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Veteran Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of their Preparedness to Teach English Language Learners Literacy

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MA, Immaculata University, 2007

BA, Immaculata University, 1991

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The English Language Learner (ELL) population continues to steadily grow. While most research focuses on preservice or novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to instruct ELLs, there have been very limited studies focusing on veteran elementary teachers. The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore veteran elementary teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs literacy. This study was grounded in the conceptual framework of Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Purposeful sampling was used to select nine veteran elementary classroom teachers to share their perceptions through in-depth, semistructured interviews. Study participants were kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers. Data were coded to determine categories and themes. The findings revealed that teachers were confident in their ability to teach ELLs in the classroom and that teachers' perceptions play a key role in creating a student-centered learning environment. Five themes emerged that aligned to the research questions: (a) Professional Development Increases Teacher Expertise and Confidence, (b) Teacher Support Leads to Better Classroom Instruction, (c) Instructional Models and Curricular Resources Provide a Clear Learning Path for all Students, (d) Classroom Environment is a Key Factor in Student Success, and (e) Student-Centered Learning Helps Meet Students' Learning Goals. Possible results may be achieved through increased student learning and academic achievement. This study may precipitate the implementation of enriched teacher professional development programs and professional development practices, improved preservice teacher training programs, revision of curriculum mapping, and selection of appropriate instructional resources.

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Dedication

In thanksgiving to the Master Teacher, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, James and Katherine Philbin. My mom and dad instilled in my brothers and me the value of education and made many quiet sacrifices to provide us with exceptional academic opportunities. They encouraged us to show courage and perseverance, reminding us to always to be accountable and responsible, and to treat others with love and respect. They loved, supported, and believed in me without measure and continue to be a source of inspiration from their heavenly home.

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With a grateful heart, I acknowledge the many individuals who have supported me on this educational journey. Thank you to my committee chairperson, Dr. Jessica Fuda-Daddio, for your expertise and support. Thanks, too, for your understanding and compassion, and knowing when I needed assistance "getting down the hill." I am appreciative beyond words. Thank you, Dr. Nancy Williams, for your suggestions, responsiveness, and willingness to share your expertise and Dr. Dimitrios Vlachopoulos for your feedback.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Changing demographics in the United States present new challenges for mainstream classroom teachers. As the number of English Language Learners (ELLs) continues to grow, elementary classroom teachers are faced with the responsibility of teaching literacy to these second language learners (Coady et al., 2016; Díaz- Rico, 2017; Li et al., 2017). This rapidly growing ELL population consistently demonstrates lower academic achievement in reading than their non-ELL counterparts and the achievement gap increases as students' progress through the grades (Paul & Vehabovic, 2018).

Research shows that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are associated with student learning (see Engin, 2020; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Teachers' self-efficacy plays an important role in teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Their sense of self-efficacy affects their instructional choices, which may influence student learning and academic outcomes. Teachers with high self-efficacy are better able to meet the needs of diverse student populations, such as ELLs (Kim & Seo, 2018; Shahzad & Naureen, 2017). It is important to address how veteran teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs characterize the instructional practices teachers are using to instruct this diverse group. While a substantial amount of research focuses on preservice and novice teachers (deJong & Naranjo, 2019; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017; Wright-Maley, 2015) no sufficient research has examined veteran teachers' perceptions. Focusing on veteran teachers' perceptions is essential as this teaching population continues to grow. Carrillo and Flores (2018) defined a veteran teacher as one who has served the education profession for a long period of time. For this study, a

veteran teacher signifies one whose teaching experience ranges from 7 years and beyond. This study has the potential to positively influence ELLs' literacy growth as well as improved effectiveness in teacher preparation programs.

I begin this chapter by providing background about the study, focusing on the consistent growth of ELLs and the challenges classroom teachers face as ELLs are progressively placed in mainstream classrooms. ELLs' low academic achievement is discussed as well as the relationship between teachers' perceptions of their ability to instruct this student population and their instructional decisions. In this qualitative study I explored veteran elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs and how those perceptions may characterize their instructional decisions. The study focused on kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers' perceptions due to the relationship between early literacy and student achievement (see National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019; Suggate et al., 2018; Yamasaki et al., 2019). Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy is discussed as it framed the research study. Previous studies address the relationship between novice teachers' self-efficacy and student achievement (e.g., Shanzad & Naureen, 2017; Vasquez & Pilgrim, 2018). There is a paucity of research on and literature on veteran teachers' self-efficacy and student outcomes. The relationship between one's beliefs and one's capability to accomplish a certain level of performance or course of action is further addressed in this chapter (see Bandura, 1986).

The chapter also provides information about the scope of the qualitative study, which included in-depth interviews with veteran elementary teachers from urban school district in northern New Jersey. Nine individuals representing several schools throughout

the district were interviewed. Possible assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are presented along with concise definitions of key terms or concepts. Finally, the chapter concludes with the potential significance of the study, which may result in literacy growth of ELLs, addition of instructional resources, and implementation of targeted preservice teacher preparation programs and professional learning opportunities focusing on ELLs.

Background

The number of ELLs has grown over 50% during the last 10 years and continues to show steady growth (Dussling, 2020; Irvin, et al., 2021; Snyder et al., 2017). In the United States, one in four children speak a language other than English at home (Okhremtchouk & Sellu, 2019). It is estimated that the ELL population in the United States will exceed 40% of the U.S. student population by the year 2030 (Lucas et al., 2018; Okhremtchouk & Sellu, 2019; Sugimoto et al., 2017). Over 76% of all United States public schools serve ELLs (Villegas, 2018). The rapid growth and underperformance of ELLs is putting considerable demands on classroom teachers as ELLs are increasingly placed in general education classrooms with lack of materials (Herrera, 2018), little to no support (Diaz et al., 2016; Moser, Zhu, Nguyen, & Williams, 2018), and insufficient foundational knowledge or professional training to meet the instructional needs of this diverse group, particularly in the area of literacy (Cole et al., 2017; Deng et al., 2021; Stairs-Davenport, 2021; Trahey & Spada, 2020; Villegas, 2018). In addition to these challenges, ELLs' reading performance is characterized by widespread underachievement. They are consistently underserved and outperformed by

their non-ELL counterparts in reading and the achievement gap increases as students progress through the grades (Artigliere, 2019; Maarouf, 2019; Paul & Vehabovic, 2018; Reyes & Gentry, 2019). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), there is a 40% achievement gap between fourth grade reading ELLs and their non-ELL counterparts in reading. Sixty-nine percent of fourth grade ELLs are not meeting basic skills in reading compared to 29% of their non-ELL counterparts. Only a small percentage of ELLs are considered proficient or advanced in reading skills (7%), which has been consistent over the course of a 10-year time frame. ELLs consistently have disproportionately high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and low college-completion rates (Artigliere, 2019).

Most classroom teachers are learning on the job as this is their first experience teaching ELLs (Mills et al., 2020; Russell, 2016). School district leaders have identified the need to train teachers on developing instructional strategies to meet the needs of this diverse population (Baninski et al., 2018; Hallman & Meineke, 2016) as mainstream teachers often lack knowledge about the instructional strategies needed to support the literacy needs of ELLs (Clark-Goff & Eslami, 2016; Gándara & Santibañez, 2016; Giles & Yazan, 2020; Hayden & Gratteau-Zinnel, 2019; Lopez & Santibanez, 2018; Özüdoğru, 2018;). While teacher education programs provide pedagogical knowledge and field experience opportunities for preservice teachers (Cho & Johnson, 2020; Pavlak & Cavender, 2019; Sugimoto et al., 2017), most preservice or novice teachers do not feel prepared to teach ELLs (Li et al., 2017; Turgut & Huerta, 2016). Teachers' feelings of unpreparedness may affect their self-efficacy, or belief in their abilities to successfully

carry out a particular course of action. Many classroom teachers are learning on the job as this is their first experience teaching ELLs (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Fu and Wang (2020), along with Diaz et al. (2016), explained that beliefs are one of the most influential factors in a teacher's job performance. High-efficacy teachers use diverse student-centered instructional strategies and adapt goals based on students' needs (Lopez & Santibanez, 2018; Oppermann & Lazarides, 2021; Zee & Kooman, 2016).

In the United States, ELLs' low academic performance has prompted an exploration of the instructional strategies mainstream teachers use to support the literacy needs of ELLs (Hinojosa, et al., 2017; Paul & Vehabovic, 2018)). It is important to understand mainstream veteran teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs as these beliefs can influence their self-efficacy. Teachers' beliefs about their perceptions of their preparedness have been an indicator of their ability to teach effectively. Their beliefs influence their instructional choices and their perseverance when facing challenges or obstacles (Rowan & Townend, 2016). These perceptions can play an integral role in student achievement and can influence the instructional decisions veteran teachers make in meeting the diverse needs of students (Enderlin-Lampe, 2002, as cited in Tran, 2015; Sabouri, 2017).

Problem Statement

There is a consistent achievement gap in reading between the rapidly growing ELL population and their non-ELL counterparts (Hinojosa et al., 2017; Paul & Vehabovic, 2018). ELLs underperform on several educational indicators. Additionally,

ELLs continue to have high dropout rates, as well as low college enrollment and graduation rates (Barrio, 2017; Lambert et al., 2018; Maarouf, 2019).

Teachers' perceptions often influence their instructional decisions (Moser et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017). There is a direct relationship between one's perceptions and self-efficacy, or one's ability to perform a task. The beliefs a teacher has about their ability or preparedness to teach ELLs can influence their instructional practices (Bandura, 1977; Küçüktepe et al., 2017). Numerous studies have been conducted on preservice teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs and the instructional practices they are implementing in the classroom (Coady et al., 2016; Kilic, 2020; Martin & Rosas-Maldonado, 2019; Villegas et al., 2018; Wessels et al., 2017). While most preservice teachers thought their teacher preparation programs were effective, they noted areas of perceived weakness in their professional preparation and ability to teach ELLs. These studies also determined that preservice teachers need more professional support in order to effectively instruct ELLs. Many expressed the need to acquire ELL related knowledge and interact with ELLs in educational settings (deJong et al., 2018; Li et al., 2017). The limited studies conducted with veteran teachers focused primarily on their professional needs with ELLs. Some of those needs include systematic professional development related to ELLs, accessibility of tools and resources, and a better understanding of ELLs (Hong et al., 2019). Santibañez et al. (2018) concluded that veteran elementary teachers believe they lack the pedagogical skills to teach ELLs and do not feel prepared to adapt instruction to meet the needs of this diverse population. Additionally, they do not feel prepared to deliver instruction to both ELLs and non-Ells in the same classroom setting.

There is a need to obtain more information about veteran elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs and the instructional practices teachers are using to meet the needs of this linguistically diverse group (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multi-case study was to explore how veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs characterizes instructional practices. It was important to consider the perceptions of veteran teachers in these grades as students in the United States are expected to have acquired reading foundational skills by the end of third grade. Students who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are four times more likely to not complete high school. Additionally, many states have enacted legislation that requires students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade to be retained (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2019; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019; Winke & Zhang, 2019). These grade levels also mark the beginning of most ELLs' academic journey. In order to explore elementary teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs literacy and how these perceptions characterize their instructional practices, in-depth interviews were conducted with study participants in an urban school district in New Jersey. Most of the teachers in this urban district have been teaching for 10 years and approximately two-thirds of the students speak one of 41 languages other than English at home. ELLs, which comprise over 90% of the district's student population, are underperforming academically, particularly in reading and

language arts. Due to the large ELL population, students receive daily English as a Second Language Instruction. Eighty-five percent of this student population did not meet or exceed expectations on the English Language Arts/Literacy section of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment. Additionally, almost 90% of ELLs did not attain proficiency on the English Language Proficiency Test (State of New Jersey DOE, 2018). It was important to examine teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs as this population remains academically at risk.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative multicase study:

RQ1: What perceptions do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade literacy teachers have about their preparedness to teach reading to English language learners?

RQ2: How do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade first grade literacy teachers' perceptions characterize their instructional decisions to meet the diverse needs of the ELL population?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

The conceptual framework for this study was based on Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as beliefs in one's ability to organize and implement the steps required to achieve identified goals. The theory of self-efficacy, which is a key concept of Bandura's social cognitive theory, suggests an individual's self-efficacy is based on one's perceived competence; it determines one's performance. According to Bandura's theory, individuals with high self-efficacy have high expectations of themselves and show determination and resiliency when faced with

challenging tasks. When unsuccessful in achieving goals, individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to remain confident in their abilities and recognize factors that led to the non-fulfillment of their goals. In contrast, individuals with low self-efficacy tend to avoid difficult tasks. Since they do not have a lot of confidence in their ability to achieve, they are more likely to abandon tasks and experience feelings of failure (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1977) identified four ways to develop self-efficacy, which frame this study. These constructs, which include mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social/verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal (Bandura, 1997) play a role in exploring how teachers' perceptions influence their instructional decisions. An individual may also build self-efficacy by observing demonstrations of competence by similar persons. Additionally, self-efficacy may be developed through social persuasion. Having the confidence of trusted advisors increases self-efficacy. Finally, one's emotions or moods influence how one evaluates self-efficacy (Bandura, 2008). Mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy as they are based on individuals' authentic experiences, providing significant efficacy information (Bandura, 1977). In this study, mastery experiences provided information about veteran teachers' perceptions of one's preparedness to teach ELLs, which was reflected through interviews with veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade elementary teachers. Bandura's theory was appropriate for this study as it investigates teachers' self-efficacy, or perceived belief in their preparedness to accomplish instructional objectives with ELLs. Teachers' perceptions about their abilities to foster student learning is an important attribute often

associated with student achievement. Teachers who have a high sense of efficacy and act on it are likely to have students who learn (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993).

Nature of the Study

This qualitative multicase study took place in an urban New Jersey school district where students consistently fail to meet expectations in the area of reading (see New Jersey Department of Education, 2019). Qualitative research is based on the methodical pursuit of understanding how individuals view and experience the world around them and interprets the meanings of those actions. It is inductive, as it understands human experience deeply and in-detail (Rahman, 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). It lends itself to in-depth exploration that includes a variety of data tools including, but not limited to interviews, observations, documents, and physical artifacts (Houghton et al., 2013). Study participants included veteran elementary teachers from elementary schools where ELLs comprise most of the class population. Classrooms representing nine kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers participated in the study in order to achieve data saturation. In-depth, semistructured interviews were used to explore how teacher participants' perceptions influence ELLs' literacy growth. Interview questions based on Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy were structured in an open-ended format. The data collected for the study was organized, analyzed, and coded for themes. The coding of the data allowed me to examine the interview transcripts and sort and analyze the collected data. The first level of coding provided me the opportunity to identify basic categories within the interview data. The second level of coding allowed me to synthesize the data into smaller categories (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Words or phrases associated with

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy were noted during the process as Bandura's theory frame this research study.

Definitions

English Language Learners (ELLs): *English Language Learners (ELLs)*: A national-origin- minority student who is limited-English-proficient (United States Department of Education, 2020).

Inclusion: The practice of supporting the participation of all students within the general education setting (Chaves-Barboza et al., 2019).

Mainstream Classroom: A school setting where classes are taught by general education teachers (Turgut et al., 2016).

Preservice Teacher: An individual enrolled in a college or university teacher preparation program (Dorel et al., 2016).

Self-efficacy: An individual's perception of their effectiveness (Bandura, 1984).

Teacher Efficacy: The belief an individual hold about their ability to successfully perform a task that requires specific knowledge and cognition (Bandura, 1997).

Veteran Teacher: A teacher who has served the education profession for a long period of time (Carrillo & Flores, 2018). For this study, a veteran teacher signifies one whose teaching experience ranges from 7 years and beyond.

Assumptions

There are several assumptions that were essential to the significance of the study. I assumed that the data collection interview guide was a reliable and valid instrument that elicited reliable responses. Another assumption was that study participants understood the

nature of the interview questions. Finally, I assumed that study participants provided authentic responses and shared their perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs.

Scope and Delimitations

This purpose of this qualitative study was to explore veteran teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs due to the consistent growth of mainstreamed ELLs in the United States. I used purposeful sampling to select nine study participants, which included first, and second grade teachers with 7 or more years of teaching experience, representing an urban school district in New Jersey. To this study, a veteran teacher signifies one whose teaching experience ranges from 7 years and beyond.

Veteran elementary teachers were purposely selected for this study as most related studies focus on preservice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLS (e.g., Coady et al., 2016; Sugimoto et al., 2017; Villegas et al., 2018; Wessels et al., 2017). Semistructured, in-depth interviews were the primary data collection tool and were conducted during the 2020-2021 school year. I analyzed and coded the acquired data to identify common themes. The study can potentially be replicated to include a larger sampling size and extended to other grade levels. Districts representing other geographical areas and demographics may also be considered.

Limitations

Several limitations may have impacted this qualitative multicase study. The validity and reliability of the study could have been compromised by various factors, such as study participants' level of autonomy in the classroom due to district curriculum requirements, previous professional experiences, or their personal and/or political beliefs.

Due to my experience in the field of education, it was imperative to maintain a neutral stance during the interview process. Asking indirect and/or open-ended questions during the interview process limited potential bias. Measures such as an audit trail, which includes the use of a research journal, helped me address limitations. Additionally, using purposeful sampling and providing a thick description of the study helped facilitate transferability.

Significance of the Study

In this qualitative multicase study, I explored veteran teacher's perceptions about their preparedness to teach literacy to ELLs in mainstream kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms. Much of the previous research conducted on the topic focuses on preservice or novice teachers' training and their perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs (see Kilic, 2020; Li et al., 2017; Merga et al., 2020; Sugimoto et al., 2017; Turgut & Huerta, 2016). As the ELL population grows, veteran elementary teachers will be faced with the challenge of educating this diverse group in a general education setting (Dussling, 2020; Maarouff, 2019; Stairs-Davenport, 2021).

Little is known about veteran teachers' perceptions, training, or use of instructional practices (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). The study addressed teachers' beliefs and preparedness to teach ELLs as well as the role self-efficacy has on student achievement. It has the potential to impact social change, according to Walden policy, as teachers gain a better understanding of other cultures, deepen their ELL knowledge, and consider perspectives of all students (see Walden University, 2020). The results of this study can be used to enrich teachers' professional practices as well as influence teacher

professional development and selection of instructional resources and curriculum planning. Implementing on-going and meaningful professional development has the potential to foster teachers' self-efficacy and provide instructional strategies to positively influence ELLs' literacy growth. Subsequently, the potential exists for increased graduation rates and participation in the workplace, increasing economic growth. This study will also add to the body of literature on supporting the academic development and needs of ELLs and has the potential to help fill the gaps in the literature on the subject.

Summary

The increasing growth of ELLs is impacting the educational system in the United States. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019)], ELLs' enrollment has increased over 50% while non-ELLs' enrollment has grown less than 10% over the past decade. Consequently, the number of ELLs has exceeded the number of ELL specialists needed to provide instruction to this population. The U.S. Department of Education (2018) reported a shortage of ELL teachers in over 30 states. In many cases, general education teachers are being asked to provide instruction to ELLs in the mainstream classroom (Carnoy & Garcia, 2017; Kieffer & Thompson, 2018). While preservice teachers have received some preparation, veteran teachers often do not have the training or resources to adequately instruct these second language learners (Coady et al., 2019; Li et al., 2017). Additionally, ELLs' reading performance is characterized by widespread underachievement compared to their non-ELL counterparts (Paul & Vehabovic, 2018). Research studies show there is a direct connection with teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and student learning (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Exploring veteran teachers'

perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs has the potential to increase student achievement and improve teacher preparation programs. Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the theories that frame this research study as well as an in-depth review of current literature that established the relevance of the research problem.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore how veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs defines their instructional practices. In the United States, over 5 million students are considered ELLs (NCES, 2020). This student population represents 21% of the K-12 student population and is expected to surpass other populations by the year 2030 (NCES, 2018). Mainstream classroom teachers play a significant role in the academic success of ELLs. As the ELL population continues to grow, classroom teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching literacy to ELLs in general education classrooms. It is likely that many ELLs will spend their day in mainstream classrooms with teachers who may lack the preparation or resources to instruct them (Diaz et al., 2020; 2016; Wissink & Starks, 2019; Yough, 2019). Teachers' beliefs in their ability to effectively teach students is an indicator that predicts their instructional decisions and students' academic achievement. These beliefs, known as self-efficacy, shape the way teachers carry out classroom tasks (Woolfolf & Hoy, 1990; Zee, de Jong, & Koomen, 2016). Additionally, ELLs are struggling academically, particularly in literacy. They are consistently outperformed by their non-ELL counterparts (Diaz et al., 2016; NCES, 2020). Due to these recent trends, there is a need to understand how veteran elementary teachers' perceptions shape their instructional practices. It is especially important to focus on veteran teachers' perceptions as this group comprises a significantly large percentage of the teaching population. Teachers with 10 years or more of teaching experience comprise 61% of the profession (NCES, 2018). With the inclusion

of more ELLs in the regular education classroom, it is important to examine veteran teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to instruct this student population in literacy. In this literature review I discuss the growth and academic performance of ELLs in the United States, teacher preparedness to instruct ELLs, the role of teacher self-efficacy, and teachers' beliefs about ELL

Literature Search Strategy

Articles and studies for this literature review were selected from peer reviewed, scholarly articles published in the past 5 years. Several databases were accessed through the Walden University Library including ERIC, SAGE Journals, Education Source, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search. Research was also obtained by using Walden University's dissertations and theses search engine, which included ScholarWorks and ProQuest. Google Scholar was also used to obtain scholarly articles. Searches were conducted using keywords related to the purpose of the study and included: *English Language Learners, English proficiency, teacher perception, self-efficacy, teacher preparedness, mainstream classroom, veteran teachers, instructional strategies,* and *student achievement*.

During the research process, it became evident that limited studies were conducted on veteran teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs. As a result, the search was expanded to include other aspects of teachers' perceptions and beliefs. Articles that used the terms beliefs and attitudes were also included if they were relevant to mainstream classroom teachers and ELLs. It is important to note that articles focusing on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy date back to 1977.

Conceptual Framework

Elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach the growing population of ELLs is an important subject, particularly considering the achievement gap between ELLs and their non-ELL counterparts (NCES, 2019). A teacher's self-efficacy is an essential element of a successful learning environment and is associated with positive student learning outcomes (Miller et al., 2017). During the past 30 years, many researchers have found a direct connection to teacher efficacy and students' academic achievement (Kim & Seo, 2018). Due to the nature of this research, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977) framed this study. Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977) was appropriate as I focused on teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to instruct ELLs. Self-efficacy is one's personal belief about his or own abilities to successfully carry out a particular course of action. For teachers, self-efficacy is the belief a teacher has about their skills or ability to affect performance for all students (O'Conner et al., 2017). Teachers who have a high sense of self-efficacy often positively impact student achievement (Bandura, 1977; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993).

Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as one's beliefs in their capacity to achieve a task and influence outcomes and events. A strong sense of self-efficacy enriches personal successes and one's well-being. Self-efficacy beliefs are an important aspect of human motivation and behavior as they influence one's choices and course of action. Bandura (1977) suggested that self-efficacy is formed through four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social/verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal. Mastery experiences allow one to experience the success of self-efficacy first-hand. They are the

most effective way to foster a strong sense of self-efficacy. The key to mastery is persisting during challenging experiences, experiencing success, and attributing success to one's effort and ability (Snyder & Fisk, 2016). Vicarious experiences allow one to observe models achieving success on a particular task, thus encouraging the observer to achieve the same. Similarities between the observer and model are important factors relative to the observer's success. Verbal/social persuasion also influences one's self-efficacy as individuals are encouraged or supported in their skills or abilities needed to complete a task. During the fourth source, physiological arousal, individuals rely on their somatic or emotional states when considering their abilities and skills. Additional factors such as mood, aches and pains, and fatigue effect one's perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

A teacher's sense of self-efficacy is important due to its relationship to teaching behaviors, teacher persistence, student motivation, and student achievement. Increased levels of self-efficacy have been associated with more mastery-oriented methods of instruction and higher expectations for students (Miller et al., 2017; Snyder & Fisk, 2016). Studies suggest teachers with high self-efficacy create positive learning environments by planning and delivering meaningful instruction (e.g., Woolfolk et al., 1990). Shahzad and Naureen (2017) determined in their mixed-methods study that teacher self-efficacy had a positive effect on students' academic outcomes. Additionally, a meta-analysis study by Kim and Seo (2018) showed that the mean relationship between teacher efficacy and students' academic achievement was significant. Add summary and synthesis to connect the literature to each other and your study.

Growth and Academic Performance of ELLs

The number of ELLs in the United States has hit a record high and this number continues to increase. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), the number of ELLs has more than doubled during the past 3 decades, outpacing general student enrollment (de Jong & Naranjo, 2019). It is expected that by the year 2030, ELLs will comprise 40% of the student population (LeSeaux & Galloway, 2017; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2018). The growth of the ELL population brings great diversity to United States classrooms as this racially and ethnically diverse group speaks a variety of languages. Many ELLs originate from Asia and Latin America. Additionally, they are more likely to live in poverty and have poorly educated parents (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).

ELL education has a long history in the United States, dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries. During that time, there was no designated language as a number of languages were spoken. It was not until the late 1800s that states began mandating English as the instructional language. ELLs were increasingly expected to assimilate into English speaking environments (Gibson, 2016; McKenzie et al., 2019). Local school districts decided how to educate students who did not speak English, resulting in a variety of policies. The Bilingual Education Act, enacted by congress in 1968, provided funds to support limited English proficient (LEP) students, otherwise known as ELLs Wiese and Garcia, 1998,). In 1973, the Supreme Court decided unanimously in Lau versus Nichols that schools were required to provide supplemental instruction for ELLs (Wiese and Garcia, 1998). Currently, public school districts are required by state and federal laws to

provide instructional support services that help ELLs attain language proficiency and achieve academically as their non-ELL peers (Cardoza & Brown, 2019; McKenzie et al., 2019) Despite the positive changes achieved with the passing of Lau versus Nichols and the implementation of mandates at the state and federal levels, the ELL population consistently struggles to meet the requirements for academic success (Cardona & Brown, 2019; National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). Additionally, these students are expected to meet the literacy requirements as set forth by the Common Core Standards, which outline rigorous grade-level expectations in the areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing to prepare all students to be college and career ready (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2020).

ELLs are consistently outpaced by non-ELL students (Hinojosa, et al., 2017; Paul & Vehabovic, 2018). In addition to learning grade level content, ELLs must also acquire English, the language used for instruction (Murphy & Torff, 2019; Snyder et al., 2017). Developing reading skills is an area in which many ELLs struggle, as is evidenced by their performance on the NAEP reading assessment (NCES, 2019). The NAEP reading assessment is administered every 2 years and is considered the largest, most representative assessment of continuing achievement of all students. According to The National's Report Card (2019), 65% of ELL fourth grade students and 72% of ELL eighth grade students in 2019 scored below basic reading level (see Table 1). This is considerably higher than their non-ELL peers, where only 29% of fourth grade students and 24% of eighth grade students scored below the basic reading level (The Nation's

Report Card, 2019). These results were very similar to ELLs' performance in 2017 (see Table 2).

Table 1

Percent of ELLs Below Basic Reading in 2019

	ELLs	Non-ELLs
Fourth Grade	65	29
Eighth Grade	72	24

Table 2

Percent of ELLs Below Basic Reading in 2017

	ELLs	Non-ELLs
Fourth Grade	68	28
Eighth Grade	68	21

Although ELLs have made small gains nationally, their performance continues to fall behind the non-ELL population. In a mixed methods research study, Thomason et al. (2017) determined that the expectations set forth in the Common Core, particularly the close reading protocol, proved challenging if not unattainable for ELLs. Students became increasingly frustrated, and their lack of motivation and engagement severely declined. Miley and Farmer (2017) also found that there is a significant difference in the proficiency levels between ELLs and non-ELLs. Their multicase study took place in a rural school district in Tennessee. Elementary and middle school students' performance on the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) showed that ELLs

overall performance on academic content assessments is lagging those of their English-speaking classmates. ELLs' performance continues to fall behind the non-ELL population, particularly in densely populated states such as Texas, California, New York, and Florida (NCES, 2019). In California, the high school examination pass scores are nearly 10% lower than other groups. The graduation rate continues to be well below that of their non-ELL peers (Johnson & Wells, 2017). According to the California Department of Education (2020) only 68% of ELLs graduated in 2018 while the overall graduation rate slightly increased to 83%. Using assessment data along with graduation information from California ELLs, Johnson and Wells (2017) conducted a multicase study to identify recommendations to ensure ELLs are better prepared to achieve academic success. They suggested that preservice teachers work closely in field settings with ELLs, teachers receive professional development focusing on pedagogical language knowledge, and teacher evaluation programs are in alignment with practices that support ELLs learning. Add summary and synthesis to connect back to your study.

Current research suggests that schools often fail to provide adequate instruction and support for ELLs. The quality of education ELLs are receiving is in question (NCES, 2019; Mitchell, 2020). According to Murphy and Torff (2019), lack of teacher preparation in multiculturalism, language acquisition, and ELL strategies is impacting instruction. It is likely ELLs are receiving less rigorous instruction, impacting their academic performance and growth.

Teacher Preparedness to Teach ELLs

Higher Education Professional Training

The growth of the ELL population has precipitated the need for on-going and sustainable ELL professional development. There is a lack of consistency in teacher preparation throughout the United States (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017; Turgut, Adibelli, & Huerta, 2016). Very few teacher education programs require or provide training to teacher candidates who will most likely teach ELLs (Moser, Zhu, Nguyem, & Williams, 2018). While some states are working with colleges or regional education agencies to provide support, only a few states require teacher preparation programs to provide related training. State-approved preservice preparation programs in Florida must include strategies for teaching ELLs. Preservice teacher education in Pennsylvania are required to include coursework that addresses the needs of ELLs and New Jersey teacher preparation programs need to be aligned with standards that support the content needs of ELLs. Virginia and Washington have more stringent policies. Virginia preservice teachers are expected to demonstrate their ability to meet the needs of this diverse group and Washington teacher preparation programs expect candidates to understand theory, pedagogy, and the principles of second language acquisition in addition to having knowledge of students' linguistic backgrounds and culture. California, Indiana, Missouri, and New Mexico require teachers to complete ELL coursework in order to obtain a state teaching license (Education Commission of the States, 2020). Task forces and commissions have addressed the issue of lack of preservice teacher preparation by offering suggestions (Corey, 2019; Education Commission of the States,

2020). While teacher preparatory programs have started to recognize the need for student field teaching experiences and relevance of ELL related coursework, there is no generally accepted method for preparing preservice teachers to work effectively with ELLs in mainstream classroom settings (Turgut et al., 2016; Wissink and Starks, 2019). Most focus on making preservice teachers aware of educational policies related to ELLs and their demographics. Studies by Hansen-Thomas, Richins, Kakkar, and Okeyo (2016) and Wissink and Starks (2019) found that more specific coursework at the college level would better prepare classroom teachers to meet the needs of ELLs. Preservice ELL training programs are not as effective as they need to be given the increasing enrollment of ELLs in the classroom (de Jong and Naranjo, 2019; Wright-Maley, 2015).

Preservice teachers have voiced the need to deepen ELL related knowledge in their coursework in several areas, such as pedagogical knowledge and skills as well as related background information through field experiences. They also expressed the need to grow in appreciation for ELLs' cultural background and language experiences (Li et al., 2017; Turgut et al., 2016). Research supports that many preservice teachers in the United States feel underprepared to teach ELLs. Li, Hinojosa et al., 2017 found in their qualitative study of preservice teachers in a large midwestern university that 92% of the students felt unprepared to teach ELLs due to the insufficient ELL related knowledge in their courses and lack of field opportunities. They expressed the need to interact with and practice teaching ELLs during their educational program. Studies conducted by Turgut et al., 2016 and Wessels, et al., 2017 revealed similar findings. Preservice teachers need to better understand research-based instructional practices. Embedded practices should also

be included in all coursework. Additionally, teacher preparation programs should include field experiences where preservice teachers can interact and engage with ELLs.

Professional Training at the District Level

School districts are required to provide teachers, administrators, and staff research-based, frequent, and impactful ELL training on methods for working with ELLs (Education Commission of the States, 2020). Despite the federal requirements, most classroom teachers have very limited, if any, training or preparation teaching ELLs and this remains to be a formidable challenge that most teachers feel unprepared to address in the classroom (Johnson, et al., 2016). Less than 20 states require ELL training for general classroom teachers beyond the federal requirements (Education Commission of the States, 2020.) Many general education teachers feel inadequate or not prepared to educate ELLs in the classroom (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Li, Hinojosa et al., 2017; Turgut et al., 2016; Wessels et al., 2017). Additionally, ELLs may present complex instructional challenges for teachers who have not had the necessary preparation or training in ELL instruction. These teachers are ultimately responsible for meeting the instructional needs of this linguistically and culturally diverse group as ELLs are increasingly placed in mainstream classrooms (Li et al., 2017).

Research shows the need for more effective ELL training. Professional learning opportunities can be delivered in a variety of forms, such as professional learning communities, workshops, coaching, mentoring, and university courses (Lucas et al., 2018). Most teachers earn a degree with lack of knowledge about ELLs, particularly in the areas of multilingual education, ELL pedagogy, and second language acquisition.

Teachers are aware they need to acquire specific areas of knowledge to meet the distinctive needs of second language learners. However, many are not afforded the time or opportunity (Guler, 2020; Li et al., 2017). Recent research studies validate the need for systematic professional development for in-service teachers. Okhremtchouk and Sellu (2019) explored Arizona teachers' readiness to work with ELLs. Study participants overwhelmingly stated the need for professional training on how to support ELLs, particularly in the content areas. This need was magnified by teachers who have taught more than 10 years as the results showed they lack the necessary training to instruct this diverse group. General education teachers also stated the need for more pedagogical knowledge about ELL instruction and noted that their effectiveness is significantly influenced by their current lack of knowledge (de Jong and Naranjo, 2019). Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016 conducted a mixed methods study in 10 school districts in Texas to explore the perceived professional development needs of middle and high school general education teachers. Teachers who had two or more college courses perceived themselves as more effective teachers and most participants noted that formal ELL training improved their ability to effectively teach ELLs. Wissink and Starks (2019) also found that more specific coursework in how to teach ELLs should be required to better prepare teachers along with the need for field experiences. Their study captured novice elementary teachers' perceptions of how well their teacher education program prepared them to teach ELLs. Study participants included teachers with less than 5 years of teaching experience and classrooms with a high percentage of ELLs. All of these studies with in-service

teachers indicate the importance of teacher preparation during the college certification process.

Teachers' Self-Efficacy

Research confirms that teacher preparedness and professional training positively affects teachers' self-efficacy. Teachers' self-efficacy plays a significant role in the classroom as it influences teachers' instructional decisions and motivates them to create an effective learning environment for all students (Lopez & Santibanez, 2018; Wang et al., 2017. Teachers' efficacy beliefs are also an indicator of how much effort teachers will expend on an activity and how long they will persevere when confronted with challenges. Teachers with high self-efficacy believe they can support students by implementing various activities, strategies, and instructional methods (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Teachers will low self-efficacy think they do not have the confidence to meet the needs of students and often tend to expend less energy when faced with instructional challenges (Sharp et al., 2016).

In a mixed- methods study of 148 teachers representing grades K-12, Yoo (2016) determined that gaining new knowledge was positively related to teacher efficacy. Teacher efficacy increased as a result of teachers' professional development experience. Powers, 2016 conducted a similar study to investigate the effect of professional development on self-efficacy. Results confirmed there was a correlation between professional training and self-efficacy as teachers' self-efficacy increased after participating in professional development related activities. Tran (2015) confirmed the need to prepare teachers to teach ELLs in his mixed methods study of 144 PreK-12

teachers representing two districts in Central Texas. The study determined that training teachers in ELL methods positively influences teachers' self-efficacy. Teachers with high efficacy beliefs are focused on meeting all students' needs and are more likely to develop challenging lessons and diversify their instruction to promote student learning (Miller et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017). If teachers perceive themselves as successful, they are more persistent in closing the achievement

Preparing teachers to effectively teach ELLs will increase teachers' self-efficacy regarding ELLs and in turn positively impact student achievement (Vasquez & Pilgrim, 2018). Shanzad and Naureen (2017) confirmed the positive relationship between teacher self-efficacy and student achievement. Results of their quantitative study indicated there is a significant correlation between teachers' level of self-efficacy and student achievement. Student achievement increased and teachers stated they were able to respond positively to students, even in the most challenging circumstances. Additionally, the confidence levels of both teachers and students increased. Kim and Seo (2018) added that the relationship between teacher efficacy and student achievement was based on the length of teachers' professional experience. In cases where teachers had been teaching for a number of years, self-efficacy was positively associated with student achievement. Additionally, teachers with high self-efficacy are more enthusiastic about their profession, positively impacting student performance.

Teachers' Beliefs About ELLs

Teachers' perceptions of ELLs play a critical role in how they meet the instructional needs of this diverse group. Their perceptions are influenced by many

factors such as experience teaching ELLs, educational background, language acquisition, and geographical location. Their beliefs have educational implications as they influence instructional practices, effecting student outcomes (Goff & Eslami, 2016; Guler, 2020; Li et al., 2017). Teachers' beliefs may have a positive or negative influence on student achievement. Educators in the United States have mixed feelings on teaching ELLs (Briggink et al., 2016). Teachers who have the same expectations for ELLs as other students in their classroom can positively affect student learning (Rizzuto, 2017).

Many mainstream teachers hold negative views towards ELLs in their classroom. Some have expressed doubts about mainstream ELLs' ability to learn while others believe that ELLs do not make an effort to learn English (Rizzuto, 2017; Sato & Hodge, 2016). In a mixed-methods study of K-8 teachers in the northeastern part of the United States, Rizzuto (2017) determined that most teachers held negative perceptions about ELLs. Study participants did not think they should be required to adapt their preferred way of instruction to meet the needs of mainstreamed ELLs. They also expressed their frustration that ELLs use their native language in their classrooms. Harrison and Lakin (2018) found similar results in their qualitative study of almost 200 middle and secondary classroom teachers. Negative perceptions of ELLs can have a harmful effect on the classroom environment and meeting ELLs' instructional needs. Due to the impact teachers' perceptions have on academic achievement, their perceptions may contribute to ELLs' achievement gap. Providing ELL related professional development opportunities for classroom teachers can improve teachers' perceptions of ELLs and in turn increase ELLs' academic outcomes (Geoff & Eslami, 2016; Garcia et al., 2019).

Synthesis

As the ELL population continues to grow, classroom teachers are faced with the task of instructing this linguistically diverse student population. This presents many challenges as ELLs are consistently outperformed academically in reading by their non-ELL counterparts throughout the country, particularly in highly populated states such as Texas, California, New York, and Florida. (Diaz et al., 2016; NCES, 2019) The achievement gap increases as students progress through the grades; ELLs are also less likely to graduate high school or complete college programs (Artigliere, 2019; Paul & Vehabovic, 2018).

There is also a lack of consistency in preservice teachers' preparation programs and general education teachers' professional training (Murphy & Torff, 2019). Preservice teachers have expressed the need for ELL specific coursework and field experience training with ELLs (Li et al., 2017; Turgut et al., 2016). Many mainstream teachers have not participated in any ELL professional training or preparation, leading to feelings of unpreparedness in meeting the needs of the growing number of ELLs in their classroom (Johnson et al., 2016; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Li, Hinojosa et al., 2017). Since teacher preparedness and professional training have a positive effect on teacher-efficacy, mainstream teachers often lack the confidence to implement instructional strategies to support ELLs' learning. Both teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and teachers' beliefs about ELLs are associated with student learning (Bandura, 1977; Kim & Seo, 2018; Miller et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2017). As a result, it is important to explore how teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs characterize their instructional decisions.

This multi-case study will focus on mainstream veteran teachers as most studies conducted on teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs concentrates on preservice or beginning teachers (Li et al., 2017; Turgut et al., 2016; Wessels et al., 2017). Additionally, veteran teachers represent 63% of the teaching population and the number continues to increase in U.S. public schools (NCES, 2018).

Chapter 2 provided an in-depth review of the current literature that established the relevance of the research study, focusing on the growth and academic struggles of the ELL population, preparedness of preservice and inservice teachers, teacher efficacy, and teachers' perceptions of ELLs. An overview of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy was also provided as the theory frames this research study. Chapter three will provide information about the research design and all components of the methodology, including the instrument, and data analysis plan.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs. I examined how their perceptions define their instructional practices. As the number of ELLs continues to increase in the United States, elementary teachers are faced with the challenge of meeting the instructional needs of this diverse population. Many often feel unprepared as they lack knowledge about the instructional practices needed to support the literacy needs of ELLs (Clark-Goff & Eslami, 2016; Gándara & Santibañez, 2016). Additionally, ELLs are consistently outperformed academically by their non-ELL counterparts and the achievement gap continues to increase as they progress through the grades (Paul & Vehabovic, 2018). This chapter begins by explaining the research design and rationale for the study as well as defining the role of the researcher. Information about the methodology and data collection tools is provided, including how the instrument was developed. An in-depth explanation of the data analysis plan is included, and issues of trustworthiness are addressed. The last section of this chapter explains the processes that will be implemented to follow proper ethical considerations and addresses any potential ethical concerns.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions will guide this qualitative multi-case study:

RQ1: What perceptions do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade literacy teachers have about their preparedness to teach reading to English language learners?

RQ2: How do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade first grade literacy teachers' perceptions characterize their instructional decisions to meet the diverse needs of the ELL population?

I used a multicase study design as multiple grade levels were explored. The multicase study approach allowed me to conduct in-depth research and collect detailed information about the particular phenomenon or specific case. It allowed me to investigate the meaning of contemporary, real-life events (see Ravitch & Carol, 2016; Stake, 2011). The multicase study design may also formulate new research questions, hypotheses, and emergent theories to be tested as well as the opportunity to replicate research (Yin, 2003). Additionally, this approach was suitable for researchers who want to provide in-depth understanding. It is also a widely recognized approach in the education field (Suter, 2012). The multicase study approach was appropriate for this research study as it explored kindergarten, first, and second grade veteran elementary teachers' perceptions (phenomenon) of their preparedness to teach ELLs in a general education classroom environment (natural setting). This approach allowed me to analyze the data within and across grade levels.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is the main instrument in qualitative research. This individual develops questions to collect data and then interprets the data by making observations, exercising subjective judgement, and analyzing and synthesizing the data (Harling, 2012). The researcher focuses on identifying patterns among many variables to construct themes. The research process, methods, data, and findings are shaped by the researcher's

social location, positionality, subjectivity, and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In my role as the researcher, I needed to be as precise as possible in my record keeping. I was aware of the importance of being mindful of and acknowledging any potential bias. I used a research journal as a tool to bracket possible biases. I recorded my reflections throughout the study, specifically focusing on the data collection process. Using a research journal allowed me to record notes before, during, and after the semistructured interviews with study participants. Additionally, the research journal served as a resource when writing about the results.

During the past 3 decades, I have served the education field in a variety of roles and I am well aware of my potential biases and how they may impact the results of the study. I have acknowledged potential biases or preconceived thoughts about both the study and positions I have held in education. Anney (2014) and Shenton (2004) recommend the use of an audit trail, which allowed me to document how the data leads to the study's recommendations. My research journal was also a component of the audit trail. I used member checking in order to remain objective and prevent potential bias on my part. It was important to note that I am not employed by the district and have no personal or professional relationships with any of the study participants. Additionally, participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time during the study. As the researcher, I had a responsibility to communicate honestly and openly, respecting the participants' privacy and avoiding misrepresentation of information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Methodology

Selection of study participants requires a clear understanding of the purpose of the research study. Finding appropriate study participants may be a time-consuming process (Patton, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As I explored veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade literacy teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach reading to English language learners and how those perceptions characterize their instructional decisions, I used purposeful sampling to identify veteran mainstream elementary teachers from several elementary schools where ELLs comprise most of the class population. Using purposeful sampling allowed me to focus on study participants who were knowledgeable about the content of the study and provided greater in-depth findings than other probability sampling methods (see Anney, 2014). Participants were selected based on certain criteria. The study was conducted at an urban school district in New Jersey where ELLs comprise over 90% of the student population, based on the National Center for Education Statistics (2020). Veteran elementary teachers with a minimum of 7 years of teaching experience were selected to participate in the study. These individuals represented kindergarten, first, and second grades. The supervisor of bilingual and ESL education assisted me by providing a list of potential participants. I contacted each to participant via email to explain the purpose of the interview. Nine individuals participated in the study which allowed me to achieve data saturation. Creswell (2013) advised that sample sizes in qualitative research should remain smaller to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This number of participants allowed me to explore

each individual's experiences and reach saturation while avoiding redundancy (see Creswell, 2013; Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Instrumentation

Interviews are an effective means of gathering data (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016). They are often open-ended to collect information and probe for more information when appropriate, allowing the researcher to better understand and explore the study participants' experiences. As I developed my research questions, I referred to Walden University's Interview Guide Worksheet. Several of the questions were based on my review of the literature about ELLs' academic achievement, professional training related to ELLs, teachers' perceptions of preparedness, and teachers' perceptions of ELLs. I also included questions related to the conceptual framework, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. These questions explored how participants' beliefs about their preparedness as well as how their professional training may have affected those beliefs and attitudes. I was mindful to develop open-ended questions that kept the participants focused (see Turner, 2010). I was also cognizant of the purpose of interviewing, which is to understand one's lived experience and the meaning one makes of that experience (Siedman, 2006) and found Patton's (2015) suggestions about developing open-ended questions to be very helpful. As I prepared my questions, I referred to the interview guide worksheet to help organize my data. My interview questions (see Appendix A) were based on my research questions and conceptual framework. Since there is a connection to self-efficacy and teacher preparation, I included a few questions exploring how teachers' experiences have affected their attitudes and beliefs. In order for the interview instrument

to be considered an effective measure, it must be valid and reliable (Morse, et al., 2002). To ensure validity and reliability, I elicited feedback from subject matter experts. My dissertation chair and committee member reviewed the interview guide and provided feedback related to its language, wording, and relevance. Fellow postgraduate scholars who share similar criteria as the study participants participated in practice interviews. The interview process replicated the study's data collection protocol. After the data was transcribed and coded, I modified the interview questions to authentically examine the lived experiences of the study participants. Eliciting feedback from study experts and conducting practice interviews ensured the interview instrument is valid and reliable.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After identifying a school district where ELLs comprise at least 90% of the student population, I contacted the supervisor of bilingual and ELL education to request the application for approval to conduct the research study. After I received approval from the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, the supervisor of bilingual and ELL education provided a list of potential study participants. Participants needed to meet the criteria of teaching a minimum of 7 years and must currently teach kindergarten, first, or second grade students in a general education environment. Potential participants who met the criteria were sent an email explaining the purpose and significance of the study, along with the methodology that would be used. Nine individuals met the criteria and were selected to participate. I emailed potential study participants an Informed Consent Statement and asked them to respond "I consent" if they wished to participate in the study.

Data was collected through interviews with the teachers who met the criteria of 7 years of teaching experience and currently teach kindergarten, first, or second grade students in a general education environment. To ensure honesty in informants when contributing data, each interviewee was reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could decline to respond to a question or withdraw from the study at any time. Study participants participated in phone interviews that lasted approximately 30–60 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded using the software Otter Voice Notes. The phone recording was transcribed upon conclusion of the interview. Additionally, member checking was used to check for accuracy in the data and eliminate researcher bias (see Anney, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I followed up with two participants via email for additional clarification. After completion of the research project, both the audio recordings and transcripts were stored in two different data locations for 5 years, a locked file box and an external hard drive. At the conclusion of the 5 year period, the paper data records will be shredded. Electronic data will be erased using software applications designed to remove all data from the storage device. Data stored on external drives will be physically destroyed.

Data Analysis Plan

Coding is the most common way to organize qualitative data. Researchers may select from either an inductive or deductive coding process. I used the inductive coding process since my goal was to discover patterns, themes, and categories. In comparison, the deductive coding process uses an existing framework or set of possible themes or categories (Patton, 2002; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The interview protocol was based on the

study's research questions and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. To prepare to code the interview data, I organized each transcript in an Excel document. As Meyer and Avery (2008) note, an Excel spreadsheet is essentially a database. It this instance, it represented data from interviewees' responses. I initially read through the data and took some notes in my journal, mindful that early analysis should focus on recognizing and identifying concepts, themes, and examples (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Once I read through the data and my journal notes, I referred back to the Excel document and reviewed my data more closely. I color coded any key words or phrases, being mindful to highlight examples and concepts that the interviewees specifically mentioned. After I did this for all sets of interview data, I reviewed all of the data to check for additional codes, identifying categories and themes. No discrepant points were uncovered. If this had been the case, I would have contacted the study participants to ask for further clarification.

NVivo software was used to facilitate data analysis. NVivo is designed to organize, analyze, and identify themes or categories from interviews. The software has the ability to import and analyze a variety of data and allows for coding, relationship coding, matrix coding, word frequency, text search, and coding comparison queries. Data may be represented through a variety of tools, such as charts, word-clouds, and comparison diagrams.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Additionally, four criteria should be considered in qualitative research in order to ensure a trustworthy study. These criteria include credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability. In this qualitative study, the following measures were taken to ensure the study's credibility. First, the multi-case study method was selected as it explores a contemporary phenomenon within its natural setting and involves the collection of in-depth and detailed data (Harling, 2012). Also, study participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they may decline to answer a question or opt out of the interview at any time. Probing questions were used to confirm transparency in interviewees' responses and peer debriefing sessions were held to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Member checking was used. Member checking is an essential process in qualitative research; it is considered the "heart of credibility" (Anney, 2014, p.277). The use of peer debriefing also ensured credibility as the researcher received feedback and guidance from peers to help improve the quality of the study's findings. Additionally, I used a research journal to record personal reflections relative to the study, events that occurred in the field, and initial impressions of the data. Finally, to enable a more inclusive analysis, a detailed description of the phenomenon being studied was addressed in greater detail in chapters one and two of the dissertation proposal.

Transferability shows how the research findings can be applied or transferred to other contexts; it ensures that the findings are consistent and can be replicated (Anney, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This information includes the research design and implementation, data gathering and analysis process, and reflection on the effectiveness of the research protocol (Shenton, 2004). Providing a thick description of the study will allow an individual to consider how well the study can be replicated in a different

environment. Additionally, the use of purposeful sampling will also help facilitate transferability.

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time. It is achieved by reviewing the study's findings to confirm the findings are supported by the data. The use of the code-recode strategy, which allows the researcher to code the same data twice, enhanced the dependability of the study. Additionally, dependability was established using peer debriefing and an audit trail (Anney, 2014; Shenton, 2004).

Finally, confirmability is the extent to which the results are shaped by the study participants and can be confirmed by other researchers. Steps were taken to ensure confirmability as opposed to the thoughts or preferences of the researcher. In order to ensure the findings are derived from the data, the researcher used member checks, a research journal, and the use of an audit trail (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Procedures

The researcher serves as the main instrument in qualitative research and their individual values and ethics influence the ethical practices of the study. The researcher-participant relationship is a major source of discussion and debate in qualitative research. This relationship and the purpose of the research study define a variety of elements, such as amount of information shared about the study, degree of consent, level of privacy, and protection provided to the participants (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016). Due to the integral role the researcher plays in qualitative research, it is important that the researcher considers potential ethical issues and follows ethical procedures.

Research studies conducted through Walden University must comply with U.S. federal regulations and Walden's ethical standards. To ensure compliance, I submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to request approval to conduct this multi-case study. Prior to submitting the application, I met with district leadership at the research site to discuss the parameters of the study. During this meeting, explained the purpose of the study as well as the data collection tool, process, and analysis plan. I also explained how the data was used and who has access to that information. Procedures for protecting the participants' identities was also shared. Once the administrators signed the Letter of Cooperation, I submitted my application to Walden University's Instructional Review Board for approval to conduct the study. Once approval was received, I contacted study participants via email to explain the purpose and significance of the study, along with the methodology that would be used. An Informed Consent Statement was also included, requesting potential participants to respond "I consent" if they wished to participate in the study. Participants were also reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Access to the interview data was limited to my dissertation committee. Data was stored on an external hard drive and backed up on an USB storage device. Both storage devices are located in a waterproof and fireproof document safe located in my home office. Related study notes and my reflexive journal are also be stored in the safe. All data will be safely stored for a minimum of 5 years.

Summary

This chapter identified the multi-case study approach as the research tradition and provided the rationale for selecting this methodology. The role of the researcher was described and the process and criterion for selecting study participants was also addressed. Information about the development of the data collection instrument was provided. Additionally, the rationale for data collection and data analysis was discussed. Strategies that will be used to ensure the reliability and validity were explained as well as steps that will be taken to confirm that ethical procedures are in place. In chapter four, I will present the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

In this qualitative multicase study I explored how veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs characterizes instructional practices. I also examined how their perceptions define their instructional practices. The case study approach was appropriate as this method provided an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (see Simons, 2009). The following research questions guided this qualitative multicase study:

RQ1: What perceptions do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade literacy teachers have about their preparedness to teach reading to English language learners?

RQ2: How do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade first grade literacy teachers' perceptions characterize their instructional decisions to meet the diverse needs of the ELL population?

This chapter begins with a description of the setting and demographics for the study. Information about the data collection process is provided, such as number of participants, specific details for the data collection instrument, description of how the data was recorded and information about any unusual circumstances encountered in the data collection. The data analysis process is explained, describing how the data was coded. Specific codes, categories, and themes are identified, and qualities of discrepant cases are described, noting how they were factored into the analysis. Issues of trustworthiness are addressed. The last section of this chapter addresses each research question and provides data to support each finding.

Setting

The study was conducted in an urban public school district in New Jersey. Data was collected at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. During the 2020-2021 school year, the district implemented remote learning for all students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected study participants' experiences and had the potential to influence interpretation of the study results. This is addressed in the Limitations of the Study section in Chapter 5.

Demographics

Study participants included nine veteran elementary classroom teachers representing kindergarten, first, and second grades with a minimum of 7 years of teaching experience. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 10 years to 31 years, with the average total years of experience being 19 years. Of the nine study participants, two pursued certificates in bilingual education due to the large percentage of ELLs in the district. Participant demographics are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Demographics of Participants

Participant #	Grade Level	Years of Teaching Experience
P1	First	19
P2	Kindergarten	20
P3	Kindergarten	22
P4	Second	10
P5	First	19
P6	Second	12
P7	Second	20
P8	Second	19
P9	Kindergarten	31

Data Collection

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit nine veteran elementary teachers representing kindergarten, first, and second grades in a New Jersey urban school district where ELLs comprise over 90% of the student population. Purposeful sampling was chosen to intentionally select appropriate participants to provide information to answer the research questions (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposeful sampling also increased the likelihood of data saturation (Suri, 2011). The selected participants were best suited to provide, through in-depth interviews, an understanding of veteran elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs and how those perceptions characterize instructional practices. Once approval was acquired from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (approval number: 05-10-21-0673024), I contacted the supervisor of bilingual and ELL education to obtain a list of potential study participants. Potential participants who met the criteria were sent an email explaining the purpose and significance of the study, along with the methodology that would be used. An informed consent statement was also included, requesting potential participants to respond "I consent" if they wished to participate in the study. Initially, 12 individuals indicated a willingness to participate. Ten individuals responded to the email with the words, "I consent." The other two potential participants did not respond to additional requests for consent. It was also determined, upon further communication, that one of the participants did not meet the participation criteria. As a result, this potential participant did not participate in the study. A total of nine individuals met the study's participation criteria and indicated their consent. Data saturation was achieved with nine participants;

these individuals were best suited to provide the needed information to answer the research questions (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Suter, 2012).

Phone interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes and were audio recorded using Otter Voice Notes. I also took notes during the interview process using a research journal. Pseudonyms were used in place of names to protect the identity and/or background of study participants. Each participant was assigned a code to label data to prevent private information from being revealed. After each interview, I downloaded the transcription provided by Otter Voice Notes. I reviewed the transcription of each audio file, compared it to my notes, and made any corrections. Additionally, I emailed two participants for clarification on two points. Once I had my final transcription files, I uploaded the files using NVivo software, which was used to facilitate data analysis.

Data Analysis

Inductive coding was used to discover patterns, themes, and categories. To identify basic categories in the interview data, I used initial or open coding (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2009). I reviewed each transcript numerous times, highlighting words and phrases used by each participant. This process was followed for each of the interview questions. To help organize the data, I created an Excel spreadsheet that listed each interview question and the study participants' response for that specific question. I added an additional Excel sheet for additional notes and/or quotes from the participants. I compiled a list of initial codes, keeping in mind the study's research questions and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. Using NVivo software, I used axial coding to identify a relationship among the codes. This allowed me to organize and find patterns in the data.

Since I was using the code-recode strategy, I repeated the coding process. My coding became more refined as I reclassified some of the codes into different categories. Redundancy in responses indicated data saturation. Further collection of data would likely not provide more information. Five themes emerged during the coding process (see Table 4).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Several measures were taken to ensure a trustworthy study. Data's trustworthiness is evidenced by the following: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Suter, 2012, p. 362). To ensure the study was credible, in-depth and detailed data was collected via phone interviews. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they may decline to answer a question or withdraw from the interview at any time. Probing questions were asked to confirm transparency in participants' responses. Study participants gave permission to record the interviews. Access to the audio recordings and the research journal notes also ensured the validity of the data. I used member checking to validate the data analysis.

Transferability of the study's findings was established by addressing potential researcher biases. I also provided a detailed description of the study, allowing one to consider replication in a different environment. The use of purposeful sampling also helps facilitate transferability as this sampling involves participants who exhibit similar characteristics. Dependability was achieved using the code-recode strategy and an audit trail. The audit trail was also used to ensure confirmability. Member checking and the use of a research journal guarantee the findings resulted from the data.

Results

The problem addressed in this research study is that the rapidly growing ELL population consistently demonstrates lower academic achievement in reading than their non-ELL counterparts (see Paul & Vehabovic, 2018). Five themes emerged from the data and can be found in Table 4. Three themes (Themes 1-3) are related to teachers' perceptions (RQ1). Two themes (Themes 4-5) pertain to a student-centered learning environment (RQ2). All five themes are discussed in detail below.

Table 4

Themes Identified in the Data

Theme Number	Description
1	Professional Development Increases Teacher Expertise and Confidence
2	Teacher Support Leads to Better Classroom Instruction
3	Instructional Models and Curricular Resources Provide a Clear Learning Path for all Students
4	Classroom Environment is a Key Factor in Student Success
5	Student Centered Learning Helps Meet Students' Learning Goals

Theme 1 – Professional Development Increases Teacher Expertise and Confidence

Participating in professional training has improved teachers' craft, increased their knowledge, and built their confidence. All nine study participants noted that the district has invested in their professional development. Most participants (P1, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9) stated they were very satisfied with the training they have received. Participants representing first and second grades conveyed a strong sense of satisfaction with their

training. P5 noted that district leaders have taken into consideration their needs and are there to support them. P1 and P7 shared that the professional training the district has provided has improved over the past 5-10 years and that they have several opportunities for additional professional development throughout the year.

P8 added that the training provided a better understanding of how to teach. Participants have received biliteracy training (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8), focusing on students' backgrounds so that teachers can relate better and strategies that meet students' different language needs. Participants have "on-demand" access to digital library training resources. Professional development trainings have focused on scaffolding strategies (P2, P5, P7, P9), cognates (P1, P2), writing (P5, P6, P7, P8) and the use of visuals (P5). Second grade teacher participants noted the quality of on-going writing training the district provides. The district has provided training on Costa's level of intellectual functioning, which focuses on higher level questioning strategies (P9). The opportunity for professional development was also the impetus for one participant (P6) to do more research on the topic, which in turn will provide the opportunity to improve upon their craft. Participants have implemented student-focused initiatives such as a bilingual club (P6), embraced leadership roles, and conducted professional trainings within the district (P9). Participants have also decided to further their education (P6, P8). "It is a lot of work, but it is working for the students" (P9).

Participants noted that their level of confidence has increased because of the focused professional training opportunities (P3, P4, P5, P7). P4 stated,

> The professional development has given me more confidence. I remember thinking, 'Oh my Gosh! How am I going to do this?' Now I think, 'I got this!' My students are getting it. This makes me feel more confident and my students are learning. That is the ultimate goal.

P5 expressed similar thoughts,

> I have learned so many different strategies to address the needs of my students. It gives me more of a confidence boost. I feel like I can do this! There are ways to reach these kids and they can succeed.

The district has invested in a variety of professional learning opportunities to meet the needs of study participants. These opportunities have given teachers a better understanding of how to teach, increasing teacher expertise and confidence.

Increasing teacher confidence also increases student confidence. As was expressed by P5,

> If you feel confident and tell students they can do it, that confidence comes off me and goes to them. So, if I am showing confidence and I tell them they can do it, there is nothing stopping them. That confidence goes onto them and their self-esteem increases.

Increased teacher efficacy may lead to increased student efficacy. Students will high self-efficacy have the potential to increase their academic growth. may

One of the participants (P7) also shared that the training has also been beneficial for new teachers. It gives both new teachers and veteran teachers confidence. "I was not prepared to do this; the training has helped me bridge into the new language." This

confidence was also the motivation for one participant's sense of passion. Students are affected by how teachers prepare. If teachers have no guidance, they will not be prepared to teach their students (P6).

Theme 2 – Teacher Support Leads to Better Classroom Instruction

Most participants have experienced on-going support from administration, notably the ELL supervisor, (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9) and credit this to improved student learning environments. Consistent classroom observations provide opportunities for feedback and reflection (P1, P2, P5, P7, P9). Such opportunities were valued by first grade teachers. P1, P4, and P7 noted that the ELL supervisor visits classrooms often, modeling lessons for teachers. Additional opportunities for support include a biweekly professional learning community known as the bilingual café (P4, P7). Teachers also participate in on-going planning meetings where they evaluate student data and discuss goals for both students and teachers (P4, P6). P4 stated "it is an opportunity to reflect on how students learn and how they need to be supported."

Support from the district's leadership has encouraged teachers to assist each other. Teachers are given the opportunity to observe other classes and share instructional activities, strategies, etc. to meet the diverse language needs of their students (P1, P5, P9). P1 added that new teachers also have the opportunity to observe veteran teachers. This collaboration has created a trust element among teachers (P9). P8 shared, "If you are a good teacher, there is a sense of trust; they support you with on-going professional development." Only one participant (P3) expressed slight dissatisfaction with the support

provided by the district, noting that the opportunities for feedback became less frequent compared to their beginning days in the district.

Theme 3 – Instructional Models and Curricular Resources Provide a Clear Learning Path for all Students

Another theme that emerged was the implementation of instructional models and curricular resources to address the academic needs of ELLs. All of the study participants noted the importance of utilizing instructional models to reach the varied needs of the student population. P7 and P9 value having a clear learning path for students, even if it means a lot of prep work on their part. “It is a lot of work, but it is working for our students” (P9). The district has implemented the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model. The SIOP model is a method used to train teachers to effectively meets the needs of ELLs in order to become academically and linguistically proficient (Riley & Babino, 2021). Participants (P1, P2, P5, P8) noted that the model has assisted them in building background for students, utilizing instructional strategies, and preparing lessons. Lesson preparation connects the learning objectives and standards. P6 and P7 mentioned incorporating WIDA standards in their instruction. These standards are based on academic language and compliment the SIOP instructional model. P7 commented that incorporating the standards into the instruction helps with instructional lesson planning, helping to create clear learning objectives for all students. While the learning targets remain the same for ELLs and their non-ELL counterparts, teachers scaffold the instruction and their expectations depending on students’ needs. P1, P2, and P5 added

that the SIOP model's focus on scaffolded instruction assists them in meeting their students' diverse needs.

Curricular resources play a key role in helping teachers develop curricular plans, supporting student success. Participants expressed support of several curriculum resources. *Words Their Way* is a word study program that provides strategies to deepen students' word knowledge. In addition to the focus on syllables, word patterns and vocabulary, participants find the pictural support and graphics to be especially helpful in creating learning paths for students (P2, P6, P7, P9). This was especially important to both kindergarten and second grade teachers. The *National Geographic* program focuses on in-depth reading strategies and writing. Participants, notably second grade teachers, stated the district's commitment to improving students' writing and this resource has been instrumental in supporting both teachers and students (P4, P5, P6, P7, P8). P4 shared, "Students are writing; they are creating questions and I am seeing it happen." Several participants (P4, P6, P7, P9) use *Scholastic's Guiding Reading Program.* This resource assists teachers in "matching students to the right book" (P2). *Scholastic's Guided Reading Program* provides instructional support and assists teachers in personalizing learning paths for students.

Theme 4 – Classroom Environment is a Key Factor in Student Success

Study participants stressed the importance of creating a student-centered classroom environment. Students who are comfortable in their environment are more likely to be engaged, improving learning outcomes (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8). Several participants described the classroom setting as a family environment where diversity is

embraced and celebrated (P5, P6, P7, P8). Students need to be in a classroom environment where they can be proud of their background. In order to create this environment, teachers make it a point to respect their differences and foster a strong teacher-student relationship (P1, P3, P6, P7, P8). By acknowledging and accepting diverse backgrounds, students are more likely to appreciate and respect language differences. P6 shared, "Learning happens once a student has a strong sense of identity. Otherwise, they may withdraw and learning outcomes may suffer." A student-centered environment also leads to collaboration among students (P1, P7, P8, P9). P1 noted, "Sometimes the classroom seems like two different classrooms since two languages are spoken. The students collaborate; they help each other." This builds a sense of community (P6, P7, P8, P9).

A collaborative, supportive environment where differences are accepted and respected provides a sense of safety and security for students (P4, P8). A safe, secure environment encourages students to communicate more openly (P2). Kindergarten teacher participants stressed the importance of creating an environment where students are free to share their academic thinking. It is important for students do not fear making mistakes and realize that school can be fun (P2, P3, P5). As P2 shared, "They strive for success and celebrate the small steps. Learning becomes a lot easier."

Theme 5 – Student Centered Learning Helps Meet Students' Learning Goals

Creating a student-centered learning environment plays a key role in achieving student success. Teachers are cognizant of the importance of creating a learning environment that addresses all students' instructional needs. Participants (P1, P2, P3, P7)

emphasized the importance of addressing and meeting the needs of all learners. P7 noted, "We do what we need to do for our students to move them along and learn." This can be challenging as teachers are differentiating both reading and language levels (P6).

More than half of the participants (P1, P2, P4, P6, P8) referenced the use of assessment data in order to plan and differentiate instruction. Instruction is intentional; it is specific to each student (P3, P7). Most participants (P1, P4, P5, P8, P9) noted the use of visuals to meet students' specific needs. P1 stated that visuals, such as photos, are a good tool to model the objective or lesson. P5 also mentioned that visuals are helpful when providing directions. This helps ELLs better understand the expectation. In addition to the use of visuals to meet students' instructional needs, study participants provide options for student choice (P5, P7). For example, students have a few options of how they can complete a story. They may choose to draw a picture or write a story. P5 stressed the importance of student choice, "Student choice is something that really helps struggling students. It provides students with some control or ownership. If students like the activity, they are more likely to complete the task."

Most participants (P2, P3, P4, P7, P9) referenced the use of small group instruction in order to meet each student's needs. Working in small groups provides opportunities for teachers to focus on a variety of skills and strategies (P9) and allows teachers to see where students are in the learning process. Kindergarten participants spoke of the importance of center activities. The use of centers is used daily by many of the participants (P2, P3, P6, P7, P9). P3 shared, "They (centers) allow the teacher to create a space to model and to allow student mistakes. Centers give students a bit of

intimacy." P5 and 7 also mentioned the use of partner activities to support student learning. This is especially helpful for students who speak little to no English. In these situations, bilingual students help with translations and share responses with the teacher. Several participants (P2, P4, P6, P7) use guided reading to meet students' learning goals. It is important to make sure students have appropriately leveled books (P2, P4) and that struggling students have opportunities to meet with the teacher as much as possible, at least three times a week (P7).

In order to meet students' learning needs, participants (P2, P5) differentiate and scaffold assignments, which often includes student partner work (P5, P6, P8) and the use of technology (P4, P7). Communicating with parents is also a factor in ensuring student success (P2, P9). It is important to develop a personal relationship with parents and this starts at back-to-school night (P2). Study participants (P1, P7) agreed that planning takes time and that targeting all student levels can be overwhelming at times, acknowledging that virtual learning is not the ideal learning environment (P5).

This study addresses the consistent academic underachievement of the rapidly growing ELL population. The findings for research question 1, "What perceptions do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade literacy teachers have about their preparedness to teach reading to English language learners?" revealed that teachers were confident in their ability to teach ELLs in the classroom. They credited this confidence to the professional development provided by the school district and ongoing support from the administration. The implementation of instructional models and resources also played an integral part in study participants' feelings of preparedness.

The results for research question 2, “How do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade first grade literacy teachers’ perceptions characterize their instructional decisions to meet the diverse needs of the ELL population?” showed that teachers’ perceptions play a key role in creating a student-centered learning environment. Participants voiced the importance of creating an atmosphere that accepts the cultural and linguistic differences of each student as well as one that focuses on meeting their diverse academic needs.

Summary

The study addresses the consistent reading achievement gap between the growing ELL population and their non-ELL counterparts. The results revealed that study participants have positive perceptions about their ability to teach ELLs in the classroom. They credited their sense of preparedness to ongoing professional development, support from administration, and access to instructional resources. Results also showed that teachers’ perceptions played an integral part in creating a student-centered learning environment. Five themes emerged that aligned to the research questions: (a) Professional Development Increases Teacher Expertise and Confidence, (b) Teacher Support Leads to Better Classroom Instruction, (c) Instructional Models and Curricular Resources Provide a Clear Learning Path for all Students, (d) Classroom Environment is a Key Factor in Student Success, and € Student-Centered Learning Helps Meet Students’ Learning Goals. Chapter 5 will provide and analysis and interpretation of the study’s findings relevant to the literature and conceptual framework, Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy. Implications for social change and recommendations for further research will also be addressed.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative multicase study addressed the consistent achievement gap of the rapidly growing ELL population. The purpose of the study was to explore how veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs characterizes their instructional practices. It was important to consider the perceptions of veteran teachers in these grades as students are expected to acquire reading foundational skills by the end of third grade. The following research questions guided this qualitative multicase study:

RQ1: What perceptions do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade literacy teachers have about their preparedness to teach reading to English language learners?

RQ2: How do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade first grade literacy teachers' perceptions characterize their instructional decisions to meet the diverse needs of the ELL population?

Findings for the study revealed that study participants felt confident in their ability to teach ELLs in the classroom. Overall, they were satisfied with the professional development and on-going support provided by the district. They also benefitted from access to curriculum tools and resources. The study also revealed that teachers' perceptions of their preparedness play a key role in creating a classroom where students' instructional needs are met, and their cultural and linguistic differences are accepted. Five themes emerged that aligned to the research questions: (a) Professional Development Increases Teacher Expertise and Confidence, (b) Teacher Support Leads to Better Classroom Instruction, (c) Instructional Models and Curricular Resources Provide a Clear

Learning Path for all Students, (d) Classroom Environment is a Key Factor in Student Success, and (e) Student-Centered Learning Helps Meet Students' Learning Goals.

Interpretation of the Findings

While some studies have focused on novice or preservice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs (e.g., Li, et al., 2017; Turgut et al., 2016; Wessels et al., 2017) or their training (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017; Wissink & Starks, 2019), few researchers have focused on veteran mainstream teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs. Due to the lack of research focusing on this population, the findings of this study are significant, adding to the body of literature on supporting the academic development and needs of ELLs referenced in Chapter 2, the literature review.

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed to collect in-depth information about both research questions and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, the theory that frames this study. Research Question 1 explored teacher participants' perceptions of their preparedness to teach reading to ELLs. The findings revealed that teachers were confident in their ability to teach ELLs. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed or accomplish a task. Study participants identified ongoing professional development opportunities as a source of confidence and efficacy. The professional learning opportunities helped them feel prepared and gave them confidence. Similar results were found in the body of literature. Studies by Yoo (2016), Power (2016) and Tran (2015) confirmed that professional training increases teachers' self-efficacy. While Yoo's mixed-methods study involved a larger sampling size, the results were similar: teachers' efficacy increased because of

teachers' professional development experience. Additionally, most study participants shared that ELL focused professional development improved their ability to teach ELLs. P3 noted that they have had training on ELLs' background so they can better relate to this population. As a result of the district provided training, P1 felt more able to relate to ELLs and see things from their perspective.

Study participants also noted that professional training and on-going support provided by the district positively affected their self-efficacy, or belief in their ability to meet the diverse needs of students. Bandura (1997) theorized four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social/verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal. The second source of self-efficacy, vicarious experiences, refers to social role models. In terms of teacher-efficacy, a vicarious experience refers to an opportunity to observe another teacher or colleague. Study participants expressed appreciation for opportunities to observe other teachers (P1). Observing teacher colleagues also increased their confidence in their own abilities (P4, P9). Study participants' desire for observation opportunities supports the findings revealed in a qualitative case study by Wissink and Sturks (2019). Their study with novice elementary teachers identified the need for opportunities to observe other teachers, as well as participation in field experiences and enrollment in ELL specific coursework. Study about benefits of teacher observation.

Bandura's third source of self-efficacy refers to social experiences, notably feedback from others regarding their performance. According to Bandura (1997), constructive feedback about an individual's abilities or performance enhances feelings of

self-efficacy. This was evidenced in this study as most participants noted the benefits of constructive feedback and reflection. This was a strong theme among first grade study participants. Regular classroom visits by administration and the ELL supervisor provided on-going opportunities for teacher feedback (P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, P9).

Participants also expressed satisfaction with the district's curriculum framework and access to a variety of instructional resources. The incorporation of standards-based instruction guided their lesson planning. Study participants used clear learning objectives to meet the instructional needs of their diverse group of learners. Teachers credited the use of several instructional resources such as *Words Their Way*, *National Geographic,* and *Scholastic's Guided Reading Program* to develop students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities. Teachers' access to instructional resources to meet the needs of ELLs is not a commonality in other school settings (Besterman, et al., 2018; Heitin, 2016; Herrera, 2018). Teachers lack curricular resources and appropriate assessments. Additionally, most instructional resources are modifications of the materials used for non-ELL students. Since these materials fail to build background, teachers often create their own resources (Loewus, 2016).

Research Question 2 explored how veteran teachers' perceptions characterize their instructional decisions to meet the diverse needs of the ELL population. The results revealed that classroom environment is a key factor in student success and that student centered learning helps meet students' learning goals. Individuals (P5, P7) noted that their classroom environment has changed over time based on their teaching experiences. They (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8) also shared that students achieve success in positive,

welcoming learning environments. Participants' decision to create positive learning environments is reflective of mastery experiences, Bandura's primary source of self-efficacy. Teachers' success in creating such environments increased their self-efficacy. "I have the confidence to do what needs to be done to create a student friendly learning environment. Teacher confidence increases student confidence" (P5).

The results of the study also stated the importance of focusing on the needs of all learners. This theme was prevalent among the kindergarten participants. Study participants (P3, P4, P5, P7) felt confident in their ability to meet the needs of ELLs in the classroom and used a variety of strategies and instructional models, such as guided reading, visuals, scaffolding, and higher-level questioning strategies. This supports the findings in Tran's (2015) mixed-method's study that found that teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to implement instructional practices that meet the needs of all students. Similar results were revealed in research conducted by Lopez and Santibanez (2018) and Wang, et al., (2017). Additionally, Suprayogi et al. (2017) stated that teachers with high self-efficacy believed they can support students by using a variety of strategies and instructional methods in the classroom.

The commonality that most of the literature shared related to teachers' preparedness to teach ELLs and the relationship between self-efficacy and feelings of preparedness. Preparation increases self-efficacy, which in turn increases confidence and precipitates feelings of teacher preparedness. A mixed-methods study by Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) explored professional development needs of middle and high school general education educators. The results revealed that teachers who had taken two or more

college courses felt they were effective teachers. Preservice teacher preparation programs play a key role in teachers' efficacy and feelings of preparedness. Yough's (2019) qualitative study surveyed preservice teachers to explore the relationship between ELL coursework and self-efficacy. The findings revealed that teachers' sense of self-efficacy for teaching ELLs increased through the coursework in their teacher preparation program. Previous research studies indicate that teachers did not receive adequate preparation in college. Murphy and Torff (2019) noted that very few teacher education programs provide training to preservice teachers. Specifically, there has been a lack of preparation in multiculturism, language, and ELL strategies (Moser et al., 2018). Study participants agreed that more specific coursework at the college level would have better prepared them (P2, P7, P8). P7 shared, "College did not prepare me for real-life situations in the classroom." P8 stated that college preparation courses were limited while P2 noted "College needed to prepare me more; I was not prepared for classroom realities."

Limitations of the Study

While the research study's findings added to the body of literature related to teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs, there are several limitations that should be addressed. First, the potential for bias exists. Bias operates on a multitude of levels and often is unconscious or implicit, subtly influencing one's thoughts or actions (Reinholz, Stone-Johnstone, & Shah, 2020; Staats, et al., 2017). Teachers tend to show preferential treatment to students who have commonalities such as appearance, culture, or language. Minority students often experience educational inequity; bias towards this population is associated with lower academic performance (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra,

2021; Reinholz et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2021). In this study, it is possible that participants' may have biased views due to their cultural background or experience. For example, three of the study's participants were second language learners (P1, P6, P8). Their previous learning experiences may have led to unconscious bias, affecting the study's validity. In the future, researchers may want to consider participants' backgrounds and how they may potentially affect the study's findings.

In qualitative research, there are no guidelines for sample size (Patton, 2015). Samplings are typically small in order to effectively analyze data (Carminati, 2018). The small sampling of teacher participants is a potential limitation. The study participants represented one large urban district in New Jersey. This may have lowered the generalizability of the findings. According to Blaikie (2018), the larger the sample size, the more the researcher is able to generalize the results. Future studies may be replicated with a larger sample size that to include multiple districts. Also, the sampling group consisted of all females. Including male participants may lead to different results. Subsequent studies may include involving different states and demographics to add to the study's findings.

Additionally, the district implemented remote learning for all students during the 2020-2021 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Study participants relied on technology tools to meet the diverse language needs of ELLs. Several participants (P4, P6, P9) noted that remote learning was challenging for ELLs. The remote teaching and learning environment affected study participants' experiences and potentially influenced

the study's results. Future studies may occur in learning environments that use face-to-face instruction.

Finally, the timing of the one-on-one interviews is another limitation that should be considered. Interviews were conducted during the last few weeks of school. Participants were in the process of completing end-of-the-year tasks. Time management was challenging for some teachers. Future research may occur at a time of the year where teachers are not experiencing potential time constraints.

Recommendations

Considering the growing ELL population and consistent achievement gap between ELLs and their non-ELL peers, it was important to explore elementary teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs and how those perceptions define their instructional practices. The findings in Chapter 4 revealed that study participants have positive perceptions about their ability to instruct ELLs in the classroom and that self-efficacy plays an integral role in teachers' feelings of preparedness. Support from administration and opportunities for ongoing professional development positively affected participants' self-efficacy. Access to instructional resources was also a key factor in teachers' positive feelings of preparedness. The results also indicated that teachers' perceptions played an integral part in creating a student-centered learning environment. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to use instructional practices that meet the diverse needs of all students. Teachers' self-efficacy increased through coursework in teacher training and preservice programs. These findings present several suggestions for future research.

Participants credited their preparedness and confidence to the support of district administrators and school leaders. Subsequent studies may explore administrators' perceptions of their preparedness to support teachers of ELLs. In addition to overseeing curriculum and assessment, administrators are responsible for creating systems of support for teachers in order to achieve student success. This includes implementing on-going consistent professional training plans. Exploring their perceptions of administrators' preparedness has the potential to increase the confidence levels of administrators and teachers as well as improve educational outcomes for all students.

Access to instructional resources supported teachers' planning and instruction. The literature revealed that many teachers do not have access to curricular resources. Future studies may explore how implementation of consistent instructional frameworks and resources influences teachers' self-efficacy and student achievement. Study participants (P2, P7, P8) also shared they had little to no training in college and noted that more specific coursework would have better prepared them to meet the diverse needs of ELLs. Future studies may evaluate preservice training programs to determine how they can better prepare preservice teachers to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of students. This preparation extends beyond instructional strategy preparation. There is a need to prepare preservice teachers for the reality of teaching a diverse population of learners. Future studies may also focus on preservice programs that include hands-on or field experiences. Additionally, some states require ELL coursework in order to acquire teacher certification. Exploring the perceptions of certified teachers in those states may provide additional information related to self-efficacy and ELLs' academic performance.

Study participants also mentioned the importance of developing a home-school connection. Future studies could explore strategies to increase parental engagement and how those strategies influence instruction in the classroom. Strong home-school partnerships support students' development and may improve student outcomes.

Future research studies may replicate the current study with a larger sample size to include multiple districts. Subsequent studies may include involving different states and demographics to add to the study's findings. Another thought for future studies is to consider participants' cultural backgrounds. Three study participants were ELLs. Perhaps a study exploring the perspectives of classroom teachers who are not ELLs would produce different results.

Implications

The results of the study found that participants were confident in their ability to teach ELLs in the classroom. Support from administration and participation in professional learning activities played an integral part in participants' feeling of preparedness. As the ELL population continues to grow, teachers will be faced with the challenge of meeting this group's diverse needs. Professional training opportunities have the potential to impact social change as teachers deepen their ELL knowledge and acquire a better understanding of other cultures. Implementing on-going professional practices may provide instructional strategies to meet the varied needs of the ELL population. As was indicated in the study, teacher support leads to better classroom instruction.

Additionally, the study noted the importance of utilizing instructional resources in

the classroom to provide a clear learning path for students. The results of this study also have the potential to increase teacher self-efficacy. Teachers with high efficacy are confident in their abilities to create a student-center learning environment, which is a key factor to student success. Consequently, the potential exists for increased graduation rates and participation in the workplace, increasing economic growth. This study will also add to the body of literature on supporting the academic development and needs of ELLs and has the potential to help fill the gaps in the literature on the subject.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multi-case study was to explore veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs and how those perceptions define their instructional practices. The ELL population continues to show exponential growth and is consistently outperformed academically by their non-ELL peers. To answer the research questions, semistructured interviews were conducted with nine veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers with a minimum of 7 years of teaching experience.

The results revealed that teachers were confident in their ability to teach ELLs in the classroom. Participants credited their feelings of confidence to on-going professional development, support from administration, and access to instructional resources. In addition to professional training on ELL specific topics, participants valued opportunities to observe colleagues and welcomed constructive feedback. The study also found that teachers' perceptions of preparedness played a key role in creating a student-centered

learning environment. Investment in appropriate instructional materials assisted teachers in creating and delivering standards-based instruction.

Additionally, the results noted the relationship between self-efficacy and teachers' feelings of preparedness. Participants demonstrated confidence in their ability to effectively instruct ELLs. Teachers credited their confidence or high efficacy to the on-going professional learning and support of administration. District-provided professional training positively affected study participants' self-efficacy, or belief in their ability to meet the diverse needs of students. The results of this study indicate the importance of developing and implementing a sustainable professional develop plan. Successful implementation has the potential to increase teacher efficacy and confidence, leading to teachers' feelings of preparedness.

Continued investment in teachers' professional development has the potential to increase teachers' self-efficacy. Increased teacher-efficacy may also increase students' efficacy, leading to academic growth. Positive results may be experienced both locally and globally as increased academic achievement has the potential to lead to higher graduation rates and participation in the workforce. All of this positively affects the global economy.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Thank you for meeting me with me today to discuss how veteran teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach English language learners and how those perceptions characterize their instructional decisions. Thank you, too, for returning the signed informed consent form.

I will record the interview and share a copy of the transcript for your review. Please know that your participation is voluntary and you may decline to answer a question or opt out of the interview at any time during the interview.

Warm-up Question(s)	How would you describe your philosophy of teaching?
Research Question 1 What perceptions do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade literacy teachers have about their preparedness to teach reading to English language learners?	Please describe your current classroom environment. If I visited your classroom, what would I experience? How do you differentiate instruction in the classroom, particularly in the area of literacy? Describe any ELL training or professional development you have had as a classroom teacher. How satisfied are you with the preparation you have received to teach ELLs?
Research Question 2	How do you respond to ELLs' academic struggles?

How do veteran kindergarten, first, and second grade first grade literacy teachers' perceptions characterize their instructional decisions to meet the diverse needs of the ELL population?	What specific strategies do you use to respond to ELLs' academic needs? Describe the training/preparation you have received from the district. How would you describe the optimal learning environment for ELLs? Are there specific strategies you use to meet ELLs' academic needs?
Conceptual Framework Bandura's theory of self-efficacy	How did your professional training experiences affect your attitudes and beliefs about your preparedness to teach ELLs? How do your beliefs about your preparedness characterize your instructional decisions relative to ELLs? Is there anyone in your building or district that provides support, feedback, or suggestions that supports your ELL instruction?

Closing Questions/Comments	Thank you for sharing your thoughts about your perceptions of your preparedness to instruct ELLs in the classroom. Is there anything else you would like to share with me before we conclude the interview? Thank you for your willingness to participate in the interview. I will send you the recording and/or transcript of our interview and you will have the opportunity to make any corrections at that time.

At the conclusion of the interview, I will share the following closing statement:

Thank you for participating in this study about veteran teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach ELLs. Please contact me via email at kelly.philbin@walden.edu or by phone at (609) 828-5198 if you decide you do not want your data used in this study and I will permanently delete your interview data. Please know that any recommendations or reports that result from this study will not disclose the identity of any of the participants. Thank you again for your participation.