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Making It to the Next Grade: How Elementary School Principals Make Sense of Grade Retention Policies for English Learners

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MAKING IT TO THE NEXT GRADE: HOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

MAKE SENSE OF GRADE RETENTION POLICIES FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

by

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ABSTRACT

MAKING IT TO THE NEXT GRADE: HOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

MAKE SENSE OF GRADE RETENTION POLICIES FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Lynmara Colón
Old Dominion University, 2021
Dr. Rachel S. White

Critical approaches to policy suggest that policy, even in the most apparently democratic polity or institution, codifies and extends the interests of those who disproportionately wield power (Levinson et al., 2009). While many people are involved in conversations and decision-making processes related to the implementation of grade retention or promotion policies, the final decision is made at the school level. Critics of grade retention, meanwhile, also warn that retained students may be harmed by stigmatization, reduced expectations for their academic performance on the part of teachers and parents, and the challenges of adjusting to a new peer group (Schwerdt et al., 2017). The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine how school leaders developed and implemented retention policy for the fastest growing student populations in the United States: English learners (ELs) (Rubio, 2014). I conducted a survey of 62 elementary school principals in one large suburban school district in Virginia. Preliminary analysis of the survey responses that was used to purposefully select a subsample of principals that engaged them in semi-structured interviews that deeply explored how school leaders made sense of grade retention policies for ELs. In particular, I focused on if and how school leaders' personal characteristics and school context influenced how they made sense of and implemented retention policy for ELs in their schools.

To my loving dad, Manuel Cosme García who I lost on the second year of this doctoral journey. Your words of affirmation have never left me, your wise words were always present during this journey. Your memory has kept me going, and I hope that wherever you are you are proud that your girl made it.

To my team, I am honored to spend my days with you. You indulged me in conversations around this topic. You welcomed the journal articles and challenging debates, encouraging me to be prepared to do make this work actionable. You understood my vision for students and celebrated every milestone with me. I have learned how to use my research to lead while being vulnerable about my story. Thank you for asking questions and becoming interested in this topic as much as I am.

This race would have never been possible without Dr. Rachel White. You have been such an inspiration and gift to me; transforming me into the student I never imagined I could be. When I wrestled with doubt, you found the right words to keep me going. You took a chance on my dream and gave me permission to engage in a study that is one of my greatest passions. Every week you invested time in growing me into a stronger student. You did life with me, taking the time to know my story and seeing beyond the narrative of deficiency I grew up listening to. You are the dissertation chair I needed and one I wish every doctoral student has in their academic journey. I am honored to have your name attached to this work. You opened the door to a scholar world, one I have fallen in love with. Thank you for never lowering your expectations and providing me with the feedback I needed to go out there and be the best version of me. We did this!

To my committee, Dr. Gupta and Dr. Myran I am forever grateful for your support. You understood my passion for English Learners and saw the possibilities in this research. You listened and allowed me to write my story, helping me find the freedom I needed after trying to make-sense of this issue for so many years. Thank you for taking a chance on me. I am honored to have you in my corner.

To my cohort, many thanks. You grieved with me the day I lost my dad during class. You checked on me and made this journey a magical experience. I will miss our texts, laughs, and check-ins, but I also know our field will be better because of your tenacity and passion for this work.

And to all of my ELs; my professors have armed me with knowledge to advocate for you. Be inspired and encourage because if you can dream it, you can do it!

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

"What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember

it".

Gabriel García Márquez

Critical approaches to policy suggest that policy, even in the most apparently democratic

polity or institution, codifies and extends the interests of those who disproportionately wield

power (Levinson et al., 2009). While the United States is rapidly diversifying (Eide &

Scholwalter, 2001), policy often serves to reproduce existing structures of domination and

inequality (Adidin et al., 1971; McConkey, 2004). Within education, grade retention policy has

been discussed as one such policy that reproduces inequalities in American society by way of

tracking students (Oakes, 2005). In the United States, ethnic minority students and students from

socio-economic families are more likely to be retained (Jimerson et al., 2002), thus contributing

to the reproduction of existing structures of domination of non-white, impoverished citizens.

Proponents of policies encouraging the retention of low performing students contend that these

students stand to benefit from an improved match of their ability to that of their peers, the

opportunity for additional instruction before confronting more challenging material, and any

additional services provided to students during the retention year (Schwerdt et al., 2017). Critics

of grade retention, meanwhile, warn that retained students may be harmed by stigmatization,

reduced expectations for their academic performance on the part of teachers and parents, and the

challenges of adjusting to a new peer group (Schwerdt et al., 2017).

While retention research is robust, most research has focused on all students, racial

minority students, or students with special needs. One key student population that is largely

missing in retention research is English learners (ELs). Higher retention rates have been shown among ethnic minorities, especially among Hispanic students who are learning English (Abidin, et al., 1971; Alexander et al., 1994; Hughes et al. 2018; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Reinherz & Griffin, 1970; Zill et al., 1997). ELs in U.S. public schools are more likely to be of low-socioeconomic status (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Capps et al., 2005); and socio-economic status is closely related to students' reading proficiency (Jimerson et al, 2002)—a key predictor of grade promotion or retention. Thus, ELs often face "both the disadvantage of coming from a poor family and the disadvantage of being an English learner in a primarily English-language education system" (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016, p. 164). Often due to lack of resources and supports, reading deficiencies often lead to high rates of retention for ELs (Kouhana, 2017). Yet, we know very little about how school leaders approach the retention decision making process for ELs, and if this process looks any different than the process for non-ELs (Eide & Scholwalter, 2000). It is especially important to understand retention decision making processes related to ELs because ELs already possess many of the familial (e.g., low-income) and demographic (e.g., ethnic minority) characteristics associated with an increased likelihood of being retained.

The field of language policy (and its subfield, language education policy) increasingly has called for a focus on how particular polices are taken up or enacted by participants in everyday situations (King & De Fina, 2010). As such, this dissertation asks: how do school leaders make sense of state retention policies for ELs, and subsequently develop and implement local retention policy for ELs in their schools? Informed by theories related to sensemaking and policy implementation (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Spillane, 2008), I also ask two sub-questions:

1. How do school leaders' backgrounds, experiences, tenure, and education and training influence the decision making around retention practices for ELs?

2. How do accountability pressures influence retention policies for ELs? Additionally, how have changes in accountability pressures related to COVID-19 impacted how school leaders think about and implement EL retention policy if at all?

In the sections that follow, I provide a summary of the literature on student retention. I then describe literature on the retention of ELs and the connections to accountability. Next, I present the purpose of this study and describe my positionality as the researcher. Subsequently, I describe the conceptual framework that guides this study, based primarily in the sensemaking literature. Finally, I present the key terms and limitations of the proposed study as well as recommendations for future practice.

Student Retention

Roughly 10% of American K-12 public school students are retained at least once between kindergarten and eighth grade, with the incidence of retention concentrated among low-income students and traditionally disadvantaged minorities (Planty et al., 2009; Schwerdt et al., 2017). For example, in 2016, 7% of Hispanic children were retained, compared to 2% of non-Hispanic, white children; and, 8% of children in households with incomes at or below the federal poverty level were retained, compared to 3% for children with higher incomes (Child Trends, 2018).

The decision to retain a child may be based on factors such as immaturity, ability to speak the English language, the belief that an extra year of schooling will produce successful academic outcomes, and failure to meet criteria for promotion (Bowman, 2005). Though research indicates that grade retention does not typically increase student performance, it is widely practiced in schools throughout the nation (Hong, & Yu, 2007; Wu et al., 2008). In fact, a

large literature in educational psychology confirms that retained students achieve at lower levels, complete fewer years of school, and have worse social-emotional outcomes than observably similar students who are promoted (Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson et al., 2002; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Schwerdt et al., 2017). Retention of students is also associated with increased financial costs to the school and may hinder progress and negatively impact retained students' self-esteem, ultimately impacting student drop out and engagement moving forward in their educational careers (Figlio & Ozek, 2020; Goos et al., 2013; Ozkan et al., 2018).

Issues of retention and social promotion have been discussed at length in the research literature (Alexander et al., 2003). During the 1970s, promotion of academically struggling students for social purposes (i.e., social promotion) was a common educational practice (Roderick, 1994). The basic premise of social promotion at this time was to promote students despite not satisfying grade requirements, considering their psychological and well-being as a basis for the promotion decision. However, academic gains for this group of students were often minimal and in some cases absent (Roderick, 1994), resulting in negative consequences, such as dropping out of high school (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

With growing pressure to raise academic standards in the 1980s, social promotion lost much of its appeal. The 1983 *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) report played an important role in focusing practitioners' attention on ensuring students master grade-level content and curriculum before being promoted to the next grade level (Holmes, 1989). Increased political pressure to demonstrate student achievement based on standardized assessments pushed educators to retain failing students by implementing stricter promotion standards (Owings & Kaplan, 2001), often based on state assessments. A focus on growth and performance in other areas such as critical thinking, open-mindedness, maturity, and citizenship, and language proficiency (Deming &

Figlio, 2016) have also led schools to take into account mastery of these non-test-based skills in order to move on to the next grade level (Balow & Schwager, 1990).

Federal and state guidelines and policies require each student to learn grade-level content standards, which are typically tied to local and state retention and promotion policies. In many states, local education agencies are required to have a process in place that identifies and recommends strategies to address the learning, behavior, communication, or development of individual children who are having difficulty mastering learning standards (e.g., 8VAC20-131-30 Student Achievement Expectations of the Code of Virginia Law). Grade retention policy differs by state, and states with more lenient grade retention policies often have different standardized test results (Yan et al., 2018). Given the research of the adverse effects of retention (Figlio & Özek, 2020; Ozkan et al., 2018), it is important to examine how retention policies impact ELs to better understand if and how education leaders associate retention with language proficiency, and if and how language proficiency impacts retention decisions.

Retention of English Learners

Currently, one in four students in U.S. public schools speaks a language other than English at home (CIS, 2017). Between 2000 and 2017, the proportion of ELs in American K-12 public schools rose 25%, from 8% to 10% (NCES, 2020). Today, more than five million K-12 public school students are ELs (NCES, 2020). Furthermore, more than four million children are in the process of developing English proficiency and are classified as ELs (Arne, 2015).

Language proficiency is central to academic growth because learning requires understanding the abstract language used in school and using it as a tool for acquiring new knowledge (Carroll, 1986). From both cognitivist and language socialization perspectives, a key element to attaining English proficiency is providing ELs opportunities for collaborating and

interacting with English-proficient peers (Atkinson, 2011). This is threatened when the unique language needs of ELs are not considered when discussing retention and ELs progress as it relates to reading proficiency instead of focusing on language proficiency indicators. For example, a student new to the United States might have not achieved the target instructional reading level at the end of the year as measured by a formative reading assessment system in English. An intervention team could dive into unpacking an EL student's reading level based on their ability to show comprehension of text in English, reading behaviors for students with average English language proficiency, and background knowledge. The time to reach English proficiency is long—on average, 6 years—for ELs who start in kindergarten and receive quality dual-language programming in both their native (L1) and English (L2) language, with at least half of the instruction time in their L1. Additionally, research tells us that it takes longer—7–10 years or more— if students have not had the opportunity to be schooled in their L1, and many in this situation do not reach grade-level achievement and are often referred to by school personnel as "long-term English learners." (Thomas & Collier, 2017). As such, dismissing these students' needs for additional time to process information as well as the fact that most assessments are not reliable and valid for them (Abedi, 2016) can explain why there is a significant gap in test scores between ELs versus English native speakers (Office of Language Acquisition, 2015). This information becomes important as schools attempt to provide state and federal policy-mandated supports to the student attempting to ensure that communication barriers do not impede their ability to learn.

Lau v. Nichols (1974), a court case that focused on the lack of supplemental language instruction in public school for students with limited English proficiency, has led to state and federal policies requiring school leaders to ensure communication barriers do not impede a

child's ability to learn. In the *Lau* (1974) ruling, the majority opinion stated: "There is not equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education" (Douglas, 1973).

The *Lau* ruling required school divisions to take affirmative steps to rectify students' English language deficiency in order to open up access to programs to identified ELs (OCR, 2020). One way that school divisions can support students' English proficiency is by providing classroom supports such as access to English as a second language programming, differentiation of instruction, language translation devices, and additional time on assessments to try to understand students beyond their language proficiency. As these supports are provided, educators often monitor both growth in academic content and English language proficiency through both formative and summative content and language assessment.

When school leaders are making decisions related to retention, assessment results are taken into account. In many states, EL students must take content assessments in a language they have not fully acquired (Deming & Figlio, 2016). Additionally, Title III of ESSA requires that results of language proficiency assessments be discussed at the conclusion of each school year to determine if an EL will be reclassified as English proficient. While language proficiency assessment results are required to be considered in EL reclassification decisions, they are not required to be considered in grade level advancement decisions.

According to a recent report from Education Dive, 18 states and the District of Columbia[1] allow for grade retention of students in third grade based on their reading proficiency as measured by performance of a state content exam (Modan, 2019). Other states have similar

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[1] Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, South Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Iowa, Washington, Arizona, Arkansas, Montana, New Jersey, California, Florida, Nevada, North Carolina

policies but allow local education agencies to decide on a student-by-student case. As stated in the administrative code of Virginia, the state does not fall in either category; instead, it requires school division superintendents to certify to the Virginia Department of Education that the division's promotion and retention policy does not exclude any students from membership in a grade, or participation in a course, in which the Standards of Learning assessments (SOLs) are administered. Additionally, Virginia state policy authorizes, but does not require, divisions to use state assessments to determine student eligibility for promotion.

Virginia state law requires all ELs to participate in the state's assessment program. However, each school must establish a committee to make determinations regarding the participation of EL students in such assessments, with the ability to provide EL students with a one-time exemption from state testing in the areas of writing, and history and social science ("8VAC20-131-30. Student achievement expectations," n.d.). Thus, while school leaders have content assessment performance data on most ELs, it is not clear the extent to which performance on these assessments is considered in grade retention. Moreover, because local divisions develop their own retention and promotion policies, the extent to which performance on other assessments, such as language assessments, play into retention decisions remains unclear. Nonetheless, retaining students based on English language proficiency goes against the policies and *Lau* (1974) decision that contends that ELs must have equitable access to educational opportunities, coursework, and programs, so they can experience success as they move along in school.

Retention of English Learners and Accountability

When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964 was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, all students in grades 3 through 8 were required to be

assessed annually in English language arts (ELA) and math. Under NCLB, schools were required to make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) toward 100 percent proficiency on state assessment performance; however, under the more recent reauthorization, commonly known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), federal policy now allows states to set annual growth targets for both the entire student population, as well as subpopulations such as ELs (ESSA, 2015). Under ESSA, if ELs are consistently underperforming and not improving toward the set goals, it may trigger that school for targeted support and improvement from the state (ESSA, 2015).

When faced with strong incentives to concentrate on some school quality metrics but not on others, schools might be expected to focus on short-run gains in what is being measured. State assessments have been found to place considerably high external pressure on schools, students, leaders, and teachers based on an external assessment of test frequency, accountability, and repercussions of poor performance (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002). Therefore, school leaders make efforts to avoid a poor school quality designation status that may trigger mandatory changes in staff, community pressure to increase accreditation status, cuts in funding, and pressure from local and state education officials. Given the myriad of ramifications that can result from a poor school quality designation based on student subgroups' ELA and math performance, educators and school leaders must think carefully about retention decisions and the ways in which those decisions may impact their school quality designation. Thus, state ELA and math assessments have become the focal point to demonstrate achievement of students, putting English language proficiency assessments as a complement.

As a way to provide information to schools about a student's language proficiency in different domains (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) several states administer assessments every year, such as the ACCESS assessment to measure ELs' language proficiency.

The language proficiency assessments are often also utilized as a predictor for mastery of state ELA and math assessments. While several states, including Virginia, provide students with a one-time exemption of certain state content-based assessments, most ELs are assessed in ELA and math content areas as well as English language proficiency. Results of such content and language assessments are part of schools' state accountability profiles as a measure of student progress. This poses a tremendous challenge for teachers and school principals, whose schools will later be identified in Virginia as either meeting or failing to meet the target based on student achievement on both content and language proficiency assessments (Rudnick, 2012). High-stakes tests are used to hold schools, districts, and states accountable for student performance, therein affording the federal government greater control over the constitutionally decentralized national system of U.S. education. While Virginia has adopted the implementation of the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests at the primary tool for assessment, the law specifies testing must take place in both English and mathematics and requires ELs to take the same statewide content assessments that are administered to native-English speakers. ELs must therefore take and pass tests administered in English. Not only must they participate in tests of English language proficiency to prove they are progressing in their acquisition of English, but they must also take the same tests of academic content as native-English speakers. (Menken, 2009).

The final decision to promote or retain a student is typically made by the school leader. Especially in a state like Virginia, with strong local power related to retention policies, decisions around retention can vary depending on the leader and the school. Educational leaders whose schools' quality are measured by student test scores may be more likely to focus on teaching students to the test and retaining ELs as a way to give them another year to learn English. This

especially happens with students who are already struggling with the academic material (Shepard, 1989).

Research suggests that, with the exception of some small positive effects on their psychosocial functioning and grade retention likelihood later on in primary education, students who are retained do not benefit much from their retention year (Goos et al, 2013). If this is true for students who are proficient in English, why is it then that retaining ELs continues to be considered as a strategy to provide time for students to acquire the language? Some scholars have suggested that it is better to place the child in the next grade, even if the student has not learned all the material required for promotion (Shepard & Smith, 1990), and that appropriate supplemental instruction during the year of promotion should enable low-performing students to catch up with their classmates who were not experiencing academic difficulty (Natale, 1991). Moreover, for students who speak English as their second language, scholars that have suggested retention may be ineffective because gains in academic achievement during the repeated year are presumed to be either negligible or quickly fade if they do occur (Walters & Borgers, 1995).

Researchers have highlighted numerous problems with several assessment mandates, which require testing ELs in a language in which they are not yet proficient and using tests that were normed on native-English speakers. Wright and Li (2008) carried out a detailed analysis of math test items currently being used in Texas and showed their linguistic complexity for ELs. Solarzano (2008) reviewed over 40 studies on NCLB high-stakes testing of ELs, noting that ELs are typically administered achievement tests in the English language after one year of language services. Many achievement tests were not designed with ELs in mind. As a result, the ability to infer content mastery from these tests can compromise the educational decisions that educators make based on test results. The student population for which the test is designed and developed

is a crucial aspect that eventually affects the integrity of the test, not to mention subsequent decisions based on the results. (Solórzano, 2008). The research makes evident that a test given in English to an EL is not a valid measure of academic content knowledge (Menken, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how school leaders develop and implement retention policy, specifically for students who are ELs. ELs are the fastest growing student populations in the United States, with this growth now extending to non-traditional immigrant states (Rubio, 2014). Very little research has examined the process by which EL retention decisions are made. Examining the interpretation and implementation of retention policies for ELs will contribute to the field by building upon prior research around EL policy implementation; providing policymakers, practitioners, and researchers with a better understanding of how school leaders go about implementing retention policies for students with limited English proficiency; and better understanding the potential role that language may play when considering student retention. This study will also help practitioners and policymakers understand the differences in EL retention policy implementation across school leaders, which could reveal potential inequalities existing between schools when it comes to retention of ELs.

Researcher Positionality

Retention of ELs—the fastest growing group of Americas' K-12 public school children— has received little attention in the research community. My research interest in the retention ELs transpired as a result of my role as Director of English Learners Programs and Services for a school division serving over 29,000 ELs out of almost 90,000 students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelve. In preparation to better serve our students, I took a deep interest in the reason why some schools inquired about the possibility of retaining students who had limited

skills in English when they did not achieve a mastery score on the Standards of Learning (SOL) or were on grade level in reading as measured by the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). ACCESS for ELs is a standards-based, criterion referenced English language proficiency test designed to measure English learners' social and academic proficiency in English. In many conversations, I discovered that most recommendations for retention of ELs were changed once we had meetings about students' strengths and the process of acquiring language and how ACCESS scores provide information about student's language proficiency levels. As such, I am interested in better understanding how school leaders make sense of implementing retention policies, specifically for the EL student population.

Last, this research brings a personal interest as I experienced being recommended for grade retention in 9th grade as a result of a low language proficiency level at the time. As a student I understand the process of language development and the impact of such recommendations. As such, this research is an interest of mine, trying to understand the decision-making process of school leaders.

Conceptual Framework

As policy is implemented in schools, school leaders engage in collective sense-making of policy implementation (Cohen & Ball, 1990). This study seeks to investigate how school leaders make sense of and implement grade retention polices for ELs at their schools, and the ways in which individual characteristics and accountability pressures may influence the implementation of grade retention policy for ELs. Specifically, this study will examine how school leaders' backgrounds, tenure, and training, as well as accountability pressures influence their interpretation and implementation of EL retention policy. To better understand how school

leaders make sense of and implement external and internal grade retention policies for ELs, I will draw from theories of sensemaking and policy implementation.

What a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals. How the implementing agents understand the policy's message(s) about local behavior is defined in the interaction of these three dimensions (Spillane et al., 2002). By looking at how principals make sense of retention policies, policymakers can better understand how beliefs, practices, actions, and how accountability pressures impact the implementation of grade retention policies for ELs in schools serving this vulnerable population. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework that was used for this study and how individual characteristics, internal relationships, and external forces influenced school leaders' sense making and implementation policy.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework


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          ┌─────────────────────────┐
          │  Individual knowledge   │
          │       and beliefs       │
          │        -Training        │
          │     -Life experiences   │
          │          -Work          │
          └─────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
│  Collective Sense-   │      │  External Pressures  │
│       Making         │◄────►│ -Political environment│
│    -Relationships    │      │       -Policies       │
│    -Organization     │      │                       │
└──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
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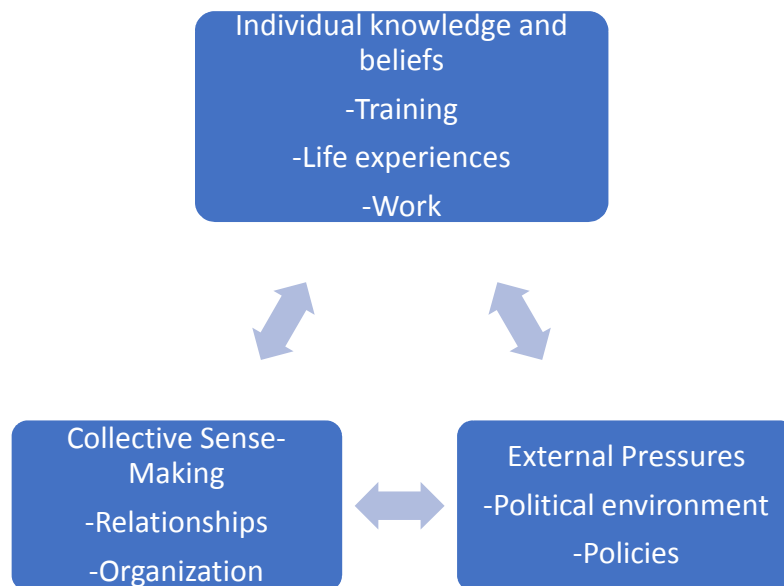
This framework is an adaptation of Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer's (2002) sense-making framework. The sense- making framework explains the three-step process used to understand policy. Imbedded within each step are factors that shape how policy implementers come to interpret policy changes.

Research suggests that school administrators acquire a wealth of knowledge over time that impacts their beliefs and ultimately their understanding of policy (Cohen & Ball, 1990). As such, the knowledge school leaders' have developed through life experiences, training, and previous work experiences (Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 1995) may have an effect on how grade retention policy is understood and enacted upon. The research on policy implementation has consistently found that the people implementing the policy matter (McLaughlin, 1987). While central office leaders often share essential information about policies and regulations with school leaders, it is ultimately the school principal and those serving students who have influence over how grade retention policies are implemented. As a result, it is important to understand the

different factors that relate to how principals make sense of grade retention policies for ELs, and how sensemaking of such policies influences the implementation process. In Chapter 2, I will expound upon this conceptual framework and connect it to the literature around ELs and retention policy.

Definition of Terms

The defining terms listed below are important to identify themes and a common frame of reference related to this study (Mercier, 2017). While they might have different or multiple uses in the educational field, they are defined as below in this study:

Administrator/Principal/School Leader. For purposes of this study, the terms administrator or school leader are used interchangeable, and refer to the principal of a school.

English Learners. Immigrant or US-born students in need of appropriate language assistance services to become proficient in English and allowing them to fully participate equally in the standard instructional program within a reasonable period of time (DOJ & USDE, 2015).

Leadership. "A process whereby an individual influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2010, p. 3). In the school context, Bornstein (2017) indicates that leadership in schools should perform various functions that include shared leadership, equitable distribution of resources, strategies, and practices so that the needs of all students and teachers are met and conditions that allow for that allow teachers and parents to address to the learning needs of diverse students.

Professional Development. The ongoing pursuit to grow and develop as a leader. In this study, the term professional development is synonymous with training, conference, and other professional learning activities that seek to enhance and expand the school leader's abilities to support instructional staff working with English Learners.

Students. For the purpose of this study, students refer to enrollees of Kindergarten through 5th grades.

Limitations & Delimitations

Limitations are factors for which the individual conducting the study has no control over. The first limitation is that I am employed and supervise the EL program in the school division where the study took place. As part of my role as the Director of the EL program, principals might have answered questions to highlight the positive aspects of the program at their schools, using language learned in various trainings provided by my place of employment. I have also worked for the Division for 11 years, which could have influenced individuals' willingness to participate in the survey. My previous role as an elementary school principal has allowed me to build relationships with most of the school division leaders who will take the survey. I understand the expectations and assessment administration for ELs, Title III federal program requirements, and required professional learning for leaders and staff. Furthermore, I have provided direct support to school leaders when it comes to closing some of the identified gaps in the literature review affecting ELs. As a result, the survey that was used as part of this study was voluntary and anonymous for all participants. Patton (2014) explains that delimitations are those boundaries set to conduct a particular study. More specifically, delimitations are the aspects of a study that can be controlled and, in so doing, provide the boundaries of the study (Simon & Goes, 2010). This study focused on elementary schools with principals who have been serving in a leadership role for two years or more, as they were expected to be more familiar with the grade retention practices at their schools, providing more details during phase II of the data collection process. While this approach limited the sample size, I believe that a school leader with two

years or more as a principal would most likely be aware of the grade retention policies and data

of ELs retained at their individual schools.

CHAPTER II

Literature and Conceptual Framework

Questions related to grade retention include: Who should be promoted, when, and why?; Who should be retained, and why?; Should retained students be given additional services or supports?; Will being retained result any social or emotional ramifications to the student?; and Who should be making the decision on behalf of the student? While these questions have been debated for many years, some have yet to be answered. However, researchers have examined which group of students are retained the most (Holmes et al., 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Research has shown that students most likely to be retained come from single parent, low socioeconomic households, with caretakers who are not involved in their education and/or have a negative attitude towards school, or with limited English language proficiency. These students are likely to have already repeated kindergarten, and they are likely to be Black or Hispanic (Bali et al., 2005; Burkam et al., 2007; Martin, 2009; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; Meisels & Liaw, 1993). Despite conclusions that retention is "an unjustifiable, discriminatory, and noxious" policy (Abidin et al., 1971), grade retention has increased over the past 25 years (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1966, 1990). In addition to academic achievement, grade retention apparently can be damaging to the social and emotional development of children, especially as it relates to personal adjustment (Frey, 2005).

With research showing that our most vulnerable students are most likely to be retained, it is critical to understand the grade retention decision making process from the point of view of those making the decisions: principals. In this chapter I review the studies related to English learners (ELs) and grade retention. I begin with an explanation of English learners in the United States, the laws that protect ELs, and how the educational system supports ELs from an

instructional and accountability lens. I then summarize the literature on grade retention and social promotion. I will also describe literature on how principals make sense of which students need to be retained and the impact of grade retention on students.

<p style="text-align:center">English Learners, Retention and Accountability in the United States</p>

Who are English Learners?

English learners (ELs) are one of the most rapidly growing groups of students in this country (Mavrogordato & White, 2017). It is projected that by 2025 approximately one out of every four public school students will be identified as an EL (Calderon et al., 2011; National Education Association, 2008). The growth in the EL student population, especially in urban school districts, brings challenges at federal, state, and district levels as education leaders try to accommodate the needs of ELs (Sheng et al., 2011). Elfers & Stritikus (2013) stated that immigration in the last two decades has brought a number of challenges for schools and district leaders and those supporting students with limited English proficiency. Some of these challenges include inequitable resources, school conditions, segregated schools and classrooms, and the lack of experienced, highly qualified, or trained teachers to serve the unique needs of ELs (Gándara & Rumberger, 2004).

In order to provide context on what it means to be an EL student in the United States, a definition was crafted by the Department of Education. As referenced by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, an EL is an individual who

1) is age 3 through 21;

2) is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school;

3) meets one of the following criteria

a) was not born in the United States, or whose native language is a language other than English;

b) is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas; and comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency (ELP); or

c) is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant—and

4) has difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language, that may be sufficient to deny the individual

a) the ability to meet the challenging state academic standards;

b) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or

c) the opportunity to participate fully in society.

Although the number of ELs in U.S. public schools continues to grow, the educational outcomes for this group of students have not improved substantially in the past 20 years (Sullivan et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a; Wolf et al., 2014; Yettick & Lloyd, 2016). It is well documented that ELs face significant achievement gaps: according to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 16% of ELs in fourth grade perform at or above the proficient level in mathematics, compared to 45% of the non-English learners (Figlio & Özek, 2020). Federal legislation and several Supreme Court cases have guaranteed ELs' access to publicly funded education in the United States. The access granted for these students has evolved from merely reducing discrimination based on national origin (*Title VI, Civil Rights Act*, 1964) to the declaration that

undocumented ELs are entitled to a publicly funded education in the United States in accordance with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982). The intense international competition that our country faces in today's global economy demands that all of America's youth receive the kind of education that they need and deserve. Yet our public education system is failing our students. In order to repair this broken system, the United States must confront the fact that inequality continues to plague our public schools. One of the most harmful manifestations of this is that local school district funding is allocated in a way that hurts poor and minority students, such as ELs. A study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that educational funding is being allocated on the basis of "staff allocations, program-specific formulae, squeaky-wheel politics, property wealth, and any number of other factors that have little to do with the needs of students." This has resulted in lack of engagement, increase in drop-out rates, and low performance that goes beyond language development (Podesta & Brown, 2008).

To investigate how school principals made sense of retention policies in their schools, and create inclusive school environments for ELs where they have accommodations, appropriate resources, and access to information in their primary language; it is important to examine the history of education in the United States. Throughout the 19th century, and well into the 20th century, blatant inequalities and inequities indicated that not all children were included or provided the same educational opportunities as others (Lee & Burkham, 2002). According to Thomas Jefferson, an education, at public expense, is the main determinant in leveling playing fields and creating equal opportunities (Verstegen, 2015). Early adoptions of this ideal, however, faced the challenges and realities of slavery, segregation, child labor, and discrimination (Bibb, 2018; Johnson et al., 1985; Notlemeyer et al., 2012; Thattai, 2001; Trattner, 1970).

Forty years ago, in the landmark case *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), the Supreme Court ruled, "There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education." Citing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (1964), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of "race, color, and national origin" in any federally funded program, the Supreme Court held that school districts were obligated to take "affirmative steps" to effectively educate students acquiring English. This was a class action suit brought by the parents of Chinese students that did not speak English against the San Francisco Unified School District for the district's failure to provide equal educational opportunities which violated the Fourteenth Amendment as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although the district was absolved of any responsibility for minority children's "language deficiency," a unanimous Supreme Court opposed the decision stating, "students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education" (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974).

The *Lau v. Nichols* (414 U.S. 563) decision required U.S. public schools to establish policies ensuring that ELs have access to linguistically appropriate accommodations for them to experience a "meaningful education." This ruling resulted in bilingual education and the subsequent Lau Remedies (1975), a set of guidelines that converted the schools' legal obligations for English language learners into pedagogical mandates (Lyons, 1990). The Lau Remedies require, among other things, that districts determine student eligibility for specialized English language services. Eligibility is established by determining (a) the student's first language, and the language most often spoken by the student, is not English, and, subsequently, (b) the students' linguistic ability in English. States have responded to legislation and court decisions in

a variety of manners, and the *Horne v. Flores* (2009) decision determined that states had autonomy to decide how they were to provide access to educational opportunities to ELs.

No Child Left Behind and ESSA

In 1965, President Johnson signed the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA was a piece of civil rights legislation that focused on equity as a civil rights law. Later on, at the start of the Reagan administration, The National Commission on Excellence in Education was tasked with comparing the U.S. education system with those in other countries and making conclusions on how the American system could be improved (Soderholm, 2019). In 1983, the commission published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This report did not seem encouraging for marginalized populations such as ELs as it offered a grim picture of American educational system. According to the report, American schools were getting plummeting, test scores were falling, and millions of students remained reading at lower levels. In 2001, the ESEA was reauthorized, revamped, and renamed with bipartisan support. Led by Senator Ted Kennedy and President George W. Bush, the ESEA became the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB was passed with a focus on accountability for states and localities for student performance. It built on prior equity legislation by disaggregating reporting for student outcomes into demographic subgroups to account for the achievement of all students on math and reading tests.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced NCLB in 2015, was designed to remedy some of the challenges that arose out of NCLB. One example is schools with diverse student bodies that had a portion of students who were ELs were often labeled Focus Schools, those with the largest achievement gap between the top 30 percent of students and the bottom 30 percent. This became especially concerning because this policy penalized schools that were well

integrated, where ELs and English proficient students attend school together (Mavrogordato, 2015). After more than a decade in effect, NCLB's was a target of criticism for both the political left and right (Saultz et al., 2017). ESSA brought to light some opportunities for growth when it came to marginalized groups, holding several groups accountable. For example, Virginia's accountability system was designed to measure student's growth and performance. Accountability systems in Virginia incorporated results based on minimum standards called Standards of Quality (SOQ). Despite occasional efforts to engage with lower policy levels, the SOL policy process is driven largely by a top-down approach (Ruff, 2019). ESSA redefined accountability measures for ELs by allowing states to set their own goals for language proficiency for ELs and for other indicators required for all students, such as proficiency in reading and math and graduation rates, and the standards based movement. Policy makers believe that the extending EL monitoring to four years yields more accurate information about ELs performance and progress over time, enhancing program evaluation and improvement. This extension also recognizes the developmental nature of second language acquisition, allowing for better service delivery to students at all levels of English proficiency (August & Haynes, 2016).

Assessment and Accountability

Considerable interest has focused on the effect of the standards-based reform movement on grade retention practices. During the past decade, accountability has loomed large in reform initiatives as numerous state and local government agencies have implemented mechanisms that hold schools accountable for student performance (Clotfelter & Ladd, 2006). In an effort to improve student achievement, many states recently have implemented policies that require elementary school children to meet explicit performance goals in order to be promoted. It is important to recognize that the implementation of policies requiring a demonstrated proficiency

on curriculum-aligned tests for promotion to the next grade is a part of comprehensive accountability policy that also includes consequences for schools and teachers based on student performance on curriculum-aligned tests (Hughes et al., 2010).

Eighteen states explicitly tie student grade promotion to performance on a state or district assessment (Education State Notes, 2005), and three of the largest school districts in the country (New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago) have similar policies (Jacob & Lefgren, 2009). Ironically, the role of school principals in implementing accountability-based policies has gone largely ignored (Spillane et al., 2002). As noted by Foster (2004) as accountability measures have become entrenched within the educational rhetoric that situates schooling "as the venue for increasing the economic competitiveness of the state" (p. 176), principals must interpret and act upon federal, state, and district policies, and make sense of global policy trends and rhetoric (Koyama, 2013). Recognizing the issues and questions surrounding administrator influence as states and districts intensify their press for accountability, Shipps and White (2009) suggested that research in this area be part of the agenda for future research on administration, especially as it relates to leading vulnerable populations.

Because states' educational reform activity in the past decade has focused most emphatically on standards and accountability for curriculum, instruction, and assessment, some studies seek to compare principals' influence and sense-making in these areas with their influence on matters of policy implementation (Marks & Nance, 2007). The common factor in student achievement in schools is student characteristics, such as language proficiency (Marzano, 2001). ELs often come to school with great academic and social emotional needs, and might need encouragement in their native language (Schwerdt et al, 2017; Stearns et al., 2007). Scholars and practitioners argue that students who are learning English have been

marginalized with respect to access to the curriculum, mastery of the curriculum, and social standing within the public schools in the United States (Crawford, 2007).

As the U.S. population grows more diverse, public schools are faced with meeting the needs of an increasing population of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Schools in the United States are often the first point of contact for new immigrant students as they work to facilitate their integration and socialization into American society. Aiding immigrants in learning English has become one of the primary foci of schools and is a major challenge for principals and central office leaders looking to build the capacity of educators serving them. This is a pressure that could result in an increase in retention in the early grades if educators' reason that low achieving primary grade students will be more successful on the forthcoming state accountability test if they are given an extra year of instruction (Holmes et al., 2010).

The current accountability system in Virginia requires ELs to be tested in mathematics beginning with the first round of state exams after the students enter a U.S. school, and in reading after they have been in a U.S. school for at least one year. This poses a tremendous challenge for teachers and school principals, whose schools will later be identified in Virginia as meeting or failing to meet the target based on student achievement on these assessments (Rudnick, 2012). However, data on the performance of early grade-retained students on subsequent state accountability tests are sparse. In the 2005–2006 year in Florida, of the 12,685 students taking the fifth grade FCAT reading test who had failed the third grade FCAT reading in 2002–2003 and repeated third grade, 60% obtained a passing score (i.e., level 2 or higher), compared with 84% of all fifth graders taking the FCAT reading test in 2006 (Wagner et al., 2009). As such, Hughes et al. (2010) suggests that in order to understand the association between

grade retention and standards-based test performance, it is important to employ research designs that control for pre-retention differences on relevant variables.

Title III- Language Proficiency Support for English Learners

One of the primary goals of any program that serves ELs is for students to acquire a sufficient level of English proficiency such that they no longer require language supports (Mavrogordato & White, 2017). ESSA's Title III requires states to implement standardized, statewide procedures for identifying ELs ("entrance procedures") and for determining when special language services are no longer needed ("reclassification procedures"). To ensure ongoing monitoring of EL progress, Title I now requires annual English language proficiency assessments. Additionally, each state must set up an accountability system that incorporates at least four academic indicators (including English language proficiency) and one non-academic indicator (August & Haynes, 2016). Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) acknowledged the differences in educational attainment between EL students and their native-English-speaking counterparts. Title III is a formula grant program created with the intention of enhancing the education of English learning students, and it specifically targets ELs and immigrant children with the explicit goal of ensuring that these students attain English and meet the same academic standards as their English-speaking peers.

Title III outlines measures intended to document EL educational attainment and provides funds to help schools, local education agencies (LEAs), and state education agencies (SEAs) to establish education programs. It also affords funding to improve school, district and state capacity to educate ELs, as well as funds to promote family and community involvement in language instruction for ELs (Luke, 2018). Title III provide school districts with funding dollars and program implementation resources to support ELs success. Grade retention is not part of this

formula and the resources outlined as part of the requirements are meant to put instructional strategies in place that will support language development. In addition to instruction, these funds support family engagement and immigrant youth. As such, studying how school leaders' backgrounds, experiences, tenure, and education and training experiences influence their retention practices and decision-making processes for ELs, as well as how accountability pressures influence retention policies for ELs, is the central aim of this study. Additionally, since there have been some changes in the accountability system due to COVID-19, I seek to understand the relationship between the accountability measures and how school leaders think about and implement EL retention policy, if at all, during the pandemic. The next section will take a closer look at the history of grade retention and the impact it has on ELs.

Effects of Grade Retention

Retained students often received lower ratings on socioemotional and behavioral indicators than their promoted peers prior to retention. On average, retained students have lower social skills, poorer emotional adjustment, and more problem behaviors before retention. They tend to have a lower self-concept, to display lower confidence, and to be less self-assured and socially competent (Ferguson et al., 2001; Jimerson et al., 2002; Robles-Pina et al., 2008). Of the three meta-analyses that included socioemotional outcomes in the synthesis of literature around the effects of retention, (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001) report that retained students scored significantly lower than promoted peers on measures of social, emotional, and attitudinal outcomes. Recent studies that yielded 148 analyses of socioemotional adjustment outcomes of retained students relative to a matched comparison group of students, 8 resulted in statistical significance favoring the retained students and 13 were statistically significant favoring the comparison group (Jimerson, 2001a).

Research shows that students' lack of opportunities in their educational careers is linked to less positive outcomes (Gándara & Orfield, 2012). Relative to students who are promoted, retained students are more likely to be male, minority, younger than their peers, of low socioeconomic status, and living in poor households and single- parent families (Mantzicopoulos, 1997; Roderick, 1994; Shepard et al., 1990). Furthermore, scholars have found that ESL courses tend to impede access to advanced courses for ELs (Callahan & Hopkins, 2017; Callahan et al., 2009; Callahan et al., 2010). Other research has demonstrated that ELs are disproportionally tracked into lower-level classes (Estrada, 2014; Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Umansky, 2016a; Thompson, 2017b). These findings align with Umanksy (2016a) research where ELs were identified as having inferior access to courses compared to their English proficient students for four reasons. These are: (1) prior achievement, (2) institutional constraints, (3) English proficiency, and (4) EL classification (p. 1796). These results found that a student's EL status label has caused teachers, counselors, and students themselves to have lower expectations for academic achievement (Dabach, 2014; Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Gándara and Orfield (2012) asserted, "English learners, because of their perceived handicap of not speaking English fluently, are typically consigned to courses that are not only not college preparatory, but in fact often do not even yield credit for graduation" (p. 11). Because English language development (ELD) courses often times take up at least two or more class periods a day, ELs are often left out of mathematics, science, and other courses needed for graduation (Geiger, 2011). As a result, data shows that only 67% of ELs graduate on time, and fewer than 20% of ELs attend 4-year colleges after graduation (ED Data Express, 2018; Kanno & Cromley, 2013).

Grade retention has been identified as the single most powerful predictor of dropping out (Rumberger, 1995). Furthermore, there is considerable literature examining high school dropouts that identifies grade retention as an early predictor variable (Alexander et al., 1999; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992). Much of the evidence for this relationship has been documented in longitudinal studies like the ones discussed earlier. A review of 17 studies examining factors associated with dropping out of high school prior to graduation suggests that grade retention is one of the most robust predictors of the problem (Jimerson et al., 2002). Another notable study is the federal High School and Beyond (HS&B) study, a project that was conducted as part of the larger NELS '88 research. HS&B followed a nationally stratified cohort of 30,030 students from 1,015 schools who were sophomores in 1980 through the end of the study in 1992. One aspect of the study included the examination of dropout rates. Among the cohort, researchers found that whereas the overall rate of dropout was 12.4%, the dropout rate jumped to 27.2% for retained students—leading the researchers to assert that retained students were twice as likely to drop out as students who were never retained (Barro & Kolstad, 1987).

Although research is unclear on a causal relationship between high-stakes testing and high school dropout rates for ELs, there appears to be some connection (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Solórzano, 2008; Sullivan et al., 2005). For example, studies by Dee and Jacob (2006) and Warren, Jenkins, and Kulick (2005) show that when states that require high school exit exams are compared to states without them, dropout rates are higher and high school graduation rates are lower in states with exit exams. In New York, for example, ELs have the highest dropout rate of all students (29.4%) and the lowest four-year graduation rates (25.2%) (Reyes, 2008).

Employment

Retention does not only impact within-school outcomes such as academic achievement and graduation; it also impacts post-school outcomes. An older study of adults who had been retained in school revealed that they were more likely to be incarcerated, abuse drugs and alcohol, and receive welfare than those that were never retained (Darlington et al., 1980). There is not much literature on the relationship between retention and students' later employment outcomes. Eide and Showalter (2001) analyzed the 1980 sophomore cohort of the nationally representative HS&B dataset and reported a statistically significant negative association between retention and post–high school labor market earnings. Jimerson (1999) suggested that when students are retained in the early grades, a trajectory of likely negative outcomes is triggered, and that "numerous factors conspire toward its continuation" (p. 248). Jimerson's (1999) 21-year longitudinal study provided evidence indicating poorer employment outcomes through age 20 among retained students. Specifically, retained students were paid less per hour and received poorer employment competence ratings at age 20 than their low-achieving but promoted peers, while the low-achieving but promoted group was comparable to the control group of regularly promoted students in all employment outcomes at age 20.

Positive Effects of Grade Retention

Although many studies have not reported whether retention was accompanied by supportive interventions, in a few studies that found positive academic outcomes at certain grade levels, retained students received targeted interventions designed to help them overcome individual problems (Lorence and Dworkin, 2006; Lorence et al., 2002; Greene & Winters, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009; Peterson et al., 1987). While proponents of grade retention policies hypothesize that the threat of retention will motivate students, findings on attitudinal outcomes

are largely inconclusive. Several studies reported positive results (Gottfredson et al. 1994; Karweit, 1999; Jacob et al., 2004), while others found that retained students were "significantly more attached to school than their promoted peers" after retention (Gottfredson et al., 1994, p. 775) and showed improvement in teacher ratings of motivation to learn in the two years following retention (Karweit, 1999).

In an eight-year longitudinal study with matched control groups for same-grade comparison, students retained in grade 2 or 3 caught up with promoted students in terms of achievement test scores during their repeated year, and at least part of these gains were sustained through grade 7 (Alexander, 2003). However, in no instance did these students actually reach the performance level of promoted ones, but the retained students often were close in comparisons with low achieving but promoted students. Some researchers commented that it was unclear whether the positive outcomes of this research came from retention or the supportive components (Fager & Richen, 1999).

There are a number of arguments in support of the idea that repeating a grade can be beneficial for students' learning development, most focused related to native English speakers (Kretschmann et al., 2019). Some argue that grade retention offers low- achieving students time to catch up on their knowledge gaps. Additionally, it might offer a more suitable level of instruction for those who are retained so that students are no longer being asked to work beyond their abilities (Martin, 2011). Allen and Hughes (2009) show that the effects of grade retention depend on the study design quality, such that the effects of retention tend to be more positive if a study features a high-quality design—that is to say a high adequacy of control individuals with low pre-retention differences to the retained students. In summary, previous results on the effects

of grade retention on student motivation have been inconclusive and few studies have employed research designs that allow for causal interpretation (Kretschmann et al., 2019).

Policy Implementation, and Principals' Beliefs, and Attitudes

Scholars have increasingly applied a cognitive framework in studying the policy process (Spillane at al., 2002). Cognitive frames have also been used in studies of policy implementation in education (Ball, 1994; Spillane, 2000), public policy (Weiss, 1989, 1990; Yanow, 1996), political science (Hill, 1999), sociology (Marris & Brittain, 1975), and social psychology (Kunda, 1999; Nisbett & Ross, 1981; Weick, 1995). School leaders' responses to district policies must be understood as a function not only of leaders' identities but also the multiple contexts in which their sense-making is situated. Political arrangements are also an important context for principals' sense-making as they face major political challenges because their position in the organizational hierarchy focuses their work in at least two directions. School leaders are street-level workers dependent on and responsible to their local community stakeholders and the district office for implementing school policy (Lipsky, 1980). With an increasing number of states using promotional gates as a means to ensure students are mastering curriculum content, it is important to explore how enforcers comprehend such policies. Sense-making is not a simple decoding of the policy message; in general, the process of comprehension is an active process of interpretation that draws on the individual's rich knowledge base of understandings, beliefs, and attitudes (Carey, 1985; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; Rumelhart, 1980; Schank & Abelson, 1977). Because sensemaking is a unique proposition in that sense made is a relative concept of the human condition this framework can help us understand that how grade retention policies can make complete sense to one person but may seem utterly foolish to another.

The available evidence suggests that values and emotions are a crucial factor when making decisions about policy implantation (Spillane et al., 2002). This research focuses on the ways in which educational leaders draw on their own values and emotions to implement policy. There is emerging literature on the effects of education policies and programs targeting EL, yet relatively little is known about the effects of broader education policies related to these students (Figlio & Ozek, 2019). Examining the effects of these policies on this vulnerable population is particularly important for several reasons according to the literature (Eide & Showalter, 2000; Figlio & Ozek, 2019). First, while early grade retention policies do not specifically target ELs, this group of students is disproportionately affected. Second, Grissom and Shepard (1989) estimate that retaining a minority student increases the probability of not completing high school by 20 to 30%. Lastly, the current body of research seems to demonstrate that, with the exception of some small positive effects on their psychosocial functioning and grade retention likelihood later on in primary education, grade repeaters do not benefit much from their retention year (Goss et al., 2013)

A deep dive into the effects of grade retention policies for ELs by Figlio & Ozek (2019) revealed that there is a substantial heterogeneity in the effects of the policy depending on background differences. For example, it might take longer for a Spanish-speaking EL and ELs from different backgrounds longer to get to the desire proficiency level compared to other EL groups (Conger, 2010; Grimsson; 2004; Slama, 2014; Thompson, 2012). As a result, what is often overlooked is the fact that the lower average EL versus non-EL performance is in great part an artifact of policies historically excluding from the EL group former ELs who have successfully reclassified (Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013). Easily lost from view as well are powerful socioeconomic forces that tip the playing field negatively for the majority of ELs and

may pose greater obstacles to school success (Estrada et al., 2019). This supports many previous studies that have shown a negative relationship between retention and student outcomes, including short-term disciplinary issues, psychosocial trauma, and higher risk for high school dropout. Some of the studies of long-term achievement are negative as well. In fact, retention may even exacerbate inequity, as African-American, Latino, and English-learner students are retained more frequently than their white or native English-speaking peers (Callahan, et al., 2019).

Sense-making is situated: it is tied to the situation in which stimuli are noticed, interpreted, and subsequently acted on (Brown et al., 1989; Resnick, 1991; Suchman, 2015; Weick, 1995). Carpenter and Brewer (n.d.) conceptualize leaders not as commonly evoked archetypes of "renegades" or "educational leader- team players," but rather as "savvy participants," able to navigate complex policy networks (as cited by Koyama, 2013). What a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals. How the implementing agents understand the policy's message(s) about local behavior is defined in the interaction of these three dimensions (Spillane et al., 2002).

Principal's Sense-making and Influence

A key, though often ignored, aspect of cognition is sense-making—that is, the ways in which people make sense of their environments (Spillane, et al, 2002). Drawing on cognitive and sociological theories, this approach to understanding policy implementation, termed sense-making, is predicated on the assumption that people act on the basis of what has meaning for them (Spillane et al. 2002a; Spillane et al., 2002b). Specifically, this approach holds that actors interpret reform policy messages through the lens of their prior knowledge and experience.

Because cognition is dependent on context (Collins et al. 2001), how actors interpret and act on policy messages also is influenced by the social context and larger policy environment in which the reform is implemented, for example, the interactions among teachers to understand and operationalize ambiguous and sometimes conflicting policy messages (Coburn, 2001; 2005; Coburn & Stein, 2006; Russell & Bray, 2013). As such, principals' beliefs concerning grade retention are important to understand (Bowman-Perrott, 2010), especially since there is little research concerning their attitudes about retention (Murray et al., 2010).

Weick (1995 p.18) explains how identity construction is a foundational principle of the sensemaking concept as "sensemaking begins with the sensemaker". Who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity (Weick et al., 2005). Weick (1995) posits the sensemaker is an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition consequently the establishment and maintenance of identity is a core preoccupation in sensemaking. Most studies concerned with the relationship between policy and instructional practice focus on how educators and schools respond to a single policy or a network of related policy initiatives (Odden, 1991). Action is based on how people notice or select information from the environment, make meaning of that information, and then act on those interpretations, developing culture, social structures, and routines over time (Porac et al., 1989; Weick, 1995). Furthermore, these embedded contexts shape sense-making processes by influencing patterns of social interactions (influencing who is talking with whom about what) and shaping conditions for sensemaking (Holt & Cornelissen, 2013). Situating principals as policymakers in complexly layered performative spaces of evaluation and accountability assists

us in exploring the process of account- ability between the educational inputs and outputs (Koyama, 2014).

Sense-making is situated, that is, tied to the situation in which stimuli are noticed, interpreted, and subsequently acted on (Brown et al., 1989; Resnick, 1991; Suchman, 1988; Weick, 1995). With this in mind, a principal has the positional authority and responsibility to act on and ensure that all students have the same opportunities to learn and be successful (Engle & Conant, 2002; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, 2006; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2009). As with any policy, it is the interpretation of the policy by school officials that impacts student achievement (Lipsky, 1980). Educators serve on the front line as the gatekeepers of the policy and both the institutional sector and politics are important contexts for how they make sense of such.

Research conducted by Spillane and colleagues (2002), for example, showed that principals' interpretation of accountability policies was influenced by multiple social and organizational factors (e.g., teachers' interpretations of test scores, student demographics) and influenced their school's curriculum priorities and classroom activities. Russell and Bray (2013) showed that educators' interpretation of the No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Act legislation was influenced by the structure of the policies themselves. In places where the policies were ambiguous, educators were more likely to "construct interpretations that strayed from explicit policy intent" (p. 16). With grade retention policies, school leaders and teachers adhere to a benchmark of test scores as one measure for promotion, it is their belief about the policy that guides how they teach and interact with students (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). School district leaders and administrators serve as the first sense-makers of policy. They interpret policy and pass that interpretation on to teachers. School administrators in particular

serve as the mediators of policy for school districts and teachers (Spillane et al., 2002). Principals play a role in shaping the messages that teachers receive about policy. In interpreting those messages, teachers then make decisions about how to implement the policy in their classroom.

Accountability Pressures

Principals occupy a unique place in educational organizations, often negotiating multiple internal and external accountability policies, and mediating the actions of diverse actors, both in and out of schools (Leithwood et al., 1999; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Spillane et al., 2011). The work of mid-level management is key because accountability levers operate in and through particular schools where they are understood through existing beliefs, experiences, and ways of doing business (Spillane et al, 2002). Such levers do not exist in a vacuum, and school managers are not passive receptors of their environments. Rather, they enact their environments, that is, they "construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many objective features of their surroundings" (Weick, 1979).

Although there has been considerable research about the effects of retention on student outcomes, research about why educators recommend it for students is underdeveloped (Bonvin et al., 2008). This research area is important to understand because, "retention is typically viewed as a school-level decision made by principals and teachers" (Bali et al., 2005 p. 133). Principals serve as instructional leaders for schools and help shape teachers' beliefs about child development as well as informing them about the consequences of interventions, including retention. Interestingly, principals' views about retention are similar to teachers in that they report low academic performance and maturity as reasons to retain students and feel retention should occur in kindergarten as opposed to first or second grade (Cannon & Lipscomp, 2011; Range, 2009). While retained students may appear to make significant gains during the retention

year, improvements are often not big enough to bring them to the same performance level as the promoted students (Alexander et al., 2003; Karweit, 1999). Moreover, those gains are typically short-lived and tend to fade in subsequent years (Alexander et al., 2003; Baenen, 1988; Jacob & Legfren, 2002; Jimerson, et al., 1997; Jimerson, 2001; Karweit, 1999; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006; Lorence et al., 2002; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004; Peterson et al., 1987; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005).

History of Social Promotion

The decision to retain a student has repercussions that extend well beyond the repeated year. However, educators, parents, and politicians have also criticized social promotion as anachronistic in an era of standards, school reform, and high accountability (Frey, 2005). The concept of social promotion emerged in the early 1900s with the belief that schools were catering to students' wants in an effort to keep them entertained. During the 1920s through the 1940s there was a pendulum of negative and positive reports about social promotion and grade retention (Owings & Magilaro, 1998). Social promotion had been a popular practice through the 1970s (Kelly, 1999) and was reconstrued as a by-product of the "soft-headed, open education, child-centered curriculum" of the era (Shepard & Smith, 1989, p. 1). By the mid-1980s, public opinion polls indicated that the general public felt strongly (72%) that promotion to the next grade level should be contingent on mastery of grade-level requirements (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Similar to what is found in much of today's research, reports produced during this time highlighted grade retention as an economic drain on urban school districts and a form of humiliation for retained students. The humiliation resulted in some students dropping out of school (Rothstein, 1998).

After *A Nation at Risk* was published, states and urban districts started measuring schools based on student achievement scores (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). As a result, in the 1990s states began to develop standards and assessment policies that held students to a higher standard. Concurrently they began to implement increasingly stringent promotion policies aimed at requiring students to master content knowledge (Phillips, 2015). No other educational reform in the last decade has changed the face of education like the standards movement. Forty-nine of the nation's 50 states have adopted academic content and performance standards in an effort to articulate exactly what is expected of public-school students.[2]

Since political rhetoric and legislation focused on increased standards and accountability for ensuring students mastered content standards (Jimmerson & Kaufman, 2003) has spread, research on the effectiveness of social promotion has been thin, and the extrapolated results show limited benefits to the practice. A phase of high accountability coupled with content and performance standards has made social promotion an area of concern for many school leaders trying to increase achievement of all students. Holbein & Ladd (2015) conducted a study focused on the accountability pressures school leaders experienced and the impact on student performance. They found that accountability pressure produces mixed results for the behaviors they examined in school leaders. Therefore, the practice and policy of retaining low-performing children has been used as an alternative to promoting students who have not met competency standards (Frey, 2015).

Gaps in the Literature

There has been little research done assessing teachers, principals, counselors, and school psychologists' attitudes towards grade retention and why educators continue to ignore the

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[2] Iowa remains the only state without a standards document

research regarding the practice of grade retention. Two studies (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Tomchin & Impara, 1992) have interviewed teachers and principals about their position on grade retention (Viland, 2001). Recently, researchers have challenged the view that clear conclusions about the effect of grade retention are warranted, based on methodological limitations of extant studies (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Wu et al., 2008). For example, Lorence (2006) criticizes prior meta-analytic studies by Holmes (1989) and Jimerson (2001b) for using a "score card" approach to counting the frequency of negative, positive, and non-significant effects or calculating weighted effect sizes without regard for the methodological quality of studies included in the meta-analysis. Lorence (2006) judged that only four studies reviewed by Jimerson used both adequate comparison groups and statistical controls. The literature available presents little information about how many ELs repeat grades (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Ou & Reynolds, 2010). While dropout rates and test scores are connected to grade retention, these rates might be considered a basic indicator of children's progress through the American education system.

Leadership for Social Justice

Addressing equity differences between students in minority and majority groups has been a reform goal of the past administrations of the federal government (NCLB, 2002; ESSA, 2015). The primary way equity is assessed in schools is through the use of standardized assessments, and the measurement of the achievement gap between student's scores (ESSA, 2015). ESSA acknowledges school leadership's importance and places emphasis on the use of federal funds in order for schools to support leadership capacity (Fusarelli et al, 2018). As a result, there are opportunities for leaders to engage in training and professional learning aimed to address inequities, vulnerable populations, inclusive practices, and culturally responsive strategies. By

making this a priority, the state's accreditation system recognizes that training is needed as school leaders are being held accountable for how well teachers deliver instruction and how much students learn (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

While scholars have defined social justice leadership using various descriptions, commonalities of their definitions direct school leaders to focus on advocating for marginalized student populations (Theoharis, 2007), critically questioning current policies (Dantley & Tillman, 2006), and eliminating inequities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). According to DeMatthews (2015), "the practice of social justice leadership begins with an ability to recognize inequity amongst other issues associated with school administration" (p. 145). For principals this means being aware of grade retention policies and how they relate to ELs, as well as the impact of using the practice as a way to give students another year to acquire the language.

Social justice leadership extends beyond effective leadership and being satisfied with providing equality for all students by being concerned with achieving equity of schooling experience and opportunity throughout the lifetime of the student (DeMatthews, 2015). As school leaders boldly confront inequitable conditions and engage marginalized groups through community outreach and shared decision making (Wasonga, 2009), they promulgate social justice dispositions within all educational stakeholders. Educational leaders who are measured by student test scores will be more likely to focus on teaching students to the test. This especially happens ELs who are already struggling with the material (Shepard, 1991). Using test scores as a measure for equity may cause school leaders to focus on the end results, rather than focusing on the environment education is occurring (Shepard, 2016).

CHAPTER III

Methodology

"Whether born from experience or inherent physiological or cultural differences our gender and

national origins may and will make a difference in our judging."

Sonia Sotomayor

The purpose of this study was to identify how school leaders make sense of grade

retention policies for English Learners (ELs) in their schools. This study had two intended

outcomes. The first intended outcome was to determine school leaders' self-reported level of

knowledge around grade retention policies, ELs and their needs, and the relationship between

decisions related to EL students' academic and linguistic growth and grade retention or

promotion decisions. The second intended outcome was to examine the relationship between

school leaders' understanding and implementation of retention policies and (a) their professional

experiences and education as well as their tenure in a leadership position, (b) their background

experiences serving ELs, and (c) accountability pressures, including those that were waived by

the state due to COVID-19.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed methods sequential explanatory design, consisting of two

distinct phases: quantitative, followed by qualitative (Ivankova et al., 2006). The following

questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do school leaders' make sense of state English Learners' retention policies,

   and subsequently develop and implement English Learners' retention policy in

   their schools?

2. How do school leaders' background experience and tenure influence the decision making around retention practices for English Learners?

3. How does accountability pressures influence retention policies for English Learners? Additionally, how have changes in accountability pressures related to COVID-19 impacted how school leaders think about and implement English Learners retention policy if at all?

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design used survey results collected in Phase 1 of the research to inform the Phase 2 sampling and the development of an interview protocol that was used in Phase 2 to dive deeper into EL-specific grade retention policy implementation processes and procedures as described by a sample of school leaders. The rationale for a mixed methods study is grounded in the fact that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient, by themselves, to capture the trends and details of a situation (Ivankova & Plano, 2018). Additionally, my goal was to understand how elementary school principals' sensemaking and external factors influence their implementation of retention policies for ELs at their current schools. The qualitative phase of the study aimed to collect data that answered the main research questions, while the qualitative phase of the study provided an opportunity to further explore the results from the qualitative phase. A strength of this mixed methods approach is that it extends, sharpens, and provides rigor to the conceptual thinking, seeing how to answer new questions and even identify questions that would not have occurred otherwise (Edwards, 2008). Additionally, it is valuable to gather information from different sources, utilizing different methods, which work together as an efficient design (Creswell Clark, 2007). Finally, the mixed methods approach allowed for the use of one method of research to counter or overcome the weaknesses in another method (Ivankova, 2017). As such, it was important to use both methods, using qualitative data

to explain in more in detail quantitative data, providing two types of data validation for create a solid foundation for drawing conclusions about the intervention.

Described in greater detail below, phase 1 of the study consisted of collecting survey data. The survey focused on grade retention of ELs and school leaders' knowledge of retention policies as well as their reported values around retention of ELs. Phase 2 of the study consisted of collecting qualitative interview data, which expanded upon the quantitative survey data to understand more in-depth school leaders' beliefs and understandings around grade retention policies and practices related to ELs.

Data & Methods

Site and Sample Selection Procedures

The school division selected for this study is a large suburban K-12 school division on the east coast of the United States. According to the state's Department of Education student records collection information, the school division selected for this study has over 90,000 students. The school division is racially diverse, with no single racial group making up more than 35% of the district. In particular, the division student population is comprised of about one-third Hispanic and one-third White students, about one-fourth Black students, and just less than 10% Asian students. District-wide, just over half of all students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and one-quarter of students are identified as ELs.

Criterion sampling emerged as the most appropriate sampling procedure for this study in that the attributes of the sample will allow me to intentionally select participants from school sites from which I can potentially gather insight into issues of central importance to this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Principals from approximately 60 elementary schools were part of the sample group. All of these schools serve ELs of different English proficiency levels,

including dually identified students receiving special education and gifted services. For the purposes of this study, only elementary school principals in the school division served as the target population, supporting the literature review arguing that students tend to be retained in the primary grades (Figlio & Ozek, 2020; Goss et al., 2013; Hong & Yu, 2007). The sampling framework aimed to ensure school leaders leading schools with different demographics and enrollment of ELs were considered for the study. Additionally, data collected from the surveys informed the criterion sapling method for the interviews in that I selected school leaders with different understandings and implementation procedures around the retention of ELs. As such, I recruited a diverse sample of 10 principals within this sampling framework for the qualitative interviews

Data Collection Procedures

An online survey was utilized to collect data for phase 1 of this study and a semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to collect data for phase 2. I completed the required modules aligned to Social and Behavioral Research. A *Certificate of Completion* is included in Appendix A. Upon ODU IRB approval, I applied for IRB approval from the Office of Program Evaluation of the selected school district. After the approval, I began to execute phase 1 of the study, as described in the subsequent section. The *Cover Letter to the District Superintendent* is included in Appendix B. The *District Consent Form* sent to the division superintendent is included in Appendix C. A *Participant Recruitment Email* (see Appendix D) with the *Implied Consent Agreement* (see Appendix E) was sent electronically via email to all participants in this study explaining my interest in the topic, directions on how to complete the survey and the timeline for completion.

Phase 1: Quantitative - Survey Procedures and Sample

The electronic survey was sent to 62 principals at the school division. From those who received the survey, 20 participants fully completed the survey, and 2 declined to participate. Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of percentage of ELs at each principals' school. The majority of school principals are currently serving in schools where the EL enrollment population is less than 1/3 of their overall student population.

Table 1

Percentage of ELs in Principals' Schools

Percentage of ELs	*n*	Percent
0-10%	1	0.05%
11-21%	6	30.0%
22-32%	4	20.0%
33-43%	1	0.05%
44-54%	3	15.0%
55-65%	0	0.0%
66+ %	5	25.0%
Total:	20	100%

Figures 2 and 3 show principals' years of leadership experience in the school division the study took place, and in any school division. The majority of school participants have served in a leadership role in their current school division for more than 12 years. Additionally, half of school principals have between 6-11 years of overall leadership experience in any district, while 35% reported having between 12-17 years of experience. Moreover, 50% of principals in this

study have between 6-11 years of overall leadership experience in any district, 35% reported

having between 12-17 years of total leadership experience. Finally, 65% (n=13) of principals

reported having experience while 35.0% (n=7) reported having no previous experience working

directly with Els.

Figure 2

PRINCIPALS' YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN THE SCHOOL DIVISION

0-5 years   6-11 years   12-17 years

15%
25%
60%

Figure 3

PRINCIPALS' YEARS OF EXPERINCE IN ANY SCHOOL DIVISION

0-5 years   6-11 years   12-17 years

15%
35%
50%
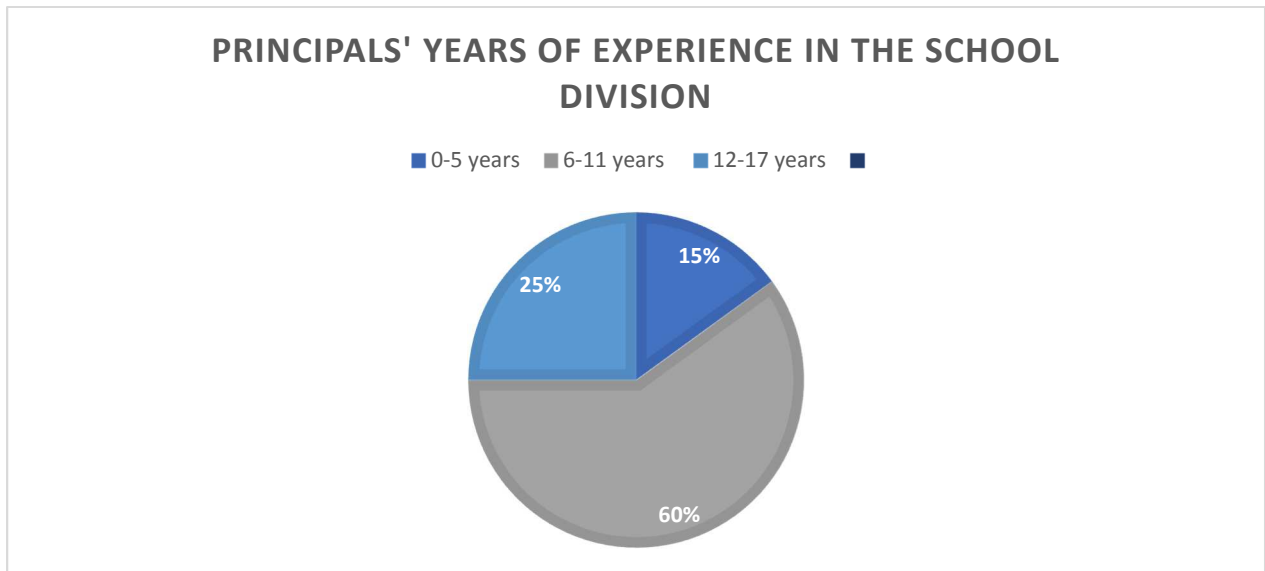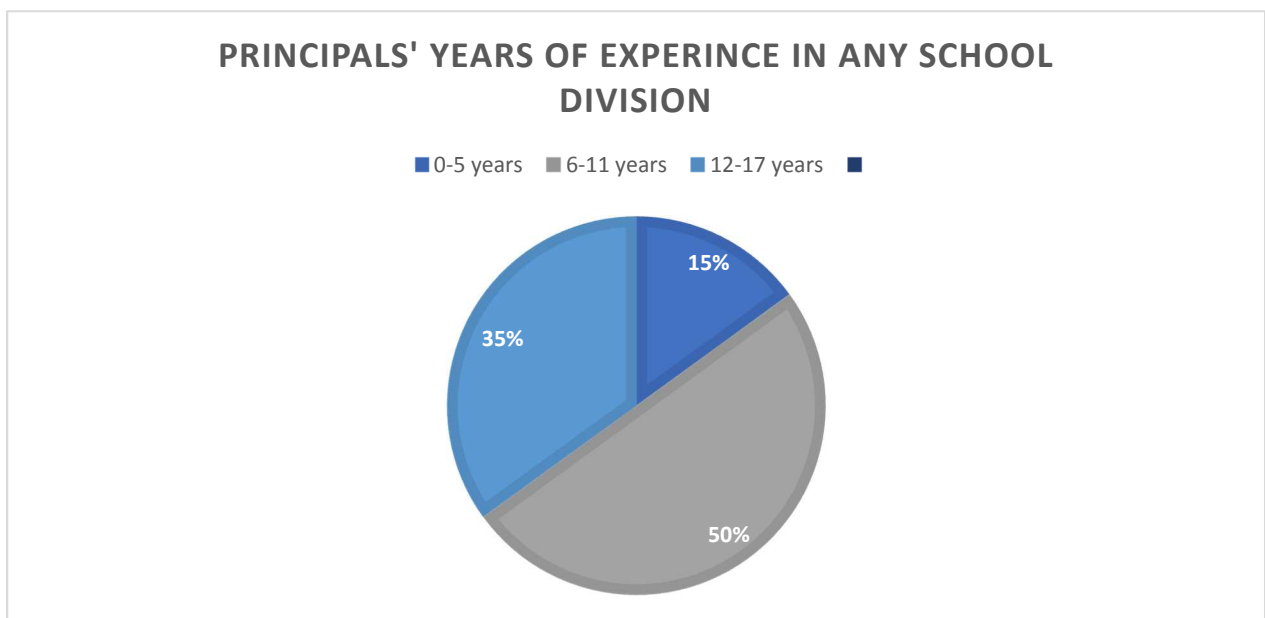
Phase 1- Quantitative: Survey

Phase 1 of this mixed-methods study included a survey divided into two parts. Part 1 collected data on participants' background information. Part 2 included a compilation of 23 Likert questions to measure school leaders self-reported sense-making of grade retention policies for ELs in their schools. The purpose of the survey was to collect data on (1) school leaders' attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning relevant to ELs, (2) school leader's perceptions about grade retention policies impacting ELs, (3) their beliefs about accountability pressures as it related to grade retention of ELs, and (4) how they understand and implement grade retention policies for ELs.

Researchers have long argued that quality teachers are key to the academic success of the student population (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2003) and efforts to provide coursework and professional learning that are designed to improve teacher quality can indirectly lead to increased student achievement (Bos et al., 2012; Hattie, 2003). As such, the instruments for this study were informed by Hiatt and Fairbairn's work around the overall importance of quality teacher and leaders' professional learning and knowledge of ELs. Together, they have identified levels of preparedness to serve ELs framed through the lens of the five domains (language, culture, instruction, assessment, and professionalism) of the *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) P-12 Professional Teaching Standards* (TESOL International Association, 2010). The survey was a compilation of 34 Likert-type questions and open-ended questions from existing surveys informed by the literature.

While some questions were binary, yes/no, questions, many questions were Likert-style questions, using a scale of 1 to 5 to capture the self-reported sense-making level and values of elementary school leaders around grade retention policies impacting ELs. The scale 1 to 5 is as

follows: *1- strongly agree 2- agree*, *3- neutral*, *4- disagree,* and *5- strongly disagree*. School leaders had the opportunity to go over each of the declarative statements and select only one answer per statement. School leaders were asked to select the response that closest aligned with their perceived level of preparedness for each of the statements.

Table 2 lists the first set of attitudinal questions, placed on a binary yes/no scale. Column 1 of Table 3 lists a second set of questions aligned to the social justice leadership framework. These questions were accompanied with Likert-style response that range from strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree or agree, agree, strongly agree. Column 2 of Table 3 explains which Likert-scale question corresponds to which research question in the study.

After completing the Likert-type section of the online survey, participants were asked to respond to 4 open-ended questions describing how they make decisions to retain ELs vs. non-ELs. These questions were:

1. Briefly describe in your own words how you go about making decisions to promote or retain non-English learners at your school.

2. Briefly describe in your own words how you go about making decisions to promote or retain English learners at your current school.

3. How if at all has COVID-19 impacted your decisions around promotion and retention of non-English learners at your current school?

4. How if at all has COVID-19 impacted your decisions around promotion and retention of English learners at your current school?

Table 2

School Leaders' Self-Reported Levels of Knowledge and Implementation of English learners

Policy

	Yes	No

Professional Learning

1. During the past 3 years I have attended at least one professional learning offering which enhanced my knowledge of English Learners.
2. During the past 3 years, I have attended at least one professional learning session which enhanced my knowledge of the different cultural groups my school serves.
3. Over the past 3 years, as part of a professional development session, I have had the opportunity to evaluate my own cultural and ethnic beliefs about English Learners.
4. In the past 3 years, I have held at least one professional development session at my school about the various social, cultural and/or ethnic issues that affect the education of the English Learner students we serve.
5. During this past 3 years, I have read at least one article that has expanded my knowledge of English Learners.
6. During the past 3 years, I have received professional development on language acquisition for students.
7. Our school has books, videos, lists of websites and other resources faculty/staff can use to enhance their knowledge on how to support English Learners.

	Yes	No

School Knowledge

8. Our school has a way to identify the country of origin of our students.

9. Our school has trained interpreters easily available for various languages when meeting with parents to communicate the progress of English Learners.

	Yes	No

Policy

10. Instructional members of our school reflect the ethnic, racial, cultural and language diversity of our student population.
11. In my opinion, our staff is knowledgeable of our students' cultural and ethnic background.

Continued
12. Our school has a written plan to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate educational services for English Learners.
13. Our school has written policies to address concerns voiced by stakeholders regarding unfair or inappropriate treatment due to their primary spoken language.
14. Our school annually assesses our progress in implementing culturally and linguistically appropriate educational services for English Learners.
15. Our school has a process for referring English Learner students for grade retention.
16. Our school has reviewed student grade retention policy in the past 2 years.

Leading and Teaching for Social Justice	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Uncertain	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
17. An important part of teaching is examining one's own attitudes and beliefs about the unique background of every student.					
18. Part of the responsibilities for a teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities.					
19. English Learners have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom.					
20. Whether English Learners succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work.					
21. Teachers at my school have the ability to recognize linguistically biased item test items and inappropriate assessments for English Learners.					
22. Teachers at my school understand systemic structures such as: segregation of English Learners in self-contained					

classes, limited access in advanced classes or special programs, and/or tracking them into remedial courses.

Table 3

Survey Questions Relevant to Research Questions

Professional Learning	Research Question
1. During the past 3 years I have attended at least one professional learning offering which enhanced my knowledge of English Learners.	1 & 2
2. During the past 3 years, I have attended at least one professional learning session which enhanced my knowledge of the different cultural groups my school serves.	1 & 2
3. Over the past 3 years, as part of a professional development session, I have had the opportunity to evaluate my own cultural and ethnic beliefs about English Learners.	1 & 2
4. In the past 3 years, I have held at least one professional development session at my school about the various social, cultural and/or ethnic issues that affect the education of the English Learner students we serve.	1 & 2
5. During this past 3 years, I have read at least one article that has expanded my knowledge of English Learners.	1 & 2
6. During the past 3 years, I have received professional development on language acquisition for students.	1 & 2
7. Our school has books, videos, lists of websites and other resources faculty/staff can use to enhance their knowledge on how to support English Learners.	1 & 2

School Knowledge	Research Question
8. Our school has a way to identify the country of origin of our students.	2
9. Our school has trained interpreters easily available for various languages when meeting with parents to communicate the progress of English Learners.	1 & 2

Continued

Leading and Teaching for Social Justice	Research Question
10. An important part of teaching is examining one's own attitudes and beliefs about the unique background of every student.	1 & 2
11. Part of the responsibilities for a teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities.	1, 2 & 3
12. English Learners have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom.	1, 2 & 3
13. Whether English Learners succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work.	1, 2 & 3
14. Teachers at my school have the ability to recognize linguistically biased item test items and inappropriate assessments for English Learners.	2 & 3
15. Teachers at my school understand systemic structures such as: segregation of English Learners in self-contained classes, limited access in advanced classes or special programs, and/or tracking them into remedial courses.	2 & 3

Phase II- Qualitative: Semi-Structure Interview Procedures and Sample

The following section details how I collected the data for phase II of the study. This section concludes by discussing the standards of qualitative research and the strategies that I used to ensure that the data collected for this study was valid, reliable, and unbiased. Additionally, this section includes a discussion of the subjectivities I bring to this work and I will close with an outline of how confidentiality was ensured during this study.

Pilot Study- Cognitive Pre-Testing

After completing the survey portion of the study, and prior to conducting the interview portion of the study, a pilot study was conducted. This allowed me to administer specific pre-testing of the interview protocol. A total of three individuals who are currently working with ELs in various leadership roles outside of the select school division were selected and interviewed

using the initial interview protocol. Interviews for the pilot study were conducted via Zoom. The pilot study allowed me to clarify the questions for the qualitative interview portion of the study, and helped me practice certain techniques and methods such as paraphrasing and listening for themes and patterns between questions. For those individuals who had more experience with ELs, I noticed that the interview took longer as they had more examples to share and knew more in-depth specific policies around grade retention. As a result, some items were removed and the order of the questions was adjusted.

Interview Sample

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), a study's population is a group of individuals who conform to a common and specific criterion, chosen from the general population for which a study's data are used to make inferences. There were 62 elementary schools at the time in the school division where the study took place. Each building site has a principal and at least one assistant principal. All schools enroll ELs with various language proficiency levels. Because this study's findings emanate from the experiential knowledge of principals as it relates to ELs and grade retention, I sought detailed support data of student enrollment and years of experience from the school division to support the sample selection for this part of the study.

In an effort to narrow the population into a sampling frame that was representative of the group, I identified a target population based on the characteristics of the total population (Creswell, 2013). Of the 62 elementary school principals in the school division, the population was narrowed to 10 elementary school. I chose a target population with common characteristics to the larger population (Creswell, 2013). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined a sample as "the group of subjects from whom data are collected, often representative of a particular population" (p. 490). As such, participants for this phase of the study were identified for serving

different demographics of ELs and the range in years of experience as school principals. In order to narrow the target population and get a sample, I secured interviews with 10 principals in the school division, of the 62 elementary schools who were selected based on their unique enrollment of ELs. As a result, principals from identified schools were considered for participation if they met four of the five following criteria:

- Serving three or more years as a school leader/administrator in the capacity of principal.

- Participation in professional development focused English Learners, Equity, Social Justice, or Culturally Responsive practices.

- Recognition by the district office or county office of education for exemplary leadership.

- Principal serving a school with an enrollment of 50% or more of Els.

- Principal leading a school with an enrollment of 10% or less of Els.

Initially, two principals with the highest retention percentages of ELs at their individual schools were invited to participate; but after three email invitation attempts to which they did not respond, two other principals meeting a similar criterion were invited as part of the study.

School leaders were provided with the option of completing the interview via Skype, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams to ensure safety as a result of the current COVID-19 health measures. While face-to-face interviews allow the interviewer to observe visual cues (Garbett & McCormack, 2001) and nonverbal data (e.g., emotion, gestures, actions) (Burnard, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 2005), a virtual meeting tool was the closest in providing a similar interview experience due to the current pandemic and mitigation requirements by the state. Each school leader was asked the same questions, and interviews lasted, on average, 40 minutes. Participation in interviews was voluntary and participants were ensured that all data will remain confidential. As an effort to establish trust, I asked school leaders for their consent to record the interview for

analysis purposes. Names were not be revealed during the analysis of the data or reporting or results and there was no cost or incentive involved for participating. All participants signed an informed consent form prior to the interview (see Appendix E).

Interview Questions

Table 4 lists interview questions and how each question supported the overarching research questions established earlier in the study. I coded interview transcripts and discerned patters in the conversation, looking for understanding of grade retention policies and values around teaching and learning for ELs.

Table 4

School Leader's Interview Protocol

Interview Questions	Research Question
1. Tell me something about your background. When and where were you educated? When and where did you begin teaching?	1
2. What do you believe is special about this school? How are you supporting this unique aspect of the school?	1 & 2
3. Is there a specific challenge that the school is facing when serving English Learners or something that you feel needs to be addressed? How are you tackling these challenges?	1, 2 & 3
4. What factors do you consider when referring a student for retention? How about English Learners?	1, 2 & 3
5. How would you describe your involvement in the instructional practices of English Learners?	1 & 2
6. How would you describe your involvement when it comes to English Learners' grade promotion and retention practices at your school?	1, 2 & 3
7. Describe to me your leadership around policy implementation related to English Learners. Can you provide a few examples that demonstrate your leadership around EL policy?	1, 2 & 3

Continued

8. Do the professional development initiatives at your school influence retention/promotion decisions? How?	1 & 2
9. How do you handle the possible mismatch between retention/promotion policies for ELs and accountability measures at your school?	1, 2 & 3
10. What role do you see yourself play when it comes to the decision of retaining students? What about ELs? In which ways do you use the current grade retention guidelines to inform your decision-making process?	1,2 & 3
11. Describe how your experience has influenced how you make sense of policies about ELs that you were not aware before. Is there any particular training that has influenced your experience?	1,2 & 3
12. How has the recent changes in accountability due to COVID-19 shifted how you evaluate ELs progress?	
13. How do you help your staff make sense around retention of English Learners policies?	1 & 2
14. How has the recent waiver in accreditation due to COVID-19 influenced retention/promotion practices at your school?	2 & 3

Analysis

Survey Data Analysis

The Likert-scale survey question data was analyzed in STATA software. Only those who completed the survey fully were included in the analysis ($n= 20$). Given the small sample size, I focused on descriptive statistical analyses to determine trends in responses.

Interview Data Analysis

The overall goal of mixed methods research, of combining qualitative and quantitative research components, is to expand and strengthen a study's conclusions and, therefore, contribute to the published literature (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). As such, mixed methods advocate the use of both inductive and deductive research logic which is a great

strength in itself. Consequently, I conducted a second round of coding in which the transcripts were coded inductively, enabling me to equally undertake theory generation and hypothesis testing in one single study without compromising one for the other (Jogulu & Pansiri, 2011). Prevalent themes derived both inductively and deductively within the interview data were highlighted on hard copies of transcribed interviews that permitted ease of visual coding and posted by themes to easily compare the significant themes.

Analysis Procedures

Data obtained from interviews conducted via a videoconferencing platform were transcribed. Transcripts from the digital platform interviews were transferred into text files. I then prepared a qualitative data matrix using columns by systematically categorizing excerpts of the interviews in order to find themes and patterns. I first analyzed the data deductively by developing a codebook with initial set of codes from the survey administered during Phase I of the study.

A thematic content approach was used to code and analyze the open ended-survey questions, informing the semi-structured interviews. Tesch's Eight Steps of Coding were considered as described by Creswell (2013). The first step was to carefully read all comments provided by each participant, followed by identifying key concepts to code. This gave me the opportunity to look at the frequency of themes within the responses. Next, I made a list of all relevant themes and clustered those similar together by topic, removing any that did not fit a specific category. A final list was made to identify major themes for grade retention decision making for ELs and non-ELs.

Verification Procedures

Verification procedures, or validity, in qualitative research ensures that the study accurately understands the knowledge and meaning of that which is being examined or explored. In other words, verification procedures provide a degree of confidence that the researcher "saw what s/he believes s/he saw" during the research. These procedures provide confirmation that the constructs, categories, explanations and interpretations of the research and of the phenomenon being studied are accurate (Creswell, 2007, pp. 207- 209).

As pointed out by Creswell, the act of combining qualitative and quantitative data raises a number of validity questions unique to the mixed methods design (Creswell, 2004). Mixed methods research validity has been identified by others as in many ways the most important aspect of the research project (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). What makes it so, seems in part to stem from the very act of mixing the data types. Even more potentially problematic in the exploratory mixed methods design is the use of data from the qualitative phase as the foundation and basis of the quantitative phase. Without some measure of validity of the qualitative data, the entire research enterprise risks being seen as a house of cards, with unreliable data derived from unreliable data.

A number of recommendations guided my approach to validity testing in this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). These included:

- report and discuss validity within the context of both quantitative and qualitative research;
- define validity, in the scope of a mixed methods study, as the ability of the researcher to draw meaningful and accurate conclusions from all of the data;

- view the triangulation of data types as a strength of the research that can lead to better than either dataset might have furnished individually (sometimes referred to as 'consequential validity' or 'triangulation validity', Creswell and Plano Clark, 2004, p. 146); and

- discuss potential threats to validity inherent to each stage of the research.

Because I validated the data on my own, this phase supports the idea that researcher bias should not be "bracketed" or ignored, but explored and made transparent (Hammersley, 2000). In this way, an oversimplified notion of bracketing one's bias risks undermining the very thing it seeks to address, that is rigor and trustworthiness.

We know from research that there are many aspects that can be interrogated about one's theoretical positions, power, privileges, life experiences, and potential biases in the research in open and reflective ways prepares the researcher to address the seen and unseen obstacles as the study unfolds (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Gregory, 2019). As such, it is important to acknowledge my own theoretical position within this study and during the validation process as my current role as the Director of the office, provides me privilege and access to information around this topic. Additionally, my life experience as an EL student referred for retention can shape the conceptual framework, its research, and how I interpret the subject (Salsberry, 1989; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

CHAPTER IV

Results

"There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve: the fear of failure" Paulo

Cohelo"

Overview

In Chapter I of this dissertation, I introduced the study and its background as it relates to English learners (ELs) as well as the history of grade retention in the United States. Chapter II's comprehensive review of the literature focused on the profile of ELs in the United States, the accountability processes that threaten them, and how the sensemaking conceptual framework relates to current policy implementation, impacting marginalized populations. In Chapter III, I described the study's methodology as a mixed methods sequential explanatory design, using elementary school principals' experiential knowledge collected through a survey, followed by semi-structured interviews of 10 school principals. Chapter IV identifies and describes the findings from this study by examining data collected from the survey, followed by analysis of semi structured interviews with 10 elementary school principals serving schools with a different range of enrollment of ELs in a large suburban K-12 school division on the east coast of the United States. A mix of the quantitative and qualitative approaches, guided by Ivankova's (2018) mixed methods approach, informed both quantitative and qualitative research questions and the ways by which the results from the quantitative and qualitative phases were integrated during the analysis and interpretation of the results of the study.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one central question, followed by 2 sub-questions designed to explore how elementary school principals make sense of grade retention policies for ELs as well

as to investigate and examine how principals' lived experiences may be related to their beliefs about and enactment of grade retention processes at their schools. The research question that guided this study was: How do school leaders' make sense of state grade retention policies for ELs, and subsequently develop and implement local retention policy for both ELs and on-ELs in their schools? Informed by theories related to sensemaking and policy implementation (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Spillane, 2008), I also asked two sub-questions:

a) How do school leaders' backgrounds experiences, tenure, and education and training experiences influence the decision making around retention practices for ELs?

b) How do accountability pressures influence retention policies for ELs? Additionally, how have changes in accountability pressures related to COVID-19 impacted how school leaders think about and implement EL retention policy if at all?

Findings

Quantitative Results

Data collected from the self-reported survey indicates that 74% of the principals who responded agree that their staff is knowledgeable about their students' cultural and ethnic background. Additionally, the same percentage of principals self-reported that their schools have a written plan to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate educational services for Els.

When it comes to assessment and reviewing grade retention policies, 85% of the principals annually assess the progress of Els students and 80% review grade retention policies annually. Finally, 85% self-reported agreeing that part of the responsibilities of a teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities.

When broken out by level of experience, I found substantial differences across the survey items. As shown in the four right-most columns of table 5, principals who have an enrollment of

11-21% of Els in their schools appeared to have higher levels of staff who are knowledgeable of their students' cultural background. When it came to the review of grade retention policies and the belief that part of a teacher's responsibility is to challenge school arrangements that maintain social inequities, the majority of principals with previous experience as well as those leading schools with 66% or more ELs strongly agree with those statements. Most principals regardless of their background working with Els and years of experience in leadership disagree that ELs success primarily depends on how hard they work in the classroom.

For schools with an EL enrollment of 21% or less, principals self-reported not having formal school written plan that supports their staff in implementing culturally and linguistically appropriate educational services for ELs. Another commonality between schools with lower enrollment of ELs were responses where principals disagree that teachers at their school have the ability to recognize linguistically biased test items and inappropriate assessments for ELs.

Table 5

Principals Self-Reported Items on Policy and Instruction

	All principals		With previous experience		Without previous experience	
N	20		13		7	
	% Strongly disagree/Disagree	% Agree/Strongly Agree	% Strongly disagree/Disagree	% Agree/Strongly Agree	% Strongly disagree/Disagree	% Agree/Strongly Agree
In my opinion my staff is knowledgeable of our students cultural and ethnic background.	75	15	15	85	14	57
Our school has written policies to address concerns voiced by stakeholders regarding unfair or inappropriate treatment due to their primary spoken language.	75	25	69	31	57	43
Our school has written plan to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate services for ELs	55	45	38	62	14	86
Our school annually assesses our progress in implementing culturally and linguistically appropriate educational services for English learners.	85	15	23	77	0	100

Our school has reviewed student grade retention policy in the past 2 years.	80	20	23	77	14	86
Part of the responsibilities of a teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities.	85	5	0	92	14	71
English learners have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom.	0	75	0	0	86	0
Whether English learners succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work.	20	65	62	23	71	14
Teachers at my school have the ability to recognize linguistically biased test items and inappropriate assessments for English learners.	40	40	0	0	43	43

At the conclusion of the survey, four open-ended questions were included to address how principals make sense of grade retention for ELs vs. non-ELs. Perceptions and values of principals in this portion of the survey principally reflected a belief that in most cases they utilize a protocol to arrive to a decision for retaining students as well as include several stakeholders to make the final determination. There were no differences found between how principals arrive to the decision based on language or background. Responses principally reflect that a common protocol and process is used for both ELs and non-EL students and that in most cases the same process used for non-Els is considered to determine grade retention of ELs.

Figure 4 illustrates themes that arose in the participants' answers to the open-ended survey questions along with some example quotes.

Figure 4

Principals' Decision Making for Grade Retention of ELs and non-ELs
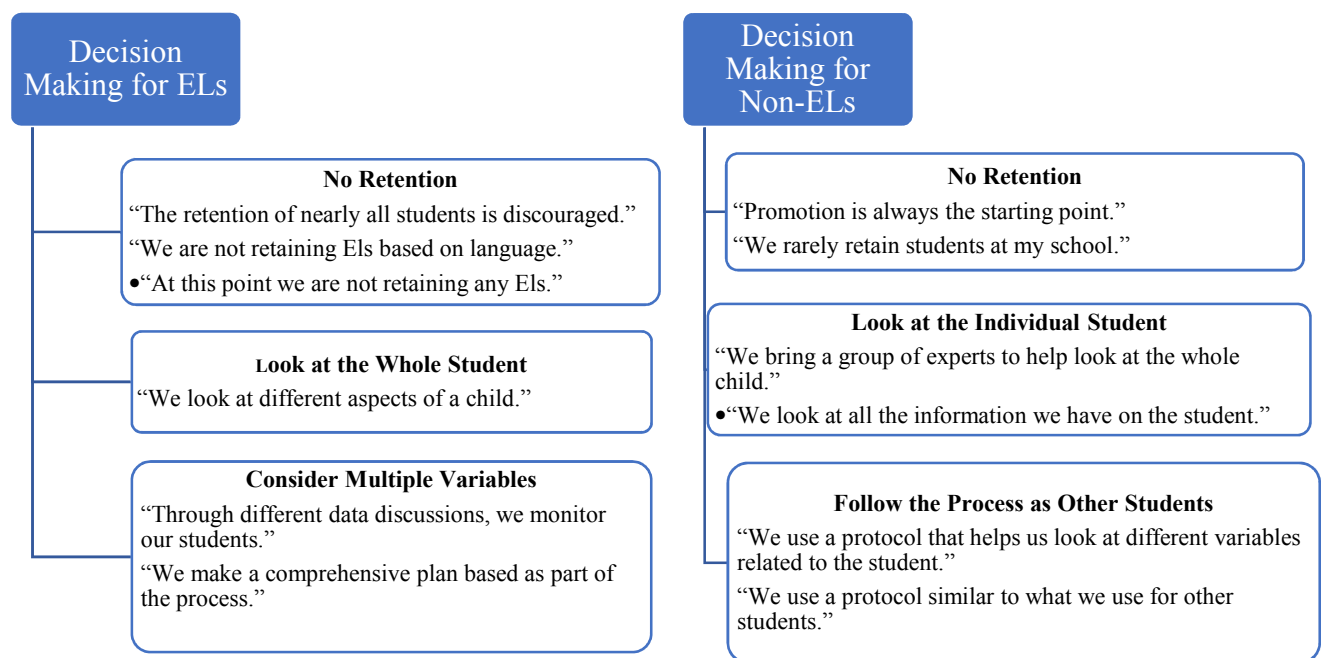
Results from Interviews

The following five emergent themes are presented in the order of highest to lowest frequency and aligned within the study's framework domains that reflect the lived experiences of the participants.

1. Factors for grade retention

2. School principals' life experiences

3. School principals' educational training

4. Vision

5. Relationships with parents

A thematic map was developed to categorize the themes identified. Figure 5 displays how the themes and theoretical framework align in response to the interview questions to which elementary school principals indicated making sense of grade retention policies, their implementation, and how COVID-19 has influenced their decision-making process.

Figure 5

*Sensemaking Framework in Alignment to Emerging Themes*
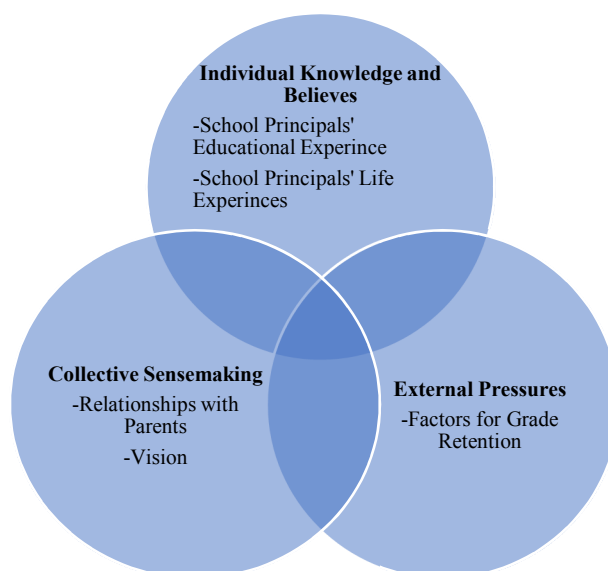
Figure 5 served as guide to inform a codebook pattern collected from semi-structured interviews. Table 6 presents some of the codes that emerged and the individual categories for analysis. These codes provided information relevant to the main research questions, supporting the theoretical sense-making framework. Codes were reviewed and defined to identify which ones aligned with the research questions, excluding any that were not relevant to the study. This process allowed the refinement and explanation of the qualitative phase of the study.

Table 6

Emerging Themes from Coding

Codes	Data Source	Coding Type	Examples
Factors for retention of students	Interview	Open coding	"We go through the (retention) process with teachers" "We meet as an intervention team" "We look at results and the consistent access to it"
Home Background	Interview	Open coding	"Growing up and living amongst other cultures, helped to shape my beliefs, over time, about how diverse students with different backgrounds have special gifts and talents" "My parents were uncomfortable seeing me graduate from a college where there was so much diversity" "I did not have any classmates from diverse background" "I am Title I all the way…born and raised in that setting"
Relationships with Parents	Interview	Open coding	"We are special because we make connections and relationships with student's parent a priority" "We take into consideration issues brought up by the parent" "I will not argue with a parent" "Our ESOL families lack resources and understand. We have to work harder to provide information they understand"

			"I feel the parents know their child best. If they ask for retention I do not fight it"
School Vision	Interview	Open coding	"The process aligns with our expectations for students" "I expect teachers to own the learning of the students" "They know I will not support retention." "My team knows I make the final decision for retention of students"
Educational Experience	Interview	Open coding	"I was not a good student growing up. I can relate to some of our ELs" "I was in culture shock when I came to VA and had ELs in my class" "I am a career switcher and learning about ELs was not the focus of my program"

Performance Data

During the 10 virtual interviews, participants were asked whether they use division-wide policies or processes at their schools as well as review them to inform the implementation and as such, develop an awareness in teacher's understanding. Although the continuum was broad, all of the elementary school principals wholeheartedly noted an essential use of school data or protocol as a leadership strategy to determine grade retention of ELs and non-ELs. The use of data to guide potentially difficult discussions was a strategy employed by several participants.

As a collective sensemaking strategy, efficient use of data can help narrate stories about the student as a unique learner and communicate insights to other stakeholders effectively. Each of the school principals identified the obligation to look at student performance data and its possible interpretations to assess where the student was academically, influencing how they went about making a final decision. When answering how they are managing grade retention decisions during COVID-19, school principals expressed to their staff that this was not an option this year

due to the lack of data and uncertainty. They expressed being focused on other things, often describing this year as one where things are changing too rapidly for them to keep up.

There were more similarities between the participants who lead Title I schools serving Els and who come from diverse backgrounds. The qualitative findings revealed that the values around grade retention are the same for ELs and non-ELs, based on their learning expectations for all. Throughout the interviews they would refer back to their teaching experiences and how they use that as a strategy to help their staff make sense of grade retention policies at the school. Most principals (6 of 10) shared that teachers no longer ask about retention because the process is part of the culture and natural processes at the school.

Several of the elementary school principals highlighted the significance of setting high expectations of all students regardless of ethnicity or class as essential to student success. When describing parent involvement and the implementation of policies, most agreed that they knew the parent had the final say when it comes to the decision making. Because parents are part of the process, they were unwilling to enter into a disagreement that could hurt the relationship.

"Parents know their student best. How can you argue with that?"

"If I do not retain them, they will call central office and I will have to do it. I rather not have that"

"If a parent asks (for grade retention), I just do it. I am not fighting it"

Principals vigorously indicated that looking at student data is essential to making the decision. While different, they all had a process at their schools where staff can bring up a student in need of intervention. For some, they shared not being the administrator leading that effort but emphasized that retention considerations must be communicated to them before a final decision is made. Using data was not only important to decide; but data were also used to

determine gaps and to drive the decision to increase supports for the student. Most of the principals (7 of 10) referred to students' reading levels being a primary factor for students being referred for grade retention. When asked about ACCESS scores 7 out of 10 principals indicated that the ESOL teacher often speaks to those, but the student's reading level seems to take the priority over language development. Even though ACCESS scores provide a composite score for reading, none of the principals referred to these domains as a factor for recommending a student for retention. Other factors such as age, maturity, and attendance emerged during two of the interviews with the school principals.

Hiring Practices

The strategic hiring practices and efforts of adding not only diverse teachers, but staff with the skills and culturally competence knowledge needed to support ELs was mentioned by 8 out of the 10 principals. These school principals described the importance of their recruitment efforts in selecting teachers who have experience supporting students in need of English language development, while building a culture where all students thrive. Three of the principals alluded to the challenges they faced when some teachers did not want to acknowledge that some ELs take longer than others to become proficient in English. The intervention process and data collection requirements allowed teachers to reflect on all the things they need to consider prior to recommending a student for grade retention. One of the principals interviewed recognized that some teachers needed coaching and other needed to transfer to other schools as they encountered challenges serving ELs, "We just can't afford not to give it our all for these kids", "This is not any school; we have to work harder here because of who we serve". On the contrary, one of the principals often hired immigrant teachers from a partner organization with the school division, sharing that they could relate to her students because of their background.

One principal was mindful that staff was not always accepting or willing to participate in training to support ELs because their enrollment was low for these students, but through questioning, I learned that the school assigns the same teachers every year to support ELs, while the rest of the staff is not required to complete training to support them. The principal described it as being easier because the teachers were the experts in the school when it came to language development. Discussions about the data, implementation of policy, and decision making due to COVID-19 allow principals to reflect on their thinking, their biases, and their actions and consequentially determine if individual and/or collective adjustments needed to be made moving forward.

Many school principals indicated that they attended various professional developments as a means to provide crucial insight and information to knowledgeably respond to the requirements of the school division as it relates to ELs. While the protocol included a question related to professional learning, the majority of principals (8 of 10) said that the professional learning they have attended has little or no impact on how they lead their schools or support ELs. They described their life and teaching experiences as the primary factor that influence how they support diverse learners in their schools.

A consistent theme throughout the interviews was the use of research to share the implementation of policy. While most of the principals expressed looking at the whole child when making grade retention decisions, they also shared that they use research from journal articles and studies to validate the message and protocols provided to teachers. None of the principals shared research specific to grade retention of ELs with staff as part of their process. Most referred to research articles and resources provided by their principal supervisor or found in magazines from professional associations they belong to. Of the 10 principals, 2 shared that their

principal supervisor annually reviews the policy during principal meetings; utilizing research to support it. They follow up with their staff using the same resources as a way to be consistent with the message.

Instructional Leadership and Supervision

A leadership strategy employed by almost all participants to support teachers of ELs at their schools, was their involvement in the supervision process. A few participants shared that due to the requirements and vulnerability of these students they oversee the EL program while the assistant principal evaluates teachers of special education students. The data collected from interviews revealed a connection between what some principals reported in the survey (school not having a written plan to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate educational services for English learners) and teachers' recommendations for grade retention. While most principals reported having teachers at their schools who care about all their students and have high expectations, the majority of school principals shared that it is mostly general education who drive the process, placing the initial recommendation. "They know they need to consult with the ESOL teacher" explained one of the principals, while another one went into detail about how the shortage of teachers makes it difficult to find ones who understand a diverse range of learners, especially ELs. As a result, I asked follow up with questions to understand what principals meant by including qualified teachers as part of grade retention discussions. One principal explained that teacher shortage makes it hard to have 100% of culturally relevant teachers who understand ELs. Additionally, the cost of providing adequate training from outside consultants can be overwhelming as well as monitoring the levels of culturally competency of their staff as a follow up to the training. One of the principals shared investing a significant amount on an outside consultant group to train her staff on Sheltered Instruction for ELs, but

regretted the expense on such consultants because most of the staff who participated moved to

another school division or transferred to other schools.

CHAPTER V

Findings and Implications

"I think it's important to move people beyond just dreaming into doing. They have to just see you

are just like them and that you made it" Sonia Sotomayor

Research shows that English Learners (ELs) are the fastest growing student population in U.S. schools (Horsford & Sampson, 2013; Krogstad & Fry, 2014). The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) data showed that 1 in 10 students in U.S. public schools is classified as an English Learner. Projections show that by 2022, one-third of the U.S. student population will be identified as English Learners (Hussar & Bailey, 2014). This growth in ELs brings challenges to the school setting as teachers (Hiatt & Fairbairn, 2018) and principals are not prepared (Baecher, Knoll, & Patti 2016) to meet the students' unique needs.

This chapter begins by summarizing the study and connecting findings to relevant literature. I will then present the implications of the findings for practitioners and researchers. Lastly, I will conclude with suggestions for future research and descriptions of the limitations of this study. It is important to note that this study looks to contribute within the field in various roles: central office administrators, teachers, school administrators, as well as policymakers based on their unique work around the development and implementation of policies that support ELs.

Background

Connection to the Research Questions

Schools can no longer ignore the increasing number of ELs in mainstream classrooms and the necessary support and leadership teachers need in order to work directly with diverse students (Suttmiller & González, 2006). In Chapter Two, I provided a comprehensive review of

the literature for research on grade retention of ELs and the impact it has on students learning a language other than English. Several studies on accountability address the inequities that exists when students with limited language proficiency are required to be assessed in English (Acosta et al., 2020; Heiling 2011). Additionally, principals are often not able to provide quality instructional supervision for EL instruction due to their lack of expertise and preparation (Baecher et al., 2016). Because previous research has neither directly explored grade retention policy implementation for ELs nor investigated how elementary school principals understand and make sense of these policies, I explored this gap in the scholarly literature. To accomplish this task, I proposed two main research questions, then using a survey, I looked to identify factors that explained how school principal implement grade retention policies and qualitatively explained their unique processes and any changes in it due to COVID-19. The following three questions guided this study and were answered based on the data collected and analyzed in this study:

1. How do school leaders' make sense of state English Learners' retention policies, and subsequently develop and implement English Learners' retention policy in their schools?

2. How do school leaders' background experience and tenure influence the decision making around retention practices for English Learners?

3. How does accountability pressures influence retention policies for English Learners? Additionally, how have changes in accountability pressures related to COVID-19 impacted how school leaders think about and implement English Learners retention policy if at all?

Summary of Findings and Implications from Surveys

The purpose of this mixed-methods sequential explanatory design study was to identify and explain how elementary school principals make sense of grade retention policies for ELs in their schools. In the first quantitative phase of the study, a survey was distributed to elementary school principals to understand how they go about making grade retention decisions for ELs in comparison to non-ELs at the schools they currently lead. Additionally, the survey examined how COVID-19, if at all, has influenced how they make such decisions. Results from the first phase showed that principals who had experience working with ELs prior to serving in a leadership role implemented systems that review grade retention policies with their staff as well as provide ongoing training at their schools with consistency. Phase I of the study revealed that: 1) The majority of principals consider parent requests when making decisions to retain ELs and non-ELs 2) school principals are the final decision makers for grade retention of all students; and 3) while principals utilize policy to inform their decisions, it is the student intervention process and members of the school (school counselor, general education teacher, ESOL teacher, and parent) who influence the school principal in making a final decision for all students.

Summary of Findings and Implications from Interviews

While most principals expressed that they were not supportive of grade retention for most students, they also expressed that if a parent requests retention they will likely grant the request as the school division's policy allows it. To guarantee that parents had access to an inclusive process, all principals reported securing an interpreter for the meeting as well as translating the meeting invitations. Despite of the language spoken at home or cultural background, all participants agreed that parents know their student best and can often have more power than the system itself when it comes to such decisions. When asked about the impact of COVID-19,

school principals felt uncomfortable deciding as a result of concurrent/simultaneous teaching. They expressed being overwhelmed with balancing safety, scheduling, and staffing assignments virtual and in-person. Most of the principals were unsure about the potential impact of COVID-19 and the social emotional state of students, speaking about this being a priority over meetings to retain students. While ELs were identified as vulnerable learners during school closures, and given priority for in person learning, 60% of ELs in the school division choose virtual instruction. Quantitative results from Phase I indicated that 19 out of 20 principals have resources available at their schools to support ELs' academic growth. In like manner all principals have attended training to support students with language development in person and in a concurrent learning environment. Despite of the resources available and the professional learning in place, principals had reported having significant concerns with identifying instructional gaps due to learning versus identifying instructional gaps due to students' lack of connectivity, health issues, or inconsistent attendance during COVID-19.

Positionality

At the beginning of the study, I addressed my positionality as a researcher who is immerse in the field of ELs. While I initially recognized that my personal experiences and current role in the division where the study took place could have an impact; throughout the study I discovered that my former role as an elementary school principal also helped me understand some of the statements that participants made during the semi-structured interviews. Using a mixed methods sequential explanatory design helped me remained focused on the research questions, by looking at responses in from multiple lens.

<div align="center">**Discussion of Findings**</div>

Finding One

Principals Value Relationships with Parents

According to the principal interviews, principals value relationships with parents and consider these relationships greatly when deciding if an EL student should be retained or not. Most principals agree that parents are the experts when it comes to their child and while they communicate grade retention policies during the meeting, they recognize the parent has the power to make the final decision. Each principal recognized the importance of gathering meaningful data to inform parents of their child's progress and validate the strengths of the student as well as the efforts made by the teachers to support the student academically. The relationship with parents was highlighted during some of the interviews as some of the school principals shared not "going against their request", because they knew parents could then request grade retention at a senior leadership level.

Simply having a voice present at the policymaking table does not ensure that it is heard when policymakers are making policy decisions (White, 2017). One observation from the semi-structured interviews were parents' requests varying based on the country of origin of the student's parent. During the interview phase, principals indicated that parents would often have someone proficient in English make the request on their behalf. Additionally, two of the principals who lead schools with 50% or more of ELs referred to Hispanic parents as placing more requests than any other subgroup represented at their schools, helping them navigate the process. For these two leaders the majority of their student population was Hispanic. The concept of social capital is a useful theoretical construct for explaining the disparities in students' educational performance among different nations and why Hispanic parents appear to request

retentions more than other student group. In the context of education, social capital in the forms of parental expectations, obligations, and social networks that exist within the family, school, and community are important for student success (Mishra, 2020). These variations in academic success can be attributed to parents' expectations and obligations for educating their children; to the network and connections between families whom the school serves; to the disciplinary and academic climate at school; and to the cultural norms and values that promote student efforts. Additionally, it is important to mention that the school division where the study took place has a large enrollment of ELs who have identified themselves are Hispanic or Latino, making them the largest minority in the school division (Darling-Hammond et. al 2019). Additionally, while schools had interpreters available at the school, principals shared that it was not uncommon for some parents to bring a sponsor or someone they trusted to assist them with requests of this nature.

Research has shown that policymakers frequently advance their own notions of what is good for the people rather than seeking and responding to the interests and demands of the general public (Hummel, 1987; Miewald, 1978; Mosher, 1982, as cited by White, 2017). Principals are language workers: supporting ELs is central to their work to support language development instruction. This becomes important as they implement policies and help their staff with the instructional support for a group of students that historically have been categorized as needing support services. These labels can be endorsed, redefined, or expanded by others; they can also be rejected, criticized, and contested (Thurlow, 2019). This can be seen when parents challenge or contest grade retention decisions, or when they help inform decisions, about the division's policy and retention decisions.

Finding Two

Principals Purposefully Involve Parents in Grade Retention Decisions

While schools often say parental involvement is desired, the school system is not always welcoming of parents, particularly if parents do not speak the same language as classified and certificated staff or if their cultures do not align (Hollowell, 2019). This study found that elementary school principals acknowledged that without parental involvement and support grade retention for the student would not be possible. Most principals described the importance of making sure parents were in attendance to a meeting with the team making the retention recommendation. Without parent consent, principals recognized that they would not be able to move forward with the decision as the school division requires parent consent and a meeting to take place.

Finding Three

Principals Look at the Whole Child Prior to Making a Final Determination

One third of the elementary principals that participated in the study shared having a schoolwide intervention process where a team of educators, counselors, and/or attendance officers provided expertise and discussed supports in place for the student prior to making a final grade retention determination. During these meetings the school team looked at attendance, grades, language proficiency, and prior retentions. Every school used a different protocol and followed a different timeline when holding these meetings.

While the school principals were not the primary instructors for the student, they explained wanting to make sure they considered and consulted different experts. Table 7 provides a sub-sample of the staff involved in the process; such as the ESOL teacher, reading

specialist, and counseling staff prior to making a final retention decision. Several principals

spoke about how this process helps them see if their staff agrees with the recommendation or if

the classroom teacher is the only one supporting the grade retention request. In one case, two of

the principals acknowledged having a pre-intervention meeting where teachers had to "prove

their case" before they submitted a recommendation for grade retention. This process is in place

for any student, including ELs. Most of them describe this decision as one they needed to be

confident about, exploring several options and looking from different lens before signing on it.

Table 7

Factors and Timeline Considered in Grade Retention Determinations by a Sub-Sample of

Principals

	Factors Considered	Timeline	Experts Involved
Principal 1	Age, Absences, Grades, Reading level	January-April	General teacher, ESOL teacher, Principal, Counselor, Parent
Principal 2	Absences, Grades, Birthday	February-June	General teacher, ESOL teacher, Principal, Counselor, Parent, Reading Teacher, SPED teacher
Principal 3	Absences, Reading level, Reading level, Interventions, ACCESS level	November-May	General teacher, ESOL teacher, Principal, Counselor, Parent, Reading Teacher, Special Education teacher, Tutor

Finding Four

Principals with Previous Instructional Experience Supporting ELs are Less Supportive of

Grade Retention of ELs

Table 5 shows that elementary school principals with previous experience supporting ELs

review grade retention policies and growth for ELs with more frequency than those without

previous experience. This study found that several principals who previously taught ELs did not

support retention overall for Els and non-ELs. While some had experience retaining students

earlier in their careers, these school principals often referred to the importance and lessons of the role of language and their experiences seeing their students' growth overtime. During the semi-structured interviews, several of the school principals seemed confident and comfortable discussing best practices for ELs and referred to a variety of strategies such as "differentiation", "scaffolds", and the need to give ELs "time to learn the language". These principals emphasized making sure their teachers understood the importance of being culturally responsive and delivering differentiated instruction to support language acquisition. They shared their involvement in supervising the EL program at their schools as well as being highly involved in the team's planning and collaboration process where ELs are being part of the conversation. For 6 of the principals, they referred to being the "expert" in this area as they knew the expectations from the school division. When it came to monitoring the implementation of English language development (ELD) and Sheltered content instruction minutes, 12 out of 20 principals spoke to including this as part of their mid- and end-year reflective conferences with their staff. Finally, they discussed leading cultures where training on best practices for ELs is a priority and is an expectation for their staff, aside from the 45-hour requirement for ELs best practices offerings established by the school division.

Finding Five

Principals with High Enrollment of ELs Focus on Instructional Leadership that Supports ELs

Table 5 shows that elementary school principals with previous experience supporting ELs lead school cultures where ongoing policy review and clear expectations around grade retention are part of the yearly procedures. While being a content expert does not matter as much as asking teachers important questions about what their students are learning in order for ELs to succeed

academically (Baecher et al., 2013; Becerra, 2012; Goldenberg, 2003; Slavin & Calderón, 2000; Theotaris & O'Toole, 2011), school principals must be able to make connections between their leadership practices and student achievement. Evidence from this study supports the idea of school leaders being part of the process when it comes to policy implementation. The principals leading the schools with the largest enrollment of ELs who were part of this study, shared seeking opportunities when decisions were being made at the division's level. They understood that their schools presented unique challenges when it came for issues such as grading, retention, discipline, and attendance. Principals with large enrollment of ELs must move from surface level about what their students are able to do, to understanding how language acquisition supports overall student achievement. They benefit from having ongoing communication and healthy relationships with their teachers, supporting the instructional programs versus simply evaluating it.

Discussion and Implications for Policy Makers and Practitioners and Future Research

In light of the findings from this study and the critical need for school principals who will lead the charge and operate as agents of change in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society, I recommend several strategies for action. These recommendations are directed toward district office leaders, district superintendents, school principals, counselors, teachers, policymakers, and parents. If district superintendents and principals desire to see and develop school systems that embrace and support innovative and rigorous environments for all students, intentionality is key. This requires creating conditions in schools where everyone understands policies, the process for their implementation, and how they support the overall mission and vision of the division. A system based in collaboration, coherence, and process invites all stakeholders to the development and implementation process. The implications for action listed and other recommendations

should be considered as school divisions seek to create policies and processes grounded in equity and social justice, supporting and developing leaders who are equipped to address the needs of ELs.

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Implications

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Implication One: Principals ought to continue to focus on relationship building, providing a safe environment for ELs and their families

Principals ought to continue to create spaces where ELs and their families are invited to spaces as part of the decision-making process. This includes providing translation and interpretation services during meetings as well as ongoing communication that are inclusive of EL families. My research indicates that principals are doing this by providing parents access to interpretations and translations as well as inviting them to be active participants in the intervention and grade retention process for their student. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted and changed the way in which school-family relations are formed. Building on parent and family engagement is not a new initiative. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) outlines the expectations to schools when it comes to this topic. Equally important are the mandates of fund expenditures that are designed to provide immigrant families with the necessary literacy and access to understand the services and supports available for their student. Effective leaders understand that these parent/school relationships are directly tied to academics. Thus, it is important to think critically about how school leaders build relationship with families, and how these could potentially redesign the structures that were in place prior to COVID-19 pandemic and improve these relationships with EL families. This implication challenges the consideration on how schools not only build relations in a hybrid environment but also resolve conflict, continuing to communicate and support families of ELs effectively despite the global pandemic.

This implication challenges schools to evaluate their processes for communication and how inclusive these are in meeting the current needs for families.

Implication Two: School districts should strongly consider recruitment and retention of qualified school principals who have previous experience working with ELs

School divisions that desire to genuinely engage in equitable actions that do not merely provide a check for a box. Whoever is at helm, should be intentional about the recruitment and retention of leaders that reflects the student population they lead and has instructional experience supporting ELs. Despite persistent discussion about the lack of minority leaders occupying leadership roles in schools, principals who understand the needs and supports needed for ELs can create inclusive cultures and spaces where ELs thrive. Principals in my study who understood ELs' needs place a focus on the development of their staff, providing opportunities for them to participate in ongoing cultural competence, equity, and cultural responsiveness training. School divisions should consider and revise recruitment and interview protocols, looking at ways that position school leaders in school buildings where they can use their experience working with ELs to support students, their families, and policy implementation. Additionally, school divisions can benefit from succession planning when leaders with experience with ELs retire or move to other positions. A focus on the principal pipeline will ensure strong leadership of ELs in schools, ultimately strengthening their unique EL programs. Instead of identifying a pool of leaders who have the credentials and experience in the state as part of the hiring process, school divisions can benefit from a pre-service preparation program that build the capacity of emerging school leaders that support ELs and their families. Central office leaders as well as current principals with large enrollment of ELs can ensure that aspiring leaders engage in the right professional learning,

becoming familiar with best practices to support students' language development and addressing any misconceptions in using those to refer them for grade retention.

Implication Three: School divisions should involve and consider parents in the policy making process

While schools have opportunities to involve parents in the decision-making process of school systems, school divisions ought to be intentional about efforts to increase the participation of EL families in decisions for their children. For this to occur, school divisions must continue providing translations and interpretations of events, monitoring with fidelity the required minimum instruction minutes for English development and sheltered instruction, and providing opportunities for families of ELs to have access and be involved in decision making processes. Not only is this an Office of Civil Rights requirement, but it also allows families to be fully informed of grade retention policies. This becomes even a greater priority due to COVID-19, as we some parents have access to this information as school divisions rely on their previous methods of communicating with parents. The use of virtual platforms to engage families and allow them to request translations and interpretations to actively participate and voice concerns proved to support two of the principals leading schools in this study with enrollment of over 60% of ELs with their efforts to communicate student progress and community events. School principals ought to reach out multiple times and seek participation of diverse families of ELs, ensuring their representation in groups where policy is being developed. Just as grade retention policies are reviewed every year at some of the schools, policies should be reviewed regularly with families of ELs, seeking for feedback and understanding.

Implication Four: School divisions should seek ways to support and develop instructional leaders of ELs

Students learn as much from a teacher as a teacher learns from a student. Equally, principals can learn just as much about ELs from teachers as teachers can learn about ELs from principals. As such, principals need to create structures where teachers can support ELs. This means allocating time and resources for planning, authentic learning, allowing teachers with experience serving ELs to co-teach and support students (resulting in coaching and collaboration), and moving staff from taking a deficit mindset towards ELs to seeing ELs as an asset. School divisions can achieve this by creating a balance between external consultants and utilizing voices from the field already practicing in their school division; building capacity amongst school principals and their teachers. This was identified during semi-structured interviews where three of the principals shared the involvement of their ESOL teacher leader in guided professional learning for the rest of the staff. In contrast, two of the schools with an enrollment of ELs of 21% or less, principals relied of professional learning provided by the school division or outside consultants during designated professional learning days. Instructional leaders of ELs have a laser focus on learning that supports language development, a skill that shows in the way they look at data, evaluate teachers, and student growth. Central office leaders can be strategic in their development of instructional leaders by mobilizing their professional learning efforts along multiple pathways that lead to EL performance, equity, and ways to distribute leadership throughout their schools. Effectively supporting ELs and closing achievement gaps that often lead to recommendations of grade retention requires leaders to position their efforts on the implementation of equitable practices and understand how current policy and practice is or is not impacting language acquisition.

As one of the principals reflected on the differences of the EL demographics of the schools he has served as leader; he shared some of the key training that helped him connect with families from the Middle East. He explained that they were different from the ones that proved effective with families from Central America, making this training valuable as he worked with a new group of EL families. Learning that supports school principals with challenges unique to their students, can increase empathy, because one size does not fit all when it comes to differentiating for ELs and their families. Taking this into consideration central office leadership teams can support school principals by focusing on professional learning that takes place on-site, connecting it to the school's most pressing needs with ELs as 4 of the principals with leadership experience in 2 or more schools referred to the difference in ELs needs, language development, and cultural background. As such, it is key for school leaders to transition from engaging in professional learning that only focuses on getting students to earn a passing score on a state test to professional learning centered around supporting teacher collective efficacy, the implementation of best practices, and evaluating the impact of such.

Implication Five: School divisions ought to anticipate continued EL enrollment growth and prepare school leaders to meet their needs.

ELs continue to be one of the fastest growing population in the U.S. As such, school divisions must adapt and consider how they support staff in understanding and addressing the needs of these students. These students come to our schools with a wide spectrum of needs and challenges. As part of their support to ELs, school divisions ought to continue their work in monitoring student projections and the incoming enrollment of ELs, forecasting the future enrollment of ELs and needs. This will support principals in making the necessary shifts, and developing a strategic plan that will engage teachers and other stakeholders in learning as well as

revisiting current policies. Additionally, school divisions should continue involving central office staff in this process, supporting school principals and teachers while providing professional learning opportunities for any EL populations the school division is expected to receive. To move forward, school divisions must be intentional about addressing some of the implicit bias that school principals might have and how these can show in the implementation of policy when new populations come and how it can impact their grade retention decision making.

While one of the principals believed that "good instruction is good instruction" another argued that the accountability system does not take into consideration the gaps of ELs. Another key point from three of the principals was the challenges they experienced in finding ways to mirror the traditional parent teacher conferences and shifting them to a virtual environment. They found it challenging to communicate with EL families accessing online platforms from their cell phones. Some describe it as a "struggle" to teach those with limited digital literacy the growth of their students on a small screen. Additionally, when asked about the challenges with ELs at their schools 3 of the school principals generalized that their EL families were not responding to calls, but when asked the amount of families fitting this description, they did not have quantitative or qualitative data as to why this might be the case.

When it came to COVID-19, one of the principals described the ESOL teachers at her school not having the capacity needed to provide services virtually. She was concerned about the recent enrollment of students with interrupted formal education and the level of support they need. This was consistent with three other principals who described concerns about Els growth at their school this year. The intervention process can support principals and their staff in their attempt to decrease bias against ELs around the strengths and weaknesses. This can be achieved by engaging in professional dialogue with school principals about their biases, allowing them to

deeply reflect on the diversity of the changes in their student population; and ways they can create a positive and safe experiences for all leaders and their staff.

Implication Six: Principals ought to continue involving experts in the field who understand language acquisition when considering grade retention for ELs

Without an appreciation and knowledge of the domains of language acquisition and the multiple facets of language, discussion grade retention of EL students can be extremely difficult. In order to make a responsible decision, principals ought to bring a team of educators with diverse areas of expertise as well as experience teaching the child to discuss the student's progress and provide the school team and parents with valuable information that is specific to the English language and how it plays a role in the academic progress of the student. Most of the referrals for grade retention come from the general education teacher, and while they spend most of the time with students, principals cannot overestimate the value that having a team of professionals can have in helping everyone understand the student's background, language development, and content learning progress. This became more important as principals referred to challenges COVID-19 brought to this process. One of the principals expressed lack of confidence with making decisions about grade retention due to her unfamiliarity with concurrent instruction. Having a large number of students in a virtual setting, challenged her process as the team could not effectively measure the integrity of ELs learning interactions when their computer cameras were off. As schools look at increasing their virtual offerings it would be beneficial to include a staff member with virtual learning expertise as part of the team; providing insight and information about barriers ELs experience in a virtual environment that could lead to grade retention.

Seven of the school principals who included other professionals as part of the grade retention process reported feeling more confident in supporting the decision once they had access to student data while completing the grade retention protocol in Appendix G. They described their role as one that asked questions and guided the process as outlined by the policy for the division, while ensuring each item of the grade retention protocol for Els was the main driver for the discussion. Teachers at their schools knew that they depended on them for support and the principals acknowledged the importance of using the process as another vehicle to build trust and communicate their expectations around student academic achievement. By doing this, school principals can create cultures where there are clear expectations about the grade retention process; providing stability, consistency and modeling to their staff how the policy is implemented, and modeling.

Implication Seven: Career switcher preparation programs ought to include best practices for ELs in their course of study

Evaluation and alignment are key as we work to build educators who are prepare to work with diverse populations. As such, alignment and coherence between teacher preparation programs and student enrollment is important. One of the principals who participated in the study referred to not having received adequate training through his "career switcher" program. As a result, he never felt he had has learned enough strategies on how to support ELs early in his career. Evaluation of the alignment of such programs and how they support policies impacting vulnerable students can be challenging and politically difficult. However, if partnerships are formed and clear expectations are defined, colleagues in higher education can increase the efficacy of future graduates that will be supporting ELs. By engaging in such partnerships,

students will benefit from a collaborate process that is grounded in assessing our current student demographics and how prepared are the educators that serve them.

Effects of COVID-19

In the spring of 2020, as schools shut down due to the pandemic, under the U.S. Department of Education's waivers annual English language proficiency were not required. This describes the impact remote learning on EL students during the COVID-19 pandemic. School principals have experienced challenges navigating some of the needs and limitations that come with digital literacy and how they can effectively support ELs and their families remotely. As school buildings reopened, several policies and regulations were paused to support a variety of learning models, focusing on the safety and mental health of ELs.

As leaders prioritized the safety and social emotional needs of students they were also tasked to work on reopening school plans to bring the most vulnerable learners to receive in-person instruction. For many school districts, this meant has placing ELs' learning as a top priority. Building capacity while remaining true to continuous improvement has proven to be a challenge as educators attempt to deliver instruction in person, hybrid, and concurrent teaching models. While many teachers have worked tirelessly to provide quality remote and concurrent learning experiences, data from the *New York Times* (Taylor, 2021) shows that ELs' grades have declined significantly from the previous fall. As such, many school principals debated whether or not grade retention was appropriate as the collection of data and the integrity of supports in place might have been impacted by connectivity, access, attendance, and COVID-19 illnesses at home. The majority of principals were uncertain about their stand on grade retention for any student at this point.

Family engagement is central to the success of students. While many school districts made efforts to provide families with internet and device access, the lack of digital literacy presented some challenges according to some of the principals interviewed. Schools had to quickly pivot, hosting sessions on online platforms and various learning management systems. Unfortunately, many families of ELs lacked the basic skills to successfully access these tools due to their limited digital literacy competence. In addition to that, some of the software companies the schools partnered with did not provide translations or interpretation of instructions or webinars that would support multilingual families.

The lack of diverse resources and multilingual support from external providers challenges the current practices about the effort schools make to communicate and engage parents. Distribution of resources and expectations for virtual learning should be accompanied by a communication plan as well as targeted support for families who lack the digital literacy skills and do not speak English. Connections with parents must be ongoing and accompanied by their feedback. Schools should not rely on the assumption that families of ELs understand the expectations for learning of virtual and hybrid models and how these can be different from the traditional model they are familiar with. Finally, paying attention to the new educational language that has emerged due to COVID-19 can support schools in their efforts of building effective communication with the families that need it most.

As school divisions engage in plans to address unfinished learning due to COVID-19, research should address the impact of external and internal factors of the pandemic and if principals were more likely to report increases in grade retention of ELs. Additionally, it will be important to measure if language proficiency increased or decreased as a result of students repeating the grade. Lastly, it will be important to investigate if policies were suspended or

amended for grade retention to take place during the pandemic. District leaders should engage stakeholders in building division-wide plans that monitor the oversight and policies that address EL student growth and grade retention policies. By doing so they will ensure access and equity for this vulnerable group for students. As schools prepare to receive students in the Fall of 2021, the expectations should be higher and grade retention should not be used as a strategy to close the potential gap students have experienced. This can be accomplished by a collaboration where school principals and their staff become intentional and committed to monitor ELs progress and the integrity of the instruction they are receiving. Policymakers do well in having clear expectations as well for school divisions as part of their focus on equity and evaluation of the impact of policy in schools.

Conclusion

Research shows that principals who focus on instruction, foster community and trust, and clearly communicate their school mission and goals can change instructional practice (Boston et al., 2017). However, little research has examined principals' instructional leadership as it relates to EL students and their grade promotion or retention. Thus, leadership focused on learning and closing gaps is important as academic work proved to the be the primary reason for recommending grade retention when 5 out of the 20 principals shared the reason for the initial teacher or parent referral for retaining a student identified as an EL. The ultimate concern is to delineate how leaders and leadership teams at all levels of the system participate in the work of supporting classroom teachers, and how their participation can be focused and enhanced to better support improved learning outcomes (Plecki et al., 2009).

Looking at how elementary school principals make sense of grade retention policies for ELs, I found that school leaders articulate their own understanding of what it meant to be an EL,

by relying on their experiences with this group of students as teachers. This connects to sensemaking theory in that I find that the reality and meanings of EL grade retention are socially constructed, while at the same time principals were often trying to disengage from that experience and objectify it (Schwandt, 1994). This study provides evidence on how sensemaking of EL retention is indeed a social process.

Many policy scholars have offered several strategies for examining how school leaders implement educational policies and makes sense of such. While the primary framework for this study was grounded in collective sensemaking theory, my reflection offers a new perspective that can inform how school principals can look at grade retention policy issues. As a result, I propose considering a framework that combines sense-making with a critical policy framework; challenging how the "research frame one uses dictates, to a large extent, the way one identifies and describes policy problems, the way one researches these problems" (Young, 1999, p. 681). Additionally, I challenge school districts to specify and outline a clear criterion for schools to use when making grade retention decisions for EL students.

While COVID-19 has paused many events related to testing, accountability for learning and expectations about growth are still present in our schools. ELs have been labeled as "vulnerable" learners and significant funding has been allocated to ensure schools address "unfinished learning" and "learning loss." Many districts are now having conversations around such topics and arguing if grade retention should be used as a strategy that will support students across the country in catching up. These discussions become essential as we rethink best practices and how we can best support students in the event of another pandemic or natural disaster event. How we plan for funding, acceleration, remediation, and the social emotional support that is attached to grade retention are all part of creating policies that are grounded in

equity and what is best for students with diverse language needs. As leaders look at data from the previous year while trying to establish priorities for students and their learning, they need to consider the impact grade retention can have on funding and if federal dollars should be used for that. Knowing the impact grade retention can have on students' social emotional learning and the required additional support they will need; school principals need to create budgets that consider this group of vulnerable students. For that to occur, we must revisit the accountability system and challenge if state tests are the best tool to measure the growth and needs of ELs, and if retention decisions should be based on these tools. Educational leaders must continue to look at policies and debate whether or not they continue to support and are relevant the evolving needs of the students their schools serve.

As schools reflect at the end of every school year on who they are, why they exist, and what they set out to accomplish; reflecting on grade retention of ELs can provide clarity on whether or not they achieved their goals. Every student deserves a rigorous and rewarding education no matter where they come from or what language they speak. Opportunity and achievement gaps must be closed, but not at the expense of making decisions where key actors are not at the decision-making table. Seeking to understand how retained ELs are doing years after the decision has been made can help school principals and teachers understand the true impact of grade retention in a student life; it can also inform if and how resources provided to education leaders around EL retention and established procedures for making EL retention decisions should be modified to best serve ELs.

Change is a natural outcome of reciprocal human exchanges. Sustainability can only occur when those in critical roles played by school leaders, central office leadership, teachers, and parents commit to create environments where students are lifelong learners. If educators and

school leaders want to grow individuals who are equipped to be productive members of society, they must challenge the system when some decisions betray the spirit of policy, calling out the need for improvement and true commitment to equity for ELs. Although many educators may call attention to the fact that schools are becoming more welcoming to students and that teachers are becoming culturally responsive, they may neglect to note that policy implementation is key to closing the achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs. One of the most significant roles school principals can have is connecting teachers and families in meaningful ways. When school principals act as bridges they send a message to students that their identities and progress is worthwhile. As such, this is a valuable disposition for school principals to have and can be assessed on how they implement grade retention policies and involve other stakeholders in the process.

COVID-19 has provided significant funding to support ELs during the school closures. School principals do well by dedicating some of these funds to assist their staff in communicating with their families and providing opportunities for ELs and their families to share feedback on some of the new procedures due to pandemic. Principals play an important role in developing and implementing strong instructional programs that support our most vulnerable students. As a result, they become architects that will design the blueprint of an environment where students can thrive no matter what language they speak and the development of it. As we welcome more ELs into districts around the country, school principals must lead schools that have clear values that support a vision where families of ELs are informed, have a seat at policy-making table and are empowered to be part of the development of the learning structures that supports their students.

This study challenges the idea that an additional year to learn academic vocabulary is not always best if the goal is to increase language acquisition. Information gathered from the interviews and accompanied data present the importance of establishing a clear vision and support for teachers; ensuring there is collaboration when making a final grade retention recommendation for ELs. This means that every member influencing the principal's final decision owns the process, providing a unique perspective of the student. School divisions do well by looking at data trends that look at how students being retained performed after their retained year; looking not only at their academic performance but also their social emotional conditions short and long term. Looking at standardized tests is not enough. School leadership extends beyond the internal operations of the school. The results of this study will support school divisions by ensuring ELs have equitable experiences in schools led by school principals who understand the necessary conditions that must be in pace for ELs to achieve at higher levels. While I recognize this is not an easy task, the data and implications for future practice will provide steps that can facilitate this process.

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APPENDIX A

CITI Program Course Certificate of Completion

Completion Date 17-Sep-2020
Expiration Date 17-Sep-2022
Record ID 35891808

This is to certify that:

Lynmara Colon

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Old Dominion University

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w6b8efee2-51ac-4ae7-af33-81103648502e-35891808

APPENDIX B

Cover Letter to Division Superintendent

Dear Superintendent of Schools:

English Learners (ELs) are the fastest growing student population in U.S. schools today. According to research, ELs face many inequities when they arrive to school. Some of the inequities include lack of qualified and trained teachers and administrators, ineffective language support programs, persistent achievement gaps compared to their non-EL peers, lack of access to advanced courses, as well as institutional marginalization.

School administrators are key in ensuring success for all students, particularly for ELs. The final decision to promote or retain a student is typically made by the school leader. Administrators who are knowledgeable about issues of equity and marginalization promote social justice in their schools and increase student achievement for marginalized student populations including ELs. The purpose of this mixed methods research study is to look at how school leaders' make sense of state retention policies for ELs, and subsequently develop and implement local retention policy for both ELs and non-ELs in their schools (IRB #).

We are asking for your support to conduct this study within your school division. The researcher will use a survey with 5 demographic questions and 23 Likert-scale questions. The survey will be distributed and returned electronically to all of your elementary school principals. This will be followed by interviews with a sample of 8 elementary school principals who participated in the survey. A questionnaire with 16 questions will be used to gather data for the second part of the study. The data collected from this study might be helpful to determine principals needs in understanding retention policy implementation and guidance for ELs.

All information will be anonymous and confidential. We will be willing and available to answer any questions that you may have about this study. We can be contacted by email lcolon@odu.edu or by phone at (571) 376-3742.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Respectfully,

Lynmara Colón
Doctoral Student
Old Dominion University

Dr. Rachel S. White
Assistant Professor
Old Dominion Universit

APPENDIX C

School Division Consent Form

Dear Superintendent of Schools:

Thank you for your support of Lynmara Colón in efforts to obtain the doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from Old Dominion University. Your signature below serves as official approval for Ms. Colón to collect and analyze all data collected in the study titled "How School Leaders Make Sense of Grade Retention Policies of English Learner" (IRB #). The purpose of this study is to examine how school leaders develop and implement retention policy for the fastest growing student populations in the United States.
Thank you for your approval and support in this endeavor. It is greatly appreciated.

Respectfully,

Lynmara Colón
Doctoral Student
Old Dominion University

Dr. Rachel S. White
Assistant Professor
Old Dominion University

_____
[Name redacted]
Division Superintendent

Participant Recruitment Email

[Emailed to each participant]

Greetings,

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at Old Dominion University. I am writing a dissertation titled "How School Leaders Make Sense of Grade Retention Policies of English Learners".

The purpose of this study is to identify how school leaders develop and implement retention policy for the fastest growing student populations in the United States. The results from this study will be used in the researcher's dissertation. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choosing not to participate in this study will not have an adverse effect on your current status with your current school division. Conclusion and recommendations from this study may be beneficial to your school division, school divisions across the State, and perhaps, the nation.

I write to you today in hopes that you will agree to participate in this study in which you will complete and submit a survey. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes of your time. The link to the electronic survey is below.
[include survey link here]

All participation is anonymous and confidential. Names and other identifying information will not be collected or used in this dissertation. Please note that by completing and submitting the survey you are consenting to participate in this study. You will find the *Implied Consent Form* attached to this email. If you do not wish to participate in this study, simply do not complete the survey.

As an administrator myself, I understand your time is valuable. I greatly appreciate your consideration for participating in this study.

Respectfully,

Lynmara Colón
Doctoral Student
Old Dominion University

Implied Consent Agreement

Research Title: "How School Leaders Make Sense of Grade Retention Policies of English Learners". (IRB #).

Researcher: Lynmara Colón   **Contact Email:** lcolo009@odu.edu

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this mixed methods study is to examine how school leaders develop and implement retention policy for the fastest growing student populations in the United States: English Learners.

Participation in the study: The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All survey responses will be collected electronically using the Old Dominion Qualtrics platform.

Anticipated Risks: There are no anticipated risks to persons who participate in the study.

Time Period: The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Confidentiality: All information collected in this survey will be handled with strict confidentiality. The data generated from the survey and that will be included in the dissertation will contain no identifying information regarding the participants, the participants' school or school division. The survey results will only be available to the researcher and dissertation committee chair. The data collected in survey will be held for approximately one year following the defense of this dissertation. During this year, the results will only be accessible to the researcher.

Participation: Your participation in this study is anonymous and voluntary.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for their participation in this study.

Right to withdrawal from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Your survey responses will be deleted and destroyed at the time of withdrawal. The data will not be included in the final dissertation.

Process for withdrawal from the study: If you wish to withdraw from this study, please notify the researcher either by phone or via email using the contact information provided in this Implied Consent Agreement.

Questions or Concerns: At any point, if you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the researcher or dissertation committee chair at the contact information listed below.

Researcher Contact Information:
Lynmara Colón
16490 Stedham Circle # 302
Dumfries, VA 22025
Telephone: (571) 376-3742
Email: lcolo009@odu.edu

Dissertation Committee Chair:
Dr. Rachel S. White
Old Dominion University
2306 Education Building
Norkfolk, VA 23529
Telephone: (757) 683-6694
Email: rswhite@odu.edu

Survey: How School Leaders Make Sense of Grade Retention Policies of English Learners

Instructions:
The following survey questions have been developed to examine how school leaders develop and implement retention policy for the fastest growing student populations in the United States: English learners.

Participation in this survey is voluntary and by starting this survey, you are providing consent. There is minimum risk involved in participating in this survey. It will not be possible to identify you as the person who provided any specific information for this study. Your responses are anonymous. There are two demographic questions and 23 Likert-scale questions. This survey should take about 15 minutes to complete.

By continuing, you are providing consent and certifying that you are at least 18 years or older. If you do not wish to give consent, please do not complete the survey and close your browser window.

If you have any questions or concerns about the survey, you can contact me at (571) 376-3742 or via email at lcolo009@odu.edu

Please complete all of the questions based on your current role and experience. For the Likert-scale questions, please read each of the statements and rate your level of preparedness using a scale from 1 to 5.

K-12 English Learner Grade Retention Form

Student Name: _____ Student ID#:_____

Student's English Language Proficiency Level: _____

This form is to be completed for each student under consideration for retention who is an English Learner. This is a supplemental guidance document that follows Regulation 665-1[3].

Before completing this process, please check below to ensure:
☐ The student's language was not the reason for the grade retention referral.
☐ This protocol is not being used for student recently registered in the School Division or without the sufficient data to make this decision.

English Learner students can and should demonstrate growth in content areas regardless of language proficiency. Therefore, they cannot be retained based on their status as a language learner. To determine if a student should be retained, a committee must be formed and shall include a school administrator, general education teacher, and ESOL teacher who has served the student in the current year. The student's parent/guardian (with the assistance of an oral language interpreter if needed) shall be included in the decision making. The committee shall make the decision as to whether the student is retained by considering the following:

Committee considers the following criteria (Check all that apply):
☐ Missed more than 10 days of school with limited make-up work completed
☐ Has not been retained previously (more than one time in grades K-5)
  Ensure that all U.S. and non-U.S. school records have been reviewed.
☐ Despite the following services being provided, the student has not adequately demonstrated progress:
  • High quality Tier 1 instruction with consistent, appropriate language proficiency accommodations
  • Accommodations employed by all teachers (ESOL teachers, classroom/content teachers, specialists)
  • Recommended EL Service Delivery minutes were provided

Committee considers the following data sources:
☐ Individualized Education Program (IEP) (If student has an IEP then the IEP process should be followed to include an ESOL teacher as part of the process) 504 Plan
☐ ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 test history
☐ Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) / Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)
☐ Student records

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[3] ADD REGG 665-1 TEXT HERE.

☐ Teacher data
☐ Other _____

Determination:
☐ Retention
☐ Promotion

Meeting Participants

School Administrator:

Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

☐ Administrator verifies that an oral language interpreter was present during the meeting and committee determination (if necessary)

General Education Teacher:

Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

ESOL Teacher:

Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Parent:

Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

A copy of this form must be filed in the student's category 6 file at the school

<div align="center">

VITA

Lynmara Colón

</div>

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy student in Educational Leadership at Old Dominion University, Norfolk Virginia.

Master of Arts in Educational Leadership (2012), Old Dominion University, Norfolk Virginia.

Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction (2007), Tarleton University, Stephenville Texas

Bachelor of Science in Social Work (2001), Tarleton University, Stephenville Texas.