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# Grade Retention and English Learners: A Literature Review And Teacher Interviews

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GRADE RETENTION AND ENGLISH LEARNERS:  
A LITERATURE REVIEW AND TEACHER INTERVIEWS

By

Katie Cordes

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

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION.....	6
Background of Researcher.....	6
Role of Researcher.....	6
Purpose of Research.....	8
Research Questions.....	9
Summary.....	9
Chapter Overviews.....	9
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
Research Questions.....	11
Factors That May Impact ELs Academic Progress.....	11
Learning Environment Factors.....	12
Academic Achievement and Instructional Factors.....	12
Oral Language and Literacy Development.....	13
Oral Language Development Stages.....	14
Personal and Family Factors.....	16
Physical and Psychological Factors.....	17
Previous Schooling.....	17
Cross-Cultural Factors.....	19
Grade Retention.....	19
No Child Left Behind and Retention.....	20
Academic Benefits of Retention.....	22

Academic Costs of Retention.....	23
Public's Perceptions of Retention.....	26
Teacher Perceptions of Grade Retention.....	26
Principal Grade Retention Perceptions.....	28
Student Perceptions of Grade Retention.....	28
Alternatives to Grade Retention.....	29
Professional development.....	29
Developing vocabulary and oral language.....	30
Read-alouds.....	31
Schools' value of cultural and linguistic diversity.....	31
Free voluntary reading.....	32
Reader status.....	32
Vocabulary acquisition.....	33
Early Intervention.....	33
Programs that Promote Home School Connections.....	34
Summary.....	35
<b>Chapter 3: METHODOLGY.....</b>	<b>37</b>
Chapter Overview.....	37
Study.....	37
Systemic Review Rationale.....	37
Teacher Interview Rationale.....	40
Interview Site and Teacher Participants.....	42

Elicitation Procedures.....	44
Summary.....	44
Chapter 4: RESULTS.....	45
Research Question.....	45
Chapter Overview.....	45
Results and Analysis.....	45
Question One.....	47
Question Two.....	48
Question Three .....	49
Question Four.....	50
Question Five .....	51
Question Six.....	52
Summary.....	54
Chapter 5: CONCLUSION.....	55
Research Question.....	55
Chapter Overview.....	55
Literature Review.....	55
Implications and Recommendations.....	55
Limitations.....	58
Future Research and Communication.....	59
Summary.....	60
References.....	61

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

English learners (ELs) represent a growing population in American schools. In the 2012-2013 school year over 10% or 4.4 million, of enrolled elementary and secondary students were identified as ELs (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This is a dynamic and heterogeneous group that includes students that perform lower than grade level. Teachers and schools have different interventions in place to help these students. One intervention, grade retention, is the practice of making a student repeat the same grade for an additional year. This strategy is often used when a student has not yet mastered grade level concepts and there is concern about future academic success (Dombek & Conner, 2012). The assumption is that with an extra year of similar instruction, the student would become proficient in the areas that they were previously lacking. On the other side, some students are socially promoted or advanced to the next grade level without having mastered grade level concepts. With 10% of students in the United States school system currently labeled as English learners, it is imperative that educators and policy makers use best practices when making educational judgements about grade retention and EL students by thoroughly understanding how does grade retention affect ELs academic success.

#### **Background of the Researcher**

This study is important to me professionally because I want to continually make informed decisions about the students I serve. I grew up in a largely white suburban Midwestern town. During my kindergarden to 12th grade education, I do not recall knowing any student who was retained in any grade at my schools. I did not even know that students could be retained, it was

that rare. One summer, I traveled to Japan to help teach English to elementary aged students. I met one high school student that was retained in 9th grade. I was very surprised to meet someone my age that was held back, and based on his information to me, it seems to be a little more common in Japan than in America.

I graduated from high school and continued on to a local midwestern university to study Japanese language and Japanese culture. When I was a sophomore at university I studied abroad in Tokyo, Japan, for a year with other students from the United States and Korea. After completing my undergraduate degree, I taught English as a Foreign Language in Kanagawa, Japan, for a year. My students mostly were pre school and I taught a few elementary aged sections. I also did not encounter any held back students in Japan. When I came back to the Midwest, I decided to continue my education by obtaining an K-12 English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching license and a local Midwestern university.

My interest in how grade retention affects English learners came during my third year of teaching ESL. In the second half of the year, colleagues brought up three of my English learners for possible grade retention. I was confused, as throughout my K-12 and university education I was under the impression that retaining students was a practice not used anymore. Two of the EL students made at least a year's worth of growth during the school year, but due to how far the students were behind, the students were still around a year behind in reading and in math according to district level standardized tests.

When the classroom teachers discussed the reasons why they wanted to recommend retention for the EL students, it was obvious that the teachers had the students' best educational interest in mind. However, when looking at the grade level student data, it appeared to me that

retention was only brought up for English learners who were behind in school. There were non EL and non special education students that were at the same academic level as the students in question. In addition, there was another EL student that scored lower than one of the students brought up for retention. I was troubled by whom the schools chose to be retained and I believe that the educators did not look at the whole child when they made those life changing decisions. In the end, one of the students was retained and it troubled me how easy the decision was made by the administration at that school.

Continuing to a new job in a neighboring school district, the issue of holding back students came up when bringing students that were not making adequate academic progress to a teacher work group. This school district has an even higher number of English learners than the previous district where I was employed. Students that have not been promoted seemed to not be getting what they need the second time around in the same grade and kept coming up for more interventions. One student in particular, continually had behavior and academic issues despite being a year older than peers. In addition to the held back student's minimal growth, students in the grade where this student was held back told me regularly about how this student was held back and should have been in the same grade as themselves. The fact that classmates of retained students can articulate other students retention is concerning as this could possibly lead to future ostracizing and isolation in future grades.

After learning of this student in my new school, I decided that I needed to learn more about how grade retention works and how it affects English language learners.

### **Role of Researcher**

This capstone will include an extended literature review (systemic review) and analysis of teacher interviews (qualitative data). My role is to use current research involving grade

retention and the educational needs of English learners combined with the teacher interviews to develop recommendations for using grade retention as an intervention with ELs.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The goal of the research is to inform mainstream teachers, ESL teachers, administrators, and educational policy makers about what the potential costs and benefits for retaining EL students. I am studying how grade retention affects English learners' academic success because I want educators to make the best educational decisions regarding retaining EL students. In addition, I want to explore other interventions to use with language learners.

### **Research Question**

The extended literature review and following teacher interviews will explore the efficacy of retaining EL students. The following primary research question will guide the literature review and teacher interviews: what is the effect of retention on English language learners?

### **Summary**

The introduction of this capstone familiarizes the reader with why grade retention and English learner success is important to me and why this research is important to other educators and policy makers of education and ELs. I described my history of working and interaction with ELs in American schools. Lastly, I describe how this research will help other professionals use current literature to inform their practice with English learners.

### **Chapter Overviews**

The first chapter, I introduced the background and role of the researcher in regards to grade retention and English learners. I also discussed the different acronyms regarding the field

of ESL. At the end, I stated my guiding questions for this capstone and the purpose to inform and guide retention policies for English learners.

In Chapter Two, the literature review, I will be reviewing and synthesizing literature that relates to and can help answer my primary and secondary research questions. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the rationale and methodology for my systemic research and case study. Chapter Four will deal with results of the teacher interviews. Finally, in Chapter Five, I will discuss implications, limitations, and recommendations.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review and following action research explore the efficacy of retaining English learner (EL) students. The following primary research question will guide the literature review and teacher interviews: what is the effect of retention on English language learners (ELLs)? By answering this research question, I fill the gap, that I will explain later in the chapter, in research regarding grade retention and English learners.

The literature review examines the different factors relating to how students learning English are affected by grade retention. First, I discuss the factors that impact language learner students' academic progress. Then, I will move into the typical students that are retained, the possible academic benefits and costs of grade retention. Afterwards, I also discuss No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the implications for grade retention. Later, I share common perceptions regarding holding low-performing students back. Finally, I discuss alternatives to grade retention.

#### **Factors That May Impact ELs' Academic Progress**

The WIDA Consortium recently came out with a guide to servicing EL students within the Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtI2) model (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). The WIDA Consortium is a professional program created in 2002 to help advance the academic achievement of linguistically diverse students (The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2014). RtI2 is a multi-tiered framework for teaching to increase academic success and reduce behavioral problems (McInerney, M. & Elledge, A., 2013). RtI2 is generally divided into three tiers. Typically this has been portrayed in a pyramid fashion (Shapiro, 2010). Edward Shapiro describes the pyramid as three different levels (Shapiro, 2010). Tier 1 is considered baseline,

standards-based instruction given to all students (Shapiro, 2010). Tier 2 and Tier 3 are more intensive interventions based on student need and are in addition to the standard classroom instruction (Shapiro, 2010). WIDA writes about the seven sociocultural factors that may impact English learners' academic progress in Tier 1 instruction. Educators need to develop a working knowledge of these factors to help EL students be successful in Tier 1 instruction. The seven factors are: learning environment factors, academic achievement and instructional factors, oral language and literacy factors, personal and family factors, physical and psychological factors, previous schooling factors, and cross-cultural factors (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013).

### **Learning Environment Factors**

There has been much research into the first factor, learning environment factors. This category refers to equitably educating all students and removing barriers to learning. Educators need to carefully consider the following aspects within this category: teachers, services and resources, service delivery models, role of home language and culture, and role of instruction and assessment (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). Some strategies that educators and school districts can use to support academic achievement are using culturally and linguistically appropriate instructional strategies and allowing meaningful collaboration between general education, ESL, and special education teachers (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013).

### **Academic Achievement and Instructional Factors**

In academic achievement and instructional factors, the second factor, the main takeaway is how school systems can systematically incorporate academic language and literacy instruction into all content areas (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). Teachers can do this by analyzing the specific vocabulary and the linguistic factors that the students need to know in order to understand the

content successfully. By doing background work, students may be able to internalize and use this language in other content areas. In addition, all content teachers should teach different literacy in order for their students to gain the skills to be successful in reading to learn in that specific content. When assessing student performance, educators need to assess using methods that monitor what students have learned in content areas, not on the students' English language proficiency and literacy levels. Until ELs reach the late 4.0 to early 5.0 WIDA English proficiency level, traditional tests may not accurately assess students' content knowledge (Cook, 2009). WIDA, a professional organization to development the academic language and academic achievement for linguistically diverse students, developed a leveled system to describe the academic English level for English language learners (WIDA, 2016). Students are given an English placement test upon enrolling in a school and filling out a language form indicating a language other than English. The WIDA Proficiency Levels English level starts at Level One and continues up until Level Six (WIDA, 2016). Level One is beginning level English continuing up to Level Six when a student is considered working at grade level in academic English.

### **Oral Language and Literacy Development**

Oral language and literacy development are closely connected (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). In the third factor, oral language development, there are two main areas: first language acquisition and second language acquisition. First and second language acquisition are important for educators to understand. Both first and second language acquisition generally occur through predictable stages. However, children normally acquire a first language naturally without any intervention while students learning a second language generally need specific language instruction. With the specific instruction, Stephen Krashen describes that second language

competence is a two-part process (Krashen, 1982). The first process, language acquisition, is a subconscious process in which language learners are not generally aware of language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Language acquisition describes how learners cannot describe why an utterance may be right or wrong, but like native speakers: state that the language just “feels” or “sounds” right. This process is similar to how children learn their first language. Language learners need rich, meaningful language use to acquire language. This language is often used with native speakers and the communication of meaning between the speakers is the focus for the language users instead of the form of the language (Krashen, 1982). In the second process, language learning, individuals are in a formal process of language learning in which the individual builds a conscious knowledge of the language such as its grammatical rules (Krashen, 1982). Typical second language classrooms rely heavily on the language learning type of second language acquisition. In the next section, language learners go through oral language development in a series of predictable stages.

### **Oral Language Development Stages**

The time that students go through these language acquisition and language learning stages can vary greatly from person to person (Robertson & Ford, 2015). Educators need to know which stage a learner is in not only to understand how to help and support the student to progress to the next level of English acquisition, but also to know what to expect in the language production of the student. Many English learners go through a Silent Phase when they start learning a new language in a natural, informal environment (Krashen, 1982). Students in the Silent Phase may use only rote, memorized sayings without any real understanding of what they are saying. These sayings are often said as if they are one word (Krashen, 1982). In the next

stage, Early Production, students will speak one- to two-word utterances and short sentences with many errors. They are still listening to and absorbing the language. They may start understanding the target language more than in the Silent Phase. Following the Early Production Phase, learners enter the Speech Emergent Phase in which errors decrease and vocabulary increases in highly predictable, high-context language. Highly predictable and high-context language is usually rote memorized and lower level language skills. These students are more confident in their language use. During the next three stages, Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced Fluency, students move from gaining fluency in social situations to developing academic vocabulary and phrases to becoming essentially fluent by being able to maneuver new academic situations with native-like proficiency (Krashen, 1982).

In addition to the stages of oral language acquisition, vocabulary in relation to literacy is a factor of English language learners' academic achievement. English learners typically come into kindergarten with much lower first and second language vocabularies than their monolingual peers. This is important to note because reading comprehension is closely tied to how much vocabulary a reader knows. Reading comprehension is comprised of decoding the text and having linguistic comprehension of what the text is telling the reader (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). Vocabulary contributes to reading comprehension in both of these areas, but it is easier to see how knowledge of vocabulary relates to linguistic comprehension because readers need to know around 98% of the words in a text to adequately comprehend the text (Carver, 1994; Hu & Nation, 2000). Children learn vocabulary and language for years before they enter school. During this time they also learn information about how words sound and what they mean, and

develop their phonemic awareness by comparing and contrasting different sounds. These are all pre-literacy skills that are necessary for successful reading later in the students' lives.

There are external and internal reasons why ELs generally have lower academic English vocabularies than do native speakers of a language (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). External vocabulary acquisition comes from being in a language environment that is rich and varied. Differences in language environment can account for differences in vocabularies. Children born into more affluent backgrounds with parents who are highly educated and earn higher incomes tend to use more academic language and vocabulary with their children, give them access to more texts, and engage them in more academic linguistic experiences such as museum visits (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015).

### **Personal and Family Factors**

In personal and family factors, the fifth factor, language learners are affected by the socioeconomic status of their family and family dynamics (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). As English language learners are not a homogenous group of students, students can come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds ranging from upper-class to students suffering in a variety of poverty situations (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). Students that have lived in situations of poverty may not have been able to attend school on a continual basis. Family dynamics common to family experiencing poverty also can affect a student's academic and language achievement due to different responsibilities at home such as babysitting. Other family factors such as expectations and aspirations, parental engagement, student interest, and experiential background can affect students in a variety of ways. Experiential life The home life of English learners can vary greatly as compared to the typical public school expectation of a student's home life (Sanchez-Lopez,

2013). For the following factor, Physical and Psychological Factors, students and families may have different ideas on what student academic success looks like compared to school professionals.

### **Physical and Psychological Factors**

Following personal and family factors, WIDA looks into physical and psychological factors, the fifth factor, for student learning and well-being at school. Physical factors related to school achievement include health which encompasses dental, vision, and hearing, current diseases or medical conditions, nutrition, and availability to access health care treatment (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). Psychological factors can include mental health, social and emotional development, and a sense of belonging in the school community. The article cites Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gonzalez that write “a safe, welcoming school environment with minimal anxiety about performing in a second or additional language is essential for ELLs to learn” (2008). To support these students, schools should understand that English learners often are navigating between home and school cultures that can make the students feel isolated, anxious, or depressed (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). The term for becoming proficient in another culture is called acculturation (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). Similarly to second language acquisition, acculturation generally occurs in predictable stages and takes time as an individual learns how to navigate the new norms of the new culture.

### **Previous Schooling**

The 6th factor, previous schooling, can explain a lot about a student's academic success in school. When intaking a new student, school systems should look into the student's previous education for experiences that have been less than optimal, interrupted, or conflicting in

philosophical ideas (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). Official records do not reveal everything about a students' previous educational experiences; therefore, it is important to also look into informal educational experiences. A fascinating example of how official records do not always give all the information about student's previous educational experiences is how educational experiences vary even within the United States. Some English learners in the United States may have regularly attended one English-only school; however, they may have experienced a form of "interrupted schooling" in which the school has only focused on reading and math instruction at the expense of teaching other content areas (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). The New York State Education Department (NYSED) and the United States Department of Education define "interrupted schooling" as the following:

1. Enter a United States school after the second grade;
  2. Have had at least two years less schooling than their peers;
  3. Function at least two years below expected grade level in reading and mathematics;
- and
4. May be preliterate in their first language.

These students are sometimes labeled as "SLIFE" (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education) students (WIDA, 2015). Although the unique needs of these students often are more challenging to meet in secondary education, there are SLIFE students arriving into elementary schools across the United States and thus U.S. schools need to learn how to effectively work with these students. SLIFE students can present problems for elementary educators because of the limited foundation of literacy in their first language and the challenges of learning a second language; however, many SLIFE students come to the United States often

having more life experience than their peers born in the United States (WIDA, 2015). Teachers can tap into the knowledge of these students to help accelerate their growth (WIDA, 2015). An example from a brief on SLIFE students follows “A student who assisted in the family business of selling clothing in a market most likely developed skills in the areas of economics and mathematics” (WIDA, 2015).

### **Cross-Cultural Factors**

Cultural differences even if subtle can affect an EL student’s learning (*Position Statement on the Diversity of English Language Learners in the United States*, 2006). An example of this can be when an English learner’s own expected behavior in class is in conflict with what is expected in a typical American classroom by educators and staff at the school (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). Another example is that how EL students interact with teachers and classmates may vary compared to their home culture expectations. Every district and school needs to work to eliminate the different cultural biases that hinder English language learners’ ability to be successful in American schools. Teachers can help alleviate this cultural conflict by becoming familiar with the school’s behavioral norms for their English learning students (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). School districts should also create behavior expectations for EL students after gaining a better understanding of how students of different cultures represented in the respective district are expected to behave in their respective home cultures.

### **Grade Retention**

In order to accurately discuss how grade retention affects English learners, it is imperative to know how many students are retained each year. In a recent article, Warran, Hoffman, and Andrew (2014) explain that most states do not report retention rates. Despite this

hindrance, researchers have devised numerous ways to gain statistics on the number of students retained each year. There are issues with these studies because they can show that 1% of second graders in a certain year were retained, but they cannot tell which student was retained (Warran et al., 2014). Other studies indicate that up to 10% of students are held back once between kindergarten and eighth grade (Planty et al., 2009). In the other studies there still is the issue of who is being retained is not readily and easily accessible.

Increases and decreases in the number of students retained can often be linked to national educational policy and reform changes. In the past 30 years, new national policies such as No Child Left Behind have brought an increased pressure for schools to be accountable for their student's progress (Bush, 2001).

### **No Child Left Behind and Retention**

In 2001, the federal government created a new educational policy titled No Child Left Behind. This reform was passed with overwhelming support in both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate and was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002 (Hursh, 2007). This, previous, and subsequent policies have created an atmosphere of high-stakes testing and high accountability. While many educators believe that the passing of NCLB brought about the idea of test based grade retention, the idea was actually first brought to the public's attention in 1999 when President Bill Clinton's administration issued a report to guide educators (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). This report urged educators to stop the practice of socially promoting students regardless of the students' academic achievement (Huddleston, 2015). Subsequently, our nation's educational policies began calling for an increase in standards and accountability, which resulted in greater retention numbers (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Accountability has often meant students taking high stakes tests once a year to demonstrate academic growth in reading and mathematics. In an interesting article, David Hursh concludes with Olssen, Codd, and O'Neil (2004) that "official policy texts are as much political, economic, and cultural as much as they are educational treatises, the meaning of the discourses embedded in these texts await decoding so as to reveal the real relations that this specifically cultural form of official discourse helps to construct, reconstruct, and conceal" (Hursh, 2008). Hursh writes about how political ideology changes that are both Democratic- and Republican-backed are helping to continue the decade-plus continuation of NCLB (Hursh, 2008). He calls these politicians "Neoliberals" and states that some of their central beliefs contend that personal responsibility and individual failure are from bad choices and not society's fault (Hursh, 2008). This philosophy also states that everyone is equally privileged and equally competent. In addition, the ability to choose and be competitive helps these individuals become a "marketplace of themselves" (Hursh, 2008). According to Hursh, "Neoliberal ideals, although rarely explicitly stated, form the basis for most of the education reform proposals since the report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983)" (Hursh, 2008). *A Nation at Risk* blamed schools for the economic recession of the early 1980s despite the fact there is evidence that it was caused by policies of the Federal Reserve Board and by companies sending jobs overseas (Hursh, 2008). NCLB has continued to uphold the neoliberal ideas brought about in the early 1980s (Hursh, 2008). These ideas about personal responsibility have permeated American society so thoroughly that educational policies related to personal responsibility are reflected in the grade retention policies of current school systems.

Due to the highly political nature of holding back students, Xia and Glennie believe that “schools are under considerable political pressure to appease popular demands, and research showing the drawbacks of retention can easily get lost in a sea of prevailing appeals to maintain high academic standards” (Xia & Glennie, 2005). Some states have started to require students to pass tests in core subjects at key points in their education in order to be promoted to the next grade (Schwerdt & West, 2012). As of 2011, 15 states have standardized test-based grade retention policies (Huddleston, 2015).

One state that has a test-based grade retention policy is Georgia. In 2001, the Governor of Georgia, Roy Barnes, addressed the issue of social promotion in his State of the State Address (Barnes, 2001). Barnes argued that promoting students who are not academically to be promoted was unfair to not only the teachers responsible for for teaching them, but also to the students themselves (Barnes, 2001). The Georgia State Legislature subsequently passed the Georgia Promotion, Placement, and Retention Law (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001). This law proposed that all students in 3rd, 5th, and 8th grade pass the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) in order to be allowed to go to the next grade (Huddleston, 2015).

### **Academic Benefits of Retention**

Grade retention's purported benefits have sustained this practice in American schools for over a century. There have been studies conducted on the academic effects of grade retention since the early 20th century (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). One study that examined longitudinal test data from Florida’s high-stakes tests reveals “retained students often show a sharp improvement, relative to promoted peers, in meeting grade level standards during the

repeat year, when retained students are exposed to a familiar curriculum; however, this improvement often disappears 2 to 3 years subsequent to retention” (Wu et al., 2008).

In another synthesis of studies regarding the effectiveness of grade retention as an educational policy, Jimerson writes that out of 20 studies regarding outcomes of grade retention, only 4 of these authors reported that holding back students is an effective practice (Jimerson, 2001). These studies appear to show that some students make immediate gains, but that these students also continually have a hard time catching up to grade-level peers who have not been retained (Jimerson, 2001). The majority of research continues to not support grade retention as an effective practice.

### **Academic Costs of Retention**

There has not been a great deal of research regarding how grade retention affects the academic success of English learners. Most published studies on grade retention have not had a focus on EL students and therefore, it is hard to come to complete conclusions regarding how EL students are affected by being held back. However, The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) claims that “the highest retention rates are found among poor, minority, and inner-city youth” (*Grade Retention and Social Promotion*, 2011). Many English learners fall into this category and it can be argued that it is possible that EL students are a group of students that are highly affected by grade retention.

In a comprehensive study, Ferguson, Jimerson, and Dalton analyzed numerous studies regarding how grade retention is a predictor for dropping out of school (Ferguson, Jimerson, & Dalton, 2001). They found research that suggests the correlation between regularly retained students and typical characteristics of being poor, young, and a non-Caucasian male (Ferguson,

Jimerson, & Dalton, 2001). Another fascinating correlation is a mother's level of education and her child's level of academic achievement (Ferguson, Jimerson, & Dalton, 2001).

In one major finding from the previous study, Ferguson, Jimerson, and Dalton, report that the highest performing students in their study had a mother who had graduated from college, whereas the lowest performing students' mothers had not even graduated from high school (Ferguson, Jimerson, & Dalton, 2001). Lower performance could be linked to maternal educational level.

Dropout rates increase with poor school performance. One reason why holding students back remains a frequent practice in current education is low academic performance of these students. Morrison and No (2007) reported an analysis of 117 male and 74 female high school students who were retained in Chinese schools. They discovered that repeating a grade did not result in significant improvements in academic English and general academic performance (Morrison & No, 2007). In addition, grade retention is used as a predictor of high school completion.

In a recent study, Notre Dame sociologist Megan Andrew examined two large sets of data regarding students who were held back (Andrew, 2014). She reported that students who were held back for one year sometime between kindergarten and 5th grade were 60 percent more likely to drop out of high school as compared to students of similar socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, and culture backgrounds and compared to siblings of the same family (Andrew, 2014).

Future high school dropout has been documented by having been retained in elementary school. First, in 1989, Tuck wrote that of all students who have been retained, 78% of dropouts had been retained in elementary school (Tuck, 1989). In addition, Brooks-Gunn, Guo, and Furstenberg conducted a 20-year longitudinal study and suggested that retention in elementary

school decreased post-secondary school attendance by 85% (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993). Dropout rates particularly correlate with high poverty rates, poor school attendance, poor academic performance, grade retention, and disengagement from school (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007).

Regarding the monetary costs of holding back students, according to Part One of a three-part series on grade retention by Xia and Glennie “it is estimated that nationally 5% to 9% of students are retained every year, translating into over 2.4 million children annually. With an average per pupil expenditure of over \$7,500 a year, this common practice of retention costs taxpayers over 18 billion dollars every year” (Xia & Glennie, 2005). Schools that struggle with monetary issues need to evaluate how much money the school loses when students are retained.

Furthermore, in Part Two of a three-part brief on grade retention, Xia and Glennie argue that grade retention may lower the lifetime earnings of someone who is held back (Xia & Glennie, 2005). Economic well-being may be thought of as having two aspects, the individual’s perspective and the taxpayer’s perspective (Xia & Glennie, 2005). For the individual perspective on economic well-being, Xia and Glennie share that with the probability of a grade retained student dropping out of school, the lifetime earnings of that student can be measured by calculating the average difference in earnings from ages 18 to 65 between a person with a high school diploma and a person with less than a high school education (Xia & Glennie, 2005). The second way to measure economic impact is by the loss of taxable earnings for the state and federal government resulting from relatively low wages earned by a person with lower educational levels (Xia & Glennie, 2005). The loss of taxable income for the government is

another reason for educational policy makers to evaluate the effectiveness of holding back students (Xia and Glennie, 2005).

### **Public's Perceptions of Retention**

The public's opinion on holding back students is based on the conventional wisdom that one more year in the same grade will improve a student's lacking academics, improve his or her social skills, and help the student become more motivated to work (Xia & Glennie, 2005). This opinion is generally not swayed even in light of the fact of evidence supporting it may seem counterintuitive (Xia & Glennie, 2005). In a policy brief regarding the gap between research and policy on grade retention, Xia and Glennie report the results of the 31st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools (2005). They describe that many respondents support stricter criteria for grade promotion even if "significantly more students would be held back"(Xia & Glennie, 2005). Xia and Glennie continue reporting other studies showing that many in society view social promotion as a practice that hinders low-performing students' ability to succeed academically and socially compared to their peers (Xia & Glennie, 2005). This is in contrast to many studies that suggest that socially promoted students may achieve at the same or higher levels as compared to students who were held back in the same grade (Xia and Glennie, 2005).

### **Teacher Perceptions of Grade Retention**

Teachers' perceptions of grade retention effectiveness, as is the case with any intervention, drive the continued use of grade retention in schools. Grade retention is typically used in primary grades; therefore it is helpful to understand primary educators' beliefs on grade

retention. There is minimal research on primary teachers' opinions about retaining students. In a recent study, Range et al. (2012) found that among teachers who use grade retention, these teachers believed that grade retention prevents future failure, motivates students to attend school, and increases their parents' motivation. These teachers were more motivated to use grade retention according to students' academic performance than because of students' emotional maturity level (Range et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the teachers' perceptions of grade retention helping with immaturity and self-concept was greater when students were retained in kindergarten than in first or second grade (Range et al., 2012).

Interestingly, the teachers believed that parental involvement is the most effective intervention to deter grade retention (Range et al., 2012). Despite the overall negative research regarding the effectiveness of grade retention in helping students become more academically proficient, the majority of the teachers in their study would use grade retention again (Range et al., 2012).

In another study, Xia and Glennie write that educators view grade retention as a way to narrow the respective ranges of academic and achievement levels in their classroom (Xia & Glennie, 2005). When a group of students within a grade is more homogenous, these educators believe that they can better utilize educational resources (Xia & Glennie, 2005). Range et. al. also conclude that many of the teacher participants associated students' academic performance with reasons outside the teacher's control, effectively sending the message that some students are too difficult to teach (Range et al., 2012). Some educators may not know about the research on effects of grade retention (Xia & Glennie, 2005). Even when teachers thoroughly understand the benefits and risks of holding back low-performing students, many educators still choose to use

grade retention because grade retention is easier to implement than other research-based interventions (Xia & Glennie, 2005).

### **Principal Grade Retention Perceptions**

Conversely, Grange et al., in the same study, compare the teachers' opinions as outlined in the previous section with elementary principals' beliefs about grade retention (Grange et al., 2012). Elementary principals generally do not believe that holding back students is an effective practice as compared to classroom teachers. However, both elementary classroom teachers and principals who have used grade retention would use it again with struggling learners (Grange et al., 2012). This study reaffirmed the idea that holding students back will help increase the future achievement of low-performing students in spite of the empirical data that suggests otherwise (Grange et al. 2012).

### **Student Perceptions of Grade Retention**

Students also have an opinion of the fairness of grade retention. In a study about how teachers in Texas exposed their students to achievement ideology, Booher-Jennings reports that through various methods, teachers communicated that by working hard students can be successful on the state standardized tests (Booher-Jennings, 2008). Booher-Jennings interviewed 37 students about promoting students based on a standardized test (Booher-Jennings, 2008). Only three male students did not believe that hard work would help them grow academically and the three male students also questioned the use of a standardized test to promote students to the next grade level (Booher-Jennings, 2008).

### **Alternatives to Grade Retention**

**Professional development.** The most important way that schools can deter grade retention is by providing continual professional development for school faculty and staff. According to WIDA, it is beneficial when all school staff build expertise in the languages and understandings of the cultural backgrounds of the students that they educate (WIDA, 2013). This professional development can include continued principles of second language acquisition. When all instructional staff have an understanding of this process, they can clearly see how students are developing their English language proficiency. Schools should also develop practices of looking at curriculum to evaluate how the materials mirror the experiences and backgrounds of the school's students (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013).

In addition to staff development, the way students learn a new language affects how they perform academically. Language acquisition is more important than language learning (Krashen, 1982). In his book, *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition*, Stephen Krashen writes that the “best [teaching] methods might also be the most pleasant, and that strange as it seems, language acquisition occurs when language is used for what it was designed for, communication (Krashen, 1982). Whichever language teaching method an educator uses, it seems imperative that they use a method in which the student communicates on a regular basis. Therefore, educators need to continually provide comprehensible input for students. Differentiation of academic language and teaching content will help teachers provide the important input for language learning and language acquisition. Krashen (1982) writes that the comprehensible input language teachers can provide to their students makes language classrooms the best place for language acquisition for students up to the intermediate level (Krashen, 1982).

In second language acquisition theory, there has been research into how affective variables affect second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). The Affective Filter Hypothesis states that motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety factors directly relate to second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Students with low affective filters generally acquire a second language better than do students with a high affective filter (Krashen, 1982). Educators can provide a learning environment with a low affective filter by increasing student motivation, helping students gain a better self-image that will directly help them with maintaining a high level of self-confidence, and helping students keep a low level of anxiety in their personal and classroom lives.

**Developing vocabulary and oral language.** Developing vocabulary and oral language for English learners may increase their level of reading comprehension. Stephen Krashen (2013) describes how read-alouds can be a first step to literacy. A read-aloud is a literacy strategy that involves a teacher reading a text aloud to a group of students. The text could be anything from a picture book to a chapter book. When children hear stories read aloud, it can help children develop a significant vocabulary (Krashen, 2013). Read-alouds may also help students develop a better understanding of the world, understand how stories are constructed, and develops the ability to understand more complex grammatical constructions (Krashen, 2013). Hearing stories read aloud can be a good literacy development strategy for not only newcomer English learners, but also for more advanced students. In describing their perceptions about grade retention, teachers stated that parental involvement is one of the most important interventions to help a student succeed at school (Range et al., 2012). In order to encourage families to become more

involved with their students' education, schools need to offer a positive and welcoming environment for families of newcomer English learners.

**Read-alouds.** Stephen Krashen writes in the July 2013 issue of *Language Magazine* that read-alouds can be a good literacy development strategy in addition to also being a vocabulary development strategy (Krashen, 2013). One of the most important reasons to use read-alouds with elementary students is that it can help increase reluctant readers enjoyment of reading. Engaging read-alouds also help students to develop the following skills: increased receptive vocabulary development, a better understanding of more complex grammar patterns, and enhanced background knowledge of the word occurring in the story (Krashen, 2013). Krashen warns however to not interrupt the story to point out various print features, as the research shows that there is hardly any difference between groups of early literacy students who experienced read-alouds without any interruptions versus students experiencing read-alouds with interruptions (Krashen, 2013).

**Schools' value of cultural and linguistic diversity.** Schools that value cultural and linguistic diversity as assets rather than deficits will have a more positive environment for English learners and their families (Hamayan & Freeman, 2006). These schools tend to find creative ways to help parents be more active in the school communities. An important step for schools to help parents feel more welcome can be increasing the visibility in schools of the first languages of ELs and their parents (Hamayan & Freeman, 2006). This can be done through, for example, including books in the languages that students and their families speak in the school library. Another way could be to make sure that students are encouraged to use their home languages and home cultures in content classrooms (Hamayan & Freeman, 2006).

**Free voluntary reading.** Students can benefit from more opportunities for free voluntary reading (FVR), the act of reading for pleasure. Stephen Krashen has analyzed research regarding the effects of learners reading for pleasure (Krashen, 2004). There are a few different types of FVR: sustained silent reading, self-selected reading, and extensive reading (Krashen, 2004). Sustained silent reading is when both teachers and students read for short, set periods in addition to the language arts block during the school day. In self-selected reading, students converse with teachers about what they are reading during a large free reading block connected with language arts (Krashen, 2004). Finally, extensive reading involves students being held minimally accountable for what is read (Krashen, 2004). Krashen (2004) reports that there are two important findings from research in free voluntary reading programs with implications for teachers: first, in-school FVR programs are consistently effective for literacy growth and for vocabulary development, grammar test performance, writing, and oral/aural language ability (Greaney, 1970; Krashen, 1989). Secondly, the longer these programs are in effect, the more positive results they bring about in students' literacy development (Krashen, 2004).

**Reader status.** In another fascinating insight from *The Power of Reading*, Krashen writes that people who say that they read more generally read and write better than people that do not see themselves as readers (Krashen, 2004). This reader status can be achieved when students have ample access to what they want to read. Krashen writes that school and classroom libraries in high-income areas include more books that students want to read compared to low-income schools where there are fewer books of interest to children (Krashen, 2004). This helps with students finding a "home run book," which are books that are very positive reading experiences that get students to want to read other materials (Krashen, 2004). *The Power of Reading* suggests

stocking classroom and school libraries with a variety of different reading materials including books, magazines, and graphic novels because we can not anticipate what books will appeal for any one child (Krashen, 2004).

**Vocabulary acquisition.** As well as providing time for reading, vocabulary acquisition is essential to higher reading comprehension. A higher vocabulary is connected with positive reading outcomes to at least 4th grade for monolingual students and new evidence shows that it also may be the case for English language learners as well (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). In The Nation's Report Card, the United States Department of Education report the correlation between vocabulary proficiency and reading comprehension proficiency (Glymph, 2012). In 2009 and in 2011, all 4th and 8th graders participated in a standardized vocabulary and standardized reading comprehension test (Glymph, 2012). Students in both 4th and 8th grade that scored lower than the 25 percentile on the vocabulary test performed at least 50 points lower on the scale score for the reading comprehension test (Glymph, 2012). 4th and 8th graders that scored in the 25th percentile or lower were more likely to be eligible for free or reduced-priced school lunch, English language learner or a student of color compared to the increased likelihood of being white for students that scored in the 75 percentile or higher (Glymph, 2012). It can be assumed that a middle-class white student would more likely have stronger reading comprehension based on their higher lexicons than a lower socio-economic student of color.

**Early intervention.** In order to increase the receptive and expressive vocabularies for second language learners, early intervention is best (Méndez, Crais, Castro, & Kainz, 2015). Language of instruction may also help increase vocabulary acquisition. One recent study

investigates the language of instruction when teaching vocabulary to pre school dual language learners (Spanish and English) (Méndez, Crais, Castro, & Kainz, 2015). The results showed that preschool students that that were introduced to the vocabulary in Spanish on Day 1, a mixture of Spanish and English on Day 2, and English only on Day 3 acquired more vocabulary than pre school students in English only vocabulary instruction (Méndez, Crais, Castro, & Kainz, 2015).

**Programs to promote home to school connections.** Parents have been shown to be helpful in being reading tutors for their children (Resetar, Noell, & Pellegrin, 2006; Sénéchal & Young, 2008). Paired reading along with other interventions such as repeated reading and inferring new vocabulary words through reading are strategies that parents can use at home to help their student become a better reader (Pagan & Sénéchal, 2014).

Parental involvement in a comprehensive summer reading programs can also help students improve in reading comprehension and fluency for elementary readers (Pagan & Sénéchal, 2014). In their research of Canadian schools, Pagan and Sénéchal, report that a comprehensive approach of parental involvement in summer reading programs can be successful in helping students make gains in reading comprehension and fluency over the summer (Pagan & Sénéchal, 2014). The parents were trained at the end of the year in comprehensive reading interventions that included interactive reading sessions in which parents used researched based practices in specific reading comprehension, oral reading fluency, and vocabulary strategies (Pagan & Sénéchal, 2014). Included in this study was a section on improving receptive and expressive vocabulary in the low readers as the lower readers started with a lower receptive and expressive vocabularies as measured by a standardized test. While this study's results are

positive and should be continually studied, none of the participants came from backgrounds other than English only native speakers.

The previously mentioned studies resulted in positive findings, however, Pagan and Sénéchal also describe three studies in which parental involvement was tested and how it related to student reading success resulting in mixed results (Pagan & Sénéchal, 2014). First, three large scale studies involved the school sending a letter home to encourage parents of 3rd to 5th graders to listen to their children reading. The effect was no enhanced reading performance (Kim, 2006; Kim & White, 2008; Villiger, Niggli, Wandeler, & Kutzelmann, 2012). In another study, a statistically significant, but small gain in silent reading proficiency occurred when students were trained at school and a letter was sent home to parents regarding how to help their student in oral reading and comprehension as compared to the control group (Kim & White, 2008). In the final study, training parents for summer literacy intervention resulted in the same growth as students in the control group as parental participation was low (Kim & Guryan, 2010).

### **Summary**

The literature review and following action research explore the efficacy of retaining EL students. The following primary research question guides the literature review and teacher interviews: How does grade retention affect EL's academic success?

The subsequent questions support the primary research question:

What are the costs and benefits of grade retention?

Why has grade retention come back into semi-regular use as an intervention?

What interventions could replace grade retention for English learners?

By answering these research questions, I will be able to help fill the gap in research regarding

grade retention and English learners.

In this literature review, I examined at factors that affect English learners' academic success. In addition, I discussed retained students, educational policies, and grade retention, and the academic benefits and costs of retaining students. Along with how grade retention affects students, I researched educators' and students' perception of grade retention, alternatives to grade retention, and programs to promote home-to-school connections between English learner students and families. In the following chapter, I will explain the methodology of this capstone project.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Research Question**

The extended literature review and following teacher interviews explore the efficacy of retaining English learner (EL) students. The following primary research question guides the literature review and teacher interviews: what is the effect of retention on English language learners (ELLs)?

#### **Chapter Overview**

This literature review and the teacher interviews are designed to help educators and educational policy makers make best practice decisions regarding grade retention and English learners. The following questions guide the research: how does grade retention affect ELs academic success? What are other interventions or practices that could be more effective than grade retention?

#### **Study**

This study was a two-part process. In the first part, I conducted a literature review of current and relevant literature related to my research question, how does grade retention affect English learner academic success? In the second part of the study, the teacher interviews, I interviewed educators in a suburban school in the Midwest regarding their experiences and opinions on the use of grade retention with ELs.

#### **Systemic Review Rationale (Literature Review)**

In *An Introduction to Systemic Reviews*, editors Gough, Oliver, and Thomas define systemic review as “a review of literature using systematic and explicit, accountable methods

(2012). Systemic reviews are needed because individual studies may be flawed and not comprehensive. These reviews also provide context for new research and help researchers stay informed (Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2012). The majority of this capstone will involve a systemic review of literature related to grade retention and English learners. While single studies can often be flawed for a variety of reasons such as by accident, or how the study was designed, conducted or reported, a review is much stronger as it is more comprehensible and creates a clearer picture of what has already been researched (Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2012). In addition, this current literature research regarding English learners and grade retention will help provide a new context for interpreting the results of the second part of this capstone, the teacher interviews (Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2012). An interesting quote from *An Introduction to Systemic Research* is, “This careful analysis of information has revealed huge gaps in our knowledge. It has exposed that so-called ‘best practices’ were sometimes murderously flawed; and by doing nothing more than methodically sifting through pre-existing data it has saved more lives than you can imagine” (Gough, Oliver & Thomas 2012). The previous quote describes literature reviews in the area of medicine; however, this quote could be used to describe educational practices as well. When educators thoroughly review previous research they can reveal huge gaps in our knowledge as educators and help teachers use better informed practices when teaching students.

### **Teacher Interviews**

The interview section of this capstone utilizes the qualitative approach. Qualitative research usually includes the following characteristics: rich description, natural and holistic representation, few participants, emic perspectives, a cyclical and open-ended process, and

possible ideological orientations (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The characteristics of qualitative research fit many of my aims for this research that I am conducting. I chose this as my research paradigm since my objective is to add rich and detailed information about grade retention for English learners to the previous literature review. In addition, I interviewed educators to gain an understanding of how grade retention works in their everyday work with students. I did not control for different variables because I hoped to get my participants' most candid opinions without any external pressure from me (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Related to this is that I wanted to observe my participants' emic perspectives such as why an educator may think that grade retention is a good practice and therefore, I had to keep these in mind as I worked. Mackey and Gass write that qualitative research is more of an open ended and cyclical process than quantitative research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The open-ended process was most central to this research. My opinions and beliefs were constantly rethought and reworked as I worked through this interview process. Lastly, as I started this project, my opinion and regard for the use of grade retention with English learners was not high. I started the interviews with a bias towards the research for which quantitative research does not allow (Mackey & Gass, 2005). This bias was built from both the personal negative connotations of the term "grade retention" and the research that highlighted all of the negative studies for grade retention that I conducted for the literature review.

My research question and supporting questions came around due to working with EL students that were brought up for potential retention. To answer why educators still use this intervention and how grade retention affects English learners, I interviewed English as a Second Language (ESL), classroom, and intervention teachers, and a school psychologist in a semi-

structured interview format with questions about their experiences with using grade retention for EL students. After I collected the data from the interviews, I coded the answers into different categories and concepts. I was interested in finding out whether the data that I collected from the interviews could be connected with research from my literature review. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how grade retention for English learners affects their academic work, and to provide information to educators on grade retention as an intervention for ELs.

### **Interview Site and Teacher Participants**

The site for the teacher interviews was a school in a first-ring suburb in a Midwestern city. The school is a public kindergarten through fifth grade elementary school with a highly diverse student population. Fifty percent of the students identified as being Latino, 30% identified being as Black, and the remaining 20% are divided between the three following races: starting with the largest represented, White, Asian, and American Indian. In addition to having substantial racial diversity, this school is also diverse in terms of its special populations. The majority of the students qualify for free and/or reduced lunch at 85% of the school population. Additionally, 56% of the students are English learners and 16% of the students qualify under the special education umbrella of services which could include services for speech or specific learning disability. Lastly, 2% of the students are homeless. Due to the diversity of students served at this elementary school, this school has a higher level of support services than do schools with less diverse student populations.

To find participants for the teacher interviews, I sent out a school-wide e-mail asking teachers whether they would be interested in participating in the interview. After sending out an

e-mail to recruit for interview participants at this school, I received seven responses from a variety of educational staff. The first staff interview was conducted with the school psychologist. This staff member has been working in the district for many years and is currently working as an itinerant educator between two schools. The school psychologist position at this school generally only services students either identified as special needs or a student in the process of being referred to special education.

The next two teacher interview participants are English as a Second Language teachers. Both of these teachers were newer teachers with less than five years of experience. In addition, both teachers are white and female. The ESL teachers in this school work in a mostly push-in, collaborative environment. One teacher works exclusively in one primary grade while the other teacher works between two grades in the intermediate level. The primary grade teacher teaches a combination of small group and whole group academic English writing lessons. However, the intermediate level teacher mostly teaches academic English through the social studies content in whole group lessons.

Next, the largest group of educators involved in the interviews are interventionist teachers. These three teachers were new to the school the year the teacher interviews took place. The first teacher has years of experience in many different capacities. This teacher has been a classroom teacher, reading interventionist teacher, and principal, among other roles in schools. The next teacher has been teaching in the same district for years, mostly a math interventionist. The final teacher interviewee is a newer teacher compared to the other intervention teachers, but has experience in different states as both an intervention teacher and classroom teacher. Two of the

intervention teachers work in the intermediate grades while one teacher work in the primary grades. All of the teachers work in a push-in, collaborative model.

Lastly, there was only one classroom teacher who volunteered to participate in these educator interviews. This teacher is a primary level classroom teacher with more than 15 years of experience. Additionally, this educator has worked at the school site for many years. As an educator with a lot of experience, this individual has worked with many struggling learners. In order to protect the identify of the participants, I have arbitrarily assigned the teachers a number from one to seven. In this paper I will refer to them by these numbers.

### **Elicitation Procedures**

I elicited knowledge from my participants using a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews are a combination of the unstructured and structured interview formats (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The semi-structured interview is less rigid than a structured interview, but allows for the inclusion of some structure, such as the list of questions that I used as a guide. This allowed my participants to add information and I believe, to have more of an authentic interview experience. I, however, think that an unstructured interview would have given too much room for not gaining information for my specific purpose of knowledge acquisition in how teachers view grade retention and English learners.

To start this process, I needed to pilot my interview questions. Griffiee writes that pilot interviews serve a few purposes such as “practicing interview questions, and getting feedback on the topic as well as the interview method” (Griffiee, 2005). Feedback can help shape the future validation of the study. After conducting the pilot interview, I finalized a list of guiding questions to ask participating teachers.

The final list of questions that I used in the interviews with the participants is as follows:

1. What are valid reasons to retain a student, English learner or otherwise?
2. What is the profile of a student who would qualify for retention? Is this profile different from a student who is also a language learner (English learner)?
3. What are some possible long term benefits related to grade retention?
4. What are some possible long term costs related to grade retention?
5. Have you ever retained a student? If so, what were your reasons for doing so?
6. What are some alternatives to retention that you think would benefit students?

The previous questions were used to get the whole picture of how educational professionals view grade retention and how it affects English learner students. The first question was used to arrive at a fuller understanding of the motives that teachers have in considering grade retention for any student. The next question elicited information about what type of student generally is brought up for grade retention and if the profile is different for an EL student as compared to a non-EL student. In questions three and four, the responses yielded information about the possible benefits and costs of holding back students. Finally, with the last two questions, I gained perspectives on the history of the interviewee and grade retention. Also, what other interventions the educators believe are beneficial to struggling English learners. Finally, I connected the responses from the teacher interviews to what the literature has shown in the literature review. When interviewing the participants I recorded the interviews and took notes of the interviewees' responses. By connecting the results of the teacher interviews, I help alleviate the huge gap between knowledge and practice of grade retention for English learners. After

interviewing and analyzing the responses, I shredded the notes and deleted the recordings of the interviews in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

### **Summary**

In the Methodology section of the capstone, I discussed the rationale of dividing the study into two sections, a literature review and teacher interviews. For the literature review, I needed to gain a greater familiarity with current research on the different aspects of the academic achievement of students learning English. The literature review served as a framework to help understand the results of the teacher interviews. Finally, the teacher interviews helped to fully develop what the previous literature has already reported.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### **Research Question**

The literature review and teacher interviews explored the efficacy of retaining EL students. The following primary research question guided the literature review and teacher interviews: what is the effect of retention on English language learners?

#### **Chapter Overview**

In this chapter, I will discuss the results and analysis of the interviews that I conducted with the educational professionals. I will also connect the results to the literature review by discussing the themes that came up in the teacher interviews.

#### **Results and Analysis**

The following questions were asked to elementary classroom and support teachers:

1. What are valid reasons to retain a student, English learner or otherwise?
2. What is the profile of a student who would qualify for retention? Is this profile different from a student who is also a language learner (English learner)?
3. What are some possible long term benefits related to grade retention?
4. What are some possible long term costs related to grade retention?
5. Have you ever retained a student? If so, what were your reasons for doing so?
6. What are some alternatives to retention that you think would benefit students?

These questions were asked in order to answer my overarching question: what is the effect of retention on English language learners? First, the participants characteristics will be discussed. The teachers who participated in the research were from the same suburban elementary school. To solicit participants for the interview portion of the capstone, I sent out a

school-wide e-mail asking whether staff would be interested in participating in the interview. I received seven responses from teachers and support teachers.

The support staff teachers who responded to this email included: two English as a Second Language staff, two reading interventionists, one math interventionist, and one school psychologist. Only one classroom teacher agreed to be part of the teacher interview. It is also interesting to note that the majority of the participants (four) were first-year staff at the school. I have assigned the teacher participants arbitrary numbers in order to preserve the teachers' privacy. Below are the numbers assigned to the teacher interviewees:

<b>Teacher Number</b>	<b>Role</b>
Number One	Classroom Teacher
Number Two	Reading Intervention
Number Three	English as a Second Language Teacher
Number Four	English as a Second Language Teacher
Number Five	Reading Intervention
Number Six	School Psychologist
Number Seven	Math Intervention

I conducted four separate interviews with interview participants due to the availability of the participants. I share the results of the interview by question and theme rather than interview time. The teacher responses to the questions vary depended on their role in the school. In this study, the majority of teacher participants are non-classroom teachers and also work exclusively with struggling students. These teachers primary responsibilities is to use research-based interventions to increase student academic success. Classroom teachers work with students with different academic levels and are not necessarily trained in the same instructional practices.

## **Question One**

Starting with question one: what are valid reasons to retain a student, English learner or otherwise? support staff, particularly the teachers with more of a background in child developmental were less certain about the efficacy of holding back a student for any reason. These teachers were also against social promotion without any interventions to help with the underlying issue of student achievement for struggling learners.

Question One is: what are valid reasons to retain a student, English learner or otherwise? The answers to this question varied according to the role of the educator. With the exception of two individuals, all respondents believed that immaturity was a valid reason to retain a student. By immaturity, respondents One, Four, Five, and Seven stated that this would most likely occur for a male kindergarten (or first grade at the latest) level student who was born during the summer months. The behaviors that were considered immature were inability to follow one- and two- step directions, hyperactivity, and age-appropriate rule following. Some students, according to teachers One and Four, would have done better if they were kept home for a year prior to beginning school in order to mature more. Teacher One, stated that keeping a student in the same grade could possibly help the student mature more by keeping them with younger students. However, according to Teacher Six, it does not make sense to keep a student back with students who are less mature than themselves? The logic of keeping a less mature student with younger students seems to be a strategy that may be detrimental to the goal of helping students mature. There would be not many grade-level peers in such a class whom an immature student could emulate in the classroom.

The discrepancy between classroom teachers' and educational support staff's opinions, and also between school psychologist's opinion about what a retained student looks like could be

due to the differences among their respective positions in the educational system. Classroom teachers', ESL teachers', and intervention teachers' such as reading intervention teachers- main job is to increase the academic reading and math abilities of all learners. Teachers whose main job is to instruct have mainly instructional pedagogical backgrounds and not as much developmental and psychological child knowledge, whereas school psychologists may have more experience in the developmental aspect of educating children. I would suggest that instructional staff and school psychologists collaborate more in developing behavior interventions for students struggling with lower maturity or other areas in which instructional staff have less overall knowledge.

### **Question Two**

The next question is: what is the profile of a student who would qualify for retention? Is this profile different from that of a student who is also a language learner (English learner)? Similarly to Question One, the responses differed depending on the respondent' respective role in the educational system. For interviewees who saw holding back students as a potential intervention for struggling students, they did not see any difference between English learner and English-only students who should be retained. Classroom and instructional interventionists generally believed that less mature students were better candidates for grade retention. One also called less mature students “socially behind.” The same professional, Teacher Two, also stated that students who are retained need specific family support in order to make the intervention worthwhile. This educator also indicated that most grade retentions for students are inappropriate and often lead to higher high school dropout rates as compared to the students who were socially promoted. This idea is closely linked to previous research regarding possible negative outcomes resulting from holding back students. Jimerson writes that students who are retained are more

likely to drop out of school by age 19 and less likely to receive a school diploma than students who are socially promoted (Jimerson, 2001).

Sharing an opposite opinion of the issue, Teacher Six once again strongly insisted that grade retention is not a research-based educational practice and has no place in the educational system. This educator repeated data from well-known research such as studies by Jimerson. Jimerson (2001) writes that out of 20 studies researching grade retention, only 4- or 20%- of the studies viewed grade retention favorably. Fifteen years ago, the majority of educational research about holding back students was overwhelmingly negative towards the practice, and since then, there has not been much research that favors grade retention.

### **Question Three**

Following the previous questions, Question Three: what are some possible long term benefits related to grade retention? responses varied according to the educators' previous responses. For example, if the educator was completely in disagreement with using grade retention with struggling learners, the answer to this question was "there are no benefits to holding back students." However, even teachers who were in agreement that grade retention could be used with students with significant social delays mentioned that many students held back for lower social abilities often never received specific instruction in social skills within the general education classroom. These students will also never receive more social skills instruction when held back. Therefore, a held back student may mature, according to some responses, but not necessarily due to added instruction in that area. Direct social instruction embedded in the school day would help students grow in social skills.

In addition to direct social instruction in the general education classroom, specific interventions such as Response to Intervention, which is a multi-tier system to identify and

provide interventions to struggling students, would appear to help students who are retained according to some of the interviewees. As well as interventions such as Response to Intervention, students who are retained should receive more, highly-focused, research-based interventions if they are to be held back said the majority of respondents. Educators who supported holding back students for academic reasons explicitly stated that these students should not receive the same instruction they had as the previous year. Stated differently, students being held back should be placed in another classroom than in the previous year. These educators had the strong opinion that the students need different and more intensive instruction, rather than the same instruction they had the previous year.

#### **Question Four**

In their answers to Question Four: what are some possible long term costs related to grade retention?, the respondents shared many possible costs to holding back students. The first, a major reason that one respondent shared was the results of research by Dr. Hattie stating that “grade retention is considered to be one of the most negative things that can happen to a student’s learning.”

In Visible Learning, Dr. John Hattie's 15 years research synthesis (800+ meta-analysis 50,000 studies, and 200+ million students) on the influences on achievement in school-aged students and perhaps the largest ever evidence based research into what actually works in schools to improve learning, grade retention was rated as one of the most negative educational practices on student’s learning. Hattie’s research indicated that out of the 138 factors identified (1 = great, 138 not so great), retention is ranked 136 and in fact has a negative effect on student achievement at -0.16 (Hattie, 2009).

This quote shows that out of 138 factors related to educational achievement, grade retention is shown to be second to lowest rated negative practice. This was research that I had not previously come across while reading for the literature review. The reveal of research that certain educators already possess regarding grade retention makes the point of collaboration even stronger between educators.

Another consequence of holding back a student is the increased likelihood of the student becoming a future drop out. Two respondents, Two and Six, shared research stating that holding back a student once increases the likelihood of that student dropping out of school by 50% as compared to a non-retained student and up to 90% for a twice-retained student. The previous statistic, coupled with the likelihood of the retained student never catching up and also the academic gap between white students and students of color, can lead to self consciousness and low self esteem according to one respondent. This statistic that the two educators brought up is backed by research from the literature review that describes how students who are retained are 60% more likely to drop out of high school as compared to students of similar socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, and culture backgrounds and compared to siblings of the same family (Andrew, 2014).

### **Question Five**

Question Five: have you ever retained a student? If so, what were your reasons for doing so?, was a question that resulted in few responses. This could have been because of the nature of grade retention and how it is implemented in the United States. Based on research from the literature review, Warran, Hoffman, and Andrew (2014) explain that most states do not report retention rates. Therefore, exact numbers of students that are retained are not easily known. In addition, in the experience of the author, there is no set procedure for recommending a student

for grade retention. Generally when a classroom teacher is concerned about a student's lack of progress in academic and possibly social or emotional areas, the teacher will bring the student to a problem solving committee. With these other professionals, the teachers will bring a recommendation for grade retention to the principal and the principal will either agree or disagree with the proposal. If the principal decides on grade retention, the classroom teacher and principal will subsequently meet with the student's parent/s or guardian/s for final approval. As previously mentioned in the literature review, grade retention is not a standardized practice in the United States; therefore, how students are retained varies from place to place within the United States. In addition, many support teachers including ESL, reading, and math interventionists, do not bring up students as often for retention as compared to classroom teachers.

Four of the respondents, One, Two, Four, and Five said that they would use grade retention with students struggling with social behavior problems if the students were young for the grade they were currently in. Teachers One and Two brought up students for retention. However, there were only a few teachers who had personally recommended that a student be held back and who had observed that the student that was actually retained in any of the teacher's years of experience. It appeared to be rare for a student to be brought up for retention in the interviewed teachers' experience.

### **Question Six**

The most interesting question to me, based purely on implications of the responses was Question Six: what are some alternatives to retention that you think would benefit students?, all responses from every participant solidify the idea that many educators want to use research based and intensive learning practices with struggling learners. All educators advocated for early intervention with programs such as Head Start and universal preschool. The teachers believed

that by providing all students with similar access to early childhood education, students who typically struggle will come to school having already had structured social and early literacy instruction. The teachers also stated that spending more time in early intervention is better for students than remedial instruction. Early intervention for struggling students could include free universal preschool with licensed teachers mentioned Teacher Seven. Students who attend a federally funded preschool program could come to kindergarten better prepared than students who did not have the opportunity. Méndez, Crais, Castro, and Kainz (2015) write in order to increase the receptive and expressive vocabularies for second language learners, early intervention is best for students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as they generally come to kindergarten with lower number of words in their vocabularies. This vocabulary deficit could hinder a student from future academic success due to resulting in them starting school academically behind peers.

In addition to starting intervention earlier, the educators in this study described a need for continual, intensive research-based instruction based on student needs. Some examples given were interventions used in Response to Intervention and phonics programs. Teacher Six emphasized the need to use research-based interventions as tools for student success.

Another interesting idea shared by one educator was that increasing parental involvement at school could lead to greater success for students. This idea is in agreement to research regarding teacher opinions about grade retention. In their research, Range et al. (2012) found that teachers believed that parental involvement was the best intervention to prevent grade retention. Some possible ideas given by Teacher Two, included structured routines at home for homework and out of school activities. A structured routine at home, according to Teacher Two should include time dedicated to homework completion, silent reading practice, tools such as pencils

and paper, and a dedicated space for homework completion. While I did not find specific examples for in the literature review regarding structured routines at home; research conducted by Pagan and Sénéchal (2014) states that parents can teacher their children reading strategies at home to help their student become a better reader. Additionally, schools should offer after-school activities to engage not only students, but also parents. An example of an after-school activity to connect parents to school culture could be hosting family nights throughout the school year. During these family nights guest speakers from the community or school system could offer workshops or tools that families can use to help their students' have success in the American school system.

### **Research Question**

The literature review and subsequent teacher interviews explored the efficacy of retaining EL students. The following primary research question guided the literature review and teacher interviews: what is the effect of retention on English language learners?

### **Summary**

In the results section I discussed the interview responses from the teacher interview portion of this Capstone. I detailed each question I asked the participants, and examined the responses to interpret the different themes and implications in relation to the literature review.

These themes and implications will be discussed more in-depth in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

#### **Research Question**

The literature review and teacher interviews explored the efficacy of retaining EL students. The following primary research question guided the literature review and teacher interviews: what is the effect of retention on English language learners?

#### **Chapter Overview**

In this final chapter, I summarize the findings of this Capstone. I begin with reexamining the literature review. Following this, I will discuss implications and recommendations based on the analysis of this Capstone.

#### **Literature Review**

In the literature review I laid out a background of possible factors for English learners and their academic achievement. Following this foundation, I examined which students are typically retained and how the national legislation of No Child Left Behind increased the number of students retained. Next, the academic benefits and costs of using grade retention with students were discussed. Later, I look at student and educational professional perceptions of retention. After this, I discussed how perceptions of retention affect learners and how this perception differs from educators and administrators. Finally, I focused on alternatives to holding back students and ways to promote home to school connections particularly for struggling learners.

#### **Implications and Recommendations**

One of the main issues that creates difficulty in finding research on English learners who were retained is that there are few to no easily located records on the number of students who have been retained exist. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) write that

“the highest retention rates are found among poor, minority, and inner-city youth” (*Grade Retention and Social Promotion*, 2011). However, the exact numbers of students retained is not easily located. My first recommendation is that state governments should start keeping track of the students who have been retained. When there are numbers of students who have been affected by retention, I believe that educators and educational policy makers can then make more sound educational decisions regarding these students.

In addition, based on the information gathered from the literature review and interviews with elementary teachers, interventionists, ESL teachers, and a school psychologist I have several additional recommendations. The first recommendation is to train teachers in common characteristics of students learning English. Throughout the teacher interviews there were few references to factors that may impact EL students' academic achievement (Sanchez-Lopez, 2013). If more educators are aware of these factors, there may be more research in how to best service these students. Next, there is little empirical data that supports grade retention for any student much less a student learning English. Wu et al. (2008) write that retained students often show improvement initially the first few years after being retained; however, this improvement often disappears 2 to 3 years after retention. The lack of data to support grade retention should send red flags to educational professionals regarding the efficacy of this practice. Until there is long-term data that supports holding back students, I believe that schools should not utilize grade retention as an intervention.

Another insight I gained from the teacher interview portion of this capstone is that there are few policies in school districts regarding grade retention. School districts in the Midwest have policies for educational and disciplinary practices, but rarely have I heard of someone retaining a student using a district-guided process. I believe that if a teacher or principal is to

advocate grade retention for a particular student, there needs to be a formal, official process for this in place. Therefore, many students are retained based purely on the feelings or personal opinions of teachers and principals. This is a practice that must stop.

Equally important to creating school policies surrounding retention, teacher training and effective instruction must also improve in order for all students to be more successful in school. U.S. schools have changed drastically in terms of their demographic makeup over the past ten to twenty years (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Throughout the literature review section the importance of research-based instructional practices that help all students learn and grow socially and academically was very evident. Some ideas for possible improvement would be increased research-based literacy practices, oral language development, and background building instructional practices in the classroom.

Taking information gleaned from the literature review and teacher interviews, it seems that educators do not feel supported in implementing interventions for students who are struggling the most in our schools. Retention, according to conventional wisdom would seem like a sound practice, but in reality it is not supported by research. Also, it appears that retention is easier to implement than research-based practices in some schools. Teachers need to be supported by district administration with instructional resources that they can easily implement with struggling learners. It could possibly help to have similarly ability students grouped together at some point throughout the learning day to deliver specific interventions to these groups based on their respective/unique needs. In addition to these ideas, local, state, and federal governments need to collaborate to create more well-defined standards for what type and/or amount of growth can be expected based on the amount that a student was behind grade level when s/he came into the educational system. For example, a student coming in one or more grade levels behind her or

his grade level peers in reading may not be reading at grade level by the end of the academic school year. Teachers should be expected to provide students who are behind grade level to achieve make good growth toward reading and math proficiency. However, they should not be penalized for failure to get a student to grade level based on the fact that not all students come to school with the same set of educational experiences.

### **Limitations**

Originally I had planned to interview an English learner student who was retained so that I could include this data in my research. I also wanted to interview parents and guardians of EL students who were retained to analyze their opinions regarding how grade retention affected their students' academic and social success. While I could easily find English learner students who had been retained in my school district, I was advised that interviewing district families regarding this topic could be potentially detrimental to the families and students involved in the study. Therefore, I abandoned the idea of including this information in this research study. I believe that not gaining insight into English learners' and their families' reactions and opinions about grade retention that I could have potentially gotten through conducting these interviews leaves a large gap in this research because I only have partial information to take into consideration along with the insights I gained through doing the literature review.

Correspondingly, it was difficult to get classroom teacher participation for the teacher interview. Based on what I gathered from the literature review, I assume that classroom teachers generally have the opinion that whatever will move the student ahead academically is best for the students. However, I am not sure about this idea due to the low participation rate of classroom teachers in the interview. It could also be assumed that classroom teachers may not have a vested interest in the specific achievement of English learners.

After I finished my interviews with the educational staff, once again, a English learner was brought up for grade retention at the school where I work. This pattern of teachers struggling to accelerate the learning of EL students seems to be a recurring issue in many schools. However, similarly to my past experience with grade retention, educators are hesitant to discuss this educational practice.

### **Future Research and Communication**

As I have researched and developed this Capstone, my opinion about grade retention has swayed from indifference with some misgivings to being against retention for any student. I have also come to the conclusion that more systematic oral and written instruction using academic language for all learners will help increase academic achievement for all learners. Furthermore, I am creating professional development offerings for my classroom co-teachers on including more academic language output for all learners. Consequently, I plan on continuing my research into the academic language development of English language learners. As previously described, Stephen Krashen writes that language acquisition is more important than language learning (1988). I will research more strategies to help students acquire language rather than simply learn language.

As I previously stated, although I was not able to interview any English learners who have been retained, I think it would be beneficial to interview and analyze the findings of their opinions about their personal experience with retention. Their opinions, along with other research would give educators a better view of how their choices to retain students impact students these later on in their lives.

One of my goals for this study was to communicate to fellow educators best practices for holding back struggling English learners. I will accomplish this goal by presenting the findings

from this Capstone at a local English learner conference. I will also write up recommendations for my school about grade retention and English learners to share with all instructional and administrator staff.

### **Summary**

This Capstone explored the efficacy of holding back English learners. Grade retention is a multifaceted educational issue that continues to be used by educators/school staff without their possessing a complete understanding of its effects on students. I started by introducing the reader to how I came to this idea of English learners and grade retention by describing my personal, educational, and professional background. Following this introduction, I analyzed current research regarding how English learners learn, and what grade retention means for students learning English. I also shared what I learned from literature how to best support English learners with sound research-based practices in reading. In the Methodology Chapter, I wrote about how I gathered evidence for this Capstone. Following this, I shared on the results of the interviews I conducted with educators. Finally, I concluded this research study by making conclusions regarding implications, limitations, recommendations for, and my contemplations on future research that could be done on retention of English learners.

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