" (California Department of Education CELT Information Guide, 2015, p. 19).

The data showed that the achievement gap between RFEP students and English-only students is minimal, with RFEP students sometimes outperforming native English speakers (Hill, Weston, & Hayes, 2014).  As the result of the difference in student outcomes between ELs and RFEP students, gaining an understanding on how students met the reclassification criteria is of importance in the field of education.

<div align="center">**Purpose Statement**</div>

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perceived educational experiences of former English learners from Southern California low-income area elementary schools, and how their experiences may have assisted them in achieving RFEP status. For the purpose of this study, low income was defined as families that qualify for free or reduced lunch under the National School Lunch Program guidelines.  Participants for this study were fourth and fifth grade RFEP students.  Perception of educational experiences was defined as the way RFEP students feel about their education.

**Significance of the Study**

By gaining insights into the perceptions and educational experiences of RFEP students, educators will have a better understanding of how to implement best practices and programs aimed at supporting language acquisition and academic achievement of English learners. The results of this study not only serve as a practical tool for educators, but also add to the body of research on effective EL pedagogy. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks from which this study primarily operated were Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Bandura believed that family, peers, and other individuals who influenced children were responsible for developing their higher-order functions, and through social interactions, children form meaning to the world around them (Holbrook, 1999). Similarly, social cultural theory suggests that individuals learn through social interaction and observations where the environment, people, and one's behavior influence each other (University of Twente, 2014).

**Research Questions**

The goal of this study was to examine the educational experiences as viewed from the perspectives of RFEP students to gain a better understanding of the influences and support systems that helped them achieve English proficiency and academic success. Albert Bandura's social learning theory was explored to look at how students learn from one other through social interaction which includes observation, modeling, and imitation. Social learning theory suggests that learning takes place primarily through modeled observation where individuals use the observations as guides to their own performances (Bandura, 1977). Moreover, using Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, a clearer picture emerged of similar RFEP educational experiences that are largely influenced through social interaction at school and at home.

Vygotsky believed that there exists a deep connection between social interaction and learning among school-aged children (Vygotsky, 1978). To provide the information, the following research questions were utilized to drive this study:

1. How do perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences contribute to their reclassification?

2. Which perceptions of educational experiences do RFEP students have in common with one another?

3. What are the characteristics of RFEP students?

4. What challenges do RFEP students perceive and/or experience in achieving academic success and RFEP status?

### Delimitations and limitations

The delimitations of this study were the purposeful use of fourth and fifth grade participants who have achieved RFEP status within the last 18 months. Because the focus of this study was elementary school experiences, fourth and fifth grade students provided the most practical understanding of an elementary school setting. The study was conducted at three elementary schools from a mid-size school district in Southern California. The possible limitations to this study included the small number of participants (19), the use of only two grade levels for the research, and due to the uniqueness of the district's size and geographical location, this study may not be representative of all RFEP students. Moreover, the exclusive use of English learners whose home language is Spanish constituted a further limitation of this study.

**Research Plan**

This study was conducted utilizing a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design. According to Creswell, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to ". . . collect data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study. . . " (2013, p. 37). In this way, I was able to gain access to the participants' thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and behaviors throughout the study. A phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because it describes meaning for a group of people from their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). The phenomena studied were the shared perceptions of educational experiences from reclassified English learners.

The participants for this study included 9 male and 10 female RFEP students who have been reclassified within the previous 18 months. Furthermore, six elementary school principals employed in the same school district as the students in this study also participated. The study took place in three Southern California urban elementary schools with large EL populations and high percentages of students from low income families. For the purposes of this study, low income was defined as families that qualify for free or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program guidelines (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014). The data collection consisted of semi-structured student interviews, review of site documents, and semi-structured interviews of elementary school principals. The data was analyzed utilizing Moustakas' 7 Steps (1994), then organized and categorized into themes before being represented through tables and figures.

**Summary**

California has approximately 1.4 million ELs enrolled in their public school system, accounting for one quarter of their total student population. The problem necessitating this study

is that on average, only 12% of EL students annually meet the criteria to reclassify as English fluent proficient. The purpose of this study was to provide an insight into how former English learners' educational experiences allowed them to attain English language proficiency and meet grade level standards in English Language Arts. The significance of this study was to have a better understanding of how to implement best practices and programs aimed at supporting language acquisition and academic achievement of English learners. The research questions that drove this study included: (a) How do perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences contribute to their reclassification? (b) Which perceptions of educational experiences do RFEP students have in common with one another? (c) What are the characteristics of RFEP students? (d) What challenges did RFEP students perceive and/or experience in achieving academic success and RFEP status? Delimitations of this study included the purposeful use of fourth and fifth grade participants who have achieved RFEP status within the last 18 months, while its limitations were the small number of participants (19), the use of only two grade levels for the research, and the district's size and geographical location. This study was conducted utilizing a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design. Nineteen reclassified fourth and fifth grade students from low-income families residing in Southern California participated in this study, as well as six elementary school principals. Data collection consisted of semi-structured student interviews, review of site documents, and semi-structured interviews of elementary school principals. The data collected was then analyzed using Moustakas' 7 Steps.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

The following review explores the literature surrounding the factors that influence and play a major role in the reclassification of English learners, as well as some of the language and academic barriers that these students face. The literature review in this chapter is organized into topics related to language acquisition and the education of English learners. First, the theoretical frameworks of Albert Bandura's social learning theory (1977) and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) as they pertain to English learners are explored. Social learning theory describes how learning occurs through observation and imitation of modeled behavior between individuals (Bandura, 1977). They are observations that exist within social interactions and personal experiences to create an ongoing interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors (as cited in Denler, Walters, & Benzon, 2014). Sociocultural theory emphasizes the role that social interaction plays on cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Social interaction focuses on personal relationships with individuals who are most influential in a person's life, such as parents, peers, and teachers (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), culture and language play pivotal roles in cognitive development. The relationship between learning and development were further explored through the *zone of proximal development*: a concept describing the difference between what a child can do with no assistance and what he or she can do with assistance from an adult, or a more knowledgeable peer (Vygotsky, 1978).

Next, the history of English learners in California and CDE programs and expectations for educating English learners, including their measure of English proficiency levels, educational settings, and English Language Development (ELD) standards (California Department of Education, 2015) are examined. To understand today's English learners and English learner

instruction, one must first look at their history in the United States. From its early roots in 1839, the instruction of English as a second language has been an important aspect of public school education (Genzuk, 1988). In California, the state with the largest English learner population, both NCLB legislation and Proposition 227 have made a great impact in English language instruction. In 1998, Proposition 227 was passed in California, requiring that ELs be taught overwhelmingly in English through structured English immersion (SEI) programs during a temporary transition period not to exceed one year, and then transferred to mainstream English-language classrooms (as cited in Parrish, Perez, Merickel, & Linquanti, 2006). Educational guidelines have been provided by the state for the public school system to give English learners an opportunity to become English language proficient, including the implementation of ELD standards and approved educational settings. To measure their levels of English proficiency, the state's department of education created the California English Language Development Tests (CELDT), administered to all English learners in kindergarten through 12th grade annually (California Department of Education 2014). The ultimate goal for English learners is to reach a high level of academic and English language proficiency to meet the state's criteria to achieve RFEP status (California Department of Education, 2014).

The final part of this chapter looks at site-based educational programs, instructional strategies designed to support English learners, and parental involvement. CDE guidelines encourage all California public schools to provide English learners with a daily dedicated time of ELD. To best support student achievement and English language proficiency, high-impact instructional strategies are recommended for implementation during the dedicated ELD time, as well as embedded in daily lessons throughout the school day (California Department of Education 2015). Finally, the literature consistently shows that parental involvement is a key

indicator of academic success among all students.  However, due to language and cultural barriers, parental involvement among parents of English learners is not as prevalent when compared to parents of native English speaking students (Vera, et al, 2012).

**Social Learning Theory**

Much of this study is informed through Bandura's social learning theory (1977), in which he explained the continuous interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental determinants (Bandura, 1977).  In short, social learning theory attempts to explain how people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling.  Bandura asserted:

> Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p.22, 1977)

Boyce (2011) suggested that with social learning theory, the environment, individual behavior, beliefs, and perceptions are all vital components that impact learning.  Furthermore, social learning theory describes learning as a product of interaction between these elements.  In an educational setting, students complete specific structured tasks and specific types of group work, and "learn" when and how to apply the components of the methodology that are successful (Money, 1996).  A method that Bandura described as observational learning includes motor retention process, which he describes as learning that occurs through symbolic coding operations where the learner organizes and stores learning as words or images.  However, the development of the motor retention process can only occur through, ". . . the practice of a skill or enacting a standard of behavior" (Burke & Mancuso, 2012, p. 544).

English learners, especially newly arrived immigrants, feel the need to assimilate and "fit in" with their peers. Bandura (1977) explained through social learning theory how these students observe and imitate other students as a mechanism to break down the social and cultural barriers. The cultural and language challenges faced by ELs can be a motivating factor to quickly assimilate to the new culture and language. Through observation, imitation, and modeling, ELs quickly learn the English language in a social context, but have difficulties acquiring academic language (Olsen, 2010).

A key function of this theory is that self-efficacy plays a central role in the achievement of individual goals. Bandura described self-efficacy as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (1977, p. 79). It is this conviction that will determine if an individual will attempt to deal with a challenging situation. Self-efficacy allows individuals to act on the choices they make in a way that impacts their lives. They are motivated learners who want to learn, and have acquired the skills to learn (Martin, 2004). When an individual perceives to have self-efficacy, it not only negates the fears of a situation, it also increases the self-belief that it will be conquered (Bandura, 1977). In a review that looked at twenty-seven current studies on second language learners, the researchers found that self-efficacy ". . . was one of the most influential independent variables on learner's performance and achievement within second language learning contexts" (Raoofi, Hoon Tan, & Heng Chan, 2012, p. 66).

**Sociocultural Theory**

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) has had a great deal of influence in the instruction of second language acquisition since the mid-1980s, given its emphasis on social interaction, the role of language and culture in the learning process, and the role of *zone of*

*proximal development* (van Compernolle & Williams, 2013). Vygotsky saw the cognitive development and behavior of individuals as a product of social interaction, where culture plays a significant role in deriving meaning of the world around them. In what he referred to as *mediation,* the people who influence a child's life play a central role in their learning and cognitive development. These are the people who shape a child's learning experiences through social interaction (Turuk, 2008). According to Vygotsky, mediation is extended to language as the primary tool that allows individuals to move from one layer to the next of knowledge and understanding (Turuk, 2008). He wrote:

> A child's speech is as important as the role of action in attaining the goal. Children not only speak about what they are doing; their speech and action are part of one and the same complex psychological function, directed toward the solution of the problem at hand". (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 25)

Vygotsky (1978) believed that each child went through several transformations in what he referred to as the *internalization-* the process of internal reconstruction of an external operation. Chief among them is the idea that all functions of a child's cultural development appear twice, "first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). As children are given the opportunity to work with one another, they internalize the benefits, thereby learning new strategies and knowledge of world and culture (Scott & Plaincsar, 2013).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) is often compared to Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory which states that human development is achieved through maturation and the lived experiences within the environment around them (Ojose, 2008). Piaget concluded that a child's experiences are organized in such a manner as to create units of knowledge to make

sense of the world: a mental representations used to understand and respond to each situation (McLeod, 2012). Piaget referred to this process as *schema* (McLeod, 2012). An example of schema can be found in playing a game where a child recalls the steps, patterns, and behaviors from previous experiences, then applies them to a new situation. As the child gets older, cognitive development takes place through maturation and a more complex set of schemas. According to Piaget, learning occurs when individuals are faced with new situations in which they must adapt to the environment, thereby creating a new set of schemas (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

The fundamental differences between sociocultural theory and cognitive development theory lie in the premise that cognitive development is derived from social interactions and the influences that the environment and culture have on a child, as argued by Vygotsky (McLeod, 2012). In contrast, Piaget emphasized that cognitive development evolves through universal stages in children. Furthermore, Piaget believed that development occurs before learning (Vygotsky, 1978), while Vygotsky argued that, ". . . developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes. Rather, the developmental process lags behind the learning process. . ." (1978, p. 90). From this perspective, Vygotsky developed a new approach to understanding the learning progression, which he termed the *zone of proximal development.*

Vygotsky understood that learning needs to reflect a child's developmental level. However, he hypothesized that every child has two developmental levels: the *actual level*, and the *level of potential development* (Vygotsky, 1978). The *actual level* is generally recognized as a child's ability to successfully complete a mental task without the help of another. *Level of potential development,* on the other hand is described by Vygotsky as ". . . problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, p. 86). The *zone of*

*proximal development* therefore, is the distance between the *actual developmental level* and the *level of potential development* (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky viewed the zone of proximal development as a child's potential, or the abilities that are in the process of maturing but have not yet reached mastery (Vygotsky, 1978). Throughout this process, effective classroom instruction aims at providing students with the necessary support structure so that they can acquire the tools to perform skills and concepts at an independent level without the assistance of others. Thompson's study (2013) using the principals of the zone of proximal development found that in a writing activity focused on a middle school student, the teacher's guidance and peer interactions were instrumental in taking the student from a reluctant writer to an independent writer who gained the skills to reflect on his work. This study highlights one of the key tenets in the zone of proximal development: scaffolding. Although Vygotsky never used the term *scaffolding* in his writings, it has become synonymous with the role that social interactions play in cognitive development. Scaffolding refers to the ongoing support provided to a learner by an expert, and therefore learning occurs within the zone of proximal development when a child learns with an adult (Puntambekar, 2009). Once the teacher or more knowledgeable peers have modeled and supported a task or skill, the responsibility then gradually shifts to the students until they can independently perform it (Christmas, Kudzai & Josiah, 2012).

The practical classroom applications of sociocultural theory have significant implications in second language instruction. According to Turuk (2008), a task-based approach to instruction lends itself to the social aspects or collaborative learning. Through peer interaction and collaboration, scaffolding takes place with one another, allowing movement through the zone of proximal development. Furthermore, the use of scaffolding strategies for second language

acquisition impact the rate in which students achieve proficiency in the target language. In a quantitative study, Ghafar Samar and Dehgan (2013) found that the use of teacher and peer scaffolding techniques, key to sociocultural theory, had a significantly positive impact on the reading comprehension skills of second language learners as compared to the control group who did not receive scaffold instruction. The authors concluded that through the targeted use of social and cooperative learning, students were able to correct themselves and develop cognitive processes to learn new and more difficult skills.

In a similar study of second language learners, Salleem and Azam (2015) studied the effects of sociocultural theory strategies that emphasized the concept of zone of proximal development. In this study, second language students who were provided with teacher and peer reading comprehension supports outperformed second language students who received only traditional instruction. As with the Ghafar Samar and Dehgan (2013) study, there was clear evidence that scaffolding the instruction provided the necessary support system for second language learners. Furthermore, the scaffold instruction provided the students with constructive feedback through interaction with their peers, collaborative work, and teacher review. Moreover, the array of activities offered with a sociocultural theory approach gave students an opportunity to take a greater sense of ownership in their learning by being active participants rather than passive observers.

Additional review of the literature supports the implementation of sociocultural practices for second language learners. Social interaction embedded throughout the instruction, such as pair-sharing with peers, discussions with the teacher, and whole class discussions enable the students to respond to teacher-led discussions, interact appropriately with peers, and gain academic competency (Widodo, 2007). Moreover, Vygotsky's views on cognitive development

and learning suggest that teachers should approach their instruction to second language learners in a manner that relates to their sociocultural background and their lived experiences (Lasisi, 2008). It is important to note that language and literacy are ingrained in social practices; they form a contextual relationship that, at the core, are social and cultural (Gee as cited in Lasisi, 2008). Vygotsky sums up his views on cognitive development by stating, "Clearly the problem cannot be solved by using any one formula; extensive and highly diverse concrete research based on the concept of zone of proximal development is necessary to resolve the issue" (1978, p. 91).

Bandura's social learning theory explains how individuals learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling, while Vygotsky's sociocultural theory explains how individuals learn through social interaction. Although both theories are central in this study to understand how students achieve RFEP status, it is important to note that similar characteristics may be found in general student persistence. Bandura (1977), for example, discusses how self-efficacy plays a key role in social learning theory in the achievement of individual goals. However, over the past 15 years, motivational theories such as goal setting theory, self-efficacy beliefs, academic self-concept, motivational orientations and optimism have assisted in further understanding student persistence and retention (Demetrion & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). While Sociocultural Theory looks at learning through the lens of social interaction, Tinto's Persistence Theory (1993) states that "[i]nvolvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence" (p. 71).

**History of English Learners in California**

California's rich Hispanic cultural history can be traced back to the Spanish settlers of the 18th century. Spanish culture and language was introduced to the indigenous population during

this period.  After Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, California became part of its territory.  In 1846 war broke out between the United States and Mexico, stemming from hostilities between the two nations in Texas (Library of Congress, 2015).  The war lasted less than two years, ending with Mexico's defeat and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty called for Mexico to surrender much of what is now the Southwest United States, including California (Library of Congress, 2015).  Many of the inhabitants of California at the time were former Mexican nationals; now under American rule had to adjust to a new system of governance, including the public school system.

During the 1800s in the United States, it was not uncommon to see privately run schools taught in a foreign language.  Communities where concentration of ethnic groups were found often used private schools in an effort to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage (Ramsey, 2008).  The issue over bilingual education became a hotly debated topic in California in the 19th century.  Those that argued against bilingual education felt that all education should be taught in English so that children could quickly learn the language, assimilate to the American culture, and become productive citizens.  There was a strong connection during that time between English and a strong national identity (Nieto, 2009).  In 1855, the California Bureau of Instruction mandated that all classrooms be taught in English only, making it the first English-only state in the union (Garcia, 2008).  The debate, however, was far from over.

Very little changed over the next fifty years regarding the education of English learners in California.  As Mexican immigrants continued to settle in the Southwest United States, American farmers welcomed the abundance of cheap labor to tend to their crops.  In the early part of the 20th century, Civil War erupted in Mexico, resulting in a flood of immigrants crossing the U.S. border to get away from the violence and high unemployment (Gutierrez, 2013).

During that period, bilingual education once again became a topic of discussion for educators and lawmakers. As was the case years before, California remained an English-only educational system. A major challenge for educators was the transient nature of many of these new immigrants. Once a farming area was cultivated, the immigrant families packed up their belongings and moved to the next available work site. In some parts of the Southwest, similar scenes can be found today, making it challenging for these children to receive a quality education (National Farmworker Ministry, 2015).

In the 1930s and 1940s, several landmark court decisions were made regarding school segregation. During that period, anti-immigration and anti-Mexican sentiments in California forced many students of Mexican heritage to attend segregated schools which helped to solidify the ban on bilingual education. *Roberto Alvarez v the Board of Trustees of Lemon Grove School District* in 1931 became the first court decision in the state that prohibited a school district from segregating their students based on race (McDonald, 2013). In 1948, plaintiffs in *Mendez et al v Westminster School District* fought a long standing practice of several school districts in Orange County, California that routinely segregated students of Mexican heritage from their White peers. Citing violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection clause, the Federal Court Judge ruled the practice to be unconstitutional and added that "separating Spanish-speaking children from then English-speaking classmates would deny them access to the English language" (McDonald, 2013). Six years later in *Brown v The Board of Education*, the Supreme Court cited the Mendez case as part of their unanimous decision that ended segregation in public schools across the nation.

The Alvarez, Mendez, and Brown cases provided the impetus needed for Mexican-American groups to continue the fight for their civil rights, including educational rights for

children.  In 1968, with the backing of President Lyndon Johnson, Congress passed the Bilingual

Education Act (Stewner-Manzanares, 1988).  Although this piece of legislation was not initially

a mandate to the states, it did send a clear message of the need to recognize students with limited

English language proficiency.  For the first time in the nation's history, Congress passed

legislation aimed at assisting English learners acquire English language skills.  In 1974, the U.S.

Supreme Court bolstered the Bilingual Education Act by ruling in the landmark decision of *Lau*

*v Nichols* that all states must provide English language services to all English learners in public

schools.  Eighteen hundred Chinese-American students filed suit against the San Francisco

Unified School District in that case, claiming that they were not provided with equal educational

opportunities because they did not speak English (Sugarman & Widess, 1974).

 As the result of a major American labor shortage in the agricultural sector during WWII,

the U.S. established an agreement with Mexico that would allow Mexican workers to

temporarily enter the country. The bracero program, as it was called, was in place from 1942 to

1964.  After the program ended, a large influx of undocumented workers began to fill the void

left by the contract labor force (Gutierrez, 2013).  The Hispanic population continued to grow at

a rapid pace in the 1980s and 1990s, prompting anti-immigration and English-only groups to

pop-up throughout California.  One notable mention was that of S.I. Hayakawa, a US Senator

from California, who in 1983 introduced a Bill to the Senate floor proposing a Constitutional

amendment that would make English the country's official language.  Hayakawa and supporters

of the "English-only" movement believed that English would help unite the country under one

common language, and that bilingual education would serve to deter people from learning

English (Citrin, Reingold, Walters & Green, 1990).  Although California legislators did not pass

an English-only bill, in 1986 the voters passed an official-English law. In that same year 37 states considered similar laws (Citrin, Reingold, Walters, & Green, 1990).

In 1998 California English learners were dealt a big blow with the passage of Proposition 227, which in effect ended bilingual education in the state (Sifuentes, 2008). Software mogul Ron Unz spearheaded the effort to convince voters that eliminating bilingual education was in the best interest of the state's educational system and for English learners. He argued that ELs would learn English at a faster pace in an English-only classroom environment. Under Proposition 227 (1998), "non English speaking students would be placed in one year classes where instruction is overwhelmingly in English…" (Sifuentes, 2008, p. 1). The classes, called Structured English Immersion (SEI), segregated ELs for one year before enrolling them in a mainstream classroom environment with EO students who receive general education instruction. The idea was that students would learn sufficient English during their time in the SEI classroom, then transfer that knowledge in the mainstream classrooms where the EO students would serve as models to further aid in language acquisition.

Since the passage of Proposition 227 (1998), there has been ongoing debate over its effectiveness. While proponents of the legislation look at rising standardized test scores of ELs during the past ten years, others argue that it is not possible to use that data as a point of comparison, given that there are a great number of variables that must be considered. It is true that ELs have improved on the CST, but there has been a relatively similar rise in test scores for English-only students as well. The achievement gap between ELs and EO students has increased over the same ten year period (California Department of Education, 2013).

In 2001, NCLB legislation created an accountability model that was unprecedented in the history of American public education. It forced states, California included, to take a closer look

at their instructional programs and instructional strategies. Over the past ten years, there has also been a marked improvement in ELD curriculum and intervention programs. As education moves forward, educational technology will continue to improve and offer EL students additional resources to help them achieve academic and English language proficiency. Meanwhile, the issue regarding how best to teach ELs will continue to be debated.

The CDE has long been among the leading advocates in the nation for ELD programs that support ELs. As the state with the largest EL population at 1.4 million students (California Department of Education, 2014), it bears a tremendous responsibility to ensure that its school districts and school sites throughout the state are providing the programs and resources to all EL students that will increase their English language skills and help close the achievement gap. Failure to do so creates a domino effect that starts with under-achieving students, and eventually drains other sectors of the state's infrastructure and resources. To have a broader understanding of the state's program and expectations for all ELs, a review of the literature will be conducted pertaining to levels of English proficiency, reclassification and LTELs, California ELD standards, and current EL instructional settings.

**California English Language Development Test**

Titles I and III of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and sections 313 and 60810 of California Education Code requires that all students whose home language is not English take an annual assessment to identify students who are limited English proficient, and determine their level of English proficiency (California Legislative Information, 2014). The assessment California English Language Development Test (CELDT) measures a student's English proficiency in four domains: speaking, listening, reading comprehension, and writing. The CELDT is administered each year to all ELs in grades K-12 until they have achieved RFEP

status or are no longer enrolled in the California school system. CELDT results also measure an English learner's progress in each of the four domains. School districts and school sites use CELDT data to monitor student progress and determine best course of action to address areas of EL needs.

Setting Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs) are also required by federal and state law for all students classified as English learners. Two of the three AMAOs are measured by CELDT, while the third is based on the results of the state's standardized test at the Local Education Agency (LEA). Title III provides supplemental federal funding to school districts with the goal of providing ELs with programs that will help them achieve English language proficiency and meet the state's content standards (California Department of Education, 2014). Under Title III, performance goals are set each year to hold school districts accountable for EL academic achievement. Specifically, Title III requires the following AMAOs for California: AMAO 1- Annual progress of English development as reflected on CELDT data; AMAO 2- Increase percentage of English learners who demonstrate proficiency based on CELDT; AMAO 3- Meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for English learner subgroup (California Department of Education, 2014).

CELDT performance descriptors indicate a student's level English language skills in each of the four domains. For grades 2nd–12th, there are five levels of performance which start with Beginning, followed by Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced, and Advanced (California Department of Education, 2013). Kindergarten and first grade have the same performance descriptors, without the writing domain. ELs also receive an overall performance level based on the average of all domains tested. To demonstrate proficiency on the CELDT, an overall performance level of Early Advanced or Advanced must be attained, as well as a

performance level of Intermediate or higher on each domain tested (California Department of Education, 2013).  In the 2013-2014 school year, only 39% of the 1.1 million English learners who took the CELDT scored at levels of Early Advanced or Advanced, indicating a strong need for English learner support across the state (California Department of Education, 2014).  It is important to note that the primary criteria for reclassification to English fluent proficient is an overall performance level of Early Advanced or higher on the CELDT.

While the CELDT meets the English learner assessment requirements as mandated by federal and state law, it fails to provide up-to-date information related to English proficiency levels.  Most schools in California administer the CELDT in the fall due to a testing window that normally opens on July 1, when most of the students are on summer break.  As a result, school districts do not receive the results until the end of January, making it difficult to adequately create supports based on the areas of need.  This necessitates an assessment tool that can be used at the site level to monitor English language proficiency levels throughout the school year.  When teachers have the ability to determine English language proficiency levels, they can identify where students are struggling and create greater opportunities for differentiated instruction (Myers & Tucker, 2011).  Problems with site level assessments often involve the inconsistencies in the teacher scoring.  Among the factors that may lead to inconsistencies in scoring include the student's behavior in class, teacher feelings about the assessment, misinterpreting the assessment, and insufficient training for administration of the assessment (Llosa, 2011).

The current CELDT was introduced in 1999, and has seen only minor revisions to date.  Today, with the implementation of Common Core State Standards, all students are expected to develop the critical-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and analytical skills to meet the

challenges of the 21st century (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014).  Although the new ELD standards were adopted in 2012, they will begin full implementation across California beginning the 2015-2016 school year.  The new version of the CELDT called the English Language Proficiency Assessments of California (ELPAC) will not be implemented until the 2017-2018 school year.  Until that time, California will continue to assess its English learners in the same manner that has been used for the past fifteen years.

**Reclassification**

According to the California Department of Education (2013), ELs will continue to take the CELDT until they have met the criteria for reclassification.  In short, reclassification means that an English learners has achieved the level of English proficiency to meet grade level standards in all core subject areas without the need of ELD support (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2013).  The primary goal of ELD programs is to achieve reclassification for all EL students, and closing the achievement gap.  In fact, reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP) students have demonstrated that they almost always outperform their English learner peers, and often outperform English-only students on the California Standardized Test in English language arts (Hill, Weston, & Hayes, 2014).  In one study Hill et al. (2014) conducted longitudinal research using CST data in English language arts.  They found that RFEP students in second, fourth, and seventh grades scored significantly higher than ELs on the English language arts section of the CST over a five year period from 2008 to 2013. The study also showed that RFEP students slightly outperformed, or were equal to their English-only peers over the same five-year period, suggesting that once an English learner has been reclassified, there is a high likelihood that the student will perform at grade level and close the achievement gap.

It is not difficult to determine why RFEP students perform so well academically. The criteria to meet the minimum threshold for reclassification is demanding, especially for a student sub-group that traditionally struggles academically as a result of their level English language proficiency. In fact, RFEP students are among California's best performing students, prompting school officials and lawmakers to push EL reclassification in an ongoing effort to close the achievement gap (Hill et al., 2014).

Across the state of California, local school districts have the autonomy to develop their own reclassification criteria, as long as they stay within the prescribed state guidelines. The Los Angeles Unified School District for example, which has the second largest school district in the U.S. behind the New York City Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), enrolls 370,000 English learners, 95% of which come from Spanish-speaking homes (California Department of Education, 2014). The Governing Board of the Los Angeles Unified School District approves the reclassification criteria that is consistent with the state's guidelines.

As an example of a school district's criteria for reclassification, the Los Angeles Unified School District requires EL students to (a) have an overall CELDT score of *Early Advanced* or higher and no lower than *Intermediate* in listening, speaking, writing, and reading, (b) teacher evaluation based on the student's grades or progress report, (c) a score of *Basic* or above on the English language arts part of the CST, or a passing score on the California High School Exit Exam, and (d) parent consultation (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2013).

While California transitioned into the Common Core State Standards during the 2013-2014 school year, the state's legislators elected to not assess students using the CST in English language arts or math due to its misalignment with the new standards. Because the CST's

replacement that was authored by Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, was not ready for rollout, no standardized assessment was administered for English language arts or math during the school year. Lacking CST scores for reclassification, most school districts utilized internal summative assessments as a temporary replacement. In a letter written to all California district Superintendents, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson wrote, "In the absence of a state-administered test of student performance on basic skills in 2014 (e.g., CST, CMA), local educational agencies (LEAs) will need to select another measure for the fourth criterion" (California Department of Education, 2014).

Given that reclassification is a primary goal for all ELs, the negative implications of not achieving reclassification status can be far reaching. ELs are considered an at-risk population as a result of their low test scores, high drop-out rates, low college admissions and completion rates, and a persistent achievement gap (California Department of Education, 2010). The most persistent of EL problems are related to long-term English learners. These are students who have been continuously enrolled in U.S. schools for six years and have not reached RFEP status, have remained in the same English proficiency level for two or more consecutive years, and scored a far below basic or below basic on the English language arts section of the state's standards-based achievement test (California Legislation Information 2012). The description of LTELs indicates that these students do not meet grade level standards, and will likely leave high school as ELs, most without many of the language skills necessary to succeed in college or in the work force. The post-high school outlook for English learners should serve as a motivator for educators, prompting them to ensure the reclassification of all ELs by the time they leave elementary school. Upon entering the sixth grade, away from the nurturing setting of an elementary school and one teacher for all subjects, many students have difficulties adjusting to middle school. For

ELs, the challenges of middle school can be overwhelming if they are not prepared with the English language skills and academic skills necessary to succeed in school.

**EL Instructional Settings**

In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 227, sharply curtailing bilingual education in the state's public schools (Arellano-Houchin, Flamenco, Merlos, & Segura, 2001). Teachers were no longer allowed to support English learners in their primary language as the students struggled to acquire English while learning grade level content. Proposition 227 mandated that "All children in California public schools shall be taught English as rapidly and effectively as possible" (California Secretary of State, 1998). At the time, California had become the first state in the Union to enact English-only laws in the public school system. It was also the first time in the history of the state that a ballot proposition dictated an educational program for a specific group of students. Proponents of Proposition 227 argued that the poor academic performance of the state's English learners was largely due to the ineffectiveness of the bilingual programs in place at the time (Gandara, 2012). It was further argued that English-only instruction in an English immersion program would provide improved academic outcomes (Garcia & Curry-Rodriguez, 2000). Although there is little debate about the importance of English language acquisition for students, a bilingual education allows them to draw from their first language, including literacy skills, then transferring that knowledge into the acquisition of English (Krashen, 1997, as cited in Tilley-Lubs, 2011).

Three major meta-analytic studies conducted by Willing (1984), Greene (1998), and most recently by Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass (2005) have shown that bilingual education has had a positive impact on the academic achievement of ELs compared to English-only instruction (Ryan, 2007). All three studies found that ELs in bilingual education programs consistently

outperformed their EL peers enrolled in English-only instruction.  Willig's (1984) meta-analysis study for example, indicated that students who were receiving bilingual instruction scored .67 standard deviation higher than students receiving English-only instruction.  Greene's study (1998) showed that bilingual programs produce .21 of a standard deviation improvement on reading tests over EL students who were not enrolled in a bilingual program.  The study conducted by Rolstad et al. (2005) likewise indicated that bilingual programs produced a .23 of a standard deviation improvement in student outcomes over English-only instruction.  This data represents statistically significant gains in all three studies.

Another meta-analysis study which was conducted by Collier and Thomas (2002) found dual language instruction to be effective in helping ELs close the achievement gap.  In a comprehensive study that looked at several dual language models from 1985-2001, the researchers concluded that there was a statistically significant difference in student outcomes between ELs who had received instruction in a dual language classroom and those who had not received education with primary language support.  The results of this research have made a strong case for the use of primary language support for ELs.

Today, Proposition 227 (1998) remains law, and the California Department of Education offers three EL instructional settings for English learners: Structured English Immersion (SEI), English Language Mainstream (ELM), and Alternative Program (California Department of Education, 2014).  Structured English Immersion is an instructional program for English learners where they are placed in a general education setting that offers an ELD curriculum and daily ELD instruction aimed at providing language acquisition support.  A large portion of the instruction is in English with some primary language support. The SEI model was touted as the viable alternative to bilingual education by the supporters of Proposition 227, where students

could quickly achieve English proficiency.  Since the passing of Proposition 227, numerous studies have been conducted to measure SEI's effectiveness in providing English language acquisition support as compared to bilingual instruction without any clear consensus.  The National Research Council, has concluded that primary language support has positive outcomes in language acquisition and math (Tong, Lara-Alecio, Irby, Mathes, & Kwok, 2008).  A statistically significant difference ($p < .0125$, ES = 0.64) was found in English oral proficiency, indicating that ELs placed in the experimental group had a higher mean growth rate than that of ELs in the control group (Tong et al., 2008).

Critics of SEI maintain that it is a "sink or swim" model because most teachers do not modify their instruction to meet the needs of English learners, but instead leave them to acquire English skills on their own.  Placing students of limited English language skills without the meaningful support systems in place may limit their access to the curriculum and instruction.  It is argued that the SEI program model is fundamentally flawed for its lack of understanding of complexities of language learning and the acculturation process of immigrant children (Adams & Jones, 2006).  As the era of Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium looms, an increase of rigor and greater depth of knowledge in the testing requirements will tell if the SEI model will be able to provide the sufficient ELD support or differentiated instruction and language support for all English learners.

Although the SEI model is a common instructional setting for California's ELs, the English Language Mainstream is primary option for instruction.  The California Department of Education (2014) describes ELM as

"A classroom setting for English learners who have acquired reasonable fluency in

English, as defined by the school district. In addition to ELD instruction, English learners

continue to receive additional and appropriate educational services in order to recoup any academic deficits that may have been incurred in other areas of the core curriculum as a result of language barriers."

Critics of this program argue that teachers do not provide the necessary supports and scaffolding to fill the learning gaps, and as a result, create the bottleneck effect of long-term English learners that do not possess the skills to move forward towards reclassification. One persistent problem is that many teachers have little experience with ELs and may not have a full grasp of the challenges faced by this student population in the process of acquiring English (Susan, Ehlers-Zavala, Daniel, & Sun-Irminger, 2006). It is particularly challenging for elementary teachers to bring their EL students to grade level on content standards and English proficiency with little training in ELD instruction (Hite & Evans, 2006). The importance of professional development cannot be overstated as a vital element that will produce a change in a teacher's instructional practice which then improves student learning (Odden, 2009). However, effective EL instruction often incorporates strategies that are also appropriate for native English speakers such as activating prior knowledge, cooperative learning, graphic organizers, and hands-on activities (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Increased efforts by school districts across the state to provide mainstream teachers with a continuous professional development cycle for EL instruction will be a great boost to the reclassification efforts.

The third EL instructional setting allowed under California law is the Alternative Program (California Department of Education, 2014). This program is designed to provide ELD support, along with primary language support. Parents may only access this type of program by signing a special waiver form, and it is not offered in all schools or districts. One Alternative Program that is growing popularity in California is the Two-way Immersion Program.

According to the Center for Applied Linguistics (2014), in Two-way Immersion, English learners and native English speakers are leveled in the classroom with equal numbers, so that both groups of students serve in the role of language model and language learner at different times. To support ELs and native English students in acquiring a second language, the curriculum is delivered equally in the students' home language and English throughout the school day.

The growing body of research on Two-way Immersion has shown to increase student performance. Nicolay & Poncelet (2013), for example, found in their study that after a three year period of enrollment in a Two-way Immersion program, students significantly outperformed students in a monolingual program in the areas of task assessing alerting, auditory selective attention, divided attention, and mental flexibility. The results of their study indicate that early bilingualism can have positive cognitive effects on children. Likewise, students have also demonstrated that enrollment in a Two-way Immersion program can yield academic benefits that are equal or above peers who are enrolled in a mainstream classroom as measured by state standardized assessments (Padilla, Fan, Xu, & Silva, 2013). Overall, however, the bulk of the research as discussed above indicates that English learners who have participated in ELD programs that provide primary language instruction, such as two-way immersion, have consistently outperformed other English learners who have not received instruction with primary language support (Lindholm & Genesee, 2010).

**ELD Programs**

In California, EL students are required to have a daily dedicated time of ELD instruction outside of the core content area. It is during this time that the teacher focuses on language development skills that are not a normal part of the day's core lessons. ELD instruction is for the

purpose of advancing ELs' language skills to a high level of proficiency, and to maximize their ability to master grade level standards taught in English (Saunders & Goldenber, 2010). Unfortunately that daily block of time is too often ignored, leaving EL students without the needed support system.  It is estimated that few students receive any ELD services with primary language support, and that over 30% receive no services at all, while only 20% of ELs receive some services, but with no support to access the content (Olsen, 2010).

There are several guidelines from the California Department of Education to provide ELD instruction.  First and foremost is the understanding that providing ELD instruction is better than not providing it (Saunders & Goldberg, 2010).  EL instruction is a vital gateway to language acquisition at all fluency levels.  English learners who receive ELD instruction on a consistent basis are far more likely to outperform ELs who receive no ELD services, and therefore more likely to be reclassified as fluent English proficient (August, Goldenberg, Saunders, & Dressler, 2010).  Other ELD guidelines stress that instruction should emphasize listening and speaking; instruction should emphasize academic and conversational language; and instruction should provide corrective feedback (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010).  These and other guidelines by the California Department of Education are intended to provide school leaders with the framework for an effective ELD program.

Students' ability to listen and communicate orally play an important role in their education, as well as in their daily lives.  Therefore, an emphasis must be placed in the acquisition of oral and listening skills by ensuring that ELs are taught effectively through interactive ELD instruction (Al-Mohanna, 2011).  During the regular instructional day, EL students do not generally have many opportunity to practice their oral and listening skills within the classroom setting.  Therefore, the limited time during ELD instruction serves as an

appropriate time to practice those skills under the direction of the classroom teacher. Oral language and listening are priorities during ELD instruction, but they can be productively taught during reading and writing activities (Saunders & Goldberg, 2010).

The acquisition of academic language is one of the most challenging aspects of English development. It is also the area where most long-term English learners continue to struggle and are prevented from reaching reclassification status. Academic language proficiency plays a vital role in the reclassification process, requiring a high level of understanding during classroom instruction (Crawford & Krashen, 2007). Olsen (2010, p. 23) describes the academic deficiencies of long-term English learners as lacking, ". . . rich oral language and literacy skills in scholastic English needed to participate and succeed in academic work." Without an adequate understanding of the academic language needed to meet grade level standards, ELs find it difficult to access the curriculum. Mathematical language, for example, is specific and precise; with limited academic vocabulary, English learners will struggle with grasping concepts (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). Students who lack academic vocabulary are at a greater disadvantage in learning, and that learning gap is the primary obstacle to their comprehension of the curriculum (Newton, Padak, & Rasinski, 2008, as cited in Siblold, 2011).

In language development, students will invariably make a wide range of errors when expressing themselves orally. It is up to the classroom teacher to decide how best to address those errors through corrective feedback. Today there is no debate on whether corrective feedback should be practiced in the classroom. Instead, the debate is on how to best practice it to affect positive change. Three of the more common types of corrective feedback include recasts, explicit corrections, and prompts. With recast corrective feedback, the teacher repeats what the student said without the error, while explicit corrections repeat what the students said, including

the error (Lyster & Saito, 2010). Lyster and Saito (2010) describe the elements of corrective prompts as having, elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, and repetition. Spada (2011) found that in classroom studies, the use of explicit corrective feedback, including the use of meta-language and clear indicators to the students when errors were made, were more effective than the implicit form of corrective feedback. The use of implicit feedback provides a more subtle and indirect approach to calling the attention of a particular language feature (Spada, 2011). There is a wide consensus that corrective feedback is essential in the development of language.

**Instructional Strategies**

Teaching students to develop English language skills while holding high expectations to learn core content material creates many challenges for the classroom teacher, least of which is the fact that English learners come to us with a wide range of educational and cultural experiences, as well a varied range of language proficiencies (Echeverria, Vogt, & Short, 2010). Understanding all of the complexities of second language acquisition are not within the scope of this study, but there are generally recognized instructional practices found in the educational community that have shown to be the most effective for teaching English learners. Given that most ELs spend the major portion of their school day in a mainstream classroom, it becomes critically important that the teachers have the tools to instruct them in a manner that facilitates access to the curriculum.

Specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) is a teaching approach that provides standards-based content and language development support in the mainstream classroom, as well as in ELD programs. This approach is most appropriate for students who have some understanding of English, but continue to need a support system to access grade level

curriculum (Gibbons, 2003).  Some of the more commonly used SDAIE techniques include

cooperative learning, building on prior knowledge, and the use of non-verbal representations

(Echeverria et al., 2010).

Cooperative learning allows students to engage in meaningful and productive interactions

with their peers (Snow & Katz, 2010).  It also gives them an opportunity to communicate with

native English speakers in a less threatening environment than that of a whole class discussion.

Academically, students demonstrate significant benefits from working in cooperative groups.  In

his study, Hsiung (2012) showed that students who consistently work in teams performed

substantially better than students who work in individual learning settings.  The teacher must

carefully plan activities to ensure that English learners actively participate.

The use of prior knowledge to promote student learning and language development is an

essential element of effective SDAIE strategies.  It is a powerful tool that can be used to store

acquired knowledge systematically and retrieve it to make sense of new information (Khodadady

& Hesarzadeh, 2014).  Prior knowledge includes the experiences that each student brings from

their life inside and outside of school.  Since many English learners have little or no prior

knowledge in most academic content areas, teachers should take the time to create opportunities

for these students to create connections through materials such as photographs, models, and

illustrations (Echeverria et al., 2010).

Teachers commonly employ a SDAIE strategy using non-linguistic visual representations

to make connections with the subject matter.  Through visual representations, ELs learn to recall

what they have just learned, and it is an effective method of practicing memory and

comprehension skills (Pang, 2013).  Sam & Rajan (2013) examined the differences in

performance between the EL students who utilized graphic organizers and EL students who did

not. What they found was a statistically significant difference between the two groups, where the group who used graphic organizers outperformed the other group in the understanding of texts. The control group showed minimal improvement in a reading comprehension assessment, while the group who utilized graphic organizers showed a 17% increase in their test scores. Other forms of non-linguistic visual representations may include graphic representations, physical models, and generating mental pictures (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001).

The SDAIE strategies discussed make up only a fraction of the effective practices that are available to support English learners. Additional instructional strategies exist that help ELs with specific content areas. Through awareness and professional development, teachers will be better equipped to deal with the challenges of supporting English learners when instructing in English.

**Parental Involvement**

A strong partnership between home and school plays a pivotal role in student success, particularly during a child's elementary school years when students are developing the academic foundational skills that will help shape much of their future education. Like their EO peers, ELs greatly benefit from their parents' participation in school activities and programs. When parents are involved in their children's schooling it sends a clear message that education is valued in the home. Traditionally, parents can be seen volunteering their time in their child's classroom, attending teacher-parent conferences, acting as chaperones during class field trips, providing assistance during school community events, or taking part in one or more of the school's parent action committees. However, parent participation is not confined to the school setting, as it most often takes place at home in the form of communicating expectations for their children's educational attainment, assistance with homework, or parent-child communication regarding school work (Xu, Kushener Benson, Mudrey-Camino & Steiner, 2010).

The general consensus in the literature has found a positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In their study, Lee and Bowen (2006) found that parent participation at school and parent educational expectations were strongly associated with high student achievement. Parents who frequently attended school functions, conferenced with the teacher, or volunteered in the classroom were more likely to have high academic achieving students than those whose parents had limited interactions with the school. Likewise, parental expectations for their children's educational future were strong predictors of student achievement, suggesting that high educational aspirations for their children was a motivator to do well in school. The research also suggests that parental education expectations contribute to the development of self-regulated learning on elementary-aged children, where students become reflective learners, with positive attitudes regarding their own learning (Xu et al., 2010). Positive attitudes about school and the learning process create fertile grounds from where student achievement can blossom. The same research found a strong correlation between parental education expectations, self-regulated learning, and increased reading scores among fifth grade students. High educational expectations alone do not raise reading levels; however, they instill in their children the self-confidence that promotes individual achievement and the drive to perform well academically.

There is evidence that the benefits of parental involvement transcend racial and ethnic differences. Academic measures have shown to be directly affected by the level of parental involvement in minority and non-minority students alike. In Jeynes' (2003) meta-analysis study to determine the impact of parental involvement on students' academic achievement, the 26 studies reviewed showed a consistent pattern between parent participation in their children's education and higher standardized test scores than students whose parents had limited or no

participation. The implications of this study clearly communicate that all students can benefit from parental involvement, and should therefore be a matter of high priority in schools, particularly in those where minority students represent a large segment of the student population.

For parents of English learners, their ability to be involved is often met with barriers that limit the degree of participation in their children's education. Some of these barriers may be real, and some may be perceived; however, neither is beneficial to achieve positive student outcomes. Research by Vera et al. (2012) found that the most common barriers to parental involvement by English learner parents were related to a lack of English language skills, cultural differences, and a lack of familiarity with the U.S. educational system. As a result of these collective obstacles, many parents of English learners do not access in-school opportunities to be involved in their children's education. English learner parents often do not feel connected to the school because teachers and school administration lack the training and programs to create a welcoming and engaging environment for them. Shim (2013) found EL parents' feelings about their interactions with classroom teachers described as intimidating, feeling excluded, and demeaned by how some teachers suggested that the parents do not care about the educational well-being of their children. This study underscores the communication gap between school and home that has kept many EL parents from taking a more active role in their children's education. However, for most EL parents, participation takes place at home where activities such as conversations about homework and the school day take place without the language or cultural barriers faced at school (Shim, 2013).

The language barrier is the most prevalent cause that EL parents have limited in-school participation, as compared to English speaking parents. Their inability to communicate with members of the school community can be a frustrating experience, while feeling marginalized

(Guo, 2010).  The language barrier may also limit parents' ability to fully participate at home due to their lack of understanding of their children's school work.  Irrespective of whether parents understand the content of the homework, their English language limitations make it difficult to grasp what is being asked of the child.  Nevertheless, "parents need to feel that they play a meaningful role in school decisions that affect them and their children" (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011, p. 115).

In an effort to help EL parents overcome the language barrier, some schools and school districts offer them the opportunity to attend English classes for adults.  English as a Second Language (ESL) for adult learners can serve several purposes.  First, parents can begin to develop English language skills that are needed to increase their level of communication with English-only members of their community and their children's schools.  Furthermore, adult educators will have the ability to explore with parents ideas about learning, resources, and opportunities to support their child's education, thereby making participation in their children's education something well within their reach (Shiffman, 2010).

There is a strong perception among parents that their participation in ESL classes increases their children's motivation to do well in school, as well as their own motivation to increase their involvement in their children's education (Gonzalez, 2010).  As a result, school administrators and teachers must continue to emphasize the need for a sustained partnership between school and home.  Programs, for example, are readily available that specifically target English learners, in which parents with limited English ability can read aloud, listen to, or read with their children, assisting in their reading development from home (BavaHarji, Letchumanan, & Bhar, 2014).  Resources can also be focused on programs that make school a more welcoming and accessible environment for English learner parents.  Advisory teams that include non-

English speaking parents to review school policies and procedures such as homework guidelines, improving school culture, and creating more opportunities for parent participation are meaningful ways to advance the home to school partnership (Calderon et al., 2011).

The literature is clear that parental involvement in a child's education is a strong predictor of high academic achievement. It is also clear that as a result of linguistic and cultural barriers, many parents of EL students choose to have limited parental involvement. However, in spite of those barriers, reclassified EL students continue to succeed in attaining English language proficiency, as well as grade level subject matter proficiency. It is important to bear in mind that high educational expectations by parents tend to correspond to high academic achievement. The positive impact from this method of parental involvement is not marginalized by a lack of English language skills or cultural differences, as these parent to child conversations generally take place in the home using the language with which they are most at ease.

**Summary**

In this chapter literature that plays a major role in the reclassification of English learners, as well as language and academic barriers that these students face was reviewed. The theoretical frameworks that informed this study were Bandura's social learning theory (1977) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978). Glanz et al, (2001) found that social learning theory emphasizes the concepts of self-efficacy, and self-control to achieve desired outcomes (as cited in University of Twente, 2014). Sociocultural theory on the other hand, focuses on the relationship between cognitive development and social interactions. In the classroom, the idea of teacher and peer scaffolding, and collaborative work have been greatly influenced by Vygotsky's work.

To develop an understanding of ELs in California today, one must examine the history of bilingual education that includes landmark court cases such as *Mendez et al v Westminster School District,* and *Lau v Nichols.* Furthermore, key legislation that includes the Bilingual Education Act (1968), NCLB (2001), and Proposition 227 (1998) have had a significant impact on bilingual education and ELs. Ensuring that EL students are ready for reclassification is a high priority for educators in California. Once reclassified, it signals that the student has met the language and academic targets to meet grade level standards, close the achievement gap, and have the opportunity to successfully continue an education after high school. Without the skills to be reclassified, ELs are among the lowest performing student sub-groups; they have a disproportionately high drop-out rate, and a low graduation rate (California Department of Education, 2014).

Key elements that support the academic achievement and English language acquisition of ELs include appropriate instructional settings such as SEI, ELM, and Alternative Programs. Robust ELD programs implemented daily, along with the use of high-impact instructional strategies are also instrumental in meeting the ELs' academic and English language needs. Furthermore, the literature on parental involvement indicates that parent participation in their children's education and communicating high academic expectations are predictors of high academic achievement.

The examination of the literature regarding English learners also suggested that there are many barriers that hinder the progress of this student group. Among them are language difficulties, cultural differences, poor English language development programs at school, and ineffective EL instructional practices. Most ELs are not able to overcome the barriers and fail to

be reclassified.  However, those students who achieve RFEP status manage to overcome similar

barriers that all ELs face.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

## Overview

This chapter examines a detailed description of the study's methodology. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was used to examine the perceptions and shared educational experiences of reclassified English learners. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe qualitative research as prolonged contacts with life situations that are, ". . . reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations" (p. 6). Phenomenological research meanwhile, focuses on the interpretation, or the generalizations of the data collected, rather than in the creation of concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). With the use of this approach and design, the researcher can obtain the discovery of the phenomena of student perceptions and educational experiences.

This chapter also focuses on the use of strict procedures that were followed during all phases of the study. Prior to the start of the data gathering phase, the researcher obtained IRB approval to ensure the ethical treatment of all human subjects. It is especially crucial that all IRB procedures are followed when minors participate, as is the case in this study. Furthermore, this chapter includes an explanation on the selection process for the participants and the setting of the study. Both of these areas are essential to the research, as specific demographic criteria was used to determine which school sites were appropriate for the study, and which students made good participant candidates. A section of this chapter is devoted to a short personal biography to help explain the researcher's personal connection to this study. It was important for the researcher to have the readers understand the motivations and possible biases that are embedded in the study.

The final sections of the chapter include the data collection and data analysis procedures that were used, as well as the ethical considerations for this study. Data collection consisted of

student semi-structured interviews, review of site documents, and semi-structured interviews of elementary school principals. A 23-question, semi-structured interview was conducted with each student participant. As a corroborating piece to the data collection process, site documents were reviewed and analyzed. The review of documents, such as standardized test scores, report cards, attendance reports, and discipline records supported the data collected from the interviews. In addition, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of six elementary school principals.

The data analysis was the final piece where a great deal of information was organized and filtered to find emerging patterns, in search of a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon. Moustakas' 7 Steps (1994) was the primary tool to complete the data analysis. To increase the quality of the study, and therefore its trustworthiness, the essential elements included were credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The ethical considerations for the protection of all participants was of the highest priority throughout the study. The student participants completed consent and assent forms, and school principal participants also completed consent forms. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of all participants, including students, teachers, administrators, schools, and school district.

## Design

This study was conducted utilizing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions and shared educational experiences of reclassified English learners to gain a better understanding of how these students were able achieve academic success and English proficiency while the majority of EL students continue to struggle. A qualitative approach to this study captured the participants' stories that can be told in in depth and in detail without the constraints of predetermined categories of

analysis that are typically found in quantitative research (Patton, 2002). A phenomenological design was appropriate for this study, as the researcher focused on the participants' shared educational experiences to form a "description of the universal essence" to identify a phenomena (Creswell, 2013, p. 58). Moustakas (1994) views a phenomenological approach as a means to find the descriptions that allow the researcher to create a structural analysis that reveals the essence of the shared experiences. It is from this approach that individual descriptions form general meanings. Through a data collection process that included student interviews, review of site documents, and a focus group of elementary school principals, the researcher gained insights into the educational experiences and perceptions of reclassified English learners that allowed me to identify common phenomena. Twentieth century sociologist Alfred Schutz believed that all individuals find themselves in specific situations of life, and they enter a situation based in part on their own lived experiences from which to make sense of the world around them (Wagner, 1970). From a similar perspective, the participants of this study had the opportunity to share their perceptions of elementary school experiences in a manner that was unique to each one of them, but with common threads between one another. Their similar lived experiences, or "realities" become the foundation from which to identify common phenomena (Greenwald, 2004).

## Research Questions

The following research questions were utilized to drive this study:

1. How do perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences contribute to their reclassification?

2. Which perceptions of educational experiences do RFEP students have in common with one another?

3.     What are the characteristics of RFEP students?

4.     What challenges do RFEP students perceive and/or experience in achieving academic success and RFEP status?

**Procedures**

To conduct this study, the researcher followed several procedures. Prior to the start of the data gathering process the researcher secured IRB approval utilizing an IRB application (Appendix A). The IRB exists to ensure that all research involving human participants is conducted in an ethical manner, thereby safeguarding their well-being. First, the researcher contacted the school district where the study took place to request authorization of the use of their facilities and student participation. Once permission was granted, the school principals of the three schools where the study was conducted were contacted to further discuss the details of the research. As the researcher had a positive professional relationship with district and site administrators, access to the facilities and the identification of potential participants did not present a problem.

The next step was to find and identify student participants. For this crucial part, the researcher requested assistance from the schools' administrators. The specific sought parameters were communicated to them so that they could provide the names of qualified potential participants. The researcher contacted the parents to explain the purpose of the call, and request their permission for their child to participate in the study. To make certain that there was no misunderstanding, the initial conversation was conducted in Spanish when needed. The researcher is a fluent Spanish speaker, and therefore did not require the services of a translator. Given that all of the student participants for this study were elementary-aged children, parents

were asked to sign a consent form translated into Spanish, and the students were asked to complete an assent form (Appendix B & Appendix C).

The researcher also secured the participation of six elementary school principals to take part in an individual semi-structured interview where the questions were framed around the English language development programs at their respective schools (Appendix D). All six elementary school principals were from the same school district where the study took place, and two of the six principals solicited had students participating in the study. The invitations to participate in the interview were made by a telephone call. During the initial conversation, the researcher explained the purpose behind the interview, the date and time of the interview, and its location. A consent form was prepared for each of the participating school principals (Appendix E).

Once all of the participants were secured, the data collection process began. The initial data included site documents such as grades, standardized test scores, English language assessment data, attendance reports, and discipline reports. After gathering this data, the researcher conducted student semi-structured interviews for each of the participants (Appendix F). At the school sites, interviews were conducted in a private office or vacant classroom. However, if parents, teachers, or school administrators had communicated concerns regarding student participation during the school day, a mutually agreed alternate meeting place, such as a public library would have been used. To ensure the integrity and accuracy of the interview process, the researcher utilized a primary recording device for all interviews, and a back-up device was available in case it was needed.

After all of the data was collected, the task of analyzing it followed. Moustakas' 7 Step model (1994) was the method for analyzing all of the student data. Throughout the data analysis

process, the researcher continuously wrote personal memos as a means to further reflect on all of the processed information, while gaining a better understanding of the studied phenomenon.

## Personal Biography

As a former English learner in elementary school, I had a first-hand account of some of the challenges ELs face today. The struggles of acquiring a new language while attempting to keep up with the academic demands of school can be frustrating and demoralizing for most students. My parents encouraged me to do well in school and celebrated my successes. However, due to their limited English skills, they were often unable to provide the academic support from home that is essential for student achievement. Unfortunately for my parents and other EL parents, my elementary school did not provide an adequate support system for parents who did not speak English. For this reason, my parents had little contact with my school. What I did have, however, was an uncompromising moral support system at home, as well as a stable home life that was a central part of my life during my growing years.

As I grew older and more confident with my English language skills, I began to actively participate in school sports. It was there where the love of baseball and football forced me to take a more serious approach to school. During my time in elementary school I participated on the school's flag football team. That experience afforded me the opportunity to make new friends and form a connection with school that continued past my high school graduation. This connection was predicated on the understanding that if I did not attend school on a regular basis and maintain acceptable grades, I would not be allowed to participate in school sports. This message was made clear by school officials and my parents. During my junior high school and high school years, the connection between school and athletics became stronger. By the time I was a high school sophomore, my motivation to do well in school was so deeply rooted that it

was a forgone conclusion in my home that I would attend college after graduation. That was more than thirty years ago. Later, as a high school teacher and coach, I used those same lessons I learned as a student to motivate my own students and student athletes, especially my English learners. As a teacher, coach, and now school principal, I am a strong advocate of affording students the opportunity to make greater connections with their school through extra-curricular activities. I am keenly aware that most of the English learners at my school do not have the financial means to participate in sports or other activities outside of the school setting, which is why I advocate for in-school and after school programs for them.

Today, the faces may have changed, but the same language, cultural, social, and academic challenges exist for ELs across the country. I find myself in a unique position as principal of an elementary school with a numerically significant EL population, which the State of California defines as 100 or more students with valid standardized test scores, or 50 or more students with valid standardized test scores and make-up at least 15% of the school's population (California Department of Education, 2014). Prior to my current assignment, I was the principal of one of the largest elementary schools in the state of California, serving 1,100 K-5 students, with one quarter designated as English learners. It is from the multi-perspective of a former English learner, a high school teacher, an athletic coach, and school principal that I undertook this study to add to the field of research and improve the outcomes for ELs.

**Participants**

Participants for this study included 19 fourth and fifth grade students who were reclassified as English proficient over the past 18 months, and whose home language was identified as Spanish. Creswell (2013) suggested that 19 participants is an appropriate number when utilizing a phenomenological design. In a phenomenological study, the researcher looks

for a narrow field of participants that have experienced the same phenomenon being studied so that the data does not generalize the information, but rather is used to find specifics (Creswell, 2013). The use of a relatively small number of participants can produce a great deal of detailed data in a qualitative study, which can be described as depth over breadth when compared to a quantitative research study (Patton, 2002).

The use of fourth and fifth grade students provided the greatest span of educational experiences at the elementary school level. The purpose behind limiting participants to those who were reclassified within the last 18 months was to obtain perspectives and ideas from students who have recently gone through the experience of reclassification and could more easily recall vivid details that were essential to this study. The purposeful sampling for this study in terms of participants and setting were central to the understanding of the research problem and phenomenon. In a phenomenological study, purposeful sampling is founded on the premise that each participant is chosen based on having experienced the phenomenon under focus (Creswell, 2013). Patton (2002) describes purposeful sampling as, ". . . information rich and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest. . ." (p. 40). The three elementary schools selected to participate in this study had a significant English learner population, as well as a high percentage of students who came from low-income families, as previously defined, allowing for reclassified English learners to have had potentially similar educational experiences.

It was important to identify student participants who had faced and overcome a greater array of challenges than those EL students who came from middle class and upper class homes. EL students identified as "low-income" are at greater risk of not achieving reclassification status, not meeting grade level standards, and not graduating from high school as compared to EL

students who are not identified as "low income" (Chao, Schenkel, & Olsen, 2013). Furthermore, the National Education Association (NEA) reports that EL students who come from low income families represent two-thirds of the total EL population in the United States (as cited in The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs, 2007).

The student participants included nine male students and 10 female students to ensure representation of the perspectives from both genders, while still preserving the integrity of the results. To maximize homogeneity, all of the participants were enrolled in the same school district for at least three years. In this way, each participant received a similar educational program that is consistent with the school district's priorities and educational goals.

Additional participants included six elementary school principals who took part in an individual semi-structured interview to discuss their ELD development programs, and reclassification of their EL students. All participating school principals were employed in the school district where the study took place, and two of the solicited principals served at schools where student participants were enrolled.

**Setting**

The setting for this study took place in three participating elementary schools in a suburban, mid-size school district in Southern California that serves a high percentage of students from low income families. The school district has a student population between 20,000-25,000 K–12 students. The ethnic make-up is: Fifty one percent Hispanic, 34% White, 8% African American, and 7% other (California Department of Education, 2014). The three elementary schools were chosen to participate due to their high EL enrollment: 26%, 32%, and 34% of their respective total student population, of which more than 90% represents students

whose primary home language is Spanish (California Department of Education, 2014). In the 2013-2014 school year, two of the three participating elementary schools had overall CELDT performance levels of *Early Advanced* and *Advanced* significantly below the state average of 39% (California Department of Education, 2014). Each of the participating elementary schools has an average of 91% of their students qualify for free or reduced lunch (California Department of Education, 2014). Due to the high number of EL students from low income families that are found in the participating elementary schools, the selection of this school district and these schools was appropriate for this study.

### Data Collection

For this study, the three employed methods of data collection included student interviews, analyzing site documents, and semi-structured interviews of elementary school principals. This process of data collection achieved triangulation. With triangulation, multiple separate reference points of data are collected to create a rich, well-developed cache of information that will increase the validity of the research (Grbich, 2007).

The interviews were semi-structured in nature to maintain the freedom to ask follow-up or clarifying questions of student participants. Prior to conducting the actual interviews, the researcher piloted the interview questions with a group of students who did not take part in the study. The purpose of the pilot was to limit or eliminate possible problems during the actual study, and to ensure that all participants were afforded the best possible experience during the interview process. The second set of semi-structured interviews included six currently employed elementary school principals from the school district where the study took place. An interview guide structured the conversations around major themes of ELD programs and English learner

reclassification.  A pilot interview took place with a school principal who did not take part in the study.

The sequencing of the data collection process began with semi-structured student interviews.  After the semi-structured interviews, the researcher reviewed site documents.  By inspecting the students' grades, standardized test scores, English language assessments, work samples, discipline records, and attendance records, the researcher began to form a profile for each participant.  These site documents provided an insight to the students' abilities, work habits, personalities, and parental support, all of which helped support the data collected from semi-structured student interviews.  Once the site documents were reviewed, the final step in the data collection process was through the semi-structured interviews of elementary school principals.

**Interviews**

The three methods of data collection procedures for this study were semi-structured student interviews, review of site documents, and an elementary principal semi-structured interviews.  Each of these methods assisted in achieving data triangulation, resulting in an increase of trustworthiness in the study.  Creswell (2013) describes the concept of triangulation as ". . . corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (pg. 251).   Each of the data collection methods provided answers to one or more of the research questions.  With the use of semi-structured interviews, the ability to explore in great detail the participants' perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and ideas on a wide range of topics was gained.  Unlike structured interviews, where the interviewer maintains a strict adherence to the interview script, the semi-structured interview relies on an interview guide, with the freedom to probe deeper into a topic.  The semi-structured interview guide contains a list of questions and topics that are intended to be asked in a specific order, while allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up

questions as leads are uncovered (Bernard, 2006). This type of interview approach frees the interviewer to build a conversation within a specific predetermined subject matter with the intent of eliciting a participant's experiences (Patton, 2002).

**Student semi-structured interviews.** The student interview process explored the perceptions of the participants' educational experiences that allowed them to succeed in school, as well as the challenges that they have faced as English learners. The students' responses to these questions assisted in making a determination about what they have in common with one another, which in turn allowed the description of the characteristics that can be found among reclassified English learners.

The logistics for the student interviews included a request for access to a private office or classroom at all of the participating schools, or an alternate location that was mutually agreed by the parents and me. Each interview was scheduled for an approximate time of 45 minutes. The semi-structured interviews consisted of predetermined questions and a guide with topics to be covered in a preset order. Follow-up questions were used throughout the interviews to obtain rich data from each of the participants. A pilot test was conducted with students who had no participation in the actual study prior to the start of the student interviews. The pilot test was conducted to further improve the interview procedures (Creswell, 2013). In selecting the participants for the pilot test, the researcher must make certain that they have similar backgrounds to the participants of the study for a more realistic outcome (Turner, 2010).

Each interview used a primary recording device and a back-up recording device. In addition to the use of an audio recording device, supplemental notes captured further details of the interview that cannot be communicated on the recording, such as a participant's body language. Soon after the completion of the interviews, they were transcribed into a Word

document stored in a password protected laptop computer. The researcher asked the following questions during the student semi-structured interviews, with additional follow-up questions as needed:

*Language usage*

1. Tell me about the languages that are spoken at home? In what language do your parents speak to you? In what language do you speak to your family members?

2. What language are you more comfortable speaking? English or Spanish?

3. What are the languages in which you can read and write?

4. Tell me about the languages that you speak at school with your friends.

*Educational experiences*

5. Tell me how you feel about school?

6. Why do you think that you do well in school?

7. Which teacher do you feel has helped you the most? What kinds of things did the teacher do to help you?

8. Besides you teachers, has there been someone at school that has helped you with your English skills? What kinds of things did that person do to help you?

9. Has there been anyone outside of school who has helped you with your English skill? What kinds of things did that person do to help you?

10. Tell me about the things you enjoy about school.

11. Tell me about your favorite subjects in school?

12. What have been the difficult things about learning English at school? How were you able overcome them?

13. Tell me about what you want to be when you grow up?

14.     How do you think your education will influence your future?

*Other related factors to the success of EL students*

15.     How are your parents involved at your school?

16.     Who lives at home with you?

17.     At home, can you tell me about your homework routines, and any help that you might get?

18.     What are the languages in which your parents can read and write?

19.     Tell me about your parents' expectations for your education?  How do they communicate that to you?

20.     Tell me about your behavior in school, in class, on the playground, and in the principal's office.

21.     How is your attendance at school?  Tell me about absences and getting to school on time.

22.     Tell me how you feel about doing well in school?  How do you feel when you don't do well on an assignment or test?

23.     Is there anything else that you want to add that we might have missed in this interview?

The purpose of the interview questions was to establish an understanding of the students' perceptions of their educational experiences, and to gain an insight into how they were able to overcome the language, academic, and social obstacles to achieve reclassification to fluent English proficient.  Questions 1 through 4 focused on the extent of their English and Spanish use at school and at home to establish a baseline on how exposure to their home language may influence their academic performance. Questions 5 through 14 explored the students' thoughts

and feelings about their educational experiences. Their thoughts about their past and present educational experiences may contribute to their perceptions on future educational and career outcomes. Finally, questions 15-22 examined other factors at home and school that may influence student outcomes.

**School principal semi-structured interviews.** The principal interviews assisted in the understanding of what systems and supports schools have in place for ELs, including staff professional development, and programs that support parent participation. The principal interviews took place in their respective offices to ensure privacy. Each interview was scheduled for an approximate time of 30 minutes. The semi-structured interviews consisted of predetermined questions and a guide with topics to be covered in a preset order. Follow-up questions were used throughout the interviews to obtain rich data from each of the participants. The researcher conducted a pilot interview prior to the school principal interviews.

To recruit participants for the school principal interviews, elementary school principals were contacted from the school district where the student participants were enrolled, as this was the setting for this study. School principals were chosen based on the number of English learners enrolled at their respective school sites. The two principals of the schools where the student participants were enrolled agreed to participate in this study. School principal participants were asked the following questions during the semi-structured interviews, with additional follow-up questions as needed:

*Current elementary school ELD program*

1. Describe the current ELD program at your school?

2. What is the curriculum being used, and what activities are students working on during their EL instruction?

3. Tell me about the instructional strategies that are being implemented during EL instruction?

4. How are students selected into the ELD program?

5. How are teachers selected to teach the ELD program?

6. How do you support your ELD program?

7. What is the school culture as it pertains to EL instruction?

*Professional development of EL instructional strategies/ELD programs*

8. What type of professional development have your ELD teachers received to better support EL students?

9. What type of professional development has your entire staff received to better support EL students?

10. What kind of district-level support have you received to help you implement an ELD program, and/or provide staff professional development?

*Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) students*

11. What are some of the common qualities that you find in RFEP students in the area of:

   a. Academics?

   b. Attendance?

   c. Discipline?

10. What are some of the challenges that ELs and RFEPs face?

*Parental Participation*

11. What school programs do you have in place to support parent participation?

12. What school programs do you have in place to support EL parents?

A primary recording device and a back-up recording device was used at each interview. Supplemental notes were taken in addition to the use of an audio recording device to capture further details of the interview that cannot be communicated on the recording. Soon after the completion of the interviews, they were transcribed into a Word document, which was stored in a password protected laptop computer.

**Site Documents**

The use of site documents for each participant provided evidence of their achievements, and value systems. The examined site documents included grades, standardized test scores, assessments of English language skills, student work, attendance records, and discipline records. Documents of this type provided valuable data that was generated before the study begun, much of which could not be directly observed (Patton, 2002). The researcher used site documents to provide information about the participants to corroborate and/or indicate data that was gathered from the interviews (Yanaw, 2007). By taking a close examination of the available documents, the researcher obtained a clearer picture of the participants that could not be achieved through interviews alone. Inspection of the document contents was essential, but it need not end there. Looking through student work, for example, can yield information about the student that goes beyond academics. The way in which the work is stored and organized can tell us much about the individual's personality and values (Saldaña, 2011). The use of site documentation was utilized in conjunction with the student interview process and focus group to gather rich and comprehensive sources of data that served to answer the research questions of this study. The use of site documents provided answers to the research questions. Grades, test scores, discipline records, English language levels, and attendance records provided a partial view into the

students' perceptions of their educational experiences, as well as the documented difficulties that they may have experienced academically and socially.

Gaining access to the site documents of each student required the assistance of school administrators and classroom teachers. All of the documents requested were readily available in the schools' data system and classroom. The information obtained from each student record was stored in a password-protected computer, and pseudonyms were used for all students.

**Data Analysis**

In the data analysis of qualitative research, the biggest challenge lies in taking an enormous amount of raw data, ridding oneself of the insignificant information, ". . . then identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" (Patton, 2002, p. 432). This process begins with the organization of the data before categorizing it into themes by coding and then representing the data in figures, tables, or discussion (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas' 7 Steps method (1994) was used to analyze all of the interview data.

Moustakas' 7 Steps methods of analysis of phenomenological data is a modified version of an earlier model developed by Van Kaam (Moustakas, 1994). Each step is designed to analyze the transcribed interviews of participants. Moustakas' model (1994, pgs. 120-121) begins with listing and preliminary grouping. In this step, in what he refers to as *horizonalization,* the researcher lists every expression relevant to the experience. As the interview transcripts were studied, statements were reviewed where the participants made reference to their perceptions of their educational experiences. In step two, the researcher conducted a reduction and elimination of the statements that are overlapping, repetitive, or vague. Here, the review of each interview transcript preserved only the information that was

relevant to the studied phenomenon. Once the pertinent data was gathered from each transcript, step three consisted of clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents. Through clustering began the process of organizing the data in groups-or clusters- that have things in common with one another. A researcher will have a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied by, ". . . grouping and then conceptualizing objects that have similar patterns or characteristics" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 249). Once clustering was completed, they were organized by themes. Invariant constituents provided the descriptions of the experience from each of the participants, which in turn became the formation of themes.

In step four, the researcher conducted a final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application. It is in this step that the themes identified in step three were combined to validate the data against the full transcription of each participant. If the invariant constituents and themes are not compatible or explicit, then they must be discarded as irrelevant to the participant's experience (Moustakas, 1994). In step five, the researcher developed an individual textural description for each participant using their validated invariant constituents and themes obtained from the transcriptions. Textural descriptions capture vivid images of what the individual participants experienced (Moustakas, 1994). This step answers the "what" questions of the experience. In this study, the textural descriptions of each participant reflected their individual accounts of their educational experiences, including those that were most challenging.

The final two steps in Moustakas' model (1994), the individual structural descriptions, and the textual-structural descriptions were developed. Individual structural descriptions answered the "how" questions of the experience. While textural descriptions are based on what was experienced by the individual participants, structural descriptions are developed from how

each participant felt about the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This step of the data analysis process answered the central question of this study, which was to understand the students' perceptions of their educational experiences. Throughout the development of the textural and structural descriptions, the researcher categorized the responses for individual participants and the collective group. In step seven of Moustakas' model, the researcher develops, ". . . a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole" (1994, p. 121). All of the individual structural and textural descriptions are integrated to form the composite description. To obtain a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon, themes were bracketed and coded during the entire data analysis progression.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study is generally defined as "the quality of an investigation (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299). It is what brings integrity to a study by informing the reader of the research process (Saldaña, 2011). To further strengthen a study's trustworthiness, or what Creswell (2013, p. 250) refers to as *validation,* several key elements were explored: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each one of these validation strategies are commonly employed in qualitative research.

### Credibility

Credibility, as part of the study's internal validity, has to do with the assurances that the researcher will accurately report the participants' views of their life ways (Schwandt, 2007). In this study, triangulation of data was employed, as was peer review to ensure the credibility of the data collection and data analysis process. The researcher used multiple data sources to come to a conclusion, thereby strengthening the study and achieving triangulation of the data. It is an

effective strategy for checking the integrity of the inferences drawn from the data gathered (Schwandt, 2013). For example, in this study the researcher achieved triangulation of data by conducting student semi-structured interviews, examining site documentation, and conducting a school principal focus group throughout the data collection process.

Peer review, as part of a study's internal validity, serves to provide an external check of the data and the processes used to obtain the data (Creswell, 2013). It is through the practice of peer review that the researcher depends on the reviewer's ability to ask the tough questions- in essence becoming a second pair of eyes. Reviewing one's work by a peer can bring a fresh outlook and perspective that the researcher may not have previously considered. Likewise, the feedback served as a valuable tool as the researcher moved forward with the study. Throughout each stage of this study, peers routinely gave feedback, adding to its credibility.

**Transferability**

In a qualitative study, the idea of transferability refers to the description of the participants and setting of a study, and how a reader can transfer that information to other settings (Creswell, 2013). Transferability is achieved through rich, thick, descriptive data. This occurs when the researcher can provide the reader with vivid details describing such things as physical surroundings, and interactions. Schwandt (2007), however, refers to thick description as something that describes the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, and motivations of a particular episode of social action. To make certain that transferability was achieved in this study, thick descriptive data detailed the perceptions of the student participants' educational experiences that were uncovered through the interview process, as well as the perspectives of the school principals' focus group.

**Dependability**

The term *dependability* can normally be associated with someone or something that is worthy of trust. In qualitative research, it is no different; as such, it is a vital part of a study's credibility. Honesty and transparency are hallmarks of dependability in the data collection process. Through the use of outside sources, such as an external auditor and peer debriefing, the researcher can assure the maintenance of accurate records that have been accumulated throughout the study, thereby increasing the study's dependability. In this research, the researcher maintained precise recordkeeping by organizing all original data such as audio recordings of participants' interviews (along with notes taken during the interviews), and notes taken during the examination of site documents.

**Confirmability**

The final element to achieve credibility in a qualitative study is confirmability. It is the responsibility of the researcher to demonstrate an objective approach to the interpretation of the data collected. Discovering connections between assertions, findings, and the data ensure that the researcher is making legitimate claims regarding the interpretations of an inquiry (Schwandt, 2007). A common strategy to achieve confirmability is through enumeration, a process in which the researcher counts the number of times each participant mentions an important category, word, or phrase. In essence it is quantifying qualitative data. Words and phrases such as *few*, *some*, *most of the time*, and *once in while* can be clarified through enumeration by attaching a quantitative value. Miles and Huberman (1994) find that in a qualitative study there is a great deal of counting that happens in the background regarding the judgements of qualities being made. Enumerating helps in the identification of patterns that can verify a hypothesis.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations in this study were of high priority.  Prior to the collection of data, IRB approval was secured.  Given that most of the participants of this study were fourth and fifth grade students, all minors completed assent forms, as well as consent forms from their parents after the researcher fully explained the purpose and procedures of the study.  School principals who participated in the study also received a consent form. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were used for all students, teachers, and administrators. The names of the participating schools and school district were changed.  All student interview questions were age-appropriate and limited to scope of the study.

The researcher put procedures in place to ensure the security of all data collected for this study.  When reviewing student records, only the researcher had access to them.  Any information retrieved from student records were kept in a locked filing cabinet, including field notes and audio recordings from the student interviews and focus group interview.  The researcher was the only person with access to the cabinet. The computer used for recordkeeping was password protected and kept in the same locked filing cabinet.  Three years after the conclusion of this study, all data collected will be destroyed or permanently deleted from computer files and recording devices.

All participants, parents, and legal guardians were made aware of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any point. This subject was discussed during the initial recruitment process, and it was stated in the consent form.

**Summary**

In this chapter, a detailed description of the study's methodology was reviewed. The research design utilized was a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to examine the perceptions and shared educational experiences of reclassified English learners. Procedures to this study included IRB approval to ensure ethical treatment of all human participants, followed by the identification and recruitment of student participants, and school principal participants. The four research questions that guided this study were reviewed, as well as the researcher's personal biography.

Student participants for this study were made up of 19 fourth and fifth grade students from three Southern California elementary schools who had been reclassified as English fluent proficient within the previous 18 months. Additional participants included six elementary school principals from the school district where the student participants were enrolled. The setting for this study took place in three participating elementary schools in a suburban, mid-size school district in Southern California that serves a high percentage of students from low income families.

Data for this study, data was collected using student participant semi-structured interviews, school principal semi-structured interviews, and site documents. The data was analyzed by utilizing Moustakas' 7 Steps method (1994). To further strengthen this study's trustworthiness, several key elements were explored: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, ethical considerations were given high priority. IRB approval was secured prior to the start of the data collection process, signed assent and consent forms were collected. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were used for all students, teachers, and administrators, and the names of the participating schools and school district were

changed.  All data and records collected for this study were secured in a locked cabinet and

password-protected computer, with access limited to the researcher.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to examine the perceptions and shared educational experiences of elementary school RFEP students. To capture the essence of the students' experiences, Moustakas' 7 Steps method (1994) was used to analyze all of the interview data. Data analysis, key words and phrases (that Moustakas refers to as invariant constituents), and themes were utilized to find the essential elements of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). In this chapter, the collection of data utilized for this study is described, including the results of the student semi-structured interviews, as well as the data gathered from student records. The data gathered from school principal semi-structured interviews is reported throughout this chapter. Chapter Four is organized in the following manner: (a) an overview of this chapter, (b) a description of the participants, (c) results of the data, and (d) summary of the research.

The results of the data were reported by answering each of the four research questions. Within each research question the theme(s) is/are identified, along with the invariant constituents that make up the themes. Each theme and its invariant constituents were described, and tables were been created to provide their visual representation. The relevant data gathered from the student participants' semi-structured interviews, school principal semi-structured interviews, and site documents were also presented to support each theme and its invariant constituents.

The results of this study suggested that data saturation had been achieved. Bowen (2008) describes data saturation as having been reached "…when the researcher gathers data to the point of diminishing returns, when nothing new is being added" (p. 140). The data gathered from the student semi-structured interviews, the principal semi-structured interviews, and site documents

indicated that adding additional participants to this study would not likely yield new information.

A consistency in the student responses, principal responses, and data from site documents

became evident early in the data analysis process. Polkinghorne recommended that in a

phenomenological study, 5 to 25 participants are an appropriate number from which to gather

data (as cited in Creswell, 2013). Nineteen students and six school principals participated in this

study.

## Participants

Nineteen fourth and fifth grade students from a mid-size school district located in a

suburban area of Southern California who gained RFEP status in the previous 18 months were

invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. All participating students were enrolled in

the school district, which will be referred to as Valley Unified School District (VUSD). Student

participants attended one of the following VUSD schools: Valley Elementary School, Mountain

Elementary School, or Hill Elementary School. These schools were chosen based on their high

number of English learners enrolled. The three schools had similar student demographics.

All student participants were identified as "low income" and had been continuously

enrolled in VUSD for the previous four years. A homogenous group of participants was formed

by targeting RRFEP students who met this specific criteria in which all experienced the process

of reclassification, and all were similar to one another in terms of their demographics. Creswell

(2013) stated that in a phenomenological study, it is essential that all participants are chosen

based on having experienced the same phenomena. He further stated that "the inquirer selects

individuals and sites because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research

problem and central phenomenon of the study" (p. 156). Additionally, six elementary school

principals participated in separate semi-structured interviews.  All participating school principals were employed by VUSD at the time of their interviews.

Notes were taken during the recorded interview process to assist in capturing early insights that may be relevant in other interviews, as well as aid in the analysis of the data later on (Patton, 2002).  Each interview was transcribed to ensure credibility, and the identities of the participants were protected by providing them with pseudonyms.  Student participants were identified as Student 1, Student 2…Student 19, while school principal participants were identified as Principal 1, Principal 2…Principal 6.  A description of each of the participants follows below.

**Principal 1**

Principal one was a female in her early 40s, married with no children.  She had been the principal at her school site for the five two years.  She was the assistant principal of the school for several years before being appointed to principal.  As assistant principal she had the opportunity to get to know the school community well and understand the needs of her students.  One of her biggest concerns with the EL population at her school was finding teachers who were passionate about teaching ELD.  Another concern was the lack of EL parent participation at school.  She was working with her staff to find creative solutions to this problem.

**Principal 2**

Principal 2 was a female in her mid-40s, married with three children.  This was her first year as principal at her current school site.  She came to VUSD from a school district outside the county line with several years of principal experience.  Her school was the largest elementary school at VUSD, and had the highest enrollment of EL students in the school district.  Principal 2 was a fluent Spanish-speaker, giving her the ability to communicate well with all of her EL

students and Spanish-speaking community.  She felt that her ability to communicate with community members in their native language had begun to empower them, evidenced by their increased school participation.

**Principal 3**

Principal 3 was a female in her late 50s, married with three grown children.  She was the most veteran principal at VUSD, and had been in her assignment for eight years.  Her school enrolled over 700 students, with roughly 200 of them classified as ELs.  At her school site, there was one teacher per grade level who was in charge of ELD.  Principal 3 was happy that those teachers were passionate about working with EL students; however, she worried that there was insufficient support at the school district level in terms of ELD instructional materials, and professional development.

**Principal 4**

Principal 4 was a female in her early 40s, unmarried with two children.  She had been principal at her school for the past six years.  She was promoted from assistant principal to her position after the previous school principal retired.  Principal 4 had consistently maintained among the highest state assessment (CST) scores at VUSD.  She attributed her success to a dedicated staff who focused on a positive school culture and early literacy intervention.  She conceded that as a school, they had not supported ELs in the manner in which she felts they deserve.  This was something that she had addressed with her staff; however, her teachers have complained about the outdated EL curriculum that the school district adopted nearly 10 years ago.  VUSD had been looking to adopt a new EL curriculum to address those concerns.

**Principal 5**

Principal 5 was a woman in her early 30s. She was married with two small children. At her age, she was the youngest principal at VUSD. She had been principal at her school site for the past two years. Prior to her current assignment, she was the school's assistant principal. Although Principal 5 was not a Spanish-speaker, she had been able to increase EL parent participation over the past two years. She attributed her success to an aggressive parent engagement campaign at her school. She had partnered with the school district to offer adult English classes, and parent literacy classes in Spanish. Principal 5 took the opportunity to meet with the EL parents after their classes with the help of an interpreter. Her goal was to continue building on her current success to systematically build parent participation.

**Principal 6**

Principal 6 was a woman in her mid-40s. She was married with two children. She had been at her school site for six years. The first three years she spent as assistant principal before being promoted to school principal. During her six years at the same school site, principal 6 had established many positive relationships with staff and community members. Her school was located in one of the poorest neighborhoods within the school district, which had made her sensitive to the needs of her families. Principal 6 acknowledged that her EL students were among the lowest performing students in the school district. She continued to make every effort to support them, and celebrates every victory, no matter how small.

**Student 1**

Student 1 was an 11 year old female in 5th grade. She lived at home with both parents and two older sisters. Due to her parents' limited English skills, she spoke to them almost exclusively in Spanish (when she had problem with a word in Spanish, she would substitute the

English version).  Her communication with her sisters was in English, even in the presence of her parents.  Student 1 enjoyed science and language arts, and she loved the challenges of discovering new things.  After high school, she would like to study nursing.  She added, "I want to be one of those nurses that helps like in surgeries because I like science, and I like all that body stuff, and like their nervous system, respiratory system."

**Student 2**

Student 2 was an 11 year old female in 5th grade.  She lived at home with both parents and a younger sister.  Spanish was primarily spoken at home, although both parents understood and spoke English relatively well.  At school her favorite activity was reading.  When she arrived home from school, her mother ensured that she followed a daily homework routine, and helped her with her homework.  She said, "My mom is pretty much like a home school teacher."  If her mom could not help with an assignment, she waited for dad to come home from work so he could help her.  Student 2 would like to become a veterinarian when she gets older.

**Student 3**

Student 3 was an 11 year old male in 5th grade.  He lived at home with both of his parents.  He had two older sisters, one in high school, and the other in college.  Both of her sisters supported him academically and served as good role models.  He enjoys math, and wants to go to college like her oldest sister.  Referring to his sister he said, "…she has taught me to like never let my fears go, like to do well, to work hard, and to read and write, and I have been like in, what's the word, inspired by that."

**Student 4**

Student 4 was an 11 year old female in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. She lived at home with both parents, her grandmother, and her uncle. At home Student 4 spoke English and Spanish equally. Her mother and grandmother made sure that she completed her homework each day soon after arriving home from school. Her favorite activity at school was reading. After completing college, Students 4 wants to become a teacher. "I get to teach kids and help them out" she added.

**Student 5**

Student 5 was a 10 year old female in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. She lived at home with both parents and two younger sisters. Spanish was mostly spoken at home, because her mom did not speak English very well. At school she enjoyed helping her teacher, and helping other students with their school work. After high school, Student 5 would like to go to college and study art, and continue to be a good role model for her younger sisters.

**Student 6**

Student 6 was a 10 year old male in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. He lived at home with both parents, and was the middle child of four brothers and sisters. Spanish was the primary language spoken at home, but English was the preferred language among her brothers and sisters. Student 6 enjoyed math, and liked when his teacher referred to him as the class math magician, saying, "Like I'm good at that, so my teacher calls me the math magician in class." After attending college, he would like to work as an engineer.

**Student 7**

Student 7 was an 11 year old male in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. He lived at home with both parents and two older brothers. At home Spanish was spoken with his parents, and English with his brothers.

He relied primarily on his oldest brother to help him with his math homework.  Student 7 planned to attend college after high school and study to become a dentist.  When discussing school he stated, "I want say, like school was the best thing.  So I like all the things that my parents showed me, and my teachers."

**Student 8**

Student 8 was an 11 year old male in 5th grade.  He lived at home with both parents and one older brother.  He spoke Spanish to both of his parents and English was spoken with his brother.  At school he enjoyed science and art.  When he had problems with his math homework, he relied on his mother for assistance.  After graduating from highs school, Student 8 would like to become a fire fighter.

**Student 9**

Student 9 was a 10 year old male in 4th grade.  He lived at home with both parents and two older brothers.  One brother was a senior in high school, and the oldest attended the local community college.  He spoke Spanish with both of his parents, and English with his brothers.  The brother who attended high school was the one who helped him with his math homework, saying, "He helps me because if I don't get the fractions that they used to give us like mixed fractions, he would explain what they are…" After high school, Student 9 would like to go to college and join the military.

**Student 10**

Student 10 was an 11 year old male in 5th grade.  He lived at home with both parents and two older sisters.  At home Spanish was the primary language spoken, and there was a mix of Spanish and English spoken between siblings.  Student 10 relied on both of his sisters and mother for help with homework. He said, "They help me read, they time me and they helped me

on the math that I don't understand.  They practice me with my spelling."  After college, he would like to become a doctor or pilot.

**Student 11**

Student 11 was a 10 year old male in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.  He lived at home with both parents and younger brother.  At home Spanish was the primary language spoken; however, he spoke both English and Spanish with his younger brother because he wanted to ensure that his brother learned both languages.  At school and at home Student 11 enjoyed reading for pleasure.  He does not know which career path he would like to take, but he would like to attend college.

**Student 12**

Student 12 was a 10 year old male in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.  He lived at home both parents and an older brother and younger sister.  Spanish was the primary language spoken at home.  The children typically communicated in English with one another.  When he had problems with his math homework, it is his father that assisted him.  After high school, Student 12 would like to have a career as a firefighter. When asked why he wanted to become a firefighter, he replied, "cause you get to save people's lives."

**Student 13**

Student 13 was a 10 year old female in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.  She lived at home with both parents and two older brothers.  Although Spanish was the primary language spoken at home, English was frequently spoken as well.  At school she enjoyed reading and writing.  After graduating from high school, Student 13 would like to attend college and study to become a veterinarian.  When asked why she felt she was doing well in school, she replied, "Because how I react and how I'm nice to people and how I am."

**Student 14**

Student 14 was a 10 year old female in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.  She lived at home with both parents and a younger brother.  She communicated with both of her parents in Spanish, while speaking primarily in English to her younger brother.  At school she enjoyed social studies because she found history to be an interesting subject.  At home it was her mother who normally helped her with homework.  Her mother ensured that she had a daily homework routine that started shortly after arriving home from school.  Student 14 plans to attend college after high school, but does not know what she is going to study.

**Student 15**

Student 15 was an 11 year old female in 5<sup>th</sup> grade.  She lived at home with both parents and 3 brothers and sisters.  Spanish and English were spoken at home, with a greater emphasis on Spanish.  She relied on both parents to help her with homework.  At school she enjoyed learning all of the subjects.  Student 15 may want to become a doctor or a teacher after college, saying, "My dad keeps on saying that I should be a doctor, but sometimes I am like maybe I should reject them and try to be a teacher."

**Student 16**

Student 16 was an 11 year old female in 5<sup>th</sup> grade.  She lived at home with both parents and both maternal grandparents.  She spoke English and Spanish with her parents, and only Spanish with her grandparents.  Her mother was primarily the person who helped her with homework.  At school, math and language arts were her two favorite subjects.  After high school, she would like to study to become a nurse like her mother.  She stated, "I like nurses, because my mom is a CNA."

**Student 17**

Student 17 was an 11 year old female in 5th grade. She lived at home with both parents and younger brother. At home, she communicated with her parents in English and Spanish. Communication with her younger brother was exclusively in English. Both of her parents helped with homework when she was in need of assistance. She had a daily routine of completing her homework as soon as she arrived home from school. Her favorite subject at school was math.

**Student 18**

Student 18 was an 11 year old female in 5th grade. She lived at home with both parents and older brother. Spanish was spoken with both parents, while English was the language used with her older brother. When she needed help with homework, Student 18 called on her mother or older brother. Her homework routine was to start with the hardest subject first, and work her way to the easiest subject, stating, "I do the hardest one first, which is Math, and then all the easiest last." She enjoyed photography, and would like to make it into her career one day.

**Student 19**

Student 19 was a 10 year old male in 4th grade. He lived at home with both parents and younger sister. At home, Spanish was spoke the majority of the time, with some English spoken with his parents and sister. At school, math was his favorite subject. His daily homework routine consisted of coming home from school, eating a light meal, and begin his homework with the easiest subject first, and the most difficult subject last. His career goals were to go to college and study to become a dentist. When asked why he wanted to become a dentist, he replied, "They earn a lot of money, so I can earn money even faster." Table 1 shows the representation of student participants for this study.

Table 1.

*Student Participants for this Study*

| | Student Participants |
|---|---|
| Boys | 9 |
| Girls | 10 |
| 4th grade | 8 |
| 5th grade | 11 |
| Home language Spanish | 19 |

## Results

In this section, student participants' responses to interview questions are presented.  The perceptions of the student participants' educational experiences, and the characteristics that they have in common with one another are described using the invariant constituents and themes found throughout the interview responses, and corroborated by the principal interview responses and school documents.  Each thematic category was analyzed within the context of the four research questions of this study.

### Research Question 1

In research question 1 the researcher asked how perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences contribute to their reclassification. Throughout the semi-structured interview process, student participants frequently made reference to their thoughts and perceptions of their educational experience in elementary school.  Data from school principal semi-structured interviews was also utilized to answer research question 1.  Two themes emerged, RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences, and RFEP students' perceptions of their support from home.  Each theme was discussed below.

**RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences.** The first theme centered on students' perceptions of their educational experiences. Students discussed several topics pertaining to their feelings about school, the importance of school, their plans, and the role that education plays on their goals. The five key invariant constituents that formed this theme were (1) belief that school has been a positive experience, (2) belief that students do well in at least one academic subject, (3) belief that education is important to achieve future college or career goals, (4) belief that it is their responsibility to improve academically, and (5) belief that at least one teacher has helped them improve their English language skills.

Understanding student perceptions of their educational experiences may help educators create a positive learning environment that is safe, engaging, and relevant. It also enhances the students' ability to take ownership of their own education and set goals for their future. Educational environments contribute to the learning process and academic achievement for all students (Kamaruddin, Zainal, & Aminuddin, 2009). However, for English learners, positive perceptions of their educational experiences may make the difference between becoming a long term English learner and being reclassified as fluent English proficient. The first theme for research questions 1 is represented in Table 2.

Table 2.

*RFEP Students' Perceptions of their Educational Experiences*

| Invariant Constituents | Number of participants who offered this experience |
|---|---|
| RFEP students believe that: | |
| school has been a positive experience | 19 |
| they do well in at least one academic subject | 18 |
| education is important to achieve future college or career goals | 19 |

| | |
|---|---|
| it is their responsibility to improve academically | 19 |
| at least one teacher stands out as the one who has been especially helpful in improving their English language skills | 17 |

The first invariant constituent in which students' perceptions of their educational experiences were referenced, described a positive school experience.  Students' perceptions of school environment influences their academic achievement directly through school participation, sense of identification with school, and use of self-regulation strategies (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).  Table 2 indicates that all student participants described their overall school experience as a positive one.  The following quotes capture several of the student participants' feelings about school:

"I feel good.  I feel good with my grades and all" (Student 1).

"I like school because it's my education, and education is going to be a big

part of my life" (Student 3).

"I love it!" (Student 4).

"Yeah, I like it because I get to learn new stuff and make new friends"

(Student 6).

"I get to learn new stuff every day.  Get to learn English more, and just learn

 more" (Student 9).

"I like that I get to see my friends more often, and I get to learn more often"

(Student 11).

"I feel good about it" (Student 14).

"I love school.  It's teaching me, and it is really good for me" (Student 15).

"I like school.  And I really like that I can learn more about English, and then

at home I can learn more about Spanish" (Student 16).

"I like it…like reading…making friends somewhere" (Student 19).

Student participants also overwhelmingly felt that they did well in at least one core academic area.  English language arts was an area where most students felt was their strong subject, specifically in reading or writing.  Student 2 expressed her love for reading when asked about her strongest subject at school, stating, "Reading because I love reading and a little bit in writing".  Student 1 said, "I also feel good with language arts, cause you can read it and there's questions that you have to go back in it, and it's like right there."   Student 11 described his enjoyment in reading, saying, "…I kind of like imagine I am in the book, and I am one of the characters.  I kind of like it because I feel like I am in the book and it's kind of like it's in a movie in my mind even if it doesn't have pictures I can actually imagine and see it."

Several student participants expressed that math was their best subject.  Students discussed their ability to do well in arithmetic, saying, "Mostly, I think mostly multiplication, division, addition, and subtraction.  That's what I do well in math" (Student 6).  Similarly, student 11 said, "I think I do better, in like in math.  Like adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing."  Student 8 referred to the challenges of math that he enjoyed the most, stating, "The most thing I like about school is math.  It's when you like solve the problems and like how do you solve the problems."  Student 12 considered math and science as his best subjects, saying, "Because in math I got an award.  I got an award for math and for science.  I sometimes listen all the time."  Student 1 also expressed her strength in science with, "Well, I have to say I'm pretty good as in with science, cause I like how they give you something to discover."

During the interviews, principals responded with a similar opinion regarding their RFEP students' academic achievement.  Principal 1 said, "They [RFEP students] have always been the

one who have, um, who have excelled and scored way above the kids who are English language learners." Principal 3 commented that RFEPs as a whole are "academically sound", while principal 4 said, "Generally, those students also receive, um, are honor roll students. They're high academically, especially in reading and math."

The student participants' belief that they were strong in at least one academic area was also supported by their academic records. A review of student report cards further corroborated their perceptions of doing well in at least one core academic area, as almost all student participants received an "at grade level" (score of 3) or "above grade level" (score of 4) grade in their core subject areas. Moreover, their last CELDT results indicated that all student participants received the majority of scores in *early advanced,* or *advanced* in all parts of their most recent CELDT (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

The third invariant constituent was based on the students' belief that education plays an important part in achieving their college or career goals. On this topic, most student participants had a difficult time articulating their thoughts. During the interview process, some students paused for several seconds before responding to the question on how education can help them achieve their goals, while others could not find the right words to express their thoughts. Although some of the student participants' statements were difficult to understand, they nevertheless managed to convey meaning about their belief regarding the importance of education in relation to their goals. Several of the students' responses included

> "It's really important cause how am I supposed to get into college. I mean, I need to be really, I need to be getting good grades because if I don't get a scholar…any scholarships then what college am I gonna go to? Am I just gonna stay home? I need to go to college" (Student 1).

"Mrs. Smith always told me that you are going to use this in your life, so I really, really have to pay attention to it because I knew I was going to have a hard job, and so I really like liked it" (Student 2).

"They may help me when reading.  I need to read a lot, so reading will help me [in my job] when I am reading many things like, such as papers that need to be read and they need, you need to understand them carefully in order to answer questions about them" (Student 3).

"I feel like it's going to teach me a lot.  Like when I get into college, I might learn how to be a teacher and tell the stuff to kids.  Like I can help them out" (Student 4).

"So I could get a good job and get paid" (Student 9).

"Because let's say I work in a company or anything like that.  I would have to know how to , like multiply stuff, or divide it into different groups where each part of the, like different pieces of what I need to do for my work.  Like if, it's a house, I need to divide the pieces of wood where I'm going to put them and build it" (Student 11).

"It's [education] going to help because with all the things that I could learn it's also in my work or in my family, and things that I need to learn" (Student 13).

"…so it could give you a life, good life, and then it could, instead of just going to school for nothing and, you need to go to college" (Student 14).

"It's going to help because if someone…if I grow up to be a teacher and if I need to learn these things in life, why I have to do this, and what to do, and

why do we do that?" (Student 15).

"With math you could, it could help you with money. And with writing, if you go to work and you have to fill some papers, and you really can't understand anything, you could use writing" (Student 16).

In addition to the three invariant constituents discussed above, all students reported that they felt a need or a responsibility to improve academically, especially when they did poorly on a classroom assignment or exam. For example, when asked about her feelings about not doing well on a classroom assignment, student 2 stated, "It makes me feel like I need to push harder. I am going to study more. And I might be a little disappointed too, but then I know I have to push harder…" Likewise, student 3 said, "I need to work harder in order to get 100% or an 80%. And when I get that, I know that I've worked hard for what I have." Other student participants' comments on this topic included

"I feel like I need to learn more…I try to figure it out" (Student 4).

"Well, I feel sad sometimes, and if I get another test, I'll try to do my best in all of them" (Student 5).

"Bad. I always want to do my best on it" (Student 7).

"I like learn from my mistakes. I look at it and I see what I got wrong, and why I missed it, and then I just like get it now. I know what I missed so next time I take the test, or have a math problem like that, I will know what to do…" (Student 11).

"That I didn't study very good. I start learning from the mistakes and do it right" (Student 12).

"It makes me feel weird because I know that I always have to do my best.

And it makes me feel weird" (Student 14).

"I'm kind of nervous…I should learn by my mistakes, and then next time I

take it [test] and correct it, then I will get better" (Student 15).

"I try to figure it out even more" (Student 17).

"It makes me feel like I need to try harder next time" (Student 18).

The final invariant constituent that makes up the theme students' perceptions of their educational experiences is related to the student participants' belief that at least one teacher stands out as the one who has been especially helpful in improving their English language skills. The interview question was posed in such a manner as to ask each student participant to think back to all of their teachers since kindergarten before responding. They were then asked to describe what that teacher had done to help them improve their English language skills. In their responses, student participants did not have a difficult time naming a teacher. A few students struggled when asked to describe what the teacher had specifically done to assist them. Student 2, for example, described Mrs. Jones' help as "…she made us read 20 minutes, and then write like two sentences about what we read. And I used to, I did that, but she said that she wanted like good sentences, like fourth grade sentences." Student 6, on the other hand, was direct and to the point when he responded about his first grade teacher, "Yeah, she helped me speak English well." A few students, such as student 7 could not describe specific actions that the teacher took to assist them, and therefore described the teacher in general terms, saying, "She's actually been nice to me and showed lots of things to me." Student 16 and student 18 described how their teachers used primary language support to help them acquire English language skills. They said, "She would explain things in Spanish, and then she would say how to write them in English" (Student 16), and "She used to like show cards to me that are set in Spanish and English…[and]

would like speak to me in Spanish and English at the same time" (Student 18). Although the student participant responses varied, 17 of the 19 were able to quickly identify at least one teacher who they perceived to be especially helpful in their acquisition of English language skills.

During their interviews, school principals described how they chose their ELD teachers, and how their EL students are supported in the classroom throughout the school day, validating the student participants' belief that at least one teacher has been especially helpful in improving their English language skills. School principals said

"…finding someone who is qualified, someone who has a passion for English language development." "We always keep them [ELs] in the forefront of our mind so our teachers know that it's important, and that our English language learners, um, you know, they, they need a lot more support" (Principal 1).

"What I consider to be our highest, most effective teachers" (Principal 2).

"I would say for the most part, they [ELD teachers] are passionate about it …so I would say five of the six are strong teachers" (Principal 3).

"Each teacher does their workshop time or small group time and focus on guided reading, and again utilize a lot of the same instructions with graphic organizers, and visuals, and um, focusing on the reading and writing" (Principal 4).

"I require our teachers to, when we do data conferences twice a year, to actually talk about English learners and tell me what they're doing to differentiate instruction" (Principal 5).

"Ideally, I try to pick the teachers that have experience, and that are veteran

Teachers" (Principal 6).

**RFEP students' perceptions of their support from home.**  A second theme that emerged related to research question 1 was in the area of student perceptions about their support from home.  Throughout the student interview process, student participants generally had a positive perception about the support they receive at home as it relates to their education and the acquisition of English language skills.  Likewise, some school principals saw the support from home as a key factor in the academic success of RFEP students. Support from home plays a key role in the academic success of students.  There exists a statistically significant association between parent involvement and a child's academic performance on standardized tests (Topor, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins, 2010). The two invariant constituents that were found to connect to RFEP students' perceptions about their support from home included the belief that a family member can assist them with school work at home, and the belief that their parents have expectations for their academic achievement.  Theme 2 represented in Table 3.

Table 3

*RFEP Students' Perceptions of their Support from Home*

| Invariant Constituents | Number of participants who offered this experience |
|---|---|
| RFEP students believe that: | |
| a family member can assist them with school work at home | 19 |
| their parents have expectations for their academic achievement | 18 |

Each of the 19 student participants responded that at home a family member (a parent or an older sibling) is able to provide academic assistance on a regular basis.  This data supports the literature which indicates that students reach higher academic achievement when there is support

from home, as compared to students who do not receive regular academic support at home.  In a meta-analysis study on the overall effects of parental involvement, Jeynes (2005) found increased academic achievement of students whose parents were consistently involved in their children's education, whether the outcome measures were grades, standardized test scores, or a variety of other measures, including teacher ratings.  Student participants' responses to questions related to assistance with school work, illustrating their perceptions of academic support from home included

"Well, if I have a question as in like math because I don't get a word, they [parents] clarify it but they never give me the answer. So I'm like, oh, so it means this and this, and so I have to do that, they're like, yeah you have to do that, so then they clarify the word so I can understand it and do the problem" (Student 1).

"Mostly my mom helps me because she always wants me to do it right, and so she mostly helps me" (Student 2).

"I showed her [sister] some reports of how well I was doing in school and she said 'Do you know your times tables by 12?', and I answered 'yeah'. And I answered some…and she said I needed to like work on my times tables a little bit more.  She said that because in the sixth grade you're going to need to know them quickly…it's not going to be easy" (Student 3).

"My dad usually helps me with my homework like math.  He helps me understand it" (Student 4).

"My dad gets home from work and I try to do some [homework], and if I

don't know, my dad helps me with some of them" (Student 5).

"They [parents] help me on my homework and stuff like that' (Student 6)

"Like first grade and second grade, he [dad] helps me. Like he tells me what to do to understand it" (Student 7).

"Sometimes when I need help I just tell my mom I need help on this, and she'll help me" (Student 8).

"My math homework, he [brother] helps me because if I don't get the fractions that they used to give us like mixed fractions, he would explain what they are because in class I wouldn't get it that much" (Student 9).

"They [sisters] help me read, they time me and they help me on the math that I don't understand. They practice me with my spelling" (Student 10).

"They [parents] like, like they, they remind me to study. They bought me a book for every year, they are buying me a book for like to get ready for the next year, or they may, or they write sentences for me and they make mistakes and they make me figure out what it is" (Student 11).

"My dad because sometimes he helps me with the multiplication…" (Student 12).

"My mom. She helps me with my homework, she helps me with math, she helps me with of course how to write" (Student 14).

"Mostly, sometimes my mom and dad because I barely know what to do all the time" (Student 15).

"My mom especially, and…just my mom. If I would go to her and she would explain it to me in Spanish, and then I would be a little ok"

(Student 16).

"Like with the questions that I don't really get.  A long math problem, or like when you say something that I don't understand, they just help me. They tell me what the words say, or they just tell me how to do it, but they don't give me the answers" (Student 17).

The belief that their parents have high academic expectations provides the student participants an additional support system away from the school setting.  When parents set academic expectations for their children, it creates a consistent and positive effect on students' academic growth (Fan, 2001).  Student responses suggest that there is a near universal belief among student participants that their parents have expectations for their academic achievement. Student 3 for example described how her parents have communicated their desire for her to attend college. He said, "…they said that they want me to graduate college or the University, or both.  And they tell me sometimes to like, that I need to work hard for what I need to do." Student 1 on the other hand discussed how her parents used other family members who are not good role models as a reason why it was important to do well in school,

> They tell me because some of my uncles also didn't get a good education, like ok don't be like, don't be like staying at home. Get an education and they tell me the great things that you get with an education. You can get a job, you can get a house, you can get a car, and yeah.

Other student responses included:

"They [parents] are mostly proud of me when I get threes or fours [on the report card].  They're like, you did a good job, keep it up" (Student 4).

"…they [parents] tell me that I have to listen, pay attention, and learn well"

(Student 6).

"They [parents] tell me that like you got to get an education to get a good job.  And my dad always tells me to.  So if you don't study, you don't get a great job either" (Student 7).

"They [parents] tell me to get a good job, and they tell me to get good grades in school.  I try, but it's really hard, so, and they just tell me, they try to encourage me, but it's really hard because I come from Mexico, and I learned stuff, but it's hard" (Student 9).

"They [parents] kind of expect me to get good grades and all that…I do good at home and school, so they know, so they should expect good grades from me, and I do too" (Student 11).

"They [parents] tell me that I have to go to college and learn more about the job that I want to go, to be in the future, and then I learn it, and then I can do it" (Student 12).

"If you want to be a teacher or a doctor you need all that education because it is kind of to teach you something in life that you might need" (Student 15).

"Like I should get better grades. Sometimes I just get like 60%, and they want me to get above 70" (Student 17).

"They [parents] tell me to go to college, and learn the subject that I want to learn and do it in life" (Student 18).

"…once I get the test they ask me, and I tell them like what I got on the test.  They asked to show them if I got like 100% or 90%.  They want me

to get higher than 70%. They say that they don't want me to get bad grades like in the 60s or 50s" (Student 19).

School principals said the following on the topic:

"…and once they [parents] understand why it's important to reclassify kids, typically those parents are more involved, they attend meetings, they consult with teachers, they demand help for their kids" (Principal 2).

" So RFEPs for the most part, they're academically sound, and they come from a strong educational background or emphasis at home, and they get home support." "I find typically too that their parents put an emphasis on education, reading, and, and things at home versus just raising their kids" (Principal 3).

"There is a lot of parental support to push them [RFEP students] to do better" (Principal 5).

**Research Question 2**

For research question 2 the researcher asked which perceptions of educational experiences do RFEP students have in common with one another. Based on the interview responses, almost all of the students described similar views of perceptions of their educational experiences. As with research question 1, two themes emerged, perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences, and their perceptions of their support from home (see tables 2 and 3).

**Common perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences.** In research question 1, under the theme RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences, the first invariant constituent indicated that all student participants believed that school had been a positive experience. However, the same responses applied to research question 2, as this

perception of their educational experience was one which they had in common with one another. Similar findings were noted with the other four invariant constituents. Eighteen student participants believed that they do well in at least one academic subject. All student participants believed that education is important to achieve future college or career goals. All student participants believed that it is their responsibility to improve academically, and 17 student participants believed that at least one teacher has helped them improve their English language skills (see table 2).

**Common perceptions of RFEP students' support from home.** The second theme that emerged for research question 2, RFEP students' perceptions of their support from home, was also consistent with the second theme from research question 1. The data that formed the first invariant constituent indicated that all 19 student participants believed that a family member can assist them with school work at home. The second invariant constituent showed that 18 of the 19 student participants believed that their parents have expectations for their academic achievement (see table 3). The high number of similar responses from student participants in each of the invariant constituents from both themes were indicative of the perceptions of educational experiences that they had in common with one another.

To avoid redundancy, the data from the student interviews and principal interviews that helped answer research question 2 was not re-written in this section, as it was described in detail to answer research question 1. It is important for the reader to know that all of the data from research question 1 was used to answer research question 2 (see pages 90-104).

## Research Question 3

What are the characteristics of RFEP students? Research question 3 looked at the similarities between the RFEP students who participated in this study. The data for this section

was derived from student semi-structured interviews, school principal semi-structured interviews, and school documents.  By identifying similar RFEP students' characteristics we may develop a better understanding of how and why these students achieve English proficiency and academic success.  Three main themes were developed around research question 3: academic success, language usage, and other school related student characteristics.

**RFEP students' academic success.**  The reclassification criteria established by VUSD requires that all EL students demonstrate English language proficiency, and meet their academic standards in English language arts.  Specifically, students must maintain a minimum grade point average of 3.0 in English language arts, must have received a score of intermediate, early advanced, or advanced in all parts of their most recent CELDT (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).  Additionally, the classroom teacher must provide a Profile of Progress based on the state's EL standards, with a minimum score of four out of a five point rubric in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.  The final academic or language criteria requires students to receive a score on the ELA section of the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment that is equivalent to meeting grade level standards.  MAP is a computer-based program that assesses a student's academic ability in ELA and math.  For the 2014-2015 school year, VUSD opted to utilize MAP as part of the reclassification criteria due to the phasing out of CST while the transition to the Smarter Balanced Assessment was taking place.  Without meeting all of the criteria, EL students cannot be approved for reclassification.

The invariant constituents that are being examined within the theme of academic success are CELDT scores, MAP assessments scores, and student grades.  Each of these areas make up the reclassification criteria for VUSD, and establish RFEP students' academic success.  The first theme for research question 3 is represented in Table 4.

Table 4

*RFEP Students' Academic Success*

| Invariant Constituents | Number of participants who offered this experience |
|---|---|
| CELDT scores | 19 |
| MAP assessment scores | 19 |
| Student grades | 19 |

The first invariant constituent, CELDT scores, indicates an EL's level of English language acquisition in the areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. EL students are assessed annually to determine their current level English proficiency, and progress made from one year to the next. The most recent CELDT records for each of the student participants of this study were reviewed. The CELDT records indicated that each of the 19 student participants had an overall score of 4 (early advanced) or 5 (advanced), with no subtest (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) score of less than 3 (intermediate).

MAP ELA assessment scores for all student participants were also reviewed. The company's website (2015) states that MAP provides "assessments that accurately measure student growth and learning needs, professional development that fosters educators' ability to accelerate student learning, and research that supports assessment validity and data interpretation." MAP, as the assessment tool that VUSD used to replace CST during the 2014-2015 school year, was administered three times per year: fall, winter, and spring. As part of the qualification for reclassification, the most recent MAP ELA score would need to be used. During the examination of MAP data for the student participants, all earned a score equivalent to grade level proficiency.

The third invariant constituent that made up the theme of academic success included a review of student participants' report cards. A common criticism of report card grades is that they are subjective in nature and may not provide an accurate representation of a student's academic ability. At VUSD, however, some of the subjectivity is eliminated by the use of report card grades that are based on the mastery of standards tied to performance level rubrics used district wide for elementary schools. Performance level rubrics are reported as: 1 = below grade level standards; 2 = approaching grade level standards; 3 = at grade level (Proficient); 4 = above grade level (Advanced). Student participants' report cards revealed a consistent pattern of academic achievement.

Of the 19 most recent student report cards examined, 100% scored a 3 or 4 in reading, 100% scored a 3 or 4 in writing, 95% scored a 3 or 4 in speaking and listening, 95% scored a 3 or 4 in mathematics, 100% scored a 3 in science, and 86% scored a 3 in social studies. Overall no student had a grade of 1 in any subject matter, 4.5% of all grades reviewed were 2s, while 85.7% were 3s, and 9.8% were 4s. This data indicates that RFEP students in this study perform well academically in all core content areas, and that their grades are consistent with their performance on the CELDT and MAP. Table 5 shows a breakdown of RFEP students' report card grades.

While it is true that the student participants' academic data examined is consistent with the criteria set by VUSD for reclassification, it also demonstrates that a common characteristic of RFEPs is their ability to achieve academically at or above grade level. As a subgroup, RFEP students' academic achievement can be illustrated by the fact that they "are the most successful students in terms of on-time (or better) grade progression to 12th grade: Over 82 percent progressed on time to their final year in high school" (Hill, Weston, & Hayes, 2014, p. 16).

Table 5

*RFEP Students' Report Card Grades*

| Academic Subject | Grade = 1 | Grade = 2 | Grade = 3 | Grade = 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reading | 0 | 0 | 16 | 3 |
| Writing | 0 | 0 | 17 | 2 |
| Speaking & listening | 0 | 1 | 15 | 3 |
| Mathematics | 0 | 1 | 15 | 3 |
| Science | 0 | 0 | 18* | 0 |
| Social studies | 0 | 3 | 15* | 0 |
| Total | 0% | 4.5% | 85.7% | 9.8% |

*Teacher did not report a grade

**Language usage.**  A second common characteristic found among the RFEPs in this study is their language usage at home and at school.  According to S. Krashen, second language acquisition is highly dependent on two independent systems: the acquired system, and the learned system.  In the acquired system, second language acquisition "requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act" (as cited in Shultz, 2014, p. 1). In the learned system, second language acquisition is a product of formal instruction that normally takes place in the classroom (Shultz, 2014).

During the semi-structured interviews, student participants discussed the languages that they used at home and at school.  The data gathered regarding language usage formed theme two for research question 3.  Invariant constituents that made up theme two included the language that they felt most comfortable speaking at home and at school, and their ability to communicate

fluently in English and Spanish.  Table 6 represents the data for theme two of research question 3.

Table 6

*Language Usage*

| Invariant Constituents | Number of participants who offered this experience |
|---|---|
| Feels most comfortable speaking Spanish at home | 1 |
| Feels most comfortable speaking English at home | 12 |
| Feels equally comfortable speaking English or Spanish at home | 6 |
| English is primarily spoken at school with peers | 19 |

In the area of language preferences, 12 student participants responded that they were more comfortable speaking English rather than Spanish at home. Student 3 had a difficult time deciding and said, "Well, tough question. Maybe English."  Six of the remaining seven participants said that they were equally comfortable speaking either language.  In her response, student 1 said, "I'm comfortable speaking Spanish, but they [parents] know sometimes I make mistakes, so it's like comfortable either way because they're my parents, but with my sisters I just speak English because I feel like more used to it."  Only one student participant responded that he was more comfortable speaking Spanish at home.  Student 11 felt more comfortable speaking Spanish because "my family understands me more."

The second invariant constituent dealt with the student participants' ability to speak fluently in both languages.  Cummins and Early (2015) find that an EL's proficiency level in their primary language is an important cognitive and academic tool for learning English. They

refer to it as a cross-lingual transfer between a primary and secondary language which will

benefit both languages.  Seventeen of the 19 student participant responses indicated that they

were able to communicate in English and in Spanish.  Only student 2 felt that he did not speak

Spanish well enough to communicate with others.

During the course of the interview process, students discussed their ability to speak

English and Spanish to one or both parents, and/or their siblings.  The capacity to practice both

languages at home supports the idea of cross-lingual transfer where each language helps to

improve the other. Responses from student participants regarding their use of English and

Spanish at home included

"Well, the language I really, really speak is Spanish because sometimes my

parents they don't you know some words that we know answer and we just

like talk in Spanish. But with my sisters I just talk in English" (Student 1).

"Well, my mom mostly speaks to me in Spanish, and my dad speaks to me

in English" (Student 2).

"Well, most of them are, well, my sister speaks English, so I talk to her a lot,

and my parents, I talk to them the most because my parents speak Spanish"

(Student 3).

"Sometimes I speak Spanish to my mom because she understands a little bit

of English, but I speak English to my dad" (Student 4).

"I speak mostly English, but then a little bit of Spanish" (Student 7).

"Sometimes I will speak English and Spanish [at home]" (Student 15).

"I speak English, and some of the words that I don't understand in Spanish,

then I speak in English, and then there is a word that I stump at, like I stumble

at, I speak English" (Student 16).

All student participants stated that English was the language that was primarily used by them at school when communicating with their peers. Because none of them were enrolled in a Two-way Immersion program, it would make sense that in the classroom environment English is the language they speak. However, in unstructured times such as lunch and recess, students have the flexibility to engage in oral conversations with their peers in English or Spanish. During these times in the school day, all student participants said that English continued to be their language of choice. Three students did however, state that on occasion they would communicate in Spanish with students who did not speak English well. Student 4 stated, "I speak English a lot, except when there is a new student that speaks Spanish, then I usually speak Spanish." Student 6 said, "Just like probably two friends that I speak Spanish with." Student 7 commented, "Just one, Alexa. She speaks only Spanish, so I have to speak to her in Spanish."

**Other school-related RFEP students' characteristics.** The final theme for research question 3 evolved around two areas, student discipline and student attendance that impacted student achievement (see Table 7). Both may have a significant effect on student outcomes, depending on their severity. When students are removed from their instructional setting due to disciplinary action against them, it has a negative impact on their academic achievement (Whisman & Hammer, 20014). Discipline records for the 2014-2015 school year were reviewed for all student participants. The data retrieved from those records indicated that none of the 19 student participants had any disciplinary action taken against them during the school year. Responses from school principal semi-structured interviews support the student discipline records. Of the six school principals interviewed, all indicated that RFEP students as a group have minimal discipline records. Principal 1 commented on her RFEP student discipline, saying,

"Our RFEP students are not behavioral problems at all." Principal 3 had similar comments, saying,

> Those kids know the importance of school. They're here to learn, they enjoy school. So they aren't defiant, they aren't resistant, they get along well with peers, and they enjoy coming to school. And so there really aren't any discipline issues.

Principal 2 found RFEP students' discipline to be minor to none. Principal 6 described her RFEP students as "kids who make good choices around the campus."

Much like student discipline, school attendance is a key component to student achievement. According to the National Forum on Education Statistics (2009), students who attend school regularly have been shown to achieve at higher levels than students who do not have regular attendance. Poor attendance at an early school age has long term implications that go well beyond an elementary school setting. A study conducted on high school drop-outs found that going back as early as first grade, students who dropped out of school had missed significantly more days of school than their peers who graduated from high school (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2009).

A review of attendance records indicated that during the 2014-2015 school, each of the 19 student participants had an attendance rate of 95% or higher. The high attendance rates support data demonstrating high academic achievement by each of the 19 student participants in this study. Simply put, when students are not in school, they are not learning. Principal 1 summed it well, saying, "Great attendance. I mean, it's all part of the same system you know, good attendance, uh, supportive home life, um, you know, all those things come into play." Principal 3 said, "Their attendance tends to be very good. I find it regardless of the parents'

educational level, they know that school is important…" Principal 4 described RFEP attendance

as better than most kids, "not perfect, but better."

Table 7

*Other RFEP Students' School-related Characteristics*

| Invariant Constituents | Number of participants who offered this experience |
|---|---|
| Minimal or no disciplinary action against them | 19 |
| Attendance rate of 95% or better | 19 |

**Research Question 4**

For research question 4, the researcher asks what obstacles do RFEP students perceive

and/or experience in achieving academic success and RFEP status.  It is important to remember

that until reclassified, RFEP students are students who are in the process of acquiring English

language skills and meet academic standards to obtain reclassification eligibility.  Some of these

students acquire the language and academic skills more easily than other students, but at some

point, most ELs face challenges at school (see table 8).

**Obstacles RFEP students have faced**.  Student participants for this study discussed

what they have perceived as their obstacles at school.  Their responses varied; however, most

also shared how they overcame their obstacles.  Student 3 for example talked about his

difficulties with reading, saying, "Reading was sometimes hard.  But I think it has improved a

lot." He then described how he improved his reading skills by reading long books, and "reading

one now, and that's like a 400 page book, and I am now closer to page 100.  That's what my

sister got me for my graduation [from elementary school]."  Student 5 also discussed her

difficulties with reading and understanding the text, stating, "…reading; sometimes words are so

confusing that I don't know what they mean…" He then credited his improvement to asking for assistance when he needed it.

Student 8 recalled his early years in school, having to learn the language. He said, "…in my kindergarten I was like, I learned English in pre-school, but not that much. I went to kindergarten and I was having trouble with my speaking." A few students shared that social studies was a difficult subject for them because of their lack of understanding of the academic vocabulary. Student 12 said, "Sometimes it says a word that I don't know, so I have to look it up in the book, or sometimes ask the meaning of it." Student 13 shared her strategy for overcoming the difficulties in social studies stating, "By reading the text all over again and looking at my notes."

School principals shared their thoughts on the challenges that RFEP students have encountered in their educational journey. Principal 2 said, "Obviously acquiring the language, and learning the school system and how to navigate it." Principal 4 found that getting past level 3 on the CELDT, especially on the writing section has been particularly difficult for the RFEP students. Principal 5 had a similar thought, saying, "I would say generally that if I compared my RFEP students to my English-only students, that my RFEPs struggle greater than my English-only, especially in the area of writing."

Table 8

*Obstacles RFEP Students Have Faced*

| Invariant Constituents | Number of participants who offered this experience |
| --- | --- |
| Academic obstacles | 13 |
| Language obstacles | 8 |
| No obstacles reported | 3 |

When discussing their challenges at school, the majority of student participants identified specific academic and/or language obstacles.  In the area of academic obstacles, 13 student participants responded that they had experienced academic problems in one or more subjects.  Language difficulties were identified by eight student participants.  Most of these students specifically referred to problems in understanding the academic vocabulary used in one or more subject areas.  Three students did not describe having academic or language obstacles in school.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the data from this study was described to reflect the perceptions of the student participants as seen through the lens of RFEP students.  To supplement the student's data and corroborate their information where appropriate, school principals' semi-structured interviews were utilized, as well as site documents that included student report cards, MAP assessment data, CELDT data, student discipline records, and student attendance records.

The results of the data were organized by research questions, and using Moustakas' 7 Step process, the student participants' data were analyzed to form themes based on the research question they were answering.  For research questions 1 and 2, the following themes were formed: RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences, and RFEP students' perceptions about their support from home.  For research question 3, the themes were: RFEP students' academic success, and RFEP students' language usage.  Research question 4 had the following theme: obstacles faced by RFEP students.

In all, the data painted a vivid picture of students who perceive their elementary education as a positive experience. They are students who take responsibility for their learning, and have strong academic and English language support from home.  These students have also endured academic and language obstacles throughout their elementary school years.  However,

through their hard work and the ongoing assistance of their classroom teachers and family, they

succeeded in overcoming their challenges, and thus achievied RFEP status.

**CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Overview**

The purpose of this study was to provide an insight into how former English learners' educational experiences helped them attain English language proficiency and meet grade level standards in English Language Arts, allowing them to attain reclassification status. By gaining insights into the perceptions and educational experiences of RFEP students, educators may have a better understanding of how to implement best practices and programs aimed at supporting language acquisition and academic achievement of English learners. These students have traditionally been among the lowest performing subgroups in California, with an achievement gap that continues to widen. Chapter Five begins with a summary of the findings, followed by a discussion of the findings, the implications of the study, the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a summary of the study.

**Summary of Findings**

A phenomenological approach was taken to examine the perceptions of elementary school RFEPs' educational experiences. The data was derived from 19 semi-structured interviews of RFEP students, six semi-structured interviews of elementary school principals, and school documents, such as state language development assessments, district assessments, report cards, attendance records, and discipline records. The findings from this study reveal that RFEP students who are reclassified during their elementary school years have clear opinions as they relate to their educational experiences. Their collective perceived ideas paint a picture of strong, confident students who value their education, and their parents' involvement in their school activities. It is important however, to note that caution should be taken with drawing too many conclusions from this study, as a more specific coding and description should be utilized.

**Research question 1: How do perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences contribute to their reclassification?**

The first research question was intended to address the RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences to gain a better understanding of how these students were able achieve academic success and English proficiency, allowing them to meet the reclassification criteria.  Data from the student participants' semi-structured interviews, and school principal semi-structured interviews were utilized to answer research question 1.

During the analysis of the data, two main themes emerged: RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences, and RFEP students' perceptions about their support from home. RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences included their beliefs that school had been a positive experience, the beliefs that they did well in at least one academic area, the beliefs that it is their responsibility to improve academically, and the belief that at least one teacher stood out as the one who had been especially helpful in improving their English language skills.

The findings related to RFEP students' perceptions about their educational experiences, were aligned with Bandura's social learning theory (1977), specifically as it related to self-efficacy.  The student participants' positive perceptions about school, their academic success, and their feelings on taking responsibility for their academic improvement were consistent with Bandura's beliefs regarding self-efficacy.  Bandura wrote, "Performance accomplishments provide the most dependable source of efficacy expectations because they are based on one's own personal experiences" (1977, pg. 81).  Additionally, the students' belief that at least one teacher provided the support necessary to improve their English skills can be found within the context of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978) that describes the distance between

a student's independent development level, and its potential level when guided by an adult or capable peer.

The second theme, RFEP students' perceptions about their support from home incorporated the belief that at least one family member can assist them with school work at home, and the belief that their parents have expectations for their academic achievement. This theme too was informed by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978). The academic supports that students received from home were instrumental in providing the scaffolds from which the evolution of their problem solving skills continued. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) believed the influences of family were instrumental in a child's academic achievement. The literature on student academic achievement indicated that parental expectations play a vital role on student outcomes. These studies showed that parental expectations of student performance is a predictor of high academic achievement (Schaller et al., 2006; Vera et al., 2012; Grossman et al., 2011; Davis-Kean, 2005; Rutchick et al., 2009).

**Research question 2: Which perceptions of educational experiences do RFEP students have in common with one another?**

Research question 2 focused on the RFEP students' descriptions of their shared experiences to reveal common phenomena. From this approach, individual RFEP student descriptions formed general meanings. The same themes that emerged in research question 1 applied equally to research question 2. Theme 1 (RFEP student perceptions of their educational experiences) and theme 2 (RFEP student perceptions about their support from home) were commonly shared among the student participants. For example, all of the student participants shared their beliefs that someone at home provided assistance with their school work. This perception may contribute to their ability to be reclassified, thereby answering research question

1.  The same perception can also answer research question 2, as it is a perception of their educational experience that they all have in common with one another.

**Research question 3: What are the characteristics of RFEP students?**

Research question 3, the researcher sought to identify features or attributes that were revealed among the RFEP students in this study.  As with their perceptions about their educational experiences, finding commonalities among RFEP students may yield a greater understanding of how these students meet the reclassification criteria.  The data used to answer this research question included student participant semi-structured interviews, school principal semi-structured interviews, and site documents. The three major themes that emerged from the data that answered research question 3 are RFEP students' academic success, RFEP students' language usage, and other school related characteristics, which include minimal or no disciplinary issues, and positive school attendance.

The researcher looked at the student participants' CELDT scores, their Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments in ELA, and their report card grades to examine academic success.  MAP and report card grades from RFEP students in this study showed that they overwhelmingly scored at or above grade level expectations.  CELDT scores were equally impressive, all achieving an overall score of early advanced or advanced.

Language usage pertains to the RFEP students' preference of language spoken at home, primary language spoken at school, and their capacity to speak English and Spanish fluently. Twelve of the 19 student participants reported that they preferred to speak English at home, usually with one of the two parents and with their siblings.  However, six student participants stated that they were equally comfortable speaking either language, as it allowed them the ability to communicate well with one or both parents who did not speak English well.  At school, all

student participants reported their preference for speaking primarily in English. Three of them commented that on occasion they communicated in Spanish with friends who spoke little English. Student participants reported that English was the primary language spoken at home and at school, 18 of 19 student participants described themselves as being fluent in both English and Spanish. The literature on bilingualism that informed this study finds that students who are fluent in more than one language have cognitive advantages that include the area of attention, and it supports overall academic achievement (Lindholm-Leary & Genessee, 2010; Cummins & Early, 2015).

The research from this study reveals a third area of common features among RFEP students that is labeled *other school-related characteristics.* Student discipline and school attendance were inspected. Studies by Whisman and Hammer (2014), and the National Forum on Educational Statistics (2009) related to both of these areas were used to inform this study, and showed that student discipline and attendance have a direct impact on student achievement and on language acquisition. The discipline records of all of the student participants were examined, and none demonstrated any disciplinary issues. Likewise, the attendance records for the student participants were reviewed, and all showed excellent attendance. The elementary school principals who participated in this study corroborated the student records, describing their RFEPs as students with minimal or no disciplinary issues, and having exemplary attendance.

**Research question 4: What obstacles did RFEP students perceive and/or experience in achieving academic success and RFEP status?**

The researcher examined the real or perceived challenges that RFEP students have faced during their time in elementary school. The data used to answer this research question included student participant semi-structured interviews, school principal semi-structured interviews, and

site documents.  Student participants were candid in their responses, as they described some of the difficulties they have encountered while they worked towards achieving RFEP status. Thirteen students believed that their challenges were rooted in the academic demands faced throughout their years in elementary school, specifically in the areas or reading and writing. Eight student participants described their biggest obstacles as trying to learn the academic language in the classroom.  Three student participants also shared that their biggest obstacle was not understanding the English language when they first arrived at school.  School principals also felt that academic challenges, especially with writing, were among the biggest obstacles that RFEP students faced in elementary school.

Notwithstanding their perceptions and experiences of the obstacles faced, student participants also spoke about their ability to overcome them.  Students talked about asking for assistance from the classroom teachers, while others relied on their family members for help. Student participants also described how they found it necessary to work harder and take it upon themselves to make the necessary improvements.  These findings were supported by the research on self-efficacy by Bandura (1977), Multon et al., (1991), Zimmerman and Martinez (1990), and Schunk (1991).  More recent research on grit from Goodwin and Miller (2013), and Duckworth and Eskiries-Winkler (2013) was also used to inform this study.

## Discussion

At the time of this study, in California, there were approximately 1.4 million English learners enrolled in the public school system, accounting for 24% of the total K-12 student population (California Department of Education, 2014).  They are also among the lowest performing student population in the state, with the highest dropout rate of any student subgroup at 21.9%, and a graduation rate of 63%, well below the state average of 80.4% (California

Department of Education, 2014). Preparing these students to meet their grade level academic standards, while acquiring English language skills has been an ongoing challenge for educators. Each school district provides a set of academic and English language proficiency criteria, that once met, allows ELs to be reclassified as fluent English proficient (RFEP). Unfortunately, the annual reclassification rate in California is approximately 12%, meaning that 88% of ELs continue with their academic and English language deficiencies (California Department of Education, 2014).

Chapter Two discussed the theoretical frameworks based on Bandura's social learning theory, and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. While several of the invariant constituents that emerged during the analysis of the data were consistent with both theories, others were connected with different theoretical and empirical literature.

Research question 1 asked how perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences might contribute to their reclassification. The participants' responses were categorized into two main themes: perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences, and RFEP students' perceptions of their support from home. The students' responses surrounding their perceptions of their educational experiences were based on their belief that school has been a positive experience, that they do well in at least one academic area, that educations is important to achieving college and career goals, that it is their responsibility to improve academically, and that there has been at least one teacher during their years at school who has been especially helpful in improving their English language skills. Individually and collectively, these five invariant constituents have a positive impact on ELs' academic performance and English language development, thereby contributing to their reclassification. Based on the RFEP students' high degree of similarities to one another in how research question 1 was answered, the

same responses was also be used to answer research question 2 (Which perceptions of educational experiences do RFEP students have in common with one another?).

Social Learning Theory views human behavior as an ongoing interaction between behavioral, cognitive, and environmental forces (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy is a chief component within the cognitive functions of learning. Bandura (1977) described self-efficacy as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (p. 79). This idea is evident as student participants shared a strong set of beliefs about their abilities that gave them the confidence to not only achieve success at school, but equally important, to take on challenging situations. Individuals' beliefs of their own self-efficacy determines if they will have the inner fortitude to even attempt to deal with obstacles that stand in the way of their success (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) wrote

> Perceived self-efficacy not only reduces anticipatory fears and inhibitions but, through expectations of eventual successes, it affects coping efforts once they are initiated. Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend, and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. The stronger the efficacy or mastery expectations, the more active the efforts. (p. 80)

Within the theme *perceptions about their educational experiences,* student participants demonstrated a sense of self-efficacy that is consistent with social learning theory. The belief that they do well in at least one academic area, the belief that it is their responsibility to improve academically, and the belief that their education is important to achieve future college or career goals reveal a sense of self efficacy. As RFEP students achieve successes, their level of self-efficacy increases, and the occasional failures will do little to negate the confidence in

themselves.  When individuals believe that they are making improvements in their learning, their

motivation is enhanced, and in turn they become more skillful in their work, allowing for an

increased sense of self-efficacy (Schunk, 1991).  The manner in which students approach their

work is dependent on their perceptions of their academic efficacy (Zimmerman & Martinez-

Pons, 1990).

Recent research related to grit provided a similar perspective to the literature associated

with self-efficacy. Grit comprises of traits and behaviors that generally include goal-

directedness, motivation, self-control, and a positive mindset (Goodwin & Miller, 2013).

Duckworth and Eskreis-Winkler (2013) described individuals who display grit as having a

tendency to be reliable, self-controlled, orderly, and industrious, with an emphasis on long-term

stamina rather than short-term intensity.  Both of these descriptions are consistent with the notion

of self-efficacy.  In relation to the results of this research, the research describes student

participants of the current study as demonstrating grit.

Among the RFEP students in this study, further evidence of self-efficacy was revealed

when they were looking at the obstacles that they perceived and/or experienced in achieving

academic success. While student participants discussed their academic and language barriers,

they were equally interested in sharing the experiences of overcoming those obstacles.  Bandura

(1977) stated that performance accomplishments are the most reliable forms of self-efficacy

because they are based on personal experiences.  In other words, when a person experiences

repeated successes, "occasional failures that are later overcome by determined effort can

strengthen self-motivated persistence through experience that even the most difficult of obstacles

can be mastered by sustained effort" (p. 81).  In overcoming obstacles, the confidence in their

abilities has been enhanced, by providing to student participants the opportunity to excel

academically and acquire English language skills. In a meta-analysis of 38 studies, Multon et al. (1991) found that there exists a significant correlation between students' self-efficacy and their academic performance. The results of the meta-analysis found a 29 percentile point gain in academic achievement among students who exhibited a sense of self-efficacy in the previous studies.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) described the cognitive development and behavior of individuals as a product of social interaction. Vygotsky (1978) believed that people who influence a child's life play a central role in their learning and cognitive development. The results of this study showed that there are consistencies between RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences and sociocultural theory. Specifically, the student participants' beliefs that at least one teacher stands out as the one who has been especially helpful in improving their English language skills, as well as the belief that a family member can assist them with school work at home. Both perceptions align with sociocultural theory's Zone of Proximal Development that examined the relationship between learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Student participants' responses demonstrated that their improvements in English language acquisition and academic achievement were in part due to support received from teachers and family members.

The Zone of Proximal Development is the difference between students' independent ability and the potential ability with guidance and support from adults or more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Students described experiences such as, "She [teacher] would explain things in Spanish, and then she would say how to write them in English" (Student 16), "They [sisters] help me read, they time me and they help me on the math that I don't understand" (Student 10), and "My dad usually helps me with my homework like math. He helps me understand it"

(Student 4), exemplify how the Zone of Proximal Development describes "those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Moreover, in terms of language acquisition, student participants consistently discussed how someone at home, such as a parent or older sibling, is able to communicate with them in English. The English language assistance from home provides an additional support mechanism from which to develop their oral language skills. It was through these types of scaffolding from school and home that RFEP students have been able to receive the greatest support, allowing them to accomplish new tasks that would otherwise be too difficult to do on their own. Scaffolding is described as a process in which a teacher adds supports for students as a way to increase learning and mastery of skills (The Iris Center, 2016). In one study, Yazdanpanah and Khanmohammad (2014) found that scaffolding for ELs was an effective strategy to improve their reading, writing, and listening comprehension skills. The results of their research showed that ELs who were provided with scaffold instruction significantly outperformed their peers who were given traditional classroom instruction without scaffolding. Vygotsky (1978) believed that once the student has mastered a task, the scaffold can be removed to give him the opportunity to repeat it on his own. Evidence to support this claim is found in the student participants' academic records. Report cards, CELDT results, and MAP assessments results demonstrate that student participants have been able to master grade level standards in core subject areas, as well as English language proficiency, all which are criteria for reclassification at VUSD.

Current literature provides a strong connection between parental involvement and high academic achievement. Among the most effective forms of parental involvement is in communicating high expectations of academic achievement from their children. In their study,

Schaller et al. (2006) found that 100% of immigrant parent participants expressed expectations that their children would graduate from high school and conveyed strong feelings about the importance of education. Among Hispanic parents, educational involvement such as monitoring homework and asking children about their school day are most common (Vera et al., 2012). Vygotsky (1978) proposed that the most powerful external factors on the development of students' academic achievement were found in the influences of family. Perceptions of student participants in this study indicated that their parents have high academic expectations for them that may contribute to their high academic achievement. According to Grossman et al. (2011), there exists a strong relationship between parental expectations and academic achievement at the individual level and the school level. This assessment is consistent with the findings of Davis-Kean (2005) which support the proposition that academic achievement relates to parents' beliefs and home behaviors. Furthermore, parental educational expectations have a positive influence on their children's academic achievement five years beyond their original academic achievement (Rutchick et al., 2009). Student participant beliefs of their parents' educational expectations, along with their academic success, suggested that there is a connection to the empirical literature on the subject.

In the theme *language usage* from research question 3 (What are the characteristics of RFEP students?), the student participants' ability to speak English and Spanish fluently revealed a link between their primary language and their secondary language. Current research on bilingualism found significant cognitive advantages for individuals who are competent in two languages. They include cognitive abilities related to increased levels of attention, monitoring, and switching focus of attention, all associated with executive control processes of the brain (Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2010). Additionally, cross-lingual transfers between one's

primary language and a second language for example, assist in the development of both languages (Cummins & Early, 20015).  Cummins and Early viewed the relationship between one's primary language and second language as "an intellectual, social, and cultural accomplishment that is directly related to their overall academic success" (2015, p. 15).  The findings in the literature on bilingualism may partly demonstrate how the RFEP students in this study attained high academic achievement.

Overall, through the results of this study, the researcher found several connections to the theoretical frameworks of Albert Bandura (1977) and Lev Vygotsky (1978), as well as to other empirical literature, such a Cummins and Early (2015), Schuller et al. (2006), Vera et al. (2012), and Goodwin and Miller (2013).  Much of what the student participants share in common with one another, which proved essential in acquiring English language skills and succeeding academically, are similar to the qualities and experiences found in successful English-only students.  Central among them is self-efficacy, a quality that has given the student participants confidence to successfully complete tasks assigned to them, and overcome obstacles.  Self-efficacy is the perceived notion of attaining success on a given task (Bandura, 1977).  Self-efficacy will be enhanced as students experience more successes.  Studies from Schunk (1991) and Zimmerman and Martinez (1990) support the idea that self-efficacy plays an important role in student academic success.

The high levels of support from home and school found in all of the student participants also significantly contributed to their academic achievement and English language acquisition.  Home support included parental involvement and expectations of academic achievement.  Lastly, there was evidence from Lindholm-Leary and Genessee (2010), and Cummins and Early (2015)

suggesting that the ability to speak two languages fluently provided cognitive advantages, as well as the added benefits of cross-lingual transfers.

Perceptions of the student participants' educational experiences may also shed light on why such a large portion of California's EL population fails to meet the rigorous reclassification criteria each year. While many ELs from Spanish-speaking homes share similar demographics to one another, those that do not have a strong support structure at home will likely experience greater challenges at school than their EL peers whose parents play an active role in their child's education. Given that the student participants in this study have managed to overcome the demands of acquiring a new language, ongoing strong support systems at home and at school should enable them to continue meeting the changing academic challenges placed on 21$^{st}$ century learners (Shim, 2013; Jeyne, 2003; Xu et al., 2010).

## Implications

In this study, the researcher has sought to respond to the four research questions relating to RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences, RFEP students' characteristics, and the barriers encountered while working to achieve RFEP status. This section offers implications for educational practices for school administrators and teacher to support the academic achievement and English language acquisition of EL students.

### Implications for School Administrators

A key implication of this study for school administrators is to recognize the importance of building a strong school/home partnership. For parents of English learners, however, barriers continue to exist, including the inability to understand English, unfamiliarity with the school system, and differences in cultural norms and cultural capital; all which can limit parents' communication and school participation (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Helping parents

overcome these types of barriers should be of high priority for schools where there is a significant EL population.  Student-centered and parent/child relationship types of outreach opportunities for example, could help draw in more parents and make those first steps towards involvement and engagement more relatable and less intimidating (de la Torre, 2015).  Beyond the traditional Back to School Night and Open House, schools can host parent outreach programs that are structured in such a manner that have the feel of a social event while providing relevant information.

Of particular significance would be to offer community-based education programs that inform parents about school values and expectations to assist them become advocates for their children.  To mitigate language barriers and increase the level parent participation, school administrators should ensure that community-based education programs are offered in Spanish, or provide translators for non-English speaking parents.  Providing opportunities for parents to participate at school in their primary language will help create a welcoming atmosphere and remove some of the obstacles that have kept them away.

School administrators must also provide strategies on how parents of EL students can be involved in their children's education to support and encourage academic success.  Parent-engagement opportunities include events such as Family Literacy Night, Family Math Night, Family Science Night, English as a Second Language for parents, Computer Literacy classes for parents, PTA, English Learner Advisory Committee, and School Site Council.  Additionally, home teacher visit programs should be established at schools to help bridge the gap between school and home. The National Education Association (NEA) stated that teacher home visits "…are a way for teachers to learn more about their students, get the parents more involved in their child's education, and bridge cultural gaps that might occur between student and teacher"

(2015, pg. 1). Each of these opportunities will add a greater sense of empowerment and efficacy to parents who will in turn provide better academic support at home for their children. Through these types of programs, parents can develop a greater understanding of the educational process and the importance of the role they play in it.

**Implications for Teachers**

The findings of this study have also shown that student participants perceived that at least one teacher throughout their elementary school years had been instrumental in helping them attain English language skills and academic skills. Student participant responses were similar to one another's in how they described the ongoing assistance from these teachers that is consistent with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development's difference between students' independent ability and the potential ability with guidance and support from adults or more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers' professional development that includes scaffolding strategies and EL instructional strategies should be ongoing in schools where ELs are enrolled. Scaffolding has become synonymous with Zone of Proximal Development, as both refer to the levels of support aimed at progressively moving students towards a greater level of independent understanding the material. Puntambenkar (2009) described key scaffolding strategies in the classroom as those that include providing common goals for student learning, ongoing evaluation of a students' progress, ensuring that students are active participants of the learning process, and the gradual elimination of support and transfer of responsibility. The findings of this study have shown that student participants were consistent in their beliefs that at least one teacher in elementary school has provided them with additional supports to improve their English skills, suggesting that scaffolding played a role in achieving RFEP status.

In recent years, advancements in technology have made it possible to obtain educational software designed to deliver scaffolding in many subject areas, including English language acquisition. Such programs have become increasingly popular as supplementary classroom instructional tools. One of their biggest draws to support student achievement is the interactive nature of these programs that provide high student engagement. Another important feature in many of these programs includes their ability to adapt to each student's specific learning needs. Ongoing assessments allows the programs to identify areas of student need, and a "learning path" is created as a scaffolding tool to address academic deficits. Most programs have an array of reports that can be accessed by the classroom teacher to monitor individual and classroom progress. Without proper teacher training on how to utilize a program's features, its use will have a limited capacity to produce the desired results. School administrators should invest in these types of programs as a means to help increase academic achievement in ELs. It is important to note however, that educational programs used in the classroom serve to assist the teacher's instruction, not to replace it. They provide an important first step in the design of scaffolding, but they cannot replace the human interaction that is so vital to a child's learning process.

Another implication for teachers is in the area of EL instruction. Effective instruction is key to giving ELs an opportunity to be successful in school. There are a wide range of instructional programs that have been developed to meet the needs of ELs with the goals of acquiring English language proficiency and mastery of content. Teachers should attend ongoing professional development that provide research-based instructional strategies to support ELs. Professional development that focus on implementation of EL instructional strategies such as the use of graphic organizers, non-linguistic representations, prior knowledge, content and language objectives, rich academic vocabulary, active participation, and the practice of oral language skills

are necessary to give teachers the tools that will give them the best opportunity to make a positive impact on their EL students.

Finally, student participant self-efficacy proved to be a major finding in this study. Throughout the interview process, student participant responses drew upon the belief in themselves as the ones who were responsible for their successes and failures at school.  Students who demonstrate high levels of self-efficacy attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills, which can be overcome (Adeoye & Emeke, 2010).  Although they acknowledged their perceptions of support from individuals around them, primarily family and teachers, they believed that ultimately it was their efforts have allowed them, and will continue to allow them to succeed in school.  Therefore, it is recommended that teachers be provided with strategies to increase EL students' self-efficacy and grit.  Grit, like self-efficacy, can improve over time, therefore, finding strategies to increase them will ultimately translate to increased student success (Donahue, 2015).  One such strategy is to provide ELs with encouragement and positive feedback to assist in their development of motivation and self-efficacy.  Teachers should incorporate positive reinforcement as part of daily classroom practice.  Craven et al. (2003) suggests that the delivery of constructive feedback and praise encourages students to make appropriate attributions for their own success and failure (as cited in McInerney, Cheng, Mok & Lam, 2012).

Additional strategies to help students develop self-efficacy and grit may include goal setting and providing opportunities to demonstrate mastery of content.  Teaching students to set realistic goals, as well as the skills necessary to overcome obstacles that may threaten their goals, will help them experience greater success (National Association of School Psychologists, 2010).  Likewise, when students are given the opportunity to practice their skills and put their

knowledge to practical use, their self-efficacy will be enhanced.  In their study of self-efficacy and student achievement, McInerney et al. (2012) wrote of the importance of providing children with "…authentic examples for students to apply learning materials to daily life.  Instead of teaching students surface tactics such as rote learning, teachers can introduce to students some meaningful metacognitive skills, including note taking and self-questioning, to achieve a thorough understanding of materials" (p. 265).

## Limitations

Despite the insights gained to the academic and language successes of RFEP students, several limitations were evident in this study.  Patton (2002) suggested that in qualitative research there are no rules for sample size, as it is determined by the purpose of the inquiry.  However, for this study, the findings and implications were based on the participation of only 19 elementary RFEP students.  Furthermore, all participants were enrolled in one of three schools within the same Southern California school district, limiting the collection of data to a small geographical area.  Creswell (2013) described phenomenological research as a method to describe the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon.  This, however, may be an inherent limitation, as the findings may not necessarily be representative of the larger population.  As it pertains to this study, the RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences may not necessarily represent those of RFEP students throughout the state of California.

Another limitation was the student participants' willingness to be honest and forthright in their interview responses.  This limitation was further compounded by their young age (all were fourth and fifth grade students), and the fact that researcher was the school principal of 10 student participants in this study.  The student participants' limited maturity level and possible

intimidation by the researcher's presence as a school principal could have possibly influenced their responses. In an attempt to have open conversations with all participants, nine of the student participants were interviewed in their home, where one or both parents were present throughout the interview process.

A further limitation to this study is related to its participants. Although parental involvement was a major finding, parents of RFEP students were not interviewed. Their participation would have provided an insightful account of the involvement in their children's education, as well as the impact that it may have had on their academic achievement.

A final limitation to this study stems from the researcher's personal experiences as an elementary school principal of a school with a large EL population, and as a former English learner. In the capacity of elementary school principal charged with providing EL students with a quality ELD program and an ongoing support system in the general education environment, the researcher's personal biases may have influenced this study. Moreover, having spent the majority of his elementary education as an English learner may have also contributed to the researcher's personal bias. To limit any preconceived ideas regarding English learner perceptions and experiences, the questions to the semi-structured interviews were constructed to focus on the student participants' own lived experiences.

## Recommendations for Future Research

This current study focused on the perceptions of elementary school RFEP students' educational experiences. However, further studies are recommended to achieve a clearer picture. One such study may include the expansion of the number of participants and geographical area. This study was based on data gathered from 19 elementary school student participants and six elementary school principals from a mid-size school district in Southern California. Expanding

the scope of the research to include a greater number of RFEP students from a wider range of school districts throughout the state of California may provide more reliable data that is representative of state's RFEP population.

Further research should also consist of expanding this study to include long term ELs (LTELs). This study looks specifically at RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences to gain a better understanding of how they were able to meet the reclassification criteria. Given that on average, California only reclassifies approximately 12% of their EL population each year (California Department of Education, 2015), the other 88% continue to struggle academically and with English language acquisition. A phenomenological study that also includes LTELs' perceptions of their educational experiences may shed further light on why and how some ELs achieve academic and English language proficiency, while the majority do not.

A third recommendation for future research consists of modifying and expanding this study to include RFEPs and LTELs in 11th or 12th grade. A comparison of high school RFEP students' and LTELs' perceptions of their educational experiences will provide a wealth of information that spans up to 13 years of school experience. The data gathered from such a study may provide a clearer picture of how RFEP students were able to meet the reclassification criteria and sustain their high levels of academic achievement after they were reclassified. Of equal importance would be the data gained from ELs who were not able to achieve RFEP status. Their stories based on how they viewed their educational experiences since enrolling in a US school may reveal insights that could potentially help improve the manner in which teachers serve all ELs.

Furthermore, based on this study's findings, a case-study in a school district with a high reclassification rate would benefit educators. An analysis of a school district with a significantly

higher reclassification rate than the state average of 12% may reveal a successful systematic approach to educating ELs.  A look at such a school district may also reveal a consistent implementation of best practices that promote academic achievement and English language acquisition.  Given the poor annual reclassification rate in California, a study of this nature may provide useful information to schools and school districts that struggle with their EL subgroup.

This study found that ELs face real and perceived barriers in their education.  A fifth recommendation for future research is to conduct a study to investigate the barriers faced by English learners who fail to achieve reclassification status.  A close look at the real and perceived barriers that ELs face may provide schools and school districts with information that could be used to develop additional support systems for all ELs.  Such support systems would be aimed at overcoming barriers, and increasing the EL reclassification rate.

An additional recommendation is to conduct a study that includes perceptions of RFEP students' educational experiences from participants whose home language is not Spanish. Of interest would be the differences in RFEP perceptions of students who come from diverse cultural backgrounds.  Such a study may provide insights as to how cultural values influence academic achievement and second language acquisition.

A final recommendation for future research is to conduct a study that explores the innate nature of language learning.  A study of this nature would seek to determine if RFEP students are predisposed to learning a second language, thereby providing them with a distinct advantage over ELs who do not possess such a disposition.

## Summary

This study sought to gain a better understanding of RFEP students' ability to achieve academic success and acquire English language skills.  The findings for this study were based on

RFEP students' perceptions of their educational experiences from elementary school. Although data was taken from a relatively small participant group of 19 RFEP students, the consistencies in how they described their perceived educational experiences were strikingly similar to one another, which led to key findings in several areas.

Embedded throughout the student participants' interviews was the belief that their families provided a consistent source of support in terms of academic assistance and language support (English and Spanish). The family's help did not exist exclusively from the parents, as many of the student participants described how older siblings assisted them with school work and language acquisitions when their parents were not able to do so, mostly due to language barriers. The principal impact from parental involvement however, was a result of their high expectations of academic achievement for their children. They took an active role at home in their primary language to ensure that their children's education was a priority and that there was ongoing communication regarding their expectations of high academic achievement.

Furthermore, the role of the school, particularly that of the classroom teacher, cannot be overstated. When student participants were asked to name a teacher who had been especially helpful in helping them acquire English language skills, most did not hesitate with a response. The message that resonated was that of a teacher who cared about the child. A teacher who understood the struggles of the child, and took the time to demonstrate that the child was important to her.

Finally, there was a sense of self-efficacy demonstrated by all the student participants from this study. The belief in their ability to successfully perform a task or skill has given them confidence and the capacity to overcome obstacles. The successes they experienced early in

their elementary school years, both academically and with English language acquisition, likely gave them the confidence and motivation to continue succeeding in school.

The implications of this study for school administrators consisted of building a strong partnership between school and home. It included providing parents with the tools and opportunities to overcome the barriers that have traditionally limited their participation in their children's education such as parent outreach programs and community-based programs. Teacher implications included ongoing professional development in the areas of scaffolding strategies, instructional strategies to support ELs, the use of technology in the classroom, and strategies to build student self-efficacy and grit. The findings of this study show how strong family and school support systems are critical to the success of RFEP students. If we are to make a significant impact on our current and future EL population, we have to ensure that support structures at school and home exist with the capacity to meet the needs of these students.

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**Appendix A**

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 27, 2015

Fernando Betanzos
IRB Approval 2210.052715: A Phenomenological Study of Reclassified Elementary School English Learners' Perceptions of Their Educational Experiences

Dear Fernando,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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**Appendix B**

**CONSENT FORM**

**A PHENOMELOGICAL STUDY OF RECLASSIFIED ELEMENTARY ENGLISH LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

**Fernando Betanzos**

**Liberty University**

**Department of Education**

Your child is invited to be in a research study of reclassified English learners' perceptions of their educational experiences in elementary school. Your child was selected as a possible participant because he was recently reclassified from English learner status to English fluent proficient. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow your child to participate in the study.

This study is being conducted by Fernando Betanzos from Liberty University's Department of Education.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is explore the perceptions of fourth and fifth grade reclassified English learners as they pertain to their educational experiences. This study will seek to have a better understanding of why reclassified English learners succeed academically, while the large majority of non-reclassified English learners continue to struggle academically.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, I would ask him to do the following things: participate in an interview that will last approximately 45 minutes. He will be asked questions dealing with his thoughts and feelings about his education, his use of language (English and Spanish) in school and at home, his future goals, and how his home life has influenced his education. He will also be observed during two school days to see how he interacts with his teachers, peers, and his educational environment.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has several minimal risks: Your child will be out of class for approximately 45 minutes during the interview time in which he will miss classroom instruction.  Also, during the observation process, you child may feel self-conscious, or feel that his privacy may be invaded.

The benefits to participation are that your child will provide information that may help improve the educational support of English learners.

**Compensation:**

Your child will not receive compensation for his participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject, the school, school district, or city of residence. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.  All audio recordings, transcripts of the audio recordings, student record notes, and all other data collected for this study will be kept securely stored in a locked cabinet at all times when not in use. The researcher will be the only person to have access to those records at any time. Three years after the completion of the study, all records will be destroyed.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University.  If you decide to allow your child to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**

If at any point you or your child decide to withdraw from the study, you may do so by contacting me via telephone or email at

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Fernando Betanzos. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at           or by telephone at         .  You may also contact his Dissertation Chair, Dr. Bryan Yates, at

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at          .

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

_____ I agree to allow the use of audio recording of my child during the interview process.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of parent or guardian: _____ Date: _____

(If minors are involved)

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

**IRB Code Numbers:**        (After a study is approved, the IRB code number pertaining to the study should be added here.)

**IRB Expiration Date:**        (After a study is approved, the expiration date (one year from date of approval) assigned to a study at initial or continuing review should be added. Periodic checks on the current status of consent forms may occur as part of continuing review mandates from the federal regulators.)

**Appendix C**

**Assent of Child to Participate in a Research Study**

**What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?**

A PHENOMELOGICAL STUDY OF RECLASSIFIED ELEMENTARY ENGLISH LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Fernando Betanzos, Researcher

**Why are we doing this study?**

We are interested in studying how reclassified English learners feel about their experiences in school, and what things they have in common with each other which have helped them succeed in school.

**Why are we asking you to be in this study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because you were recently reclassified from an English learner to a student who is fluent in English speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

**If you agree, what will happen?**

If you are in this study, you will participate in an interview that will last approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked questions dealing with your thoughts and feelings about your education, your use of language (English and Spanish) in school and at home, your future goals, and how your home life has influenced your education.

**Do you have to be in this study?**

No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don't want to, it's OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

**Do you have any questions?**

You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

_____          _____

Signature of Child                       Date

Fernando Betanzos, Researcher

Dr. Brian C. Yates, Dissertation Chair

Liberty University Institutional Review Board,

1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515

**Appendix D**

**Semi-structured interview guide for elementary principals**

*Current elementary school ELD program*

1. Describe the current ELD program at your school?

2. What is the curriculum being used, and what activities are students working on during their EL instruction?

3. Tell me about the instructional strategies that are being implemented during EL instruction?

4. How are students selected into the ELD program?

5. How are teachers selected to teach the ELD program?

6. How do you support your ELD program?

7. What is the school culture as it pertains to EL instruction?

*Professional development of EL instructional strategies/ELD programs*

8. What type of professional development have your ELD teachers received to better support EL students?

9. What type of professional development has your entire staff received to better support EL students?

10. What kind of district-level support have you received to help you implement an ELD program, and/or provide staff professional development?

*Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) students*

11. What are some of the common qualities that you find in RFEP students in the area of:

a. Academics?

b. Attendance?

c. Discipline?

10. What are some of the challenges that ELs and RFEPs face?

*Parental Participation*

11. What school programs do you have in place to support parent participation?

12. What school programs do you have in place to support EL parents?

**Appendix E**

**CONSENT FORM**

**A PHENOMELOGICAL STUDY OF RECLASSIFIED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

**Fernando Betanzos**

**Liberty University**

**Department of Education**

You are invited to be in a research study of reclassified English learners' perceptions of their educational experiences in elementary school. You have been selected as a possible participant because you are an elementary school principal in the school district where I am conducting my study, and you have experience working on English learner development programs and English learner instruction at your school site. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

This study is being conducted by Fernando Betanzos from Liberty University's Department of Education.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is explore the perceptions of fourth and fifth grade reclassified English learners as they pertain to their educational experiences. This study will seek to have a better understanding of why reclassified English learners succeed academically, while the large majority of non-reclassified English learners continue to struggle academically.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: participate in an individual interview which will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. You will be asked questions dealing with English language development programs, English learner instruction, professional development, parental participation, common features of reclassified fluent English proficient students, and attitudes about teaching English learners.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has minimal risks: The risk is no greater than every day activities.

The benefit to participation is that you will have the opportunity to reflect on your professional practice regarding English language development programs, and English learner instruction.

**Compensation:**

You will not receive compensation for participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject, the school, school district, or city of residence. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.  All audio recordings, transcripts of the audio recordings, student record notes, and all other data collected for this study will be kept securely stored in a locked cabinet at all times when not in use. The researcher will be the only person to have access to those records at any time. Three years after the completion of the study, all records will be destroyed.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University.  If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**

If at any point you decide to withdraw from the study, you may do so by contacting me via telephone or email at

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Fernando Betanzos. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at          or by telephone at You may also contact his Dissertation Chair, Dr. Bryan Yates, at                .

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at             .


You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

_____ I agree to allow the use of audio recording during the interview process.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of parent or guardian: _____ Date: _____

(If minors are involved)

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

**IRB Code Numbers:** (After a study is approved, the IRB code number pertaining to the study should be added here.)

**IRB Expiration Date:** (After a study is approved, the expiration date (one year from date of approval) assigned to a study at initial or continuing review should be added. Periodic checks on the current status of consent forms may occur as part of continuing review mandates from the federal regulators.)

**Appendix F**

**Questions for student semi-structured interviews**

*Language usage*

1.   Tell me about the languages that are spoken at home?  In what language do your parents

speak to you? In what language do you speak to your family members?

2.   What language are you more comfortable speaking? English or Spanish?

3.   What are the languages in which you can read and write?

4.   Tell me about the languages that you speak at school with your friends.

*Educational experiences*

5.   Tell me how you feel about school?

6.   Why do you think that you do well in school?

7.   Which teacher do you feel has helped you the most?  What kinds of things did the teacher

do to help you?

8.   Besides you teachers, as there been someone at school that has helped you with your

English skills?  What kinds of things did that person do to help you?

9.   Has there been anyone outside of school who has helped you with your English skill?

What kinds of things did that person do to help you?

10.   Tell me about the things you enjoy about school.

11.   Tell me about your favorite subjects in school?

12. What have been the difficult things about learning English at school?  How were you able overcome them?

13. Tell me about what you want to be when you grow up?

14. How do you think your education will influence your future?

*Other related factors to the success of EL students*

15. How are your parents involved at your school?

16. Who lives at home with you?

17. At home, can you tell me about your homework routines, and any help that you might get?

18. What are the languages in which your parents can read and write?

19. Tell me about your parents' expectations for your education?  How do they communicate that to you?

20. Tell me about your behavior in school, in class, on the playground, and in the principal's office.

21. How is your attendance at school?  Tell me about absences and getting to school on time.

22. Tell me how you feel about doing well in school?  How do you feel when you don't do well on an assignment or test?

23. Is there anything else that you want to add that we might have missed in this interview?