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## Former English Learners' Perceptions of their K-12 Educational Experiences

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FORMER ENGLISH LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR K-12 EDUCATIONAL  
EXPERIENCES

by

Corissa Michaelson

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in English as a Second Language.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

August 2015

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my husband, Jason, and my son, Vincent. I cannot thank you enough for all of the family time that you sacrificed so that I could work on this seemingly never-ending project. I love you both to the moon and back.

To my mother, Mary. Thank you for all of your encouragement as I worked on this project as well as for the many times you took care of Vincent so that I could get work done.

To the former ELs who participated in this study. This project would not have been possible without you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your willingness to be involved and to share your experiences!

To my family and friends. Thank you for encouraging and supporting me throughout this long process.

A special thank you to my grandmother, Eileen, who passed away during the completion of this project. Whenever I talked to her, she would ask how my project was going. When I once told her that I felt like giving up, she said, "Well, don't quit now for crying out loud. You're almost done." I remembered those words and reminded myself of them many times when completion of this project seemed impossible.

To my Capstone committee. Thank you very much, Maria, for your involvement in this project. I greatly appreciate your time and effort in reading drafts of my capstone and for participating in the capstone meetings. Thank you, Amy, for helping to shape this project. I will always remember our initial meeting wherein you helped me determine exactly what I wanted my capstone to focus on. Thank you, Kathryn, for your words of wisdom to me as I worked on this project. You encouraged me to, rather than become overwhelmed by this project, take it one day at a time. This was advice I certainly needed to hear!

I dedicate this project to my students – past, present, and future. You are the reason this Capstone exists.

## List of Abbreviated Terms

AMAO - Annual Measurable Achievement Objective  
AYP – Annual Yearly Progress  
CALP – Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency  
ELs – English Learners  
ELP –English Language Proficiency  
ESEA – Elementary and Secondary Education Act  
ESL – English as a Second Language  
NCLB - No Child Left Behind  
NES – Native English Speaker/Speaking  
FES – Fluent English Speaker  
CRM – Critical Race Methodology  
CRT – Critical Race Theory  
L1 – First/ Native Language

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In a 2009 TED talk video titled, *The Danger of a Single Story*, Nigerian poet and novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009, 2:59), spoke these words:

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So the year I turned eight we got a new houseboy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family. Then one Saturday we went to his village to visit. And his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket, made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them is how poor they were, so that it became impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

When I first started teaching, I was surprised and disheartened by the discourse about English learners (ELs). It seemed that all I heard about my students was how academically low and behind they were. Just as Adichie (2009) had a single story of poverty regarding Fide and his family, I believe a single story often exists about ELs in U.S. public schools. This single story regarding ELs is one of deficiencies, which is brought to life through labeling, stereotyping and seeing differences as liabilities. Adichie (2009, 9:28) explains the danger of a single story in the following way: "Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." Applying Adichie's single-story concept to the education of ELs, one can say that if ELs

are labeled as *at-risk* over and over again, that is what they will become. Likewise, if ELs are defined as underachievers over and over again, that is what they will become. Further, if ELs are described as struggling learners over and over again, they will become students who struggle to learn. Clearly, a single story of deficiencies has severe consequences for ELs.

In my first few years as an English as a second language (ESL) teacher, I came to realize that it was not unusual for my students to be labeled at-risk, underachieving, struggling, disadvantaged, low, and so forth. As much as I was not prepared for this reality, I was even less prepared to play a role in fixing the alleged problem of their underachievement. I had naively entered the teaching field thinking my students would be seen as capable and in the process of acquiring the language and content necessary to, in time, perform at grade-level. Unfortunately, the results-oriented mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act force state and local education agencies to expect ELs to perform proficiently on standardized assessments before they are proficient in English.

Negative labels such as at-risk, underachievers, and disadvantaged stem from viewing ELs through a negative lens, focusing on their alleged weaknesses rather than their strengths (Gorski, 2010), defining them by what they cannot do rather than what they can (Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011). This is known as *deficit thinking* (Valencia, 1997) or *deficit perspective* (Gorski, 2010; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011). Viewing ELs through a deficit lens allows “the danger of a single story” (Adichie, 2009) to take hold.

What Adichie (2009) refers to as, “a single story” is similar to *majoritarian stories* (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) and *master narratives* (Montecinos as cited in

Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). These terms refer to inaccurate stories about a group of people, usually minorities, which are created and told by the group in power. These stories become so common that they are accepted as truth. Further, these narratives, constructed from myths or assumptions about others, position white, middle-class culture as the norm. Buying into majoritarian tales is one factor that leads to deficit thinking (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Another factor leading to deficit thinking is seeing differences as deficits. Collins (1988) explains that it was through difference-as-deficit theory that deficit thinking entered the field of education. During the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the low academic achievement of poor, minority students was brought to the public's attention. Some argued that poor, minority students' alleged deficits were to blame for their failure in school. This thinking was based upon seeing cultural and linguistic differences as deficits. Despite counter arguments made by linguists and anthropologists, difference-as-deficit thinking has persisted.

In addition to majoritarian tales and differences-as-deficits, high-stakes testing, a major component of the NCLB act of 2001, serves to reinforce deficit thinking about ELs in U.S. public schools. Since test scores for this subgroup tend to be low, ELs are often depicted as at-risk and as underachievers. Yet, several scholars have questioned the validity of ELs' standardized test scores (Stevens, Butler & Castellon-Wellington, 2000; Mahon, 2006; Menken, 2010). Despite this, ELs' test scores are used to determine if they have met the annual measurable achievement objective (AMAO) that was set for their subgroup and if they have made adequate annual yearly progress (AYP) as required under NCLB (Wiley & Wright, 2004; Menken, 2010). Furthermore, high-stakes test

scores are used in decisions regarding grade promotion, eligibility for additional content support, and graduation from high school (Menken, 2010). There is much at stake if ELs do not perform at a proficient level on state standardized assessments.

A final factor that I believe supports deficit thinking is the practice of using test scores to label students. As previously mentioned, a common label used in schools today regarding ELs, as well as other student groups, is at-risk. The at-risk term is an outcome of the excellence movement of the 1980s. In fact, the nation's education system was labeled at-risk in the 1983 report on education that was authorized by President Ronald Reagan as part of his National Commission on Excellence in Education. From this came the notion of categorizing students as at-risk based on certain factors, usually deficiencies, which were seen as negatively impacting a student's academic achievement. The purpose of labeling students at-risk was to identify students who would be good candidates for interventions such as dropout prevention programs or additional learning support. Since the at-risk construct is based upon identifying deficiencies in students, it is very much a form of deficit thinking (Ronda & Valencia, 1994).

The literature shows that, due to lower test scores, ELs are also labeled as poor academic performers (Walker, Shafer & Iams, 2004) who are a supposed problem to teachers and schools (Walker et al., 2004; Gutierrez & Orellana, (2006). There is concern among teachers and administrators that ELs will "drag down" their schools' test scores. Walker et al. (2004) predicted that teacher attitudes toward ELs would worsen, in part, due to the mandates of NCLB.

In addition to negative labels based upon academic performance, ELs are also stereotyped based on their ethnicity. For instance, in the literature, Latino students

reported being stereotyped as immigrants and as low academic achievers (Foxen, 2010). Southeast Asian students perceived that they were stereotyped as either the “model minority” or as low academic performers (Yang, 2004). Further, Somali students were often stereotyped as poor academic performers and as aggressive (Roy & Roxas, 2011). Additionally, Somali Muslim students were religiously stereotyped as extremists and terrorists (Bigelow, 2008).

In the literature on ELs’ own perceptions of their educational experiences, some of the abovementioned stereotypes resurfaced. For example, Cavazos (2009) described observations of lower expectations for Latino students in the school where she student taught. Being a Latina herself, she also reflected on her own experiences with lowered expectations because of her ethnicity. Lowered expectations are likely due to buying into the stereotype that Latino students are low academic achievers.

In a study on Cambodian American students’ educational experiences, Wallitt (2008) found that participants believed many teachers had lower expectations for them based on the assumption that they were likely to drop out of school. On the other hand, participants felt that some teachers stereotyped them as the model minority and held extremely high expectations for them.

Throughout all of the reviewed literature on ELs’ perceptions of their educational experiences, one common theme was that ELs believed that teachers favored white students. In Irizarry and Kleyn’s (2011) study on immigrant youth perspectives of living and learning in the U.S., participants cited examples of teachers favoring white students. For example, study participants observed that teachers ignored their raised hands, but always noticed when a white student’s hand was raised.

Some ELs feel that teachers not only favor white students, but that they also believe white students are smarter. In Shapiro's (2014) study, she analyzed statements African refugee students made in protest to a report that was published in the paper about African students' poor test scores. In essence, African refugee students felt intellectually inferior to their white peers and that teachers reinforced their feelings of intellectual inferiority. Overall, ELs' reported educational experiences were mostly negative.

#### Researcher's Motivation

Prior to entering the teaching field, I was unaware of how severe the impact of NCLB was on ELs and their teachers. Surprisingly, I had heard little about NCLB in my teacher preparation program. In the past eleven years that I have been teaching ELs, I have become acutely aware of the pressure that administrators, teachers and students are under due to the mandates of NCLB.

The pressure to get my EL students to perform at grade-level and often feeling surrounded by a deficit mindset toward ELs is what has led me to this particular study. Over the years, I have speculated about why ELs are so often viewed through a deficit lens. I am convinced that the mandates of NCLB, particularly high-stakes assessments, have had a large role to play - especially since high-stakes testing for accountability purposes has resulted in ELs being defined by their lower test scores (Zacher Pandya, 2011; Koyama & Menken, 2013).

My concern regarding ELs being defined by their test scores is another impetus for this study. In my experience, it is rare to hear positive remarks about the amount of progress an EL has made. Rather, the focus seems to be solely on whether or not an EL is proficient (i.e. at-grade-level). NCLB has forced educators to be results oriented so much

so that the progress an EL makes throughout the school year has become irrelevant. Due to the hyper-accountability of NCLB (Ahlquist, Gorski & Montano, 2011), the progress an EL makes has no value unless that progress has led to proficiency. Thus, even if an EL makes twice the amount of progress a native English-speaking (NES) peer makes in a school year, it is not recognized as a worthy accomplishment. The only cause for celebration in the current NCLB era is a proficient, or passing, test score.

My belief that deficit thinking has a direct and negative impact on ELs' educational experiences has led me to wonder what perceptions former ELs have of their educational experiences. How do they think their teachers viewed them? Do they think they were viewed from a deficit perspective? What stereotypes or single stories do they think exist about ELs in public schools? What response might they have to some of these stereotypes or single stories?

#### Role of the Researcher

For the past eleven years, I have taught ESL in a large, suburban school district in the Midwest. I have worked with both elementary and secondary ELs, with the majority of my teaching experience taking place at the elementary level. In this study, I interviewed four former ELs, three of whom I previously taught at the middle school level. I believe the interviews provided valuable insight into the perceptions former ELs have about their educational experiences.

By utilizing Facebook, I was able to contact several former students. I sent a message, which briefly explained my study and asked for willing participants. I also sent email messages to high school EL teachers in my district to inquire about former students. I received one response providing contact information regarding a former



student. By way of Facebook, email, and networking, four former ELs committed to being involved in this study. At the time this study was conducted, participants were between the ages of 21 and 24 years old.

In order to disrupt the single story of ELs as deficient, I employed Critical Race Theory (CRT). During the interviews, I asked study participants to identify and respond to perceived deficit thinking. In this way, former ELs had the opportunity to produce a story counter to the deficit-thinking story. Counter-storytelling is part of Critical Race Methodology (CRM) (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano & Yosso define counter storytelling as, “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p.32). Thus, my main goal in conducting this study was to allow the voices of ELs to be heard as the stories of their educational experiences are rarely told in the literature.

### Guiding Questions

This study set out to find answers to important questions about ELs’ educational experiences. The main research question that guided this study was: What perceptions do former ELs have of their K-12 educational experiences? Other supporting questions were: What perceptions do former ELs have regarding deficit thinking in their K-12 educational experience? What perceived deficit thinking can they identify and what is their response? What in-school factors, if any, might have improved their educational experiences?

### Summary

The overall purpose of this study was to find out what perceptions former ELs had of their K-12 educational experiences. One particular aim of this study was to determine

whether former ELs experienced effects of deficit thinking and, if so, what their response was to some of the manifestations of deficit thinking. It is important to determine what deficit thinking ELs have experienced so that this negative thinking can be disrupted through counter-storytelling. Further, data obtained from ELs about their educational experiences might provide insight useful in planning professional development for teachers of ELs.

Moreover, I believe this study's results are invaluable as there are few studies containing interviews of ELs or former ELs. In fact, in the literature regarding the educational experiences of ELs, teachers and pre-service teachers were interviewed much more often than the students themselves. Thus, ELs' educational experiences are usually told through the perspective of others. This study is among the few that present the educational experiences of ELs through their own perspective.

### Chapter Overviews

This study focused on the educational experiences of four former ELs. In Chapter One, I introduced my research topic by discussing its purpose and significance. In Chapter Two, I review the literature relevant to this research project which includes: deficit thinking, NCLB and assessment of ELs, stereotypes about ELs in U.S. public schools, and ELs' perceptions of their educational experiences. Chapter Three describes the research design and methodology. Chapter Four presents the results of this study. In Chapter Five, I reflect on the findings of this study as well as limitations and implications.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Through my experience as an EL teacher, I have noticed a deficit perspective toward ELs in U.S. public schools. There are several factors that I believe contribute to or reinforce a deficit perspective of ELs in public schools today. I believe that buying into and reinforcing stereotypes, or majoritarian stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), is one factor. Another factor, in my opinion, is the high-stakes testing and accountability mandates of NCLB. A third factor that I believe supports deficit thinking of ELs is the practice of labeling and tracking students. In this study, former ELs are interviewed to find out what their educational experiences were like.

The overall purpose of this study is to find out what perceptions former ELs have about their K-12 educational experiences. In particular, this study aims to determine if former ELs think they were viewed through a deficit lens during their K-12 education. This study also seeks to elicit responses former ELs have regarding deficit thinking they might have experienced. Furthermore, this study aims to determine what factors, if any, might have improved participants' educational experiences.

This chapter presents a review of the literature pertaining to some of the issues that affect the education of ELs in U.S. public schools. The first section presents the issue of deficit thinking. This section includes a definition of deficit thinking, its function, how it is applied to ELs, and the consequences. The following section discusses NCLB as well

as assessment and accountability of ELs. In particular, the second section covers what NCLB is, how it impacts ELs, the assessment mandates under NCLB, and the assessment of ELs under NCLB. The third section presents how ELs are portrayed in U.S. public schools. The fourth, and final, section presents ELs' perceptions of their educational experiences utilizing previous studies conducted on this topic.

### Deficit Thinking

In general, deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) involves a group in power blaming unequal outcomes on the victims' alleged deficits, while holding social inequities blameless. Well-established stereotypes contribute to deficit thinking as they are often used to justify such thinking. For example, a commonly held stereotype about the poor is that they are lazy. Thus, those employing deficit thinking believe that people are poor because they are lazy while systemic conditions such as racism and economic injustice are held blameless (Gorski, 2010).

The origins of deficit thinking lie in racist ideologies used to justify colonialism, imperialism, and enslavement (Menchaca, 1997; Gorski, 2010). Deficit thinking is employed to defend the belief that social inequities are a result of depraved intellect, culture, language, and morality. In other words, the victims of social inequities are blamed for their inequitable situations. Other terms for deficit thinking include: deficit perspective (Gorski, 2010; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011), deficit view (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011), and deficit theory (Collins, 1988).

### Deficit Thinking in Education

Deficit thinking entered the field of education in the 1950s and 1960s as a way to explain the school failure of low-income minority students. Some posited that inferior

language and culture of poor, minority students was to blame for their school failure. Proponents of this explanation believed that difference was equal to deficit. Therefore, differences in language and culture were viewed as deficits, or barriers, to academic achievement (Collins, 1988). Linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists soon countered that cultural and linguistic differences do not render a person deficient or inferior. Further, they argued that a variety of English cannot be deemed inferior or deficient simply because it is different from Standard English. Moreover, they maintained that the language of poor, minority children was not less grammatically complex than Standard English, as some claimed. Nevertheless, many posited that poor, minority children were failing in school because their culture and language was “deprived”. Unfortunately, this explanation is still popular today (Collins, 1988; Valencia, 1997).

Educational deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) involves blaming low-performing students, often poor, minority students, for their own school failure while holding structural inequities blameless. Gorski (2010) further defines educational deficit thinking as, “...approaching students based upon our perceptions of their weaknesses rather than their strengths” (p. 2). For example, it is often alleged that poor, minority students are culturally, linguistically, intellectually or morally inferior or deficient. These alleged deficiencies are considered the reason why poor, minority students fail in school. Yet, the fact that poor, minority students often attend schools that are underfunded, lack in curriculum, and have less experienced teachers is left out of the discussion. Thus, the numerous structural inequities that contribute to lower academic achievement among poor, minority students are dismissed (Valencia, 1997; Gorski, 2010).

Since the excellence movement of the 1980s, there has been a resurgence of deficit thinking in education (Valencia, 1997). One way that deficit thinking is manifested in education is through the at-risk label. The notion of a student being at-risk is an outcome of the excellence movement and is steeped in deficit thinking as it is based upon finding deficiencies in students. At-risk has become a commonly used label referring to underperforming students, many whom are poor, minorities (Ronda & Valencia, 1994).

### The Function of Deficit Thinking

The function of deficit thinking is to create a diversion from the real causes of unequal outcomes. Deficit thinking uses blaming-the-victim rhetoric in an attempt to cover up the true sources of inequitable outcomes, such as racism or economic injustice. An example of this within the field of education is the popular “achievement gap” discourse. Focus is placed on closing the achievement gap, which diverts attention away from underlying systemic causes of this gap such as, inequitable learning opportunities and relying solely on high-stakes test scores to define the gap (Gorski, 2010; Valencia, 1997).

According to Valencia (1997), deficit thinking also functions as a form of oppression meant to keep the less powerful in their place. He sites compulsory ignorance laws (laws that made it illegal to educate African slaves), school segregation, and high-stakes testing, a current trend in education, as examples of oppressive policies and legislation that stem from deficit thinking.

## Deficit Thinking of ELs

### Differences as Deficits

According to the literature, holding a difference-as-deficit mentality is one way in which deficit thinking is applied to ELs. Many scholars have presented concerns with differences being interpreted as deficits. Gorski (2010) asserts that difference-as-deficit is the most devastating type of deficit thinking. Adichie's (2009) *Danger of a Single Story* discussion supports Gorski's assertion. She maintains that by focusing on differences - how "they" are different from "us" - a single story is created about others. Adichie further explains that the danger of a single story is, "It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (13:57).

In their essay on the "problem" of ELs, Gutierrez & Orellana (2006) posit that, "In a stratified society, differences are never just differences; they will always be interpreted and ranked according to dominant cultural values and norms" (p. 506). They point out that ELs' differences are often emphasized in research reporting, particularly research on literacy development. Furthermore, in the literature on literacy development, ELs' differences are commonly framed as problems that pose a barrier to their education. Gutierrez & Orellana (2006) maintain that mainly negative aspects, or alleged deficits, of ELs and their communities are presented in the research. In framing ELs as problems and highlighting negatives, Gutierrez & Orellana argue that their colleagues have unknowingly created or reinforced deficit views of ELs. Moreover, by emphasizing how ELs are different from mainstream students, a genre of difference has been created.

ELs are typically different from their mainstream peers in at least two ways: linguistically and culturally. In terms of linguistic differences, a common assumption based on deficit thinking is that ELs' native language (L1), which is different from the norm, is a problem getting in the way of their academic progress. Conversely, an asset-based view considers ELs' L1 to be a valuable resource useful in promoting the development of content knowledge and proficiency in English and, therefore, worthy of maintaining. There is a substantial amount of research that supports the latter view (Thomas & Collier, 1997a; Collier & Thomas, 2004; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2006).

Assuming ELs' L1 is a barrier to English acquisition has, ultimately, led to a decrease in bilingual education, particularly in states like California and Arizona with large EL populations. Since the Bilingual Education Act passed in 1974, there has been an ongoing debate about which model of teaching better serves ELs – bilingual or English-only. This debate has been a popular topic for use in political campaigns (Wiley & Wright, 2004; Wright, 2006). For example, in 1998, Ron Unz, a businessman with political ambitions, led a campaign called *English for the Children*, with the goal of ending bilingual education nation wide. The organization's website states that they and their supporters, "...share the belief that young children should be taught English as quickly as possible in American public schools" (1997, para 4).

The *English for the Children* campaign was framed as though English, the language of power and opportunity, was being withheld from some ELs and that their families had to fight for the right to learn English. As a result of this campaign, many were convinced that instruction in English-only would produce the best educational



results for ELs. Thus, several voters in California and Arizona were swayed to vote against bilingual education. Unfortunately for ELs, this resulted in Proposition 227 in California and Proposition 203 in Arizona, which greatly restricted bilingual education. This is unfortunate since many studies have demonstrated that when ELs are able to learn content in their L1 they stand a much better chance of reaching a high level of academic achievement (Wiley & Wright, 2004).

In addition to difference-as-deficit thinking being applied to ELs based on linguistic differences, it is also applied to ELs who are culturally different. As many ELs are from non-Anglo European backgrounds, they are likely considered different from a white, middle-class norm. A common assumption about non-Anglo European ELs and their families is that they are culturally deprived, leading some to conclude that ELs' cultures are inferior and do not adequately prepare them for school. Their alleged cultural deprivation is often used to explain ELs' lower academic performance (Franquiz, Salazar & DeNicolo, 2011).

#### At-risk Label as Deficit Thinking

As mentioned above, difference-as-deficit is a type of deficit thinking that is applied to ELs. Another type of deficit thinking applied to ELs is academic labeling. One such label that is often applied to ELs is the term at-risk. This label became popular in the early 1980s when it was used in politicians' responses to the *excellence movement*. In an attempt to resolve the dropout problem among certain students, legislators and politicians decided it was necessary to determine common characteristics of dropouts and use these characteristics to identify students at-risk of dropping out of school. Thus, students who exhibited any of the common characteristics of dropouts were labeled at-risk. The intent

in labeling students at-risk was to identify those who would benefit from interventions, which might prevent them from dropping out (Ronda & Valencia, 1994).

Though it may seem harmless, Valencia (1997) asserts that labeling students at-risk has severe consequences. Indeed, he claims that doing so may actually contribute to students' continued school failure rather than simply serve as a system for categorizing students' achievement in an attempt to close the achievement gap and prevent school dropouts. In determining which students are at-risk, educators are encouraged to focus on students' weaknesses. Thus, the potential of students labeled at-risk is often overlooked while their shortcomings are highlighted (Valencia, 1997). In essence, labeling students is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In many schools, measures of academic achievement, like standardized assessments, are used in determining who is at-risk. Then, at-risk students receive interventions, or additional learning support, with the goal of increasing their academic performance. Since ELs are not likely to perform well on academic assessments administered in English, a language they are not yet proficient in, they are often labeled at-risk. Although ELs' academic performance is more likely to improve upon developing proficiency in English, their lower test scores make them prime candidates for receiving literacy and math interventions (Wright, 2006; Menken, 2010).

### The Achievement Gap Discourse and Deficit Thinking

Along with difference-as-deficit thinking and academic labeling, the academic achievement gap discussion is another way that deficit thinking impacts ELs. The academic achievement gap usually refers to the discrepancy in achievement between white students and students of color and between students from low-income families and

students from more affluent families (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004).

An academic achievement gap between middle-class, white students and other students has dominated educational discourse since President Johnson's *War on Poverty* movement of the 1960s. Currently, high-stakes test results are used to determine achievement gaps. This is quite problematic for ELs since, as previously stated, they are not yet proficient in English and high-stakes tests are administered in English. Thus, the test scores of the EL subgroup are typically below average, which leads to the appearance of an academic achievement gap between ELs and NESs (Menken, 2010; Abedi & Dietel, 2004; Wright, 2006).

ELs' lower test scores are then used to define them as an underachieving subgroup, further contributing to the notion of an achievement gap and deficit thinking discourse (Koyama & Menken, 2013; Zacher Pandya, 2011). However, some of the underlying reasons for this alleged achievement gap are not given much attention. Gorski (2010) contends that this is a strategic move to divert attention away from underlying systemic issues by focusing solely on outcomes. Thus, emphasis is placed on what will help narrow the achievement gap rather than on examining the root causes of this gap in achievement. Explanations for an achievement gap are usually immersed in deficit thinking whereby the low-achieving students are blamed (Gorski, 2010).

To counteract this deficit thinking, some scholars have sought to bring attention to the root causes of the achievement gap between ELs and NESs. For example, many scholars have pointed out that when the academic achievement of ELs is measured in English, a language they are in the process of acquiring, it will appear that there is an

achievement gap between ELs and NESs. This is because ELs are not able to demonstrate all that they know and can do through the medium of English (Abedi & Gandara, 2006; Wright, 2006).

Even though it is common for ELs to receive a non-passing score on standardized tests, this should not necessarily be equated with lack of learning. Rather, this gap in achievement on standardized tests is more likely an indicator that ELs are participating in standardized tests before they are proficient enough in English to demonstrate all that they know. Thus, it should not be entirely surprising that ELs do not perform well on tests administered in a language they are still learning (Menken, 2010).

Though it is often assumed that ELs' test scores are based on objective and valid assessments, several scholars have doubted this notion. In particular, scholars have questioned whether standardized tests administered in English are a valid measure of ELs' knowledge and abilities. Many contend that assessments administered to ELs in English should not be considered a valid measure of their knowledge and, further, that test scores from such assessments should not be used to make high-stakes decisions (Wright, 2006; Menken, 2010; Mahon, 2006; Abedi & Dietel, 2004).

Similar to test validity issues, a flaw in how AYP, a mandate of NCLB, is calculated for the EL subgroup makes it appear as though there is an achievement gap between ELs and NESs. Unlike other subgroups, the EL subgroup does not remain consistent. This inconsistency is referred to as the "revolving door" or the "catch-22" flaw in how EL subgroup test scores are calculated. Once ELs reach proficiency, they are reclassified as NESs and their test scores, which are often proficient or above proficient, no longer count in the EL subgroup. Instead, their proficient scores count in the NES

subgroup. Thus, the EL subgroup is never able to show improvement, let alone proficiency. This is why Saunders & Marcelletti (2012) refer to the achievement gap between ELs and NESs as, “The gap that can’t go away” (p.139). This information might cause one to wonder: If all students ever classified as an EL remained in the EL subgroup their entire school careers, how would it impact the alleged achievement gap? Further, if ELs were able to take standardized assessments in their L1 or wait to take them in English until they are sufficiently proficient, how would this change the appearance of an achievement gap? Would the gap disappear?

While some scholars posit that there is only a perceived achievement gap due to assessments being administered in a language ELs are not yet proficient in, others contend that there really is an achievement gap, which is due to inequitable learning conditions and opportunities. Gorski (2010) and Valencia (1997) maintain that inequitable learning opportunities are to blame for an achievement gap between poor, minority students and students from more affluent families. For instance, students in low-income neighborhoods attend schools that are not as well funded as more affluent neighborhoods. Due to inequitable funding, students from low-income families often attend schools that lack current curriculum, have fewer experienced teachers, and larger class sizes. Thus, poor, minority students are not receiving the same kind of educational opportunities as their more affluent peers (Gorski, 2010; Valencia, 1997). Since some ELs are also minority students from low-income families, these inequities affect them as well (Gorski, 2010).

Similarly, Stevens et al. (2000) posited that the achievement gap between ELs and NESs was more likely due to a gap in opportunities to learn content than to language

barriers. Further, Abedi and Gandara (2006), upon reviewing literature regarding the achievement gap between ELs and NESs, concluded that inequitable learning conditions are one of the factors that contribute to this gap. Some of the ways in which ELs are subjected to inequitable learning opportunities are by attending schools in low-income neighborhoods and receiving remedial or low-level instruction because of low test scores (Heubert, 2000 as cited in Abedi & Gandara, 2006).

### The Consequences of Deficit Thinking Regarding ELs

“For those who have been victimized by deficit thinking, there must be counterattacks driven by a rage to win” (Valencia, 1997, p. 251).

Valencia (1997) claims that if deficit thinking is left unchallenged it will grow immensely and have devastating impacts on educational policy. Thus, he urges us to wage war against deficit thinking, especially since it is a form of oppression that hinders human development. If policies are informed by deficit thinking, it is detrimental to the education of ELs. For example, propositions 227 and 203, based upon deficit thinking, virtually eliminated opportunities for ELs to receive bilingual education. A decrease in bilingual education is detrimental for ELs since research has shown that use of the L1 in instruction is the surest way to academic success (Cummins, 1981; Collier, 1989). NCLB is another example of a policy based on deficit thinking. This most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act is based upon the belief that our nation’s entire educational system is at-risk. Due to the assessment and accountability mandates of NCLB, ELs are often described as underachievers and as at-risk of failure in U.S. public schools (Wright, 2006).

## No Child Left Behind

### What is NCLB ?

The NCLB Act of 2001 is the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA of 1965. ESEA, enacted by President Johnson, was intended to provide equitable education for poor students in order to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more advantaged peers. Each subsequent reauthorization has added further steps and goals in an effort to close the achievement gap (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The United States Department of Education defines NCLB as, “An act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a, p. 1). Furthermore, NCLB is described as being built upon the following four pillars of common sense: 1) holding schools accountable for the progress of students; 2) using teaching practices based on what works according to scientific research; 3) more options for parents; and 4) more local control and flexibility (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b).

While the enactment of ESEA in 1965 led to increased accountability and academic rigor in education, the publication of *A Nation at Risk* amplified this accountability. Since its publication, politicians have used *A Nation at Risk* to justify the need for heightened rigor and accountability in schools nationwide. Both Goals 2000 and NCLB are educational policies that resulted from *A Nation at Risk* (Soublis Smyth, 2008; Menken, 2010).

NCLB relies on standardized assessments to measure the academic achievement of several student subgroups. Test results are used to determine if each subgroup is making AYP as set by the state (Koyama & Menken, 2013). Thus, each state had to

create and implement state standards and assessments as well as English-language proficiency (ELP) standards and assessments that align with state standards. Further, NCLB requires each state to set AMAOs with the goal of moving students toward proficiency. For ELs, the goal is to develop proficiency in both language and content. ELP tests are given yearly in order to measure ELs' progress toward proficiency. In order to meet AMAOs, each district must be able to demonstrate that an increased percentage of ELs are reaching proficiency each year, with the lofty goal of 100% proficiency by 2014 (Wiley & Wright, 2004).

In addition to ELP assessments, ELs must take state standardized assessments, which are meant to measure academic achievement. States are required to set AMAOs for ELs on state standardized tests as well. AMAOs must include a definition of what will be considered AYP (Wiley & Wright, 2004). The state sets the annual goal for each school based on a complicated formula. All ELs who have been in the U.S. educational system for at least one year are subject to taking high-stakes tests.

#### How ELs are Impacted by NCLB

Although NCLB was perhaps meant to have a positive impact, the bulk of the literature reveals numerous ways in which NCLB has been detrimental to the education of ELs. On the positive side, some believe that since schools are now held accountable for the academic progress ELs make, increased attention will be given to the instruction of ELs, which will result in improved academic outcomes (Porter, 2000; De Cohen & Clewell, 2007). However, the negative impacts seem to greatly outweigh any positives. Some of the negative impacts presented in the literature are: diminished bilingual education programs, funding issues, decreased learning opportunities (Wiley & Wright,



2004), and problems associated with high-stakes assessment and accountability.

According to the literature, the assessment and accountability mandates of NCLB have had the most severe impact on ELs' education (Menken, 2010; Abedi & Dietel, 2004; Wiley & Wright, 2004; Wright, 2006; Verdugo & Flores, 2007; Soublis Smyth, 2008; Solorzano, 2008; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2012; Koyama & Menken, 2013). Each of the abovementioned negative impacts of NCLB will now be discussed in more detail.

Decrease in bilingual education. One result of NCLB, which has had a negative impact on the education of ELs, is a decrease in bilingual education programs. Since the enactment of NCLB, the word *bilingual* has virtually disappeared from federal law. For example, the *Bilingual Education Act* (Title VII) was changed to the *Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students* (Title III of NCLB). Further, the *Office for Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs* became the *Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students*. Finally, the *National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education* was renamed the *National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs* (Wiley & Wright, 2004).

While Menken (2010) and Wiley & Wright (2004) suggest that the word bilingual was removed from federal law intentionally, the Department of Education explains it as consolidation. The U.S. Department of Education (2007) states that, "NCLB consolidated the Bilingual Education Act and the Emergency Immigrant Education program – formerly under Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act- into the new Title III, titled English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act" (p. 1). Whether the disappearance of the word bilingual from federal

law is due to consolidation or termination, it seems evident that the U.S. Department of Education does not support bilingualism for ELs.

Although bilingual education has not been declared illegal by the U.S. government, it has decreased significantly. Since NCLB's passing, fewer bilingual education programs are offered. In New York City, for example, nearly half of all ELs were in a bilingual education program prior to NCLB and, as of 2011, the number of ELs in a bilingual education program dropped to 22% (Koyama & Menken, 2013). Wiley and Wright (2004) suggest that pressure to raise standardized test scores has caused many districts and states to abandon bilingual education. The theory seems to be that time cannot be spent on developing students' L1 when so much is at stake if they do not test well in English. Thus, many districts and states mistakenly assume that the more time ELs spend immersed in English, the sooner they will be proficient in English and will, therefore, perform well on tests.

As previously stated, it is unfortunate that bilingual education is not supported and encouraged since numerous studies have demonstrated that learning academic content in their L1 is key to ELs' continuous cognitive and academic development. Without a doubt, the factor that has the greatest influence on the academic success of ELs is use of L1 in instruction. Thomas & Collier (1995) assert that L1 needs to be developed to the highest cognitive level possible through at least 12 years of age in order for ELs who begin school with no English proficiency to be academically successful.

Furthermore, ELs who receive instruction in both their L1 and English can sustain gains they make in elementary years. Conversely, ELs who receive instruction in English only make significant gains in elementary, but then lose ground at the secondary level

when content becomes more cognitively demanding (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Thus, if all ELs had access to quality bilingual education, their “gap” in achievement might cease to exist.

Change in funding. Another result of NCLB, which negatively impacts the education of ELs, is a change in funding for EL programs. This topic receives little attention in comparison to the decrease in bilingual education programs and assessment and accountability issues. Yet, funding issues are partly to blame for the decrease in bilingual education programs. Under NCLB, states have been given complete control over Title III funds. Thus, each state is free to choose which type of EL programs will be given funding. Under the pressure to increase test scores of ELs in order to meet the accountability demands of NCLB, states are more likely to fund English-only programs than bilingual programs.

In essence, while funding for EL programs has actually increased since NCLB, the process in place to receive funding is now based on a formula rather than a competitive application process. Thus, federal funding for Title III is spread more thinly, meaning fewer dollars per EL student. Further contributing to a decrease in dollars per EL student is the fact that funding has not kept up with inflation (Wiley & Wright, 2004; Verdugo & Flores, 2007).

Decreased learning opportunities. A third result of NCLB, which has negatively impacted the education of ELs, is decreased learning opportunities. The main reason that ELs have experienced a decrease in learning opportunities is because, due to their perpetually lower test scores, they are frequently targeted to receive instruction that is aimed at increasing their scores. This type of instruction typically occurs in the form of

interventions or teaching-to-the-test. Thus, rather than participating in meaningful, engaging, and challenging instruction, ELs often are subject to “drill and kill” or rote memorization forms of instruction (Wiley & Wright, 2004; Soublis Smyth, 2008; Menken, 2010).

Assessment for accountability purposes. A fourth factor that negatively impacts the education of ELs is the accountability mandates of NCLB. The main issue regarding accountability for ELs’ progress is the flaw in how AYP is calculated for this subgroup. This flaw is also referred to as the “catch-22” (Wright, 2006; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2012) and the “revolving door” (Abedi & Dietel, 2004). In essence, the EL subgroup is always changing while other subcategories, like ethnicity and race, remain the same. The reason the EL subcategory is always changing is because ELs who reach proficiency in English are removed from the EL assessment subcategory and are placed in the English only subcategory. Then, new ELs enter the subcategory. Yet, when AYP is calculated, the instability of the EL subgroup is not taken into account (Abedi & Dietel, 2004; Wright, 2006; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2012).

This flaw in AYP calculations results in consistently low, or flat, test scores for the entire EL subgroup making it appear as though ELs are making no progress. Their lower test scores are then used to label, frame, and track ELs in U.S. public schools. The EL subgroup’s lower test scores are also used to determine an achievement gap between ELs and NESs. Furthermore, some assume ELs are intellectually inferior to NESs based on test scores. Consequently, ELs are over-represented in special education and under-represented in gifted and talented programs (Harris et al., 2009).

The Department of Education, in an attempt to address the flaw in AYP calculations for the EL subgroup, decided to allow ELs reclassified as NESs to remain in the EL subgroup for up to two years so that their higher test scores will be reflected in accountability of the EL subgroup (Wright, 2006). Wright (2006) maintains that while this allowance is thoughtful and noteworthy, it does not solve the problem. In essence, the problem consists of how to fairly include ELs in assessment for accountability and how to appropriately use ELs' test scores. Testing ELs unfairly as well as using their test scores inappropriately leads to a negative portrayal of ELs in U.S. public schools.

High-Stakes assessment issues. Yet another factor that adversely affects the education of ELs is high-stakes assessment for accountability. The main concerns regarding high-stakes assessment of ELs is validity of the assessments and how the test results are used. These two issues will be discussed in tandem since the main reason concern exists regarding the use of ELs' test scores is because the validity of their scores is highly questionable. Several scholars have argued that the results of high-stakes tests are unfairly used to label, frame and track ELs as well as determine grade promotion and meet high-school graduation requirements (Gorski, 2010; Wright 2006; Menken, 2010).

Many have questioned whether standardized assessments administered to ELs can be considered valid (Mahon, 2006; Abedi & Dietel, 2004; Stevens et al., 2000; Menken, 2010). Some factors that impact the validity of standardized assessments for ELs are: ability to meaningfully participate in high-stakes tests, (Wright, 2006; Mahon, 2006; Solorzano, 2008; Menken, 2010) receiving instruction that teaches to the test, (Wiley & Wright, 2004; Soublis Smyth, 2008; Menken, 2010) and use of assessments that are normed on NESs (Stevens et al., 2000; Verdugo & Flores, 2007).

## Factors Affecting the Validity of High-Stakes Tests for ELs

### Language Proficiency and Validity

Since standardized assessment results are often used for making high-stakes decisions such as: grade promotion, high school graduation and college readiness, validity is of utmost importance. Validity refers to a test measuring what it is meant to measure. State standardized tests are meant to measure content knowledge in the core subject areas – language arts, math, and science. ELs’ ability to meaningfully participate in taking a standardized test is critical to the validity of the test. Scholars argue that ELs cannot meaningfully participate in standardized assessments administered in English (as opposed to their L1) when they are not yet proficient in the language (Stevens et al., 2000; Wright, 2006; Mahon, 2006; Solorzano, 2008; Menken, 2010).

Because ELs are in the process of acquiring English for academic purposes, they are not in a position to compete with NESs in terms of content knowledge on standardized assessments (Menken, 2010; Abedi & Dietel, 2004; Wiley & Wright, 2004, Wright, 2006). Thus, the academic achievement of ELs should not be compared to their NES peers when the validity of the assessment is in question. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that standardized test results are a valid measure of subject knowledge when ELs are tested before they are proficient enough in English to meaningfully participate. This is especially true when test results are used to make high-stakes decisions (Stevens et al., 2000; Mahon, 2006; Wright, 2006; Menken, 2010). However, NCLB operates on the assumption that test results of ELs are valid and, furthermore, that the test results can be used to determine academic achievement of ELs and compare their achievement to

that of NESs (Wright, 2006). These comparisons are then used to define an achievement gap between ELs and NESs.

To address the issue of ELs being assessed before they are proficient enough to meaningfully participate, Stevens et al. (2000) and Mahon (2006) have conducted studies aimed at determining the relationship between language proficiency and performance on standardized assessments. Both studies found that language proficiency does indeed impact test performance. Mahon's study indicates that language proficiency may have a larger influence on the results of reading and writing assessments than math. Furthermore, Stevens et al. (2000) found that along with language proficiency, opportunities to learn play a significant role in ELs' performance on standardized assessments.

Consequently, Stevens et al. (2000) and Mahon (2006) suggest that rather than using a time limit, such as one year, to determine when ELs should begin participating in standardized tests, ELs should be given an English proficiency assessment to determine their readiness to participate. Furthermore, it is suggested that ELs should reach a certain cutoff score on an English proficiency test in order to demonstrate that they are ready to take standardized tests. School districts can determine a cutoff score, or the minimum amount of language proficiency needed to perform well on a standardized test, by analyzing the language proficiency levels of ELs who perform at a proficient level on standardized assessments (Mahon, 2006).

Since ELs do not acquire English at the same pace and rarely, if ever, reach academic proficiency within one year (Cummins, 1981; Collier, 1987; Collier, 1989), a language proficiency assessment is a more reliable way of determining testing readiness

(Stevens et al., 2000; Mahon, 2006). Evidence to support this point can be found in a large body of research conducted on how long it takes ELs to become proficient in conversational language as well as academic language.

In his research on second language acquisition, Cummins (1979) referred to conversational language as basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and to academic language as cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The findings from research on how long it takes ELs to become proficient in English indicate that, in general, it takes between five and seven years or more for an EL to become fully proficient in academic English (Cummins, 1981; Collier, 1987; Collier, 1989). The length of time to proficiency in academic English varies based on several factors such as: age upon arrival, previous educational experience, and language of instruction (Cummins, 1980; Collier, 1989). On average, it takes two years for elementary-age ELs to reach proficiency in conversational language (Cummins, 1981a) while it takes a much longer period of time to become proficient in academic English.

Yet, the demands of NCLB do not provide accommodations for the amount of time it takes for ELs to reach proficiency in academic English. Due to the sanctions NCLB places on schools that do not meet AYP, administrators and teachers are under an incredible amount of pressure to get ELs to achieve at a proficient level within a short period of time, often within one school year (Cummins, 1984; Collier, 1987; Menken, 2010; Wright, 2006).

Disregarding the research on how long it takes for ELs to become proficient in academic English, NCLB, in its first few years of implementation, required all ELs to take standardized tests no matter when they arrived in the U.S. In an attempt to put a



human face on the issue of ELs being assessed before they are proficient in English, Richard Levien (2009) produced the short fiction film, *Immersion*, which is based on true events. This film depicts the experience of a fifth grader, named Moises, who is new to the country and, upon arrival, must take a standardized test in English. It is clear that although Moises is a very smart and capable student, he is unable to demonstrate all that he knows on a test administered in a language he is just beginning to learn (Levien, 2009).

In slight recognition of the problem of assessing ELs before they are proficient enough to meaningfully participate, the U.S. Department of Education decided that, beginning in 2007, ELs would be given a one-year grace period prior to being required to take a standardized achievement test (Wright, 2006; Menken, 2010). However, Wright (2006) contends that this provision is insufficient since it takes more than one year to become proficient in academic language, the language needed to be successful in school.

#### Teaching to the Test

Teaching to the test presents another challenge in terms of validity. Since many ELs do not score at a proficient level on standardized assessments, they are frequently targeted to receive instruction that is meant to increase their test scores. This type of instruction often involves rote-memory or “kill-and-drill” activities, which use actual test items or materials very similar to the actual test. This sort of instruction does not require students to develop and use critical or higher order thinking skills. Additionally, students’ opportunities to engage in meaningful content decrease when their instruction is limited to test prep. Furthermore, the test can no longer measure what it was intended to measure

because students have been taught how to take the test using material very similar to the test itself (Wiley & Wright, 2004; Soublis Smyth, 2008; and Menken, 2010).

#### ELs Taking Tests Normed on NESs

Test norming issues also compromise the validity of standardized test results for ELs. When ELs take standardized tests that are normed on NESs it can cause the normal distribution of student scores to become unpredictable, which leads to invalid scores (Stevens et al., 2000). This can greatly impact states or districts with large EL populations (Verdugo & Flores, 2007). Thus, to increase validity, ELs need to be included in the norming sample of standardized assessments that they are expected to take (Solorzano, 2008).

#### Beliefs and Assumptions about ELs in U.S. Public Schools

It is the researcher's bias that assumptions and beliefs about ELs in U.S. public schools are often negative and lead to deficit thinking of ELs. Therefore, literature was reviewed in order to determine existing beliefs, assumptions and stereotypes about ELs in U.S. public schools. Some of the themes that emerged from review of this particular topic in the literature were: ELs are viewed as poor academic performers; ELs are considered a problem to teachers and schools; ELs are stereotyped as academically unsuccessful, or at-risk, as learning disabled and as immigrants.

#### ELs as Poor Academic Performers

In a study conducted by Walker et al. (2004), a significant finding was that, "There is a pervasive attitude that ELLs are poor academic performers who burden teachers with unwanted responsibilities" (p. 143). ELs' generally low standardized test scores contribute to the stereotype that ELs are poor academic performers. Due to this

generalization, some schools actually attempt to put a limit on the number of ELs they admit so as to decrease the likelihood that the EL population will “drag down” the school’s test scores. For instance, an administrator who believed that ELs, due to their lower test scores, caused a problem for the school confessed in an interview that he was in the practice of admitting as few ELs as possible (Menken, 2010).

Menken (2010) blames the accountability mandates of NCLB for ELs being portrayed as poor academic performers. She explains that since ELs do not typically perform well on standardized, high-stakes assessments, which are used to comply with NCLB accountability mandates, ELs are consequently labeled *low performing*. Menken argues that the low performing label of ELs is erroneous since it is impossible for tests given to ELs in English, a language they are in the process of acquiring, to result in a valid picture of what ELs know.

Walker et al. (2004) suggested that teacher attitudes toward ELs were likely to worsen in the following several years due to: expected growth in the EL population paired with a lack of training in how to instruct ELs in the mainstream as well as changes in federal legislation wherein teachers and schools are responsible for ensuring that ELs reach extremely rigorous academic standards in a short amount of time.

#### ELs as a Problem to Schools and Educators

In addition to being stereotyped as poor academic performers, Gutierrez and Orellana (2006) argue that when ELs are continuously compared to their NES peers, a genre of difference is created wherein ELs are seen as problematic in comparison to non-ELs. Gutierrez and Orellana point out that research on literacy development regarding

ELs often focuses on the many supposed challenges in educating ELs while ignoring the assets that ELs possess.

ELs are also often considered burdensome for NCLB accountability reasons. For example, a participant in the Walker et al. (2004) study recalled that when she was first hired, her principal commented that ELs sometimes cause problems for the school. Walker et al. (2004) argue that comments of this nature promote the belief that ELs are to blame for their academic failures. Moreover, such comments are based upon and encourage deficit thinking. When those in educational leadership roles hold deficit views of ELs, it can promote negative attitudes toward ELs among teachers.

### Stereotypes

The Merriam-Webster (2015) online dictionary defines *stereotype* as, “to believe unfairly that all people or things with a particular characteristic are the same.” The Oxford University Press (2015) online dictionary defines *stereotype* the following way, “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.” Thus, believing that all ELs are the same in terms of culture and experiences results in ELs not being seen as unique individuals. Adichie (2009) suggests that, “...the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (13:15).

### Stereotypes about ELs

Very little was found in the literature on stereotypes, myths or assumptions about ELs. In fact, only one piece of literature was found that specifically addressed stereotypes about ELs as a group. An additional piece of literature was found that had some myths about ELs embedded in its topic.

Twelve commonly held assumptions about ELs are addressed in a reference guide published by American Institutes for Research (AIR). Authors Gil & Bardack (2010) note the following assumptions about ELs in U.S. public schools: 1) all ELs are immigrants; 2) learning two or more languages will impede a child's fluency in both languages; 3) all children from non-English-speaking backgrounds learn English the same way; 4) children from non-English-speaking backgrounds have fully acquired English and are ready to be mainstreamed once they are able to speak it; 5) older generations of immigrants successfully learned English without any special language programs; 6) native English speakers will experience academic and language delays if they are enrolled in dual language programs; 7) bilingual education delays English language acquisition for ELs; 8) good instruction is good enough for everyone, including ELs; 9) most ELs have learned English by middle and high school; 10) many ELs have learning disabilities rather than problems with language acquisition; 11) schools should only provide English-only instruction because they do not have the capacity to meet the needs of all linguistic groups; 12) parents of ELs do not want to be involved in their children's education.

The majority of the above listed assumptions about ELs are in actuality misconceptions about second language acquisition. The two assumptions that are most relevant to this study are that all ELs are immigrants and parents of ELs do not want to be involved in their children's education. These two assumptions were found in the following study as well.

A study by Franquiz et al. (2011) further contributes to the very limited literature on stereotypes, myths, and assumptions about ELs. In this study, the researchers worked with three different groups of pre-service teachers in three different areas of the United

States. All of the pre-service teachers in each of the three groups were bilingual teachers of color. After working with, and collecting data from each group of pre-service teachers, the researchers chose specific artifacts created by the pre-service teachers to share in this article. Artifacts were selected if they effectively challenged or silenced a commonly held assumption or myth about ELs. The assumptions or myths that these artifacts challenged are the following: 1) Parents of ELs do not value their children's education; 2) ELs will make faster academic progress if they are immersed in and taught in English only; 3) all ELs are the same in that they share a common culture, or language, or immigration experience; 4) Latino ELs are not as academically successful as Asian ELs; 5) Asian students are the model minority; 6) all ELs are at risk.

#### Stereotypes about Specific Ethnic Groups

In the metropolitan area in which this study was conducted, there are large numbers of ELs from the following ethnic groups: Latino (predominantly Mexican), East African (predominantly Somali), and Southeast Asian (predominantly Hmong). Therefore, research was reviewed on stereotypes regarding the abovementioned ethnic groups.

In addition to being stereotyped simply because they are learning English, ELs are also stereotyped based on their ethnicity. The majority of ELs are from ethnic groups that are considered minorities. In other words, there are a greater number of ELs with non-Anglo-European heritage. As with the literature on stereotypes of ELs in general, literature regarding stereotypes of Latino, Southeast Asian, and East African students is limited. Relevant literature on ethnic stereotypes will be presented below.

Stereotypes about Latino students. Two sources were reviewed regarding stereotypes about Latino students. One source is a report by Foxen (2010) on Latino youth experiences of discrimination. The report covers experiences of discrimination in areas of daily life such as school, work and in the community. For the purpose of this study, only the experiences of discrimination in school will be presented. Focus groups involving sixty Latino youth ages 15 to 17 were used to collect data for this study.

The Latino students in these focus groups described feeling negatively stereotyped at school. For instance, Latino students reported being stereotyped as immigrants who “do not belong here”. One student recalled a teacher stating that Mexicans did not belong in the U.S. and that they should go back to their country (Foxen, 2010).

Latino students also described being stereotyped as low academic achievers. Students perceived that their teachers often made assumptions about Latino youth such as the following: they are often gang members; Latino girls often end up pregnant in high school and Latino boys will end up working in construction. Students believed that due to making these assumptions, teachers had lower expectations for Latino students. Several students in the focus groups expressed the thought that their teachers did not believe they would graduate from high school (Foxen, 2010).

An additional source of literature also found that Latino students are stereotyped in school as low academic achievers. This five-year ethnographic study focused on Mexican immigrants who were living in a suburb of a large city in the Northeastern portion of the U.S. In the suburb of Marshall, Mexicans were the most recent immigrant group. The researchers in this study interviewed several community members – civilians,

police officers, and teachers – in order to determine perceptions about the Mexican immigrants who had settled in this suburb (Wortham, Mortimer & Allard, 2009).

For the most part, community members likened the Mexican immigrants to the *model minority*. The term model minority first appeared in 1966 in two different newspaper articles, one in *U.S. News & World Report* and another in the *New York Times*. In both articles, the term was used to describe Asian Americans, Chinese and Japanese specifically, as hard working, successful and determined to achieve. In this study, Mexican immigrants were also described as hard working and successful.

Overall, the majority of the community members of Marshall viewed Mexican immigrants as ideal because they worked hard, had strong family values and caused no trouble. However, the model minority stereotype was not applied to Mexican immigrant students in school. In fact, when asked to describe their perceptions of Mexican immigrant students, teachers used words and phrases such as: unmotivated, lazy, and lacking in academic skill (Wortham et al., 2009).

Stereotypes about Southeast Asian students. As mentioned above, Asian Americans are often depicted as the model minority. This description has been applied to Asian American students as well. Asian American students are typically expected to excel in school. However, not all Asian Americans are doing well in school. Unfortunately, the academic struggles of some Southeast Asian American students go unnoticed because test results for Asian American students as a whole are proficient. However, if test score results for Asian American students were disaggregated, some of the academic struggles would be revealed (Yang, 2004).



Yang (2004) describes Southeast Asian American students as caught between the model minority expectations and diminished expectations of some teachers. She explains that at the national level, Southeast Asian American Students go unnoticed as they are subsumed into the larger Asian American category. However, at the local level, teachers frequently stereotype Southeast Asian American students as incapable of academic success.

Stereotypes about Somali Students. Similar to Latino and Southeast Asian students, Somali students are also often negatively portrayed in school. For example, in a study by Roy & Roxas (2011), teachers who were interviewed described Somali refugee students as unmotivated and compared them to Sudanese and Iraqi refugee students. At least two teachers expressed their desire for Somali refugee students to be more like the Sudanese and Iraqi refugee students in terms of motivation and behavior.

Further, some school personnel believed that the Somali culture does not value education. One school counselor suggested that because Somali refugees came from Africa they do not value education. It was the school counselor's opinion that education is not valued in Africa, in general. The assumption that Somali culture does not value education was used as an explanation for the poor academic performance of Somali refugee students (Roy & Roxas, 2011).

In the same study by Roy & Roxas (2011), Somali refugee students were also stereotyped as aggressive by nature. Some teachers and administrators reported that Somali students were frequently involved in fights and were usually aggressive. Roy and Roxas point out that, unfortunately, the teachers and administrators had not considered

war related stress and trauma as a reason for Somali refugee students' alleged aggressive behavior.

In addition to ethnic stereotypes, Somali students, many of whom are Muslim, are also subject to religious stereotypes. In an article exploring issues of race and religion that pertain to Somali students, Bigelow (2008) addresses the following stereotypical views of Muslim youth: Muslims are extremists and terrorists and Muslims are uneducated barbarians. Many Somali Muslims living in the United States, as well as other Muslims, are subjected to Islamophobia. Bigelow claims this is mainly due to ignorance about Islam. Islamophobia causes many Somali students to have a difficult time fitting in at school. This is especially true for female Somali students who cover their hair by wearing the hijab. The hijab clearly marks Somali females as Muslim and thus leads to increased experiences of religious discrimination and stereotyping.

This section of the literature review has presented how others, mainly educators, perceive ELs. Now, ELs' perceptions of their educational experiences, including how they believe others perceive them, will be discussed.

#### ELs' Perceptions of their Educational Experiences

Literature on ELs' perceptions of their educational experiences is extremely thin. Upon searching the literature for educational experiences of English language learners or specific ethnic groups such as, Latino/a, Somali, and Southeast Asian, very few pertinent pieces of research were found. In reviewing the small amount of pertinent research, it became evident that the educational experiences of English language learners are often told from someone else's perspective. Finding research that involved interviews of ELs in order to obtain their perceptions was very rare.

Most of the literature found and reviewed pertained to Latino ELs. One article reviewed pertained to African ELs and another article pertained to Cambodian students. Not all of the students in the reviewed research were ELs, but all were from a specific ethnic group, which has typically had a large number of ELs in schools in the United States. From the literature available for review, the following themes were represented: teachers had lower expectations for ELs or students from specific ethnic groups; some teachers were nice and understanding, but many teachers did not seem to care; teachers often favored white students; teachers and peers stereotyped ELs; some teachers assumed refugee students had educational deficits; and ELs or students from certain ethnic groups felt that they were not as smart as white students.

#### Low Expectations

In a reflective article focusing on low educational expectations for Latino/a students, Cavazos (2009) shares about her personal experience as a former EL and her perception that teachers had lower academic expectations for her because she was Latina. In addition, the article presents observations she made while student teaching in an eleventh-grade English class. Cavazos kept a daily journal of her experiences and observations as a student teacher. Through observing certain student-teacher interactions and noting comments teachers made in the staff lounge, she concluded that several teachers had lower expectations for Latino/a students.

Cavazos also included in this article information obtained from interviews of two high school teachers. Some of the their responses supported her belief that, in general, teachers have lower expectations for Latino/a students. It is important to note that the

Latino/a students were not asked to share their perspectives. Thus, it is impossible to know if the Latino/a students believed that their teachers had lower expectations.

This sentiment of lower expectations was echoed in Wallitt's (2008) research on Cambodian American students' school experiences. One study participant shared that he believed teachers at his school treated all Cambodians as though they were not worth helping based on the assumption that they would likely be school dropouts. Since there was a high dropout rate among Cambodian students at the high school this participant attended, some teachers, apparently, had lower expectations for them, or even expected them to fail.

### Stereotypes and Assumptions

Ironically, though, some of the participants in Wallitt's study felt caught between low expectations of some teachers and unrealistically high expectations of others. The unrealistically high expectations seemed to be based on the assumption that all Asians excel in school. This is known as the "model minority" myth. One student described the experience of being in math class and the teacher continually looking to him for the correct answer simply because he was Asian.

In a recent study, Shapiro (2014) analyzed statements African refugee students made during a public protest and in personal interviews. Many of the perceptions these students had of their educational experiences were negative. The main finding of this study was that participants felt stereotyped based on their ethnicity. Other findings were that African refugee students felt intellectually inferior to their white peers and believed that teachers assumed they had educational deficits and, therefore, had lower academic expectations for them.

Several participants in Shapiro's study talked about their frustration that teachers and peers seemed to think all Africans are the same. Many participants were upset that instead of recognizing that Africa is a continent made up of several countries with each country having a distinct culture, teachers and peers made sweeping generalizations about Africans. Participants were further frustrated that, in their school district, all African students were placed in one category for the purpose of reporting test results. Participants believed it was problematic to place all African students into one group for test reporting purposes because it encourages teachers and peers to continue generalizing about them (Shapiro, 2014).

Along with feeling stereotyped as Africans, participants in Shapiro's study believed teachers made generalizations about their academic abilities based on the assumption that they had little or no previous educational experiences because they were refugees. For example, two interview participants shared that they had been encouraged to take low-level math classes for two years in a row without being told that this would negatively impact their ability to be in a college prep math class their senior year of high school. Other study participants shared examples of times when they felt teachers had lower expectations for them because they were refugees.

### Intellectual Inferiority

Many of the participants in Shapiro's study believed that their teachers and peers did not think they were smart. School district test score reports highlighting the African group as underperforming only made matters worse. Unfortunately, when students sense that teachers have lower expectations for them than for other students, particularly white students, feelings of intellectual inferiority are likely to arise (Shapiro, 2014).

### Lack of Caring

Other students in Wallitt's study shared that they felt invisible in school. In one case, a student noted that many of her teachers did not know she was Cambodian. Rather than ask about her ethnicity, they simply assumed she was Chinese. This is one way that she felt invisible as a Cambodian student. In another case, a student recalled that in world history class, they never studied about Cambodia. In her estimation, the history that was deemed more important was covered first and by the time they got to Southeast Asia, there were not enough days left in the school year to cover it all. Feeling that the history of Cambodia was not seen as important caused this student to feel unimportant and uncared for at school.

### Favoring White Students

Irizarry and Kleyn (2011) had similar finding in their qualitative case study regarding immigrant youth perspectives on living and learning in the U.S. They discovered that some of their participants believed that teachers favored white students. Participants shared examples of feeling that they were invisible to teachers while white students were always noticed. For example, a few participants said teachers ignored their raised hands, yet always seemed to acknowledge white students' raised hands. Further, participants shared that teachers often responded with annoyance when they asked a question, but did not seem bothered in the least when a white student asked a question.

In summary, most of the educational experiences reported by ELs have been negative. However, as previously stated, the literature is very thin with regard to EL accounts of their educational experiences. Clearly, there is a gap in the research that this study helps to fill.

## The Gap

Since literature regarding ELs' perceptions of their educational experience is scant, it seems evident that there is a gap in research. Further, Shapiro (2014) notes, "Despite growing awareness of the existence of deficit discourse, very few researchers have examined how students perceive and respond to that discourse" (p.388). By interviewing former ELs to find out about their K-12 educational experiences, this study contributes to the abovementioned gap in the literature.

## Research Questions

The main question this study attempted to answer was: What perceptions do former ELs have of their K-12 educational experiences? This study also aimed to answer the following supporting questions: Did former ELs experience deficit thinking in their educational experience? What responses do former ELs have regarding deficit thinking they might have experienced? What in-school factors, if any, would have improved participants' K-12 educational experiences?

## Summary

In summary, deficit thinking involves viewing students through a negative lens, focusing on what they cannot do rather than what they can. There are several factors contributing to deficit thinking of ELs. Some of the factors are: language and cultural differences being seen as deficits, being labeled at-risk, and the achievement gap discourse.

NCLB, though meant to have a positive impact on the education of ELs, has had the opposite affect. NCLB is based upon deficit thinking and, therefore, serves to reinforce deficit thinking of ELs in U.S. public schools. Some of the negative impacts

NCLB has had on the education of ELs are: a decrease in bilingual education programs, funding issues, a decrease in meaningful learning opportunities, and problems resulting from the assessment and accountability mandates of NCLB.

There are several negative stereotypes ELs are subject to in U.S. public schools. For example, ELs are frequently portrayed as poor academic performers and are viewed as a problem for teachers and schools. Furthermore, many ELs are also stereotyped based on their ethnicity. For instance, Latino students are frequently stereotyped as immigrants who “do not belong here” and as unmotivated, low academic performers. Some stereotypes about Somali students are that they are unmotivated, poor academic performers; they behave aggressively; and they are Muslim extremists. Lastly, Southeast Asian students are caught between two polar stereotypes. On one hand, they are stereotyped as the model minority and are often held to extremely high expectations. On the other hand, like Latino and Somali students, Southeast Asian students are stereotyped as poor academic performers.

Research on ELs’ perceptions of their educational experiences is rather thin. However, in reviewing the literature, it is evident that ELs felt that they were treated differently in school than white students. For example, ELs who were interviewed reported that: teachers had lower expectations for ELs; some teachers did not seem to care about how ELs fared in school; and teachers seemed to favor white students. It is difficult to decipher whether ELs were stereotyped and treated differently due to being ELs or due to their ethnicity, as many ELs are also ethnic minorities.

The following chapter, methodology, will present the research paradigm that will be employed in this study. This next chapter will also describe how the chosen method



will be implemented. Further, the survey and interview questions will be included in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of former ELs regarding their K-12 educational experience in the public education system of the United States. This study aimed at answering the following research questions: What perceptions do former ELs have of their K-12 educational experiences? What perceptions do former ELs have regarding deficit thinking in their K-12 educational experiences? What perceived deficit thinking can participants identify and what is their response? What in-school factors, if any, might have improved their educational experiences?

In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with each participant in order to understand perspectives on their educational experiences. Each interview was transcribed into a word document. The constant-comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 as cited in Merriam, 2009) was used to analyze the data in order to determine the study's findings. This method involved coding the data in order to allow themes, or categories, to emerge.

### Overview of the Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an explanation of the methods used in this study. First, the rationale and description of the research design are introduced followed by a brief description of the qualitative paradigm. Second, the data collection process is presented along with a discussion of the research procedure. Third, the

methods used for analyzing the data will be outlined. Finally, the validity and reliability of this study are addressed as well as ethical considerations.

### Qualitative Research Paradigm

This study employed qualitative research design. Since many different fields have influenced qualitative research and each field has a slightly different perception of what qualitative research is, a commonly agreed upon definition is difficult to find (Merriam, 2009). Dornyei (2007), however, provides the following brief definition of qualitative research: "...involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analyzed primarily by non-statistical methods" (p.24). According to Merriam (2009), "... qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p.13). Both Dornyei (2007) and Merriam (2009) stress that the main goal in qualitative research is for the researcher to attempt to understand the participant's experience from the participant's point of view, rather than from the researcher's point of view.

Although qualitative research does not have a clear, agreed upon definition, it does have specific, consistent characteristics (Dornyei, 2007). Merriam (2009) outlines four major characteristics of qualitative research design. One characteristic is that emphasis is placed on the process of understanding, or making meaning, rather than on the outcome of the research. Understanding the phenomena from the participant's perspective rather than the researcher's is key. Since the goal of this study was to understand participants' perspectives on their educational experiences, the qualitative research method was very fitting.

Another major characteristic is that the researcher is the main instrument for collection and analysis of data. The ability to process information quickly, clarify and summarize information, check for accuracy of interpretation and explore unusual or unanticipated responses are all major advantages of the researcher being the primary instrument. However, there are some drawbacks such as biases that might negatively impact the study. Therefore, according to Merriam (2009), the researcher should determine biases and regularly monitor how they are impacting the collection and interpretation of data.

A third characteristic of qualitative research is that the process is inductive. Thus, the researcher gathers and analyzes data in order to create a theory or hypothesis. This is the opposite of quantitative research wherein the researcher begins with a hypothesis or theory and attempts to prove it. Since this study did not set out to prove a theory or hypothesis, but rather to understand former ELs' experiences, qualitative research was a good research paradigm to use.

A final characteristic of qualitative research is that it is descriptively rich. Words and images, rather than numbers, describe the study. Qualitative studies often contain detailed descriptions of the context, the participants, and the activities of interest. Again, the qualitative research paradigm was an appropriate choice for this study since the interviewing technique yielded a large amount of data in the form of words, or language.

Some other general characteristics of qualitative research are that the design is emergent and flexible or responsive; the sample selection is usually purposeful and small; and the researcher often spends a substantial amount of time in the setting, usually in close contact with participants (Merriam, 2009).

Since this study's primary goal was to understand and know more about former ELs' educational experiences, it was also a phenomenological study. Phenomenology is, "a study of people's conscious experience of their life-world." (Merriam, 2009, p.25). A phenomenological study involves determining the essence of a shared experience by analyzing the experiences of different people and comparing each person's experience with others. For example, this study attempted to determine the essence of being an EL in U.S. public schools during the NCLB era.

Phenomenologists are primarily interested in the lived experiences of others. Therefore, it is important for phenomenologists to determine their personal biases regarding the experience to be studied and to set them aside as much as possible. The outcome of a phenomenological study should be a description of the phenomenon that depicts the essence of it so well that it results in the reader feeling that they know what it is like to experience the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

### Data Collection

#### Participants

In this study, I interviewed four former ELs, three of whom I taught in an ESL setting at the middle school level. I used Facebook and other forms of networking to seek out former ELs whose K-12 school experiences were during the NCLB era. The participants in this study were between the ages of 21 and 24. I chose to interview post-secondary aged participants, rather than younger participants, in the hopes that this would yield more articulate responses regarding educational experiences. There were three Latino participants in this study and one Southeast Asian participant.

### Setting

All of the participants in this study attended school in a suburban school district in the Upper Midwest. There are approximately 26,000 students attending schools in this district. ELs make up five percent of the total student population, or approximately 1,300. All of the participants graduated from this suburban school district. Two of the participants went on to attend post-secondary education.

### Interviews

Interviews were the primary means of data collection in this study. According to DeMarrais, an interview is, “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (as cited in Merriam, 2009, p.87).

Merriam (2009) states that, “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p.88). Answers to this study’s research questions could not be found by simply observing participants since the primary goal was to learn what perceptions former ELs have regarding their educational experiences. Further, since these educational experiences have already taken place, they would be impossible to observe or replicate. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct interviews.

One of the most important steps in preparing for an interview is to create an interview guide, or, the interview questions. In order to obtain useful data, the researcher must ask good questions. Open-ended questions are the preferred type of question for interviewing. Open-ended questions are broad so as not to limit the types of answers

participants can give. If questions are too specific and structured, they will yield limited data. Researchers should avoid asking yes-or-no questions since they may yield a simple yes-or-no response (Merriam, 2009).

Open-ended questions might be followed up with probes, which, according to Merriam are, “questions or comments that follow up something already asked” (p. 100). Probing may involve asking for more information in the form of added details, clarifications, or examples. Probes are nearly impossible to determine ahead of time since they are dependent on a participant’s response to a question. Therefore, the researcher needs to be able to determine when it would be pertinent to ask a follow-up question, or probe (Merriam, 2009).

Another important step in preparing for an interview is determining whom to interview. The researcher needs to identify the criteria to be used to qualify participants for the study. Following identification of criteria for participation in the study, participants must be obtained. When participants are obtained, it is important that they become fully informed about the purpose of the study, the requirements of being involved, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Merriam, 2009).

The final step in the interview process is conducting the interview. A time and place should be arranged with each participant. Merriam advises that in order to promote positive interaction during the interview, the researcher should be, “...respectful, nonjudgmental, and non-threatening...” (p. 107). If the interview starts out slowly, Merriam suggests asking participants for basic information in order to speed things along. Ideally, an interview in a qualitative research study should seem like a conversation, rather than an interrogation. In order for the interview to be more like a conversation, it

should be semi-structured. This means that there are some structured questions, but mostly broader, open-ended questions. Further, a semi-structured interview does not have a particular order in which the questions will be asked or rigid wording of the questions. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to better access the participants' perspectives and understandings of their experience (Merriam, 2009).

### Procedure

#### Participants

The participants in this study, former ELs, were interviewed in the spring of 2015. Participants were asked questions designed to elicit as much information as possible with respect to perceptions of their K-12 educational experiences.

Individual interviews were arranged with each participant and took place at a local library. Open-ended interview questions were used to guide the discussion. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Minimal notes were taken during interviews to serve as a reminder of a question to ask next or to note immediate thoughts on a response given by a participant. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed onto a word document. Then, the data was analyzed using the constant-comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 as cited in Merriam, 2009). Constant-comparison involved coding the data in order to allow themes to emerge.

#### Materials

Pre-planned interview questions (see Appendix A) were one of the most significant materials used to collect data. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder as well as Garageband, a type of audio recording software. A personal computer that contained the Garageband software was used to record and store the data.



Additionally, a notepad and pen were used in order to take minimal notes as needed during the interviews.

## Data Analysis

### Interviews

First, each interview was transcribed onto a word document. After each interview was transcribed, the transcription was read through with the purpose of noting any bits of data that seemed to be an answer or a partial answer to a research question. Next to significant bits of data, a word or phrase was written that seemed to capture the essence of the data. After applying this coding method to the entire transcript, a list was compiled of all of the codes, or words and phrases, which were written next to each meaningful bit of data. Then, the codes were organized into categories. This coding and categorizing process was employed with each transcript. Throughout the data collection process and preliminary analysis, categories formed from one transcript were compared with categories formed from another transcript. Then, these categories were combined to form one master list of categories. This process continued through the last interview conducted and transcribed. Merriam (2009) explains that the outcome of constant-comparison data analysis is the determination of categories, or themes, that occur throughout all of the data. These categories, or themes, that regularly reoccur are the findings of the study.

### Verification of Data

One way in which the internal validity of this study was increased was by using member checks. A member check is a strategy that qualitative researchers employ in order to ensure that they have not misinterpreted what participants have said or done (Maxwell, 2005 as cited in Merriam, 2009). In order to determine if the researcher has

correctly interpreted what a participant has shared, it is important for the researcher to receive feedback from some of the participants. To accomplish this, the researcher submits an analysis of the data to some of the participants. If the participants' thoughts have been well understood by the researcher, the participants should be able to identify their experience in the researcher's preliminary analysis. It might be the case that a participant's feedback is in the form of suggestions that will enable the researcher to better capture the participant's point of view (Merriam, 2009).

Another way in which the internal validity of this study was increased was by adequately engaging in data collection. Merriam (2009) states that an adequate period of time must be dedicated to collecting data. An adequate period of time collecting data is reached when the researcher notices the data is saturated. According to Merriam (2009), saturation occurs when the researcher is no longer able to obtain any new information; the researcher begins to hear or see the same things again and again.

### Ethics

There are several ways in which this study was conducted with ethics in mind. First, all participants were thoroughly informed of the purpose of this study as well as the procedures that would be involved. Further, each participant was given an informed consent form (see Appendix B) and was told of their right to withdraw from the study at any point in time. Third, in order to protect the identity of all participants, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. Finally, audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were kept in a secured location and will be destroyed one year after this study is completed.

### Summary

This chapter began with a description of the qualitative research paradigm that was used in this study. This was followed by an explanation of the process used to collect and analyze this study's data. I discussed the use of one-on-one interviews aimed at answering the following research questions: What perceptions do former ELs have of their K-12 educational experiences? Did former ELs experience deficit thinking in their K-12 educational experiences? If yes, what is their response to the deficit thinking they experienced? What in-school factors, if any, would have improved participants' educational experiences? Next, I explained that each interview was transcribed onto a word document and analyzed using the constant-comparison method to allow themes to emerge. Finally, I concluded this chapter with a discussion about verification of data as well as ethics. The following chapter will present the results of this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study's data was obtained through one-on-one interviews with four former ELs. The interviews took place in a private study room at a public library and ranged from one-and-a-half to two hours in length. At the start of each interview, demographical and background information was obtained. Then, interview questions were used to facilitate a conversation about participants' educational experiences. Through these interviews, I sought to find answers to the following questions. What perceptions do former ELs have of their educational experiences? Do participants think they were viewed from a deficit perspective? What response do they have to possible deficit thinking they encountered? What in-school factors, if any, might have improved participants' educational experiences?

### Participant Profiles

Four former ELs, ranging in age from twenty-one to twenty-four, were interviewed for this study. Sofia was twenty-two years old at the time of this study. Her parents were born in Mexico and immigrated to the U.S. in approximately 1990. Sofia was born in the United States and attended U.S. public schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade. She attended kindergarten through the middle of fifth grade in one school district. Then, her family moved and she attended school in another district from the middle of fifth grade through twelfth grade. Sofia did not recall receiving ESL services in the first school district she attended. She said that she did not leave her general classroom

to go to ESL class. Furthermore, she did not remember an additional teacher coming into her grade-level classroom to work with her. She did, however, recall a teacher teaching the alphabet and some basic words in Spanish. When Sofia moved and started a new school in the middle of fifth grade, she remembered being taken out of her general classroom to go to ESL class. She then remained in ESL through high school. Sofia transferred from the regular high school to an alternative learning center (ALC) because she had gotten behind in credits and would not be able to graduate on time if she remained at the regular high school. She earned her diploma from the ALC and hopes to pursue post-secondary education in the near future.

Tomas was twenty-three years old at the time of this study. He was born in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. He and his family immigrated to the United States when he was nine years old. His family moved to the U.S. for better employment opportunities. His parents wanted to earn more money to help pay for medical bills for Tomas' ill grandfather. Some of Tomas' aunts had already immigrated to the U.S. for work and convinced his parents to do the same. Tomas remembered completing first and second grade in the Philippines. He was placed in third grade when he enrolled in school in the U.S. He received ESL services from third grade through tenth grade. He graduated on time and went on to pursue post-secondary education at a local university.

David was twenty-four years old at the time of this study. He was born in Mexico and lived there until he was ten years old. When he was ten years old, David and his family went to the U.S. to visit relatives and they never returned to Mexico. Once David's visiting passport expired, he was undocumented, as were the majority of his family. This was a challenge for David with regard to education. In high school, there

were moments when David felt it was pointless to continue going to school because, as an undocumented individual, he believed he had no future. David started skipping classes in tenth grade. Many factors seem to have played a role in his decision to start skipping classes and to, eventually, stop going to school altogether. One major factor was that he was very fearful and anxious in certain classes mainly because the teacher expected students to participate in class by reading aloud and talking in front of their peers. After a break from attending school, David found out that he only had five credits left in order to earn his high school diploma. So, he enrolled at an alternative learning center and earned his diploma. He hopes to pursue post-secondary education in the near future.

Martina was twenty-one years old at the time of this study. She was born in Colombia and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of eleven. Her dad had immigrated to the U.S. for better employment opportunities when Martina was less than a year old. When she was five years old, Martina's mom joined her dad in the United States. Martina remained in Colombia with her grandma and aunt because it was a very long and complicated process to get immigration papers. When she finally arrived in the U.S., Martina hardly knew her family. She had not seen her dad since she was a baby and had not seen her mom since she was five. She had never met her younger sister who, at the time, was five, turning six. Martina was placed in sixth grade her first year in the U.S. She attended sixth through twelfth grade in one school district. Martina received ESL services for only two years – sixth and seventh grade. She tested out of ESL at the end of seventh grade. In the middle of eighth grade, she was asked to participate in Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a college preparation program. Martina described this program as having a large impact on her educational experiences.

In high school, she took advanced placement and honors courses. Martina said she never would have taken such courses if it were not for AVID instructors and friends encouraging her to do so. Martina graduated from high school on time and went on to pursue a higher degree at a local university.

### Presentation of Findings

The following paragraphs will contain this study's findings organized by research questions. First, findings pertaining to former ELs' perceptions of their K-12 educational experiences will be discussed. Next, findings regarding deficit thinking that participants experienced and/or identified will be presented along with participants' responses to deficit thinking about ELs. Finally, findings about in-school factors that would have improved former ELs' educational experiences will be presented.

#### Research Question Number One

The first question I sought to answer in this study was: What perceptions do former ELs have of their K-12 educational experiences? When discussing their educational experiences, participants primarily described what it was like to be an EL in general education classes in contrast to what it was like being an EL in ESL classes. When discussing the experience of being an EL in general classes, the main themes that emerged were those of feeling different & alone; feeling afraid; and, not understanding class content. When discussing being an EL in ESL classes, the following themes emerged: feeling comfortable and understanding.

The abovementioned themes were not found in the reviewed literature. This study took place in a suburban location where the EL population is smaller than it is in a nearby urban location. Thus, ELs in this study received ESL service separate from general

classes. It may be the case that in urban locations where the EL population is higher, ELs are more likely to receive ESL service within general classes. Further, in an urban school district with a larger EL population, ELs are less likely to experience being “the only” EL in a class.

Being an EL in general classes. As beginning ELs, all of the participants were placed in general classes for at least half, if not more, of the school day. For the most part, the amount of time that participants spent in general classes each day increased as their English proficiency increased. In their interviews, each of the participants described what it was like to be an EL student in a general classroom where the majority, if not all, of the students were fluent English speakers.

*Different and alone.* All of the participants expressed that they felt different and alone while they were in a classroom surrounded by NESs, mainly of European decent. Each participant said that, at some point in their educational experience, they felt like “the only” EL, or Hispanic, or Filipino, in their class. Sofia, in describing her elementary experience in a general classroom, said, “I was pretty much like the only Hispanic or, you know, that talked a different language in the class so, I just felt so alone.”

Regarding his experience in school, Tomas shared, “. . . the first two years of being in school in the U.S., I had trouble adjusting.” He explained that he was lonely and felt that he “didn’t fit in” in the regular classroom. Tomas went on to say, “Again, I did have friends, but at that time I wished I had a friend who was also from the Philippines. It would’ve been nice to talk to someone in the same language as mine.”

During his first year of school in the U.S., David recalled that, “In fifth grade I was probably one of the only Hispanics – until my friends started to come. I remember



that. In sixth grade, I had a bunch of Hispanic friends, but in fifth grade, it was probably me and one of my cousins that's the same age as me. We were in different classes, though.”

In reflecting on her experience in general classes, Martina said, “There were not really at all speakers of other languages in the regular classes.” Martina also described feeling alone and excluded in general classes. She stated that, “... I think you definitely feel more excluded, like an outsider and like you're watching rather than being there.” Later in her interview, Martina added, “I just wanted to be with everybody else because I didn't want to be seen as different.” When Martina said she wanted to be like everyone else, she meant that she wanted to be in general classes all day long with everyone else rather than in ESL classes for one or two periods of the day. She wanted to have the same experiences the majority of her peers were having. She wanted to have a sense of belonging in general classes, rather than feeling like an outsider looking in.

*Afraid.* Three of the four participants, who immigrated to the U.S. between the ages of nine and eleven, spoke frequently about feeling afraid when they were in a general class surrounded by NESs. They described their first year of school in the United States as a scary and difficult experience. Martina explained that, “It was very scary and it was very intimidating. They could have laughed at me and I wouldn't have known.” In this statement, she was referring to the possibility of her NES peers laughing at her due to her very limited English.

In recalling his first year in U.S. public schools, David said, “Yeah, because I didn't know English, it was scary. It was just something new - everybody speaking English. I couldn't communicate.”

Participants also talked about being afraid of producing English in front of fluent English-speaking peers. They were fearful of being laughed at, because they sometimes were. They also described being afraid to ask clarifying questions to the teacher. They did not want to appear unintelligent. Two participants described the experience of having to read aloud in general classes. Tomas said, "...whenever we read textbooks, especially out loud, I would still shake a little bit because I'm thinking like, 'What if I said this wrong?' Back then kids would laugh if you say something wrong."

Like Tomas, David also had vivid memories of being expected to read aloud in front of fluent English-speaking peers. He described a typical day in his high-school English class: "We were reading a book and they would be like, 'Uh, open up to page twenty-five. Ok, Kaylee, start reading out paragraph one.' She started reading and I started to get nervous. She's gonna tell me to read; She's gonna tell me to read. And then, 'Ok', she'd be like, 'Today, we're gonna go in order and everybody's gonna get a chance to read.' And I didn't wanna read. I didn't want people to hear my voice."

Later, David discussed how reading aloud in ESL class, in comparison to reading aloud in a general education classroom, was not a problem for him. He stated, "...everybody was the same, so it wasn't embarrassing there. It was pretty comfortable." Sofia echoed David's sentiments regarding speaking or reading in front of peers in ESL class. She said, "When you're in a class with other language learners, you don't have that fear of speaking up because you know you're all at that same level or have the other native language. They're not gonna laugh because they're the same."

*Not Understanding.* Two of the participants, David and Sofia, talked about not understanding some of their general classes. In David's interview, he pointed out that the

pace of the lesson was often too fast and he could not keep up. He told a story of a time when he was in a general class and did not understand everything that was happening. His difficulty was compounded by the fact that he sat in the very back of the room, which he did because he was scared to be called on by the teacher. David explained, "...you got all the fluent English speakers in the front and then I'm here way in the back – just me – and I'm scared. So, I'm all the way in the back and I need glasses and I didn't have my glasses at that point. The teacher's writing on the board. I can't really see what he's writing. He's telling us what to do, but I can't really understand and I'm embarrassed to go tell the teacher, 'You know what? You need to slow down. I can't understand you.' I don't even understand what the book says, but it's embarrassing. So, it's just something that you – you just go in there until it's over. You don't even care if you fail it for some reason. You just get out of that class."

Sofia also had experiences with not understanding general class content. She pointed out that some teachers did not explain things in different ways for different types of learners. She recalled that, "...whatever they were to teach that day, they would just teach it. They would say it how they were supposed to say it for the whole class. I didn't receive the extra help that I needed."

Sofia also spoke about how some teachers reacted when she struggled to understand content. She said, "When I wouldn't understand something, to them it was just like, 'How else can I explain this?' ... Well, we read a chapter and I would follow along, but most of it was words I didn't understand. They would translate the words in a way that (they thought) I would understand, but then I still wouldn't understand them and it was like they were frustrated."

Being an EL in ESL classes. All of the participants received ESL classes that were separate from general education classes or classrooms. At the elementary level, these ESL classes were considered *pull-out* classes since the ESL teacher would take ELs out of their general class and bring them to a separate room for language development time. At the secondary level, language development would take place during a period of the school day. ESL students would typically go to an ESL class in place of a general English class. All of the participants indicated that they were fine with going to ESL and, in some cases, that they liked ESL class and looked forward to it.

*Comfortable.* Three of the four participants described being comfortable in ESL classes – comfortable enough to take risks as a learner. Participants also described feeling at ease knowing that they were surrounded by like peers in ESL class. David explained, “I was pretty scared to go to a normal class. I didn’t want to.” He further elaborated, “I didn’t talk. I didn’t raise my voice. I was scared to ask teachers questions. I felt like they wouldn’t answer. In ESL classes – those classes were pretty easy.” Here, David used the word *easy* in the sense that he felt comfortable, or at ease, in ESL class compared to being extremely anxious in general classes. As previously mentioned, when discussing the differences between reading aloud in general classes versus ESL class, David said, “Yeah, but there (ESL class) everybody was the same so, it wasn’t embarrassing there. It was pretty comfortable.”

Sofia also described ESL class as a comfortable and safe place to be when she said, “So, when it’s time to go to ESL, it was like, ‘Oh, fun. The time is coming.’ I liked it. The teacher is very nice. It felt like I fit in in that class, because in my regular

classroom all day I was just like so alone.” Sofia’s sense of belonging, or fitting in, in ESL class contributed to her feeling comfortable there.

Tomas described having a sense of relief when he was pulled out of his elementary classroom for ESL class. He said he thought ESL class, “...was okay because it got me out of class...” When asked to further clarify this statement, he responded, “...at the time, being in ESL just put me at ease.”

*Understanding.* Two participants stated that they learned well in ESL classes. These same two participants, David and Sofia, spoke about having difficulty understanding in some of their general classes. When recalling their time in ESL class, Sofia and David both said that they learned “a lot.”

In talking about one of his ESL classes, David recalled, “It was me and a bunch of people that didn’t know English. A bunch of kids my age that didn’t know English. They actually taught me a lot. I learned a lot from that ESL class.” Unfortunately, David did not say this about many of his general classes.

Not only did Sofia learn “a lot” in ESL class, but she also thought she “learned better” in ESL classes than general classes because, “...it was a better environment than, like, a whole class. The teachers knew how to explain the things better.” Later on in her interview, Sofia added that, “ESL teachers were more helpful and would explain things in a language that I could understand, or more specific.”

### Research Question Number Two

The second research question I sought to answer in this study was: Do participants think they were viewed from a deficit perspective? In order to determine if participants experienced deficit thinking in their educational experiences, they were

asked questions about factors that are indicators of deficit thinking. Participants were asked how they believe teachers treated them, particularly if they felt treated the same as NESs. Further, they were asked about their thoughts regarding what teachers might have thought about their potential as a student, especially with regard to graduating from high school and going on to pursue higher education. Participants were also asked about what sort of expectations they think teachers had of them.

In answering the abovementioned questions, three of the four participants identified some type of deficit thinking in their educational experiences. The two main themes that emerged regarding deficit thinking were: ELs as a burden and ELs as intellectually inferior.

Tomas was the only participant who did not identify deficit thinking in his educational experiences. He believed he was treated the same as NESs and that general teachers believed in his overall potential as a student. For example, when talking about his perceptions of how teachers treated ELs, Tomas said, “They didn’t treat us any different. There would be a teacher who you just don’t have a good mix with, but it’s not because you’re from a different country or – it’s just different opinions, I guess.” Tomas felt that teachers treated him similarly to how they treated NESs. He said, “Overall, teachers treated me fairly with other students.”

When Martina reflected on her last five years of secondary education, when she was no longer identified as an EL, she agreed with Tomas that general teachers treated her the same as NESs. Martina also believed, as Tomas did, that sometimes a student and a teacher would clash or would not “have a good mix” due to personality differences and nothing more. She explained, “Definitely, you don’t want to feel like they don’t like me

because I'm Hispanic. A lot of people are like, 'They don't like me and it must be because I'm this or this.' I never want to assume that. I think of people as their personality. I know that not everybody's gonna like me and it has nothing to do with my background. Sometimes people just clash. I'm always against being like 'Oh, it must be because I'm Latina'. It could have been that, but I don't like saying that."

Yet, during Martina's first two years of school in the U.S., when she was identified as an EL, she believed general teachers treated her differently with regard to her capability as a student. Sofia and David also believed that, as ELs, they were treated differently. Martina, Sofia, and David felt they were not viewed the same as their NES peers in terms of intellect and amount of perceived effort needed to teach them.

Intellectually inferior. Sofia recalled a few teachers in high school who treated her like she was intellectually inferior. She said, "From what I remember, there were some teachers, not all, because they saw that I speak a different language, or they knew I was ESL, they would speak to me like dumb or something. Some, not all of them. Like counting apples in front of me, or something. And I'm like, 'I get it. I'm just asking a question.' Or, when I asked a question, they were like, 'Do you not get it?' or something."

David also experienced feeling as though a teacher thought he was intellectually inferior. He remembered a time in high school when, he believed, a teacher implied that he was dumb. When David was in tenth or eleventh grade, he had to take a history class that he described as "pretty hard." A year or two later, David's younger cousin had to take the same history class from the same teacher. David's cousin had told him that sometime during the beginning of the course, the teacher had said to all of the students,

“This class is super easy. You have to be dumb to not pass it. I only had one student not pass it.” Unfortunately, David had not passed this class. In reflecting on this scenario, David said, “And, you know, he was saying, like, I was dumb, because I didn’t pass the class. And my cousin came and told me, ‘Hey, did you pass that history class?’ And I was like, ‘No, I didn’t pass it.’ ‘Yeah, the teacher was saying you were pretty dumb.’ I was the student, you know. I was mad. I was like, ‘I didn’t pass for a reason. I was scared, but you didn’t have to go tell all of the students.’ They didn’t know it was me, but my cousin knew I didn’t pass that class.”

Martina felt that, when she was classified as an EL, teachers treated her like she did not know anything – like she was intellectually inferior. Furthermore, she believed that general education teachers had no expectations of her, particularly because they thought she did not know anything. She stated, “I don’t think they really saw me as a student... I definitely don’t think – I guess, I think that they felt that I wasn’t capable, because at the time I wasn’t able to participate or engage in the class. I was just like a body in the room.”

This theme of feeling intellectually inferior was also a finding in Shapiro’s (2014) study, which analyzed comments made by participants in order to determine how they perceived and resisted deficit discourse. The participants, refugees from Africa, believed that teachers and peers thought they were not as smart as their NES peers.

ELs as a burden. Two of the participants mentioned the notion of ELs being more work for a teacher in comparison to NESs. They expressed that ELs were possibly considered more time-consuming to teach as well as more difficult.



When asked what he believed general education teachers thought about ELs, David replied, “I just felt like they thought, ‘Damn. I’m gonna have another non-English speaking kid. I’m gonna have to spare some time just to try and help him, all of them. I’m gonna have to try to put some time into this kid, because he doesn’t know what he’s doing.’ I feel like they don’t wanna do that. I felt that way from the history teacher. I felt like he didn’t wanna – he gave me the feeling like he was thinking, ‘I explained this already. Why are you making me explain this again?’ That’s what I felt like. He gave me that feeling where I can’t ask questions. I have to pay attention and see what he’s doing. Maybe somebody asked a question that he answered wrong to the other student so, I was probably scared to ask questions. It was like, ‘I’m getting paid and if you don’t wanna learn, that’s your problem.’”

Furthermore, David suggested that some teachers probably did not want to have ELs in their class because they thought ELs would require more of their time. He thought, “They probably look at everybody’s schedules and I know they knew we were different – not different, but we weren’t fluent. So, I don’t think they liked that. Maybe they were thinking, ‘You know what? All the people that don’t speak English fluently should probably have their own classes and whoever speaks fluent English, we should just have them here.’ That’s probably what they thought.”

Martina also identified deficit thinking with regard to the idea that ELs are more work than non-ELs, but she also seemed to have internalized this notion. She claimed that, “...it’s a lot of work to have an ESL student and try and get them to understand, but it does also depend on the level of – their level of English, because not all ESL students are gonna be like me at sixth grade or me at seventh grade.” Martina seemed to believe

that the less proficient, or fluent, in English an EL is, the more burdensome they will be for teachers.

David and Martina's feelings are not unfounded as Walker et al. (2004), in their study on teacher attitudes towards ELs in general classes, found that some teachers believed ELs were a burden to teach and that adapting instruction for ELs was something they did not have time for due to all the other demands placed on them. Furthermore, Gutierrez & Orellana (2006) claimed that in research on literacy development, ELs are often framed as problems, or burdens, for teachers and schools due to presumably underachieving in school compared to NES peers.

### Research Question Number Three

The third research question this study sought to answer was: What responses do former ELs have to deficit thinking that they might have experienced? All participants were asked to respond to the deficit notion that some teachers believe ELs, in general, are poor academic performers. This statement elicited a strong reaction from each participant – even Tomas, who had not identified any deficit thinking in his educational experiences. Further, when participants identified deficit thinking in their educational experiences, they were asked to respond to it. The main themes that emerged regarding responses to deficit thinking were: school is harder for ELs than non-ELs and some teachers are to blame for ELs' lack of academic progress.

School is harder for ELs. All of the participants' responses seemed to point out the inequity between ELs' and non-ELs' education in terms of access to class content. Overall, participants argued that school is more difficult for ELs than for NESs due to content being taught in English, a language that ELs, obviously, are not yet proficient in.

Participants' responses pointed out that language was a barrier to understanding content. Furthermore, participants' responses suggested that it is unfair to compare ELs' academic performance to that of NESs'.

Sofia spoke about school being harder for ELs than non-ELs. She stated that, "I don't think teachers saw it as, 'Well, she speaks a different language. You know, maybe it's harder for her to understand the topic as compared to a native.' He speaks English fluently at home or at school so it's obviously going to be easier for them than for students like me, or others that speak a different language."

David argued, "We're pretty smart, too. It's just the fact that English is kinda like the only difference. What happened to that no student left behind thing? I feel like that's not right. We don't know English like you guys do... You said a sentence and now we don't get the sentence because of a word you said, or, you know?"

Tomas explained, "We have that disadvantage of not knowing the language and then getting that extra help. It doesn't mean that that's gonna keep us from understanding the subjects that are in school. It means we need to work harder, but doesn't mean that we're not gonna understand it and do well in school. We just have more work for us than the people who were born here." He added, "It's like, for us, we have an extra step. We have to understand English before we can understand a subject – what's being taught. Like, understand English and then learn about that subject, whereas, the people who's fluent in English, they just try to understand the subject. They already know the language."

Some teachers are to blame. With regard to the notion that ELs are poor academic performers, both Sofia and Martina placed some of the blame on teachers. Sofia believed

that teachers could be more helpful to ELs. She said, “If every student had that extra help, or if teachers were more helpful, I don’t think they would say that.” Sofia seemed to be arguing that teachers are not as helpful to ELs as they could be. She seemed to believe that if teachers were as helpful as they could be, then ELs would do well in school.

Martina believed that some ELs do poorly in school because teachers have low expectations of them. She explained, “I do think that because you feel like other people expect you to do low then your expectations of yourself start lowering. I saw that a lot with other people. That’s why I said earlier that I felt like a lot of my ESL classmates got stuck because, I don’t think they believed in themselves anymore.”

Martina pointed out that she was also a victim of low expectations. She stated, “That’s why I didn’t want to be in ESL for so long, because I knew I felt that they thought I wasn’t capable because I was in that [ESL] class, and I knew that I was capable. I never said to myself ‘You can’t do this.’ That was one of the reasons why I really, really wanted to get out of that [ESL].” Although Martina believed teachers had lower expectations for her when she was in ESL, she said, “I didn’t let that get me down because I had a good support system at home, but other people don’t.”

Low expectations for ELs was one of the major themes in the reviewed literature. This theme cut across much of literature that was reviewed regarding ELs’ perceptions of their educational experiences. Cavazos (2009); Wallitt (2008); Shapiro (2014); and Foxen (2010) all reported findings wherein study participants believed that teachers had lower expectations for ELs or for students of a particular ethnicity. Since this theme was quite prevalent in the reviewed literature, it is rather surprising that only one participant from this study specifically mentioned the issue.

#### Research Question Number Four

The fourth, and final, question that this study sought to answer was: What in-school factors, if any, do participants think would have improved their educational experiences? Participants suggested several ways in which their educational experiences could have been better. The main themes that emerged from this research question were: use of L1, awareness of ELs' instructional needs, more electives, and caring teachers.

Use of L1. All of the participants thought that use of their L1 to aid them in understanding content would have been helpful and would have made a difference in their educational experiences. Participants believed that if their L1 would have been used in their educational experiences they would have understood content better, felt more involved in classes, and would not have fallen behind. However, participants reported that their L1 was rarely, if ever, used as a resource.

When asked in her interview if she thought use of her L1 in her education would have made a difference, Sofia replied, "... if I had that other – where I didn't understand it in English but then someone explained it in Spanish, I feel like I could've understood better or do my work better because I had that other option to be explained in Spanish because there are things I don't understand in English, but I do in Spanish."

Martina thought that use of her L1 in school would have enabled her to be more involved in general classes. She believed that if she had been able to have access to videos or textbooks in her L1, she could have been learning along with her fluent English-speaking peers rather than feeling like she was just watching and was not really there. She commented, "Specifically things that might have helped is maybe having someone help understand in your language or a video of something or a textbook in

Spanish would have been awesome. Then, I could just read it. I think that would have really helped if I was still in class trying to learn and being with everyone else, but I was actually knowing what they were talking about.”

If ELs had access to use of their L1 in school, Tomas thought, “...they could understand the subject in their language while learning English at the same time and that would really help them. I think more people who speak a different language would be more confident and won’t have a hard time thinking like, ‘Oh, I can’t understand any of this. I don’t think I’ll graduate.’ I think it would help boost their confidence and not be left behind and stuff. Yeah, I think that would have helped me a lot more and understand more. Cuz even now I’m confident I can understand and speak English. I think if I would’ve had that [use of L1] back then, it’d be even more – like, I think I would know more, I guess. I would have gotten that extra help.”

David also believed, as Tomas did, that if ELs were able to use their L1 in school, they would be less likely to fall behind. David shared, “... if I was learning what I was supposed to learn in English, but I was learning in Spanish, I’d be at the same level (as NES peers), probably better because it’s in Spanish. That’s my native language. It’s the same thing, but in Spanish. I wouldn’t be behind because it’s the same thing.”

According to Thomas & Collier (1997), study participants are correct in believing that use of their L1 in instruction would have helped them to do better in school and to not fall behind. In a study regarding school effectiveness for ELs, Thomas & Collier found that ELs who receive instruction in both their L1 and English could sustain gains they make in elementary years. Yet, ELs who receive instruction in English only make

significant gains in elementary, but then lose ground at the secondary level when content becomes more cognitively demanding.

Awareness of ELs' instructional needs. All of the participants talked about instructional needs that ELs have, which, many participants thought, went unrecognized. Participants mentioned that ELs need the following: extra help; repetition; use of visuals to aid comprehension; monitoring of ELs' understanding of content; slowing down the lesson when necessary.

Sofia and Tomas used the phrase “extra help” when explaining that ELs have different learning needs than NESs. Sofia pointed out that some teachers did not differentiate instruction for ELs. Rather, they employed a one-size-fits-all instructional approach. She explained, “Maybe teachers didn't think like, ‘oh, she speaks a different language. Then, I should explain it like’ – whatever they were to teach that day, they would just teach it. They would say it how they were supposed to say it for the whole class. I didn't receive the extra help that I needed.”

Martina described this one-size-fits-all instructional approach as a flaw in the education system. She seemed to believe there was a connection between some ELs' lack of progression in school, which she referred to as being stuck, and a lack of differentiated instruction. “It's just generalizing people and putting them in a box. You know, different people learn in different ways. And also, exams and tests are also very – if that's not the way you learn, it's going to be difficult for you. I think in that way it's flawed.”

A bit further into her interview, Martina discussed ways that her educational experience might have been better. She suggested that use of visual tools could have made the content of general classes more comprehensible to her. She said, “So, if we

watched a video or if we did pictures or something, I would be like, ‘Oh, that makes sense. I saw this in the textbook.’ I think that videos would help also if they were like, ‘Ok, here’s what we were talking about today and you just watched a video for homework’ or something. That would help.”

Sofia pointed out that some teachers expect ELs to understand content after just one exposure. Sofia’s following comment seemed to suggest that repeated exposure to content concepts is necessary for ELs. “...they can’t just expect us to know exactly for - like they say something for the first time and they expect us to know what they mean when we have – our native language is different.”

David suggested that in order to pace lessons appropriately, teachers should monitor ELs’ understanding and slow down when they do not understand. As previously presented in the section on participants not understanding general classes, David shared the following experience. “The teacher’s writing on the board. I can’t see what he’s writing. He’s telling us what to do, but I can’t really understand and I’m embarrassed to go tell the teacher, ‘You know what? You need to slow down. I can’t understand you.’ I don’t even understand what the books says, but it’s embarrassing, so...” Here, David clearly articulated that what he needed was for the teacher to slow down so that he could have adequate time to process the new content.

Caring teachers. Three of the four participants talked about teachers who did not seem to care about ELs. Participants felt that teachers were uncaring if they: had low expectations for ELs; did not provide the extra help ELs needed; were impatient when ELs did not comprehend. This theme of uncaring teachers was also present in the



reviewed literature. Wallitt (2008) reported that some participants felt invisible in school and believed that teachers did not care about them.

Martina recalled Latino EL peers that remained in ESL classes longer than she did. She believed that these peers were unmotivated to make academic progress and “get out of ESL.” Martina thought that her Latino EL peers were likely unmotivated because teachers had “no expectations” of them and “did not care” about them. Martina commented, “I think it’s really sad because it’s like they just got comfortable and they started to think that, ‘Oh, they don’t think I can do it. So, I must not be able to do it.’ I was always like, ‘No, I can do it.’ Sometimes, I wished that I could help them and not just be bad because everybody expects that from you. I remember talking to other people. I know that they felt that way also. Like teachers didn’t – I can only speak for the Latinos because they are the only ones I actually talked to about what was going on. And I know that they felt like teachers didn’t care about them. And they didn’t expect anything from them.”

David recalled a few teachers who did not seem to care whether ELs were understanding and learning the class material. Rather, these teachers seemed to only care about getting paid. He made comments such as, “...one of them seemed like she got paid to teach us so that’s all she was gonna do.” In describing some uncaring teachers’ attitudes, he said, “It was like, ‘I’m getting paid and if you don’t wanna learn that’s your problem.”

David did, however, recall one teacher who cared. When discussing whether teachers, in general, cared about him, David said, “Did I feel like they cared? I don’t think they thought like that. A few teachers - my reading teacher – he was pushing me to

read more. He gave me books and I read the books. He did care. I was the only Hispanic there, but he made me feel really comfortable. He helped me a lot. That's the only teacher I probably told at the beginning of the class, 'Don't make me read in front of the class, please.' Cuz he was cool like that. He talked to you like he was your friend. He was like, 'You know what?' Um, he knew my English was bad so he was like, 'You know what? You're gonna like this book.' There were books like this fat and like this and this. And he was like, 'This one right here.' And he gave me a book and I actually read that book because he knew what I was gonna like and what I was gonna read. He was a cool teacher. He asked me questions like, 'How was your third hour class? Oh, yeah? How was lunch? Okay, now we're gonna do this. If you have any questions, come ask me.' So, I did ask him questions, especially because it was rows like this and I was right here and his desk was right here and I was able to put my hands on top of his desk and ask the question that I had."

Elective choices. Two participants spoke about not having many elective choices in middle and high school due to being identified as an EL. Participants explained that students identified as ELs took ESL classes in place of general English and/or elective classes. If more than one ESL class was required, based on an EL's language proficiency level, the second ESL class was in place of an elective.

Tomas remembered wanting to take a foreign language in high school, but his ESL classes took the place of elective classes both his freshman and sophomore years. When discussing this, he commented, "I wanted to take either French or Spanish but they had, like, levels. In freshman year, you had Spanish I, and then sophomore year, Spanish II. Kind of like that. It was too late for me. Well, I could've taken, but I didn't feel like it

would've been enough." Tomas explained that by the time he was able to take an elective, which was his junior year, he felt it would not have been worthwhile to take just two years, rather than four years, of a foreign language. Furthermore, if he had taken French or Spanish during his junior year, he would have had to take a level-one class with mainly freshman peers.

Sofia recalled being behind in elective credits due to having ESL classes and having to make up these credits later on. She stated, "For me, throughout the whole high school I didn't have any elective classes. Instead of electives, I was in the ESL class. I didn't like that because towards the end, when I started ALC (Alternative Learning Center), I noticed those were the credits that I was missing. I don't know why it came to that – that I had so many elective credits to finish because I wasn't taking them in the high school. So, I didn't like it. I mean, I liked being an ESL student. I liked the environment and how the teachers were teaching and stuff, but I didn't like the part where I didn't get to choose an elective."

### Themes

This chapter reported on the themes, or findings, that emerged from one-on-one interviews. Themes were presented according to the research question they pertained to. First, results were presented regarding participants' perceptions of their K-12 educational experiences. When discussing the experience of being an EL in general classes, the main themes that emerged were: feeling different & alone; feeling afraid; and, not understanding class content. When discussing being an EL in ESL classes, the following themes emerged: feeling comfortable and understanding. Second, findings regarding whether participants experienced deficit thinking were discussed. The main themes that

emerged from this question were: ELs as a burden and ELs as intellectually inferior. Third, results regarding participants' responses to deficit thinking were reported. Major themes from this question were: school is harder for ELs than non-ELs and some teachers are to blame for ELs' lack of academic progress. Finally, findings were presented regarding in-school factors that participants believe would have made a difference in their educational experiences. The main themes that emerged from this final question were: use of L1, awareness of ELs' instructional needs, more electives, and caring teachers.

### Summary

This chapter presented the study's main findings. The chapter began with a profile of each study participant. Participant profiles were followed by the research results. Results were organized by research question they pertained to. With regard to perceptions former ELs had about their K-12 educational experiences, the themes that emerged were: feeling different & alone; feeling afraid; not understanding class content; feeling comfortable and understanding. The two main themes that emerged with regard to whether participants thought they were viewed from a deficit perspective were: ELs as a burden and ELs as intellectually inferior. With respect to participants' responses to deficit thinking, the main themes that emerged were: school is harder for ELs than non-ELs and some teachers are to blame for ELs' lack of academic progress. Finally, the following themes emerged regarding in-school factors participants thought would have improved their educational experiences: use of L1, awareness of ELs' instructional needs, more electives, and caring teachers.

Chapter Five will briefly review this study's major findings and will offer an interpretation of the results. This will be followed by a discussion of the study's

limitations. Then, implications from this study's results will be addressed and recommendations for further research will be made. Chapter Five will conclude with a final summation.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

In this research project, my main goal was to find out what perceptions former ELs had about their K-12 educational experiences. I wanted to know what it was like for participants to be an EL in U.S. public schools. I was especially interested in whether they experienced deficit thinking in their public school education. This study aimed to answer the following questions: What perceptions do ELs have of their educational experiences? Do they think they were viewed from a deficit perspective? What response do they have to possible deficit thinking they encountered? What in-school factors, if any, might have improved participants' educational experiences?

This chapter will begin with a review of the major findings, which will include an interpretation of the results. Next, the limitations of this study will be addressed. Then, implications of this study's results will be discussed. Suggestions for further research will follow the discussion of implication. The chapter will close with a final summation.

### Major Findings

This section will review and discuss the major findings from the research. This section is organized by research questions.

#### Former ELs' Perceptions of their Educational Experiences

The main findings with regard to participants' K-12 educational experiences were that when participants were in general classes they felt different, alone, and afraid. They also had difficulty understanding some of the class content. However, when participants

were in ESL classes they felt comfortable and they learned “a lot”, which implies that they understood the content of ESL classes.

Overall, former ELs reported more positive educational experiences in ESL classes than they did in general classes. Participants felt more comfortable and at ease in ESL classes than in general classes. This was especially true when participants were new to the country. Participants also described understanding ESL teachers and classes better than general teachers and classes. Former ELs described feeling a sense of belonging in ESL classes, which they often did not feel in general classes.

Although all the participants felt more comfortable in ESL classes than general classes at some point in their educational experience, two of the participants were self-conscious about appearing different from their peers due to going to ESL classes. For example, Tomas was glad to be pulled out of his general class for ESL time because he felt more at ease in ESL class. Yet, he felt awkward about it because he thought his peers wondered why he was always being pulled out of class. Further, while Martina liked the ESL program and thought it was very helpful, she wanted to get out of the program as soon as possible because she “didn’t want to be seen as different.”

Had this study involved participants who had attended school in an inner-city school district rather than a suburban school district, I wonder how the outcomes might have been different with regard to what it was like to be an EL in public schools. For example, had the participants attended a nearby inner-city school district, where there are a greater percentage of ELs overall, it is likely that they would not have felt like “the only” EL or Latino or Filipino student in their classroom. Thus, I wonder if the reason

study participants felt alone or like “the only” EL or Latino or Filipino when in general classes is because, in the suburbs, they likely were.

Further, if this study had involved participants who attended an inner-city school, I wonder if I still would have found that former ELs did not always feel comfortable in general classes and did not always understand general classes. It is likely that teachers who work in an inner-city school district, where ELs have been part of the student population for quite some time, have participated in professional development focused on instruction of ELs. Thus, it is possible that inner-city-school teachers employ EL-specific teaching strategies, which increase the comprehensibility of content lessons.

As for why participants reported feeling more comfortable in ESL classes and, in some cases, learning better in ESL classes compared to general classes, it is likely related to the fact that licensed ESL teachers have had extensive training in best practices for teaching ELs. The training and course work necessary to obtain an ESL teaching license typically include learning about: first and second language acquisition; linguistics; the history and grammar of English; becoming literate in another language; culturally relevant teaching; and effective teaching strategies for ELs.

Along with being extremely knowledgeable about language learning, ESL teachers tend to have first-hand experience with language learning. Thus, many ESL teachers understand what it feels like to be a language learner and they do their best to ensure that ELs feel at ease during ESL classes.

#### Deficit Thinking Participants Identified

I had assumed that participants would easily recall and identify deficit thinking that they experienced. Since, as an ESL teacher, I have often heard, and continue to hear,



deficit-based comments about ELs from general teachers, I was surprised that participants did not seem to experience deficit thinking as frequently as I thought they would have. I had assumed participants would report that several of their teachers seemed to hold a deficit view of them. What I found was that participants recalled one or two teachers, rather than several, as being deficit minded.

One participant, Tomas, indicated that he did not experience any deficit thinking. I wonder, though, if he was ever viewed from a deficit perspective and was just unaware. He mentioned in his interview that he “didn’t really notice about it.” Also, when discussing certain issues in his interview, he made comments such as: “I didn’t mind at that time” or “But it wasn’t a big deal for me.” However, I suspected that some of the discussed issues really had bothered him, but he did not think it was right to complain about anything. I wonder if this might be because Tomas’ dad had told him that it was an honor for him and his sister to complete most of their education in the United States. It seemed like Tomas believed he was fortunate just to attend school in the U.S. and, therefore, certain things that might have been a big deal to others were “no big deal” to him. Likewise, I wonder if the other participants felt fortunate to be attending school in the U.S. and, therefore, were content with their experience because they might have thought it was better to have attended school in the U.S. than to have attended school in their native country.

Although participants did not identify as much deficit thinking as I expected, they did identify some. Unlike Tomas, the other three participants indicated that they did experience some deficit thinking in their educational experiences. Most of the deficit thinking they identified was from secondary school experiences, primarily high school.

Participants definitely thought they were viewed through a deficit lens at times. They spoke mainly of teachers treating them as intellectually inferior or as a burden to teach due to being an EL. As mentioned in Chapter Four, these themes of intellectual inferiority and ELs as a burden were also present in the reviewed literature.

I am curious as to why the three Latino participants indicated that they experienced deficit thinking while, Tomas, the only participant of Southeast Asian descent, did not. I wonder if participants did or did not experience deficit thinking depending upon their ethnic background. Further, I wonder if Tomas really did not experience deficit thinking or if he was just not aware of it.

If Tomas did not experience deficit thinking, one possible explanation is that teachers were more likely to view Latino ELs from a deficit perspective than Asian ELs. If, however, Tomas was simply unaware of deficit thinking teachers had about him, this could be because, as mentioned above, he might have believed he was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend school in the U.S. and, therefore, he was not going to complain about anything.

I also wonder if teachers teaching in an inner-city school district would be less likely to view ELs through a deficit lens because they have likely had more professional development regarding working with ELs, since ELs have been attending inner-city schools for quite some time. In my experience teaching in a suburban school district, it was not uncommon for many of the teachers to have grown up in the suburbs and to still be living and teaching in the suburbs. Teachers who never lived outside of the suburbs tended to have less experience with diversity and were more likely to hold a deficit perspective of ELs.

### Participants' Responses to Deficit Thinking

Two main findings emerged from participants' responses to deficit thinking. One main finding was that participants believed that school is harder for ELs. Participants explained that school is more difficult for ELs due to a language barrier. While it seems like this information is common sense, participants pointed out that there were teachers who seemed to never have considered that school might be more difficult for ELs or that ELs might underperform in comparison to non-EL peers, not because they are less intelligent, but because of an inability to demonstrate all that they know through a language they are still learning.

In her article on the challenges and consequences of NCLB for ELs, Menken (2010) addresses the issue of ELs' below grade-level performance being framed by some as intellectual inferiority. She explains that since ELs do not typically perform well on standardized, high-stakes assessments, ELs are often labeled as low performers. Menken argues that this label is erroneous since it is impossible for tests given in English, a language ELs are not yet proficient in, to result in a valid picture of what ELs know. Although Menken refers specifically to test performance, this concept can be applied to other academic tasks as well.

A second main finding with regard to participants' responses to deficit thinking was that some teachers are to blame for ELs' lack of academic progress. For example, one participant said that if teachers were as helpful to ELs as they could be, or should be, ELs would perform well in school. This participant seemed to be pointing out that it is a teacher's job to teach in such a way that the content of the class is accessible and comprehensible to all students – not just to native or fluent-English speakers.

However, participants reported that the content of general classes is not always comprehensible. Based upon comments study participants made, it seems the reason content in some general classes is incomprehensible is because many general teachers are not adequately prepared to instruct ELs. This information implies that general education teachers need professional development pertaining to the instruction of ELs.

Walker et al. (2004) found this to be true. In their study aimed at determining beliefs and attitudes general teachers have towards ELs, Walker et al. interviewed 422 K-12 teachers. Through the interviews, they found that 87% of participants had never had training or professional development in working with ELs. Thus, some teachers reported not wanting ELs in their class because they felt unprepared to teach them. They further found that many teachers were unwilling to adapt, or differentiate, their teaching to meet the needs of ELs due to a reported lack of time.

#### In-School Factors That Would Have Improved Participants' Experiences

Overall, this study's results indicate that former ELs believe there are in-school factors that could have improved their educational experiences. All of the participants were certain that use of their L1 in order to help them understand content would have greatly improved their educational experiences. Three of the participants suggested that if all of their teachers had demonstrated a sense of caring about them, their educational experiences would have been better. Additionally, two participants indicated that their educational experiences would have been improved if they had been able to take electives, such as a foreign language. Further, three of the participants suggested that if general teachers had been more aware of their instructional needs, they would have been better off.

With regard to teachers being aware of ELs' instructional needs, it seemed that, overall, differentiated instruction would have improved participants' educational experiences. Participants felt that general teachers often taught in one way and expected everyone to just "get it."

Perhaps the reason that some teachers were not employing differentiated instruction is because they were not aware that they should be doing so or were not aware of how to do so. This implies that general teachers who instruct ELs could benefit from professional development focused on instructional strategies that help ELs to better comprehend content.

#### Limitations

This study was limited in a few different ways. One limitation of this study is that fewer participants were interviewed than was desired. Another limitation was that there was less diversity among the participants than was desired. Further, this study was limited in that only one former EL, who was not a study participant, was available for a pilot interview.

#### Number of Participants

I had hoped to interview one or two more participants, but it was quite difficult to get former ELs to commit to being a part of this study. I was fortunate to get the four participants that I did. Due to time constraints, I was unable to continue searching for willing participants. If this study had had one or two additional interviews, I believe the data would have been more saturated.

### Diversity among Participants

Of the four participants in this study, three were Latino and one was Filipino. I had hoped I would have a Somali, Cambodian, or Hmong participant as well. Ideally, I had wanted each participant to be of a different ethnicity in order to capture various experiences and perspectives.

### Pilot Interview

I had asked three former ELs to take part in a pilot interview. All three agreed to participate, but only one followed through. The other two did not respond to messages that I sent via Facebook. However, it was certainly beneficial to do a pilot interview with even just one former EL. Doing one pilot interview helped me to realize which interview questions were confusing or poorly worded or even unnecessary. Furthermore, the pilot interview helped me to recognize that there were some questions I needed to ask that I had not thought of initially. Yet, if I had been able to do a pilot interview with one or two other former ELs, I think the interview questions would have been even more refined.

### Implications

Based upon former ELs' perceptions of their educational experiences, the main implications of this study are: general teachers would benefit from professional development regarding instructing ELs; the ESL service model should be based on ELs' needs and preferences; and ELs should be thoughtfully placed in general classes.

### Professional Development for General Education Teachers

Results of this study indicate that general education teachers could benefit from professional development pertaining to the instruction of ELs. Furthermore, general

education teachers could benefit from learning more about ELs' cultures in order to gain an asset-based rather than deficit-based perspective.

Participants discussed several instances wherein it was evident that professional development regarding instructing ELs would be beneficial for general teachers. For example, participants pointed out that some general teachers taught in the same way for all students and did not take into account that ELs might require different instructional strategies. In addition to lacking in differentiated instructional strategies, some teachers also became frustrated when participants did not understand a concept the first time it was presented. Further, participants indicated that some teachers had a deficit perspective of ELs. Thus, it seems clear that general educators could benefit from asset-based professional development that focuses on developing understanding, empathy, and high expectations regarding ELs.

#### ESL Service Model based upon ELs' Needs and Preferences

Findings from this study also imply that ELs would benefit from receiving ESL instruction based upon their needs and preferences. In addition, when possible, individual students' needs and personalities, should be considered when deciding upon an ESL service model – whether service takes place in a separate space or in a general class. Further, when possible, students should be asked which service model they would prefer. For example, given the choice, David would likely have chosen to receive ESL services in a separate space because he was very anxious in most general classes. Since it is very difficult to focus on learning when one is feeling anxious, ELs who demonstrate anxiety in general classes should have the opportunity to learn in a small-group setting.

As more and more school districts seem to be moving toward ESL services taking place in general classes, it is important to note that some ELs, particularly newcomers, benefit from small group settings outside of the general class. Three of the four participants in this study talked about ESL class being a place of comfort for them, especially in their first or second year of school in the U.S. Again, since it is difficult to focus on learning when one is feeling anxious, it is important to provide small-group ESL service for students who display anxiety in general classes.

While ESL service models separate from general classes have their place, so do inclusive service models. There are advantages to the ESL teacher going into the general class to instruct ELs. For example, this sort of service model could solve the issue some participants mentioned of not getting to pick an elective because ESL class took the place of an elective. If they had received ESL instruction by being co-taught in a general English class, they would have been free to take an elective such as a language class. Also, students are less likely to feel that they are missing out on what the majority of their peers are learning when they remain in general classes and the ESL teacher instructs them in the general class. Yet another advantage of the ESL teacher instructing ELs in a general class is that they are less likely to feel “different” due to, at the elementary level, being pulled out of the general classroom on a regular basis or, at the secondary level, going to ESL class when seemingly everyone else goes to a “regular” English class.

#### Thoughtful Class Placement

Another implication from this study is that, when possible, educators should be intentional about placing students of the same ethnicity or culture in classes together so



that no student feels alone. This is more critical in school districts with a small percentage of ELs and students of color where an EL could end up being the only EL in the class.

#### Further Research

I am curious about how the findings might be different if this same study were conducted with participants who attended school in a district with a greater percentage of ELs or a more diverse school population. I wonder if participants attending a more diverse school district would be less likely to feel different from their peers in general classes.

I am also curious about the relationship between deficit thinking and an increase in EL population over time. It would be interesting to observe and interview students as well as general teachers to answer the following question: As the EL population increases in a school or school district does deficit-based thinking increase or decrease over time?

Further, I would like to know more about what enabled Martina and Tomas to exit from ESL before their last year of high school and to do quite well, even excel, in general classes in high school. I want to know more about what factors are involved in an EL exiting from ESL in less than five to seven years as Martina did. I am also interested in what factors can be attributed to Martina and Tomas going on to pursue post-secondary education.

Finally, as there is a very limited amount of research that focuses on the lived educational experiences of ELs, more research is needed in this area. In order to find out what the educational experiences of ELs is like in public schools in the United States, ELs or former ELs must be the source of the information.

## Final Summation

In conducting this study, I was able to find answers to the questions that I set out to find answers to. I discovered that participants often felt alone and afraid in general classes, where they spent the majority of their time. Overall, participants felt more comfortable in ESL classes than in general classes. In contrast to general classes, participants described ESL classes as “comfortable” and comprehensible.

I found that participants were aware of and did experience some deficit thinking in their K-12 educational experiences. Mainly, participants felt that some general teachers saw them as intellectually inferior to their fluent English-speaking peers. Participants also felt that some teachers considered it a burden to teach ELs.

Lastly, I found that participants were able to indicate some in-school factors that they believe would have improved their educational experiences. Participants thought that use of their L1 to support content learning would have improved their educational experience. They also believed their educational experiences would have been improved if their teachers had been aware of the instructional needs of ELs. Further, participants indicated that having caring teachers would have made a difference in their educational experience. Finally, two participants believed their school experience would have been improved had they been able to take an elective, such as a foreign language, in high school rather than having to take an ESL class.

I was fortunate to have been able to interview the four participants that I did. Three of the participants in this study were former students whom I had taught in the very early years of my career. I had not seen these three former students since they were in middle school. It was a privilege to be able to sit down with them and have a

conversation about what their learning journey was like. I was also fortunate to have been able to hear David's story. Although David was not a former student of mine, he was kind enough to participate in this study. I am very thankful that he was willing to trust me and to openly tell me about his school experiences.

It was extremely valuable to hear from former ELs regarding their educational experiences. From what participants shared, I believe we can learn how to make the educational experiences of current and future ELs better. In order to improve the educational experiences of ELs, I believe that educators of ELs must come to understand, as the participants explained in their responses to deficit thinking, that ELs are as smart and capable as their NES peers. Given the opportunity and the time, ELs can achieve at very high levels. In order to do so, ELs need to have teachers who see them as smart and capable. They need teachers who view them from an asset-based perspective. ELs need teachers who believe in their potential.

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APPENDIX A

*LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT AND SIGNATURE SHEETS*

## APPENDIX A

*Letter of Informed Consent and Signature Sheets*

## Letter of Informed Consent

March 12, 2015

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a graduate student working on a Master's degree in teaching English as a Second Language at Hamline University. As part of my Master's degree program, I will be conducting research about English learners' educational experiences in public schools. I will be interviewing former English learners to determine what their school experience was like.

The purpose of this letter is to ask you to participate in my research. For this study, I will interview participants about their experiences in school. The interviews will be audio recorded and will be conducted in a private study room at a local library that is convenient for you. Each interview will be approximately one to two hours in length. After the interviews are complete and a preliminary analysis has been written up, I may send a copy via email of what I have written up and ask that you review it for accuracy. The results of this study will be very valuable since there are very few studies wherein English learners are interviewed about their experiences in school. The results of this study will be beneficial for educators who work with English learners.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be able to receive a summary of the research results, if you would like. There is little to no risk to you for participating in this study. Your identity will remain anonymous through use of a pseudonym. Further, a pseudonym will be used for the city and state that this research takes place in. For further protection of your identity, interview recordings will be destroyed one year after the completion of this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point in time.

This study has been approved by the Human Subjects Research Committee of the School of Education at Hamline University. Once completed, this research will be public scholarship and the abstract (summary of what the research is about) and final written product will be catalogued in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons (meaning the final product can be checked out from Hamline's Bush Library). Further, results of the study may be included in an article in a professional journal or used as part of professional development. As stated above, your identity will remain anonymous in all cases.

If you agree to participate in this study, keep this page and then sign and date the agreement to participate form and return it to me. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,  
Corissa Michaelson  
EL teacher at Pinewood Community School  
4300 Dodd Rd., Eagan, MN 55123  
Phone: 651-357-7904  
Email: corissa.michaelson@district196.org

## Informed Consent Signature Sheet – Participant copy

I have received and read a letter of informed consent about this study for which you will be interviewing former English learners about their experiences in school. I understand that my participation will involve being interviewed for approximately one to two hours in a private study room at a local library. I understand that my identity will remain anonymous throughout the study. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point in time.

---

Signature

---

Date

## Informed Consent Signature Sheet – Researcher copy

I have received and read a letter of informed consent about this study for which you will be interviewing former English learners about their experiences in school. I understand that my participation will involve being interviewed for approximately one to two hours in a private study room at a local library. I understand that my identity will remain anonymous throughout the study. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point in time.

---

Signature

---

Date



APPENDIX B  
*INTERVIEW QUESTIONS*

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*Interview Questions*

Interview Questions

1) What was it like for you to be an English language learner in school? What was it like to be an ESL student in elementary school? What was it like in middle school? What was it like in high school?

2) Tell me about how you think teachers treated you, as an ESL student, in school.

3) Do you think you were treated the same as native-English speaking students? Why or why not?

4) What do you think teachers thought about your potential to graduate from high school? About your potential to pursue a college-level education?

5) Tell me about opportunities you had to be academically challenged in school through classes such as gifted & talented (in elementary) and advanced placement classes (in high school)?

6) In what ways did teachers show you that they believed in your ability to learn and do well in school?

7) What sort of expectations did teachers have of you as an ESL student?

8) How did you feel about your academic progress in school?

9) What do you recall teachers reporting (at conferences or in report cards) about your academic progress in school?

10) What do you think about your academic progress, as an English learner, being compared to the academic progress of native-English speakers?

11) Tell me about what you think your teachers and peers thought about ESL students, in general? For example, if your teachers or peers had to finish the following sentence, how do you think they would finish it?

ESL students are \_\_\_\_\_.

12) What do you think about standardized tests, like MCAs, being used to determine if you, as an English learner, are successful in school or not?