The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the perceptions and experiences of English Language Learners (ELLs) who were or are currently enrolled in online credit recovery programs at one rural traditional high school. The U.S. Department of Education reports that over half a million students drop out of high school each year. The need for innovative and flexible programs designed to ensure students earn the credits needed for graduation is more urgent than ever in public schools today. Marginalized student populations are at an even greater risk for academic failure. My conceptual framework examined online learning, best practices for English Language Learners, and the credit recovery experience for Latinx learners.

This qualitative research study focused on the perceptions of Latinx students who participated in credit recovery. I conducted face-to-face and virtual interviews with 10 current and previous credit recovery Latinx students and interviewed two site-based facilitators of the credit recovery program. My goal was to learn about the circumstances that led to initial course failure and better understand the student perception of the effectiveness of the credit recovery process.

The findings indicated several key elements essential to academic success as perceived by the student participants: positive student/teacher relationships, student self-motivation, and a career and college mindset with strategic supports in place. The importance of appropriate differentiated instruction was a recurrent theme for students with reference to the challenges of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency and pacing.
within the mainstream classroom. Cultural factors and embedded micro-aggressions also impacted the progress of these Latinx students and necessitated the use of credit recovery. Perhaps the greatest lesson learned from this study was the importance of the ethics of care and student relationships. Authentic caring pedagogy reverses the negative impact of subtractive schooling and provides equitable access for all students to attain academic success.
LATINX STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE CREDIT RECOVERY EXPERIENCE IN A RURAL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL IN NORTH CAROLINA

by

Susan W. Chappell

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

Greensboro 2021

Approved by

Katherine C. Mansfield
Committee Chair
I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved husband, Larry. You saw leadership potential in me that altered my professional path in positive ways that I could have never imagined. I could not have taken this journey without your love, support, and mentorship.
This dissertation, written by SUSAN W. CHAPPELL, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair  Katherine C. Mansfield
Committee Members  Kathryn Hytten
                    Craig Peck

June 8, 2021
Date of Acceptance by Committee

June 8, 2021
Date of Final Oral Examination
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to my dissertation committee (Dr. Mansfield, Dr. Hytten, and Dr. Peck) for imparting their wisdom and encouraging me to take risks and trust my instincts. I would especially like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Katherine Mansfield, for her unwavering support and inspiration. She is the embodiment of excellence in education, and I hope to continue to grow in her example. Thank you to my daughters Lauren, Allison, and Julia for sticking with me through thick and thin and to my husband Larry for loving me through it all. I would also like to thank my mom for her lifetime of love and faith in me. I hope I have made you all proud. Finally, thank you to every colleague, student, teacher, and parent for blessing my life and shaping me into the educator I am today.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF TABLES</th>
<th>vii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

I. **INTRODUCTION** ................................................................. 1

- Problem Statement ................................................................. 3
- Purpose and Research Questions .............................................. 5
- Background Context ............................................................... 7
- English Language Learners and Credit Recovery ......................... 8
- Methods ..................................................................................... 10
- Theoretical Foundations ........................................................... 11
- Researcher Experience and Positionality .................................... 15
- Significance ............................................................................. 16
- Overview .................................................................................... 17

II. **LITERATURE REVIEW** ........................................................... 19

- Online Learning ......................................................................... 20
  - Critical Elements of Effective Online Learning ......................... 20
  - The Role of Caring in School Success ...................................... 24
- Credit Recovery ........................................................................ 27
  - Participants ............................................................................ 28
  - Credit Recovery Benefits and Disadvantages ............................ 30
- English Language Learners and Online Learning ......................... 34
  - Graduation/Dropout Impact ................................................. 34
  - Online Opportunities for ELL Students ................................... 39
- Conclusion .................................................................................. 40

III. **METHODOLOGY** .................................................................. 44

- Pilot Study ................................................................................ 44
- Study Design ............................................................................. 48
  - Setting .................................................................................. 49
  - Sample Population ............................................................... 50
- Data Collection Methods ......................................................... 51


IV. FINDINGS .............................................................................................................62

The Nature of the Credit Recovery Program .......................................................63
   The Apex Learning Framework ........................................................................65
   How Apex is Implemented at Central High School ......................................69
Perceptions of the Credit Recovery Experience ..................................................83
   Significance of Student/Teacher Relationships ..............................................83
   Initial Credit Loss Classroom Experience .....................................................84
   Credit Recovery Classroom Experience .........................................................87
   Facilitator Perceptions of the Student/Teacher Relationship .......................91
Student Self-Motivation ......................................................................................93
   Self-Motivation and Initial Course Experience ..............................................93
   Self-Motivation and the Credit Recovery Experience ..................................96
Career- and College-Ready Mindset .................................................................100
Summary .............................................................................................................104

V. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..................106

Discussion ...........................................................................................................106
Implications .........................................................................................................112
   Initial Course Failure .....................................................................................113
   Credit Recovery Impacts ................................................................................114
   Improvement Strategies ..................................................................................115
Recommendations ...............................................................................................119
   School to District Leadership .........................................................................122
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research ...........................................124
Final Thoughts .....................................................................................................127

VI. EPILOGUE ........................................................................................................131

REFERENCES ......................................................................................................133

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ............................................................141

APPENDIX B. OBSERVATION PROTOCOL .......................................................143
LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table 1. Study Overview ............................................................................................................. 10
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Analytical Framework</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Unit Overview</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Content Learning Module Sample</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Module Assessment Sample Quiz Page</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Module Wrap-Up</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>First Block Flex Lab for Credit Recovery and Distance Learning</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Fifth Block Flex Lab for Credit Recovery and Distance Learning</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Second Block Flex Lab for Credit Recovery and Distance Learning</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Third Block Credit Recovery in the ESL Classroom</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Cummins’s Iceberg Analogy</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), in the 2016–2017 school year, the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school students was 85%, the highest it has been since the rate was first measured in 2010–2011. State education agencies calculate the ACGR by identifying the cohort of first-time ninth-graders in a given school year. ACGR is adjusted as students move in and out of a cohort. These data indicate that 15% of high school students fail to graduate on time, if at all. As a result, educational institutions are under critical examination to address this graduation problem. Implementing the credit recovery process has become a common tool for helping students remain in their cohort and successfully graduate from high school on time.

According to data collected by the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS) between October 2016 and October 2017, the number of 15- to 24-year-olds who left school without obtaining a high school credential was approximately 523,000. Many contributing factors lead to students leaving high school before graduation. For example, research shows that socioeconomic factors have a critical impact on the success or failure of “at-risk” learners (Jensen, 2009). Using online credit recovery courses is a predominant strategy used in schools to get students back on track and graduate (Rickles et al., 2018). To stem the dropout rate and provide academic support for struggling
learners, schools have become innovative in providing alternate learning environments for students to regain credits and get back on track toward high school completion.

Advancements in learning technologies have allowed districts to address academic deficiencies while students continue to advance in their current course of study. Credit recovery is one of the areas of fastest growth for online learning. Credit recovery is broadly defined as a strategy for helping students regain lost academic credits by retaking the class in an alternative format (Malkus, 2018). And while course designers often try to be inventive as they develop standard online courses, they must be even more creative when developing courses for those who had taken a course before and failed. Public school systems must diversify their options to remain competitive with charter and private schools that continue to draw students away from the traditional setting.

Additionally, to maintain engagement and empower students to engage in credit recovery, the need for a different approach that will promote student success and social/emotional willingness to engage is critical. While credit recovery courses are an option for all high school students, studies have shown that a disproportionate number of students utilizing credit recovery are students of color (Powell, 2018). Powell’s research contributes to existing racial inequality literature that illustrates how equity-focused change efforts often are contorted and perpetuate White dominance and increase Black subordination and oppression. Since its inception in the early 1960s, credit recovery is often viewed as the solution for students to stay in school and graduate with their peers. However, there is limited research on this topic, particularly surrounding students’
experiences in credit recovery courses and whether they work to help students not just gain credits but gain critical content mastery.

**Problem Statement**

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), over half a million students drop out of high school each year. High school administrators must respond by offering innovative and flexible programs to ensure students earn the necessary credits for timely graduation. Many factors may lead to a student being labeled “at risk.” For example, at-risk students typically have failed to achieve basic proficiency in at least one course required for graduation. Credit recovery is a strategy designed for at-risk students to retake a previously failed course to demonstrate mastery and earn credits to maintain a forward track to graduate on time with their peers.

Credit recovery is configured in a variety of ways in schools across the nation. Alternate learning opportunities are provided to make up missing assignments for completion or sometimes repeating a course through a digital platform to gain the lost credit. Credit recovery can be done during the school day, after school, or even throughout the summer break. Many schools utilize software programs for the credit recovery model, taking the credit recovery process into the online arena. High schools offer credit recovery courses to students at various times, including during the regular school day, before or after school, and summer sessions, depending on the district and state funding supports.

With any alternate means of credit attainment, there are debates about the rigor, quality, and effectiveness of these models. Skeptics of online learning models challenge
the validity of online recovery models due to the lack of direct face-to-face instruction received in the traditional classroom. In a study of success in online learning programs, Blackmon and Major (2012) found that online instructor accessibility was a major contributing factor to student success. Simultaneously, the researchers noted that the inability to collaborate with peers was a drawback to online learning. There are also questions regarding the rigor and monitoring of curricula provided by outside vendors for credit recovery. Critics of credit recovery programs argue that students are simply pushed through the system to maintain graduation rates. For example, Malkus (2018) alludes to the “watering-down” of diplomas and the production of ill-prepared graduates entering the workforce. Each argument merits a thorough examination to ensure that the credit recovery pathway provides high-quality, rigorous standards-based curriculum alternatives.

As I progressed with my research, I also began to think about which students participated in credit recovery and what circumstances led them to need this alternative route. Powell (2018) conducted an ethnographic case study of a credit recovery program and found that in many cases, credit recovery exacerbated racial inequalities in the educational setting. It is important to understand the mitigating factors in the traditional public school setting and outside social/emotional and environmental factors that result in the need for credit recovery. There is limited research on students’ experiences in credit recovery programs and how they perceive the quality of their learning in these settings.

The existing research has identified credit recovery as a potential source of racial inequity; however, most of the research focuses on the continued oppression of African-
American students in public schools (Powell, 2018). A program designed to allow equal opportunity for all students has created an opposing environment that contests the equity-focused initiative’s design. A significant demographic shift affecting education today is the rapidly increasing influx of students who speak English as a second language. Latinx students whose primary home language is not English face an increased challenge to master language acquisition and academic advancement (Callahan, 2005). As a result, there has been an increased need for credit recovery opportunities for Latinx students and English language learners, subsequently creating highly racialized spaces. Due to this demographic shift, a need for more research on credit recovery and the Latinx population has emerged.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The overarching purpose of this study was to examine and understand the perceptions and experiences of English Language Learners (ELLs) who were currently enrolled in online credit recovery programs at Central High School. I also sought to gain a more accurate understanding of the idiosyncrasies of this digital approach to teaching and learning at this particular high school, given my prior teaching experience and training for best practices. An early question in my study addressed best practices for online learning with a focus on how English Language learners best learn. This question was addressed through my literature review. This study enabled me to increase the field of research on ELL students and credit recovery, better understand best practices, and make recommendations for further research and improvement of existing programs.
My goal was not only to understand the students’ perspectives of their experience but also what value the student placed on the experience and its contribution to their knowledge base in preparation for graduation. The following research questions drove this study:

1. What is the nature of the credit recovery program at Central High School?
2. How do current and former students perceive their experiences in the credit recovery program at Central High School?

The purpose of the first research question was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the credit recovery program, its origin of development, and the specifics of program implementation. The second research question delved into the specific experiences of Latinx students and their perceptions of the credit recovery experience and the impact it had on their academic advancement. To understand and analyze the nature of the program and students’ experiences, I examined the literature on credit recovery and the role of caring in students’ schooling experiences. I could not fully understand or analyze the nature of the program (Question #1) or students’ experiences (Question #2) unless I had a deep understanding of the literature and used it as a lens to analyze the data collected, conduct adequate meaning-making, and convey implications of my findings for future research and recommendations for practice. In Chapter V I address the recurrent issues that arose in my study and make recommendations to improve future practice. I also acknowledge the limitations of the study and the need for further research in order to fully ascertain the effectiveness of both core instructional practices and credit recovery as a mastery learning model.
Background Context

Traditional forms of face-to-face education have undergone a radical transformation in the last decade. The traditional brick-and-mortar setting for school has been expanded to allow students to study remotely with schedules tailored to the specific needs of each student. Rapid advancements in technology have allowed educational institutions to expand their course offerings and provide differentiated alternative learning environments that afford students expansive options for learning. Schools are utilizing online learning as a tool for increasing course availability, leveraging staff to maximize student learning, and providing opportunities for remediation and mastery as educational support for at-risk students. Whether using online learning as a tool to increase academic rigor or as a resource for remediation, online learning has become interwoven into the foundations of educational practice. The onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020 drastically escalated the need for alternative online learning opportunities for students from primary to post-secondary levels and increased the need for credit recovery for initial course failures.

Online and blended models of credit recovery are offered to regain lost credit during a student’s academic tenure. Over the past 2 decades, as technological advancements have improved instructional options, schools have opted for online credit recovery courses over face-to-face courses. This preference has allowed for more flexibility in access for students and provided economic benefits for instructional budgets. For many districts, this has proven to be a cost-effective means of providing support for at-risk learners and providing opportunities to regain credits with the existing
staff. Students are enrolled in comparable modules aligned to the course content of the failed course. After remediation and re-teaching, students have the opportunity to be assessed for mastery and then move on to the next module. Proponents of the program boast the ability to regain credit and remain on track for graduation. Opponents assert that this program is a subpar alternative to face-to-face instruction. Ongoing research is needed to determine the efficacy of credit recovery programs.

While credit recovery typically is available to all students in a district, researchers assert that these programs can exacerbate the racial segregation of students (Powell, 2018). A study by Frankenberg et al. (2016) supported that assertion, finding that students of color were disproportionately enrolled in credit recovery programs at a racially diverse suburban high school, which has created a perception by stakeholders in many districts that credit recovery is primarily a minority support system.

**English Language Learners and Credit Recovery**

English language learners are a diverse group of students with different language, academic, and social-emotional needs. Latinx is defined by Merriam Webster as a “gender-neutral alternative to Latino or Latina,” typically indicating a person of Latin origin (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In 2010, the U.S. Census began differentiating categories for racial identity, including Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Throughout the literature reviewed, the terms Hispanic and Latino/a were used interchangeably. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, between 1999 and 2016, the number of Hispanics enrolled in public and private nursery schools, K-12 schools, and colleges increased by 80%, from 9.9 million to 17.9 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).
Latinx is the largest and most rapidly growing ethnic minority in the country; however, academically, they lag dangerously far behind their non-Hispanic peers. Participation in credit recovery may have assisted in increasing graduation rates but may not be yielding highly prepared graduates for the workforce or postsecondary education. In 2014-2015 The National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate conducted a survey that assessed the effectiveness of credit recovery as a strategy to improve graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). While there was an increase in graduation rates, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) completed a systematic review of research studies on credit recovery programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). It could not draw conclusions based on existing research about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of credit recovery programs. This demonstrated a clear need for additional research on the impact of credit recovery, with particular attention paid to its impact on marginalized students.

In a study of instructional practices, Gándara et al. (2003) found that ELLs (primarily Latinx) received an inferior education along seven different dimensions, even compared to other poor and low-income students. Research on best practices for this subgroup has increased with the growing demographic. Supporting ELLs in the mainstream classroom has become a matter of social justice (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Failure to address the specific needs of this subgroup of learners has resulted in higher numbers of Latinx students who need opportunities for credit recovery following course failure in the mainstream setting.
Methods

To understand the experiences of Latinx students in credit recovery programs, I conducted a basic qualitative study. My study sought to understand the social/emotional impact of course failure and recovery on Latinx students, how they made meaning of these programs, and the role of credit recovery in their academic journey. I conducted 10 interviews with Latinx students to learn about not only the credit recovery experience but also the circumstances that may have contributed to the initial course failure. My goal was to gain a deep, rich, and authentic understanding of the perceptions of students who participated in credit recovery. My target participant group was Latinx ELL students who are (or were) enrolled in credit recovery courses and/or have completed a full semester of credit recovery. Table 1 gives an overview of my approach to this study, comprised of two major research questions. Additional details for each question and corresponding methods are provided in Chapter III.

Table 1.

Study Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do I want to know?</th>
<th>How will I find out?</th>
<th>To whom will I talk? What documents do I need?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the nature of the credit recovery program at Central High School?</td>
<td>Document analysis Observations Interviews</td>
<td>Websites, lesson plans, and policy handbooks Examine curriculum, attend online meetings Talk with teachers, admin, students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What do I want to know?  

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<th>How will I find out?</th>
<th>To whom will I talk?</th>
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| 2. How do current and former students perceive their experiences in the credit recovery program at Central High School? | Interviews | Current students  
Former students |

**Theoretical Foundations**

This qualitative study was designed to ensure I gain an authentic understanding of the perceptions and impact of the credit recovery program on Latinx students. Many students find successful pathways back to graduation via the credit recovery path, but many others fall short and drop out of high school before graduating. Through interviews and observations, I gained meaningful insight into the circumstances that led to initial course failure and the student perception of the credit recovery experience itself. It is a very personal decision for students to engage or disengage from their high school education. Through an interpretative lens, I was able to listen to the actual words of the participants to construct the best understanding of the phenomenon. Despite the prevailing theories of current research, neither could I predetermine what conditions led to my research participants’ need for credit recovery, nor could I know the levels of success students experience without understanding the mitigating factors of each participant.

Critical race theory (CRT) is a tool that can be used to analyze the impact of systemic oppression of students of color in public education. Critical race theory asserts
that race is socially constructed and functions to maintain the interests of the White population that constructed it. Racism continues to be ordinary and pervasive in society, despite educational change efforts. In this study, I gleaned directly from marginalized students about their experiences with success and failure in school and the impact race played in those outcomes. This understanding contributes to my desire to share the voices of those marginalized by socioeconomic, privilege, and race-related factors that may have contributed to the need for Latinx students to utilize credit recovery to advance their academic advancement. The idea that race is socially constructed to maintain White hegemony is embedded throughout the discussion of who utilizes resources such as credit recovery and why many choose an online learning environment over the traditional setting (Viano, 2018). Using this notion, I was able to understand better the perspectives of how students receive the opportunity to regain credit and how they may have initially found themselves in that position. CRT is also addressed throughout the literature when analyzing why students of color might prefer the online setting rather than the traditional setting (Barnett, 2016). Implications are embedded throughout that the institutional racism in traditional schools drives minorities to the online forum for a safe haven. My interviews and observations sought to determine the current impact of institutional racism on the social/emotional health of the Latinx students at Central High School. This required enormous trust and vulnerability on the part of the student interviewed and the need for extreme care on my part as the researcher.

Although credit recovery is meant to be a supportive strategy to encourage course mastery and credit attainment, it is still viewed by some as an even more oppressive
environment. Powell (2018) discussed the paradox of credit recovery and how the true benefit is not to the marginalized participants. Credit recovery is intended to be a type of equity-focused intervention for at-risk students. However, Powell’s research shows that racial inequality thrives in credit recovery programs. Powell used CRT’s tenet of the role of Whiteness to create a comprehensive portrait of how racial inequality is embedded in the credit recovery concept. Continued oppression implies an inequitable expectation and rigor in credit recovery due to the interconnectedness of Whiteness and educational institutions. Opponents of credit recovery assert that it benefits the predominantly White institution and the need to meet institutional accountability measures. This is in direct opposition to the idea that credit recovery was designed to support and help students achieve personal academic success. Powell also examines the infiltration of White advantage into a program initially designed for at-risk students. Many non-minority students have begun to utilize credit recovery settings to take initial-credit courses and advance already successful academic performance and grade point averages. In an ethnographic case study conducted by Powell (2018), students of vocal affluent White parents could leverage their White advantage to racialize the institutional practices and monopolize academic support for White students in the credit recovery setting; this is a prime example of White privilege assuming a position of advantage.

The impact of race on the dynamics of the credit recovery program can fully better be understood by applying Derrick Bell’s (1980) interest convergence theory and the White advantage that credit recovery promotes. As at-risk students of color are relegated to online credit recovery, resources are freed to promote advanced placement
and more rigorous offerings for non-marginalized students. Despite the widespread adoption of these credit recovery programs, there is a lack of scholarly research on the effectiveness, rigor, and suitability of online credit recovery. However, credit recovery allows districts to push minorities through to graduation and focus their funding on advancement for students already demonstrating high levels of academic success. The consequential benefits of increased resources for Whites due to the development of credit recovery opportunities for marginalized minorities showed a convergence of interests, further exacerbating racial inequalities.

To combat trust and racial inequity issues, schools must operate from an educationally caring foundation that focuses on the merit of caring related to educational best practices (Barnett, 2016). When dealing with at-risk populations, the research suggests that curriculum and instructional methods should be customized. As the K-12 learning environment continues to evolve, online and blended learning environments have become an accepted pedagogical opportunity for at-risk students. While much emphasis is placed on student interactions, focusing on autonomy and content, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning Research Committee (Archambault et al., 2010) called for additional research on the specific needs of at-risk students in the online setting. The amicable relationship between students and teachers is customary in a traditional classroom setting. The online venue comes with a greater risk of isolation and detachment. Lan and Lanthier (2003) assert the need for “friendly and supportive online environments that pay close attention to the students’ needs” (p. 327). The act of caring and commitment is a critical piece of at-risk student success in online learning. Using a
care theory perspective, I evaluated the concept of care related to student success in credit recovery.

**Researcher Experience and Positionality**

As a former teacher of second language learners, the impact of credit recovery on this subgroup is of particular interest. With the bulk of my teaching tenure involving Grades K-8, I have had limited exposure to the credit recovery program. However, over the last 6 years as an administrator at Central High School, I have worked closely with our credit recovery facilitators to ensure student success and advancement. Stereotypically, credit recovery is portrayed by many as an option targeting minoritized students. However, in my current school, there is a diverse student population utilizing this intervention. We have a substantial proportion of Latinx students in credit recovery each semester, but they are also the second-largest ethnicity represented in our student body. As a result, it is difficult to assess whether the stereotype in the literature of credit recovery being targeted to minoritized students is prevalent in this school.

My perspective of credit recovery has been shaped by the experiences and observations I have made throughout my current administrative role. I entered into administration at the secondary level with no teaching experience in high school. As I learned the foundational components of working at this level, I was perplexed and intrigued by the concept of credit recovery. This option is a phenomenon that exists only at the secondary level in my district. After conducting a thorough review of the literature, I realized that this is neither consistently a positive alternative for students nor is it always academically beneficial. I was intrigued by the notion of mastery learning and
opportunities to regain lost credit for a timely graduation and academic advancement. This fueled my desire to study this topic and gain a deeper understanding of the positives and negatives of the program and how to improve it for all participants.

As a former ESL teacher, I have a passion for supporting this subgroup of learners’ academic and social/emotional cultural needs. As an administrator, I have a passion for seeing all students reach and exceed their full potential. Additionally, as an administrator, I have observed firsthand the positive impact of course recovery on my students at Central High School. The ability to stay with their graduating cohort and remove the stigma of being left behind proved to be encouraging and empowering to help students reach their goal of timely graduation. This study allowed me to study credit recovery, its practices, and student perceptions through a Latinx lens to improve best practices not just for Latinx but for all credit recovery participants at Central High School.

**Significance**

School districts throughout the United States have implemented varied prevention strategies to reduce high school dropout rates among at-risk students. According to a 2018 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 89% of U.S. high schools offered credit recovery options to those who needed them, and 15% of those students participated in at least one credit recovery course (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). There are advantages and disadvantages to utilizing credit recovery as an instructional tool that merit analysis. In addition to the need for a close study of pros and cons is the need to increase the body of research on this topic. Due to the variability
of design and malleability of the program, there is little conclusive research on the effectiveness of this instructional approach on long-term academic success.

In this study, I analyzed perceptions of the credit recovery experience for Latinx students. In understanding their experiences and the factors that led to initial course failure, I can develop recommendations for improving instructional practices both within the credit recovery setting and the initial credit classroom setting using the tenets of critical race theory and interest convergence. Following Mansfield (2014; 2015), this study gives voice to Latinx students regarding their educational experiences, both positive and negative, and allowed me the opportunity to add to the body of research so that future practitioners can improve credit recovery practices in the years to come.

**Overview**

In this chapter, I addressed the growing use of credit recovery as a resource for addressing the academic needs of students. Credit recovery has become a popular option for high school leaders as a measure for dropout prevention and ensure students maintain a timely path to graduation. Credit recovery targets the at-risk population of students who experience course failure during their academic careers. There are opportunities for students to utilize the credit recovery format and software to gain initial credit in some school settings. However, this is not a generally common practice given the opportunities provided through The North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) and local community colleges that partner with high schools. In this study, I closely examined the perceptions of Latinx students who had participated in one or more credit recovery courses and the impact of that credit recovery on Latinx students’ academic performance.
With the findings of this study, I made recommendations and facilitate the implementation of improved practices to address a commitment to equity and social justice for all students.

In Chapter II, I describe the body of research for online learning as an educational medium, credit recovery as an intervention strategy and instructional method, and how English language learners function academically and socially in the online realm. I share what I have learned from the research, identify gaps in the research, and discuss how my study will contribute to the current scholarly body of research. In Chapter III, I explain the methodology I used to conduct my study. I describe the participants, data collection methods and analysis strategies, and limitations of the study. In Chapter IV, I share my study findings. In Chapter V, I share my analysis of those findings and discuss recommendations for future research and improvements of existing instructional practices at Central High School.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

In a world of high-stakes accountability, schools have been charged with providing innovative learning opportunities for students to ensure equity and access for all students. Online learning has become a popular venue for many students in secondary schools. Many circumstances may lead a student to participate in online learning courses. Some students choose this venue as an alternative to the traditional setting to take courses that are not available in their school or schedule flexibility. Other students utilize online opportunities to regain credits lost due to course failure. Advocates of online learning promote the customized learning opportunities, flexibility, and convenience that this medium affords. Opponents cite the lack of a personal connection and physical interaction in the online setting that cannot supplant the traditional classroom setting. In this literature review, I provide an overview of online learning as a genre of instructional practice and focus on using credit recovery as instructional support to promote timely graduation and reduce dropouts. I also examine the role of caring for student engagement and success. I conclude with an examination of the impact of online learning and credit recovery on the academic achievement of English language learners in the secondary setting.
Online Learning

Online learning is a relatively new approach to teaching and learning that is transforming traditional educational settings. Its purpose and function vary by circumstances and necessity, allowing online learning to be an alternate route to academic growth and achievement. Online learning is an umbrella term for many virtual and hybrid instruction styles, both synchronous and asynchronous. In North America and other industrialized countries, distance education for elementary and secondary students is seen as a solution to several educational problems, including crowded schools, a shortage of secondary courses for remedial or accelerated students, a lack of access to qualified teachers in a local school, and the challenge to accommodate students who need to learn at a pace or in a place different from a school classroom (Cavanaugh & Clark, 2007). While the popularity of online learning as an instructional tool continues to increase, research on best practices and the effectiveness of this model of instruction is lacking. In the following section, I examine the basic components of online learning and discuss common themes related to students’ success or failure in the online learning setting.

Critical Elements of Effective Online Learning

As a developing field of research, online learning must be viewed in its entirety as a unique learning tool. Online learning techniques are varied and must be considered through an alternate lens than the traditional classroom setting. Online teachers must modify their traditional practices to adapt to the nuances of the virtual environment. This need for the modification of practices brings up several areas of critical importance. The
selection of pedagogy, technology, and content is the primary task of online teachers; however, there is limited evidence that teachers have been provided with adequate professional development on providing online instruction in a virtual world. Online teachers must utilize pedagogical techniques that involve communication tools to foster high levels of interaction to facilitate student learning (DiPietro et al., 2008). In a study of 16 teachers from the Michigan Virtual School, the need for highly communicative, supportive two-way interaction was evident across the respondents (DiPietro et al., 2008). The data collected demonstrated best practices that provide flexible learning options with multiple avenues for mastery. Throughout the student responses, I found an embedded theme focused on the importance of personal connections with students in the virtual realm. Teachers shared the need for connection to students to adapt and differentiate instruction as needed. Additionally, I found substantial evidence supporting the need for strong asynchronous communication.

General characteristics of online teachers included high levels of motivation, a strong technological skillset, flexibility, a strong grasp of learning styles, and extensive content knowledge. Teachers were also noted to need strong communication skills, various student engagement techniques, the ability to set clear expectations and guidelines, and knowledge to make the curriculum both relevant and engaging in a virtual realm. All of these skills are foundational in all teachers, regardless of the setting. In the virtual realm, however, teachers must achieve engagement without daily face-to-face interaction.
Other studies conducted on the needs and expectations of students in virtual learning environments expounded on the importance of an interpersonal connection between teacher and student. In a study of student outcomes at the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS), researchers found three critical categories for quality online teachers—managing online learning environments effectively, preparing content for online learning environments, and leveraging online tools for desirable strategies such as peer-to-peer communication (Oliver et al., 2009). This mixed methods study showed that overall, students were pleased with teacher performance in the online venue; however, open-ended responses allowed students to voice more specific concerns (Mansfield, 2014). These concerns included teachers providing direct instruction, not just facilitating modules; providing supplemental course content as needed and incorporating relevant materials as appropriate; incorporating interactive content; providing timely and consistent feedback; and providing individualized attention as needed throughout the course (Oliver et al., 2009). One common theme in the literature is that students in the online setting still desire personal connections and individualized support similar to the traditional face-to-face setting.

Teachers in an online course rely heavily on asynchronous communication, including email, discussion boards, and tools such as wikis or weeblys. These forms of communication provide flexibility and convenience for both the teacher and the student; however, the lack of daily face-to-face interaction can cause feelings of isolation in the learning environment (Jiang, 2017). Collaborative learning in the online environment has become increasingly popular as a means of combatting this isolation. Online learners
have displayed an increased belief in their own ability to learn in an online setting when given access to peer knowledge, feedback from other online peers, and opportunities to reflect and respond to exchanged interactions with classmates (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). While this has proven true for many online learners, I feel there is a need for further research addressing the impact of cultural diversity on the online setting and how cultural backgrounds and traditional roles may prohibit some students from engaging in active leadership roles. The research that has been done on this topic strongly supports the development of strong two-way communication to provide scaffolded support for the online learner’s needs. The needs of learners vary by learning style, making the flexibility that online learning offers an appealing alternative for many students. Failure to maintain open communication would be detrimental to student achievement and satisfaction with the online learning format.

There are several commonalities when analyzing student perceptions of their experiences in online learning classes. A qualitative research synthesis of student experiences in online learning determined five recurring themes that influenced student success, including the ability to balance school and life, time management skills, student personal responsibility, instructor accessibility (or lack thereof), and connection with peers (Blackmon & Major, 2012). All of these variables must be considered in the context of the design and mission of each type of virtual school setting. Some students enroll in virtual schools where all their coursework is online.
The Role of Caring in School Success

The importance of building relationships among students, teachers, and leadership to achieve positive academic outcomes is embedded throughout educational literature. While there is no consensus on the definition of “caring” and its role in education, it is often broadly defined as “promoting the general development, welfare and well-being of others; addressing their needs, and developing the ability to practice caring among self and others” (Louis et al., 2016, p. 313). In defining caring through the quality of relationships, educators are challenged to specify what shape this takes before developing relationships within their school and community. General practices that are common in schools today include (a) engaging the community stakeholders in the vision and mission of being a caring school, (b) school improvement team assessments that allow schools to self-assess their supportive structures, and (c) developing partnerships that promote growth and positive reciprocal relationships.

Research suggests that social and emotional supports associated with caring schools are critical for more vulnerable student populations. In a 2014 empirical study of caring and its effects, Louis et al. (2016) developed a framework to understand the nature and role of caring in schools. It identified the critical impact teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ caring behavior had on their own perception of the school environment. Their analysis supported the argument that caring is important in schools, contributes to a healthier culture, and positively impacts student learning outcomes. Regarding the Latinx population specifically, Garza and Soto Huerta (2014) collected data on the Latinx perceptions of teacher care by administering a survey and conducting focus groups. The
data demonstrate a clear connection between teacher behavior that is inviting and supportive of a student’s sense of belonging and respect. The survey results also indicated providing academic immediacy as an indicator of teacher care by survey respondents.

In a case study of the ethics of care versus justice, Enomoto (1997) highlighted the contrasts between care and justice. The ethics of care included privacy, care, compassion, understanding, nurturing relationships, and a responsibility to others. Ethics of justice were public, impartial, and rational, abstract from specifics, with final accountability to moral law. While the study showed little hope of reconciliation between the two ethics, Enomoto reinforced the significance of a shared view or common vision to balance philosophy and function. A longitudinal study of the impact of communities of caring conducted by Ordoñez-Jasis et al. (2016) found that literacy learning for Latinx students is rooted in community. Data collected through teachers’ reflective journals and action field research supported the positive correlation between positive family engagement with schools and student learning. Though different in design and specifics, each of these studies supports the positive influence of caring on student/community perceptions and overall experiences in school.

Valenzuela (1999) conducted a three-year ethnographic investigation of academic achievement and schooling orientations among immigrant Mexican and Mexican American students in a Houston High School. Valenzuela examines the practices of subtractive schooling: the process of divesting students of important social and cultural resources and at-risk for academic failure. The role of caring and education was a central theme in this study, illustrating the negative impacts of the lack of a caring reciprocal
relationship between students and teachers. Noddings’s (1984) framework on caring uses the concept of emotional displacement to describe the student/teacher relationship. A teacher who is predisposed to caring and overtly expresses that shows a student that they are valued and cared-for by that teacher. In response, the cared-for student will then, in turn, be more open and willing to share their true self. Valenzuela (1999) asserts “large, over-crowded, under-funded urban schools that seek to assimilate Latinx youth into monolingual, English-speaking, ethnic minority, neither identified with Mexico nor equipped to function competently in America’s mainstream” (p.3).

While the cared-for students will have greater academic success, conformity to the “uncaring student,” which occurs in students who are marginal to the mainstream values of school, began to spiral into academic failure and deviant behaviors. Blatant and embedded racism contribute to the collapse of the caring reciprocal relationship needed for student success. Rapid cultural assimilation feeds the “uncaring student” protocol and discounts the value of being bilingual and bicultural. Valenzuela’s 3-year data collection provided insight into a generalized pattern of cultural insensitivity, setting the stage for academic failure and social/emotional damage beyond measure. That academic failure puts marginalized students at further risk for failure to graduate, making credit recovery necessary for a student to progress successfully.

Credit recovery traditionally occurs in a traditional high school in a setting that is an alternative to the mainstream classroom. In a review of the literature, Cavanaugh et al. (2009) identified seven categories of virtual schools: state-sanctioned, college-/university-based, consortium/regionally based, local education agency-based, private
virtual schools, and for-profit curricula providers. The various types of virtual school settings lead to inconsistencies in the data collected from participants. Benefits of virtual schooling commonly reported included higher levels of motivation, increased access, high-quality learning opportunities, improved student outcomes, and educational choice. Challenges included start-up costs, digital divide access, and student readiness and content retention issues (Cavanaugh et al., 2009). Online learning is a common tool used to not only provide flexible learning options in schools but also to help overcome academic obstacles. When properly executed, virtual learning environments allow students to personalize and differentiate their educational experience to meet their specific needs for academic advancement. This can be beneficial for high-performing competitive academic students who wish to bolster their grade point average with accelerated courses and students who may have experienced course failure and need to regain lost credits. Increased student success outcomes are a driving force behind the development and implementation of credit recovery in secondary schools. In the following section, I examine the use of credit recovery as a remediation and advancement tool and its impact on student outcomes.

**Credit Recovery**

Secondary students can recover credits for failed courses through the credit recovery model of learning. Credit recovery refers to “a wide variety of educational strategies and programs that give high school students who have failed a class the opportunity to redo coursework or retake a course through alternate means—and thereby avoid failure and earn academic credit” (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014, para. 1).
Credits are recovered using technology in a virtual setting. The flexible digital credit recovery platform accommodates multiple learning styles and affords alternate routes for student achievement. In describing the limited research on credit recovery, I discuss the participants in credit recovery and the advantages and disadvantages of this alternate means of earning credit.

**Participants**

Credit recovery was created as a pathway for students to regain academic course credit and meet the needs of marginalized students during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Today credit recovery is primarily designed to serve students who lack credits for graduation (Powell, 2018). These students may be academically vulnerable to multiple course failures and a higher dropout rate. At-risk students in credit recovery are working on repeating and mastering content they previously failed while working concurrently in their assigned courses and completing other academic responsibilities for graduation. Poverty and its impact on the student as a whole also have a prominent effect on student performance. To address the needs of at-risk learners, it has become necessary to be innovative and create customized alternate learning opportunities. With changes in the overall K-12 traditional learning environments, online instruction has become an integral part of the educational canvas. Credit recovery models are primarily conducted online, although some schools adopt a blended approach where students can complete partial academic coursework offline in a more traditional format. According to the National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate (HSS), 71% of schools administer credit recovery online, while significantly fewer use a
blended model or in-person instruction (Malkus, 2018). The primary objective is to provide a flexible environment for students to regain academic momentum for graduation.

Historically, with past course failures, students’ only recourse available was condensed reteaching of the curriculum in summer school. Credit recovery is often described as the “next generation” of summer school, allowing students to regain course credit throughout the school year (Malkus, 2018). Designed to help students who have fallen behind in meeting educational standards for promotion, credit recovery became a popular option for at-risk students. In 2013, Connecticut became the first state to mandate that all high schools offer credit recovery (Viano, 2018). Traditionally, credit recovery was designed to address racial disparities between students of color and White students; it provided opportunities for students to close the achievement gap academically. It was a means for vulnerable students to remain competitive and on track for graduation.

Students of color comprise a disproportionate number of credit recovery enrollees, which can reproduce inequality and further racially stratify students (Powell, 2018). This led to a growing social stigma for those participating in this program, including bias and racist microaggressions towards participants in credit recovery.

Malkus (2018) affirms that credit recovery has become a slippery slope to a lowered expectation second track in educational reform discussion. The majority of literature I found examined credit recovery through the lens of a minority participant. However, credit recovery is an option for all students who need to regain lost credits. The literature examines the participant experience not only for African American students but
for students from other ethnic groups as well. Latino and migrant students are a significant part of the at-risk population due to cultural and language barriers. Migrant students can face academic failures due to educational disruptions resulting from repeated moves, sporadic attendance, and language barriers (Levy, 2011). Students who speak a native language other than English face a distinct learning curve when managing the content while developing fluency in a second language.

While many participants in credit recovery come from minority groups, the term at-risk student is not relegated just to minorities. A key component of credit recovery is the flexible and effective opportunity to master core content that was not achieved in the traditional setting. This is something all at-risk students may need to access at some point in their secondary educational careers. Poverty and its impact on education do not discriminate. As a result, credit recovery is a consideration for all races and ethnicities that experience academic failure.

**Credit Recovery Benefits and Disadvantages**

Credit recovery allows students to access the course material in which they have been previously enrolled in a different format and in a more individualized way (Viano, 2018). Students have the opportunity, typically in an online format, to access the curriculum for remediation and mastery. This format allows students to progress at their own pace and learning style. While the software is offered in a set format, facilitators can alter the number of modules and activities to adjust to specific student needs and learning styles. Offering students who have failed a course another opportunity to learn the content in a different format may be the key to mastery using a potentially more
individualized approach (Rickles et al., 2018). Credit recovery is designed to address the needs of each student individually, focus on the specific coursework they have experienced failure, and provide remediation for mastery learning and advancement. Studies conducted by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research found credit recovery to be modestly effective with a 76% effectiveness rate (Malkus, 2018). While students can recover credits, educators have begun to question the authenticity and comparability of the expectations to the same course in the mainstream setting. According to a 2016 report from the Civil Rights Data Collection, 73% of high schools have credit recovery programs, and 6% of student populations participate in credit recovery programs (Malkus, 2018). While the increase in popularity of credit recovery programs is without question, the effectiveness of these programs is a current educational debate.

Critics have noted that this model lacks the social-emotional and academic supports given in the regular school setting. Modes of delivery can have a significant impact on student achievement and satisfaction. While the online asynchronous format may be beneficial for the mobile lifestyle of a migrant student, they may be lacking the face-to-face support given in the traditional classroom (Rickles et al., 2018). The lack of face-to-face support is a mitigating factor in considering student success; however, it does not supplant the need for flexibility in regaining lost credits.

In a case study of children of migrant workers and their experiences with credit recovery, Levy (2011) found that learning from home via a laptop provided by the school allowed them to meet the needs of their families economically and physically while still
moving forward with their academics. While not without obstacles and challenges, technology and flexibility allowed the students in this particular study to achieve success. This multi-case study of five migrant students measured their ability to continue to complete school tasks while maintaining migrant work necessities. One key factor in student achievement in this study was that the students were self-disciplined and goal-oriented. Unfortunately, often at-risk learners have been emotionally defeated and lack the confidence to pursue their academic goals. Additionally, this program provided mentors as a part of the process that the students reported as a critical support (Levy, 2011). The independence required to complete credit recovery coursework can be daunting for the at-risk learner, particularly despite multiple course failures. The lack of face-to-face interaction can be restrictive, as students in certain studies report the instruction to be less clear than students in a traditional setting (Rickles et al., 2018).

As the research is limited and conclusions vary, Viano (2018) argues that more extensive research is needed to determine the effectiveness of credit recovery. District and school practitioners are expanding online credit recovery options to boost course credit earned and graduation rates (Rickles et al., 2018). As states and districts increase funding for credit recovery programs and the supporting technology required, rigorous accountability and effectiveness measures must be put in place to ensure credit recovery is a viable and equitable option for student learning for all learners.

Perceptions and beliefs about credit recovery vary widely. For many, credit recovery is the second chance that at-risk learners desperately seek to remain on track for graduation. For others, it is viewed as a sterile academic crutch that ignores the critical
need for social-emotional support for already vulnerable at-risk students. Although initially designed to alleviate racial inequalities (Powell, 2018), it by default created environments in which some students experience even more racial segregation and an atmosphere of continued oppression. Credit recovery programs in some schools have fallen victim to social stigma as a support for minoritized students only; this is just one illustration of the differing experiences students can have in credit recovery.

Another factor to consider is the impact of the facilitator of the credit recovery experience and the impact that person has on student experiences and outcomes. Credit recovery cannot be easily molded into a one-size-fits-all program. Each student who participates is there for a different need, and an array of various factors influence the experience they have with the program. There is an emotional component that ties to student self-esteem when facing course failure. Credit recovery must be designed to be a positive experience with a successful credit outcome to ensure students are equipped with the self-esteem and optimism to continue to move toward the goal of graduation. Some studies reported students having a stronger connection and receiving more personalized individual support in the credit recovery setting (Viano, 2018). A comprehensive study of student experiences and perceptions will allow educators to provide the most comprehensive program with appropriate support for at-risk learners. Schools are no longer one-size-fits-all, and learning environments need to be differentiated as much as the instruction provided within. Online learning opportunities allow this differentiation to occur in brick-and-mortar buildings and a virtual setting.
English Language Learners and Online Learning

Racial/ethnic minority students and students of poverty comprise a large portion of credit recovery participants. There is much debate regarding the appropriateness of the online setting for students who may already struggle academically. Prior research has identified an achievement gap for English language learners and their peers regarding academic achievement and educational attainment. This achievement gap has been partially attributed to limited exposure to academic content (Johnson, 2019). Critics argue that the independence and autonomy required in credit recovery classes can be challenging for vulnerable students. Powell (2018) maintains a vehement belief that credit recovery programs reproduce inequality by broadening racial disparities. Powell further states that credit recovery programs serve as “dumping grounds” for children of color, ultimately undermining the program’s purpose. Powell mostly discusses African American students in credit recovery, but parallels exist for ELLs. In the following section, I examine the impact and experiences of online learning opportunities, including credit recovery, both positive and negative, and the impact on graduation and the postsecondary success of ELL students.

Graduation/Dropout Impact

Hispanic/Latino students comprise the largest ethnic minority group in U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), making it critical that researchers understand more about online student success and the achievement gap for this population. In a study examining the effects of independent variables of time, school type, and delivery mode on dropout rates, researchers found a large decline in dropout
rates for Hispanic students engaged in online environments (Corry et al., 2017). This mirrored the consistent decline in the national dropout rate for Hispanic students from 1998 to 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

One possible explanation for this decline is the availability of a flexible online option for students who cannot attend a traditional brick-and-mortar school. Many Hispanic/Latino students face cultural and socioeconomic expectations to work to support their families. In a study of migrant families who received laptops to engage in credit recovery and remain on track with their schooling during peak labor times, students showed high levels of satisfaction and academic success (Levy, 2011). Academic inequities for minoritized groups can become more pronounced in the secondary school setting, where students are frequently tracked into differentiated and often limiting courses. In a study of newcomers participating in a summer credit recovery program, Johnson (2019) found credit recovery to increase access and opportunities to help bridge the equity gap. This type of sheltered, non-traditional setting proved to be successful by providing targeted, appropriate support that was self-paced and differentiated to meet the needs of the students. This was still rigorous instruction with high expectations, but the delivery method accounted for the unique learning challenges of English language learners. While Johnson’s study did not demonstrate significant increases in graduation rates, a positive impact on student credit attainment and achievement was noted. Again, a clear lack of research became apparent through Johnson’s studies. The need for further insight into the actual experiences of language acquisition is evident throughout the literature.
Language acquisition can be daunting for learners of all ages. English language learners faced the dual responsibility of learning the English language while learning academic content. When ELL students are tracked into less rigorous content to compensate for the language deficit, the result can be diminished learning opportunities. In a study of the impact of tracking, Callahan (2005) determined that there were variations in attitudes and expectations in lower-track courses that led to weaker student-teacher relationships. Callahan asserts that academic growth is directly aligned to the rigorous content coverage in higher-level courses. Isolating English language learners from these courses is detrimental, both academically and emotionally. While higher levels of performance are expected in higher-level courses, participation and selection for participation in these courses cannot be influenced by a student being designated as limited English proficient. Such discriminatory and oppressive practices prevent English language learners from reaching their full academic potential. Language may be a mitigating factor, but with the proper supports in place, English language learners can turn their bilingual skills into a clear advantage in college and career readiness preparation.

The psychological impact of low academic expectations and low academic performance and failures is a contributing factor in the dropout rates of English language learners. Twenty-four U.S. states require a series of exit exams that have proven to be a significant challenge for ELL students and graduation. Several factors contribute to lower performance by ELL students, including cultural bias within the test and the fact the tests are administered in English to students who may still be limited English proficient. The
impact of failure on these exit exams includes reduced effort, feelings of sadness, depression, shame, anger, perceptions of inadequacy, and a lack of postsecondary goal attainment (Kruger et al., 2016). These could all be causative factors to high school dropout rates or repeated course failures.

As the number of English language learners in U.S. schools continues to increase, researchers have continued to raise awareness and study this unique group of learners. Some researchers find cultural and linguistic diversity a handicap, even contending that these students and their families lack the knowledge to navigate the U.S. educational system successfully. Cultural bias and conscious and subconscious racist ideologies about English language learners can create a hostile environment that fosters student academic failure and increases dropout rates. Specific practices and structures must be in place to empower English language learners to develop their English literacy while concurrently mastering academic content (Kruger et al., 2016). In today’s diverse and changing educational and career landscape, being bilingual is an asset and a way to build efficacy in English language learners. Therefore, educators must have a firm grasp of language development for an English language learner to provide proper support.

High-stakes testing and accountability measures are typically critical factors in student retention and graduation rates. It is evident in accountability data that tracking and retention/course failure negatively impact achievement levels of English language learners. Retention and course failure dramatically increase a student’s risk of dropping out of school. Causal relationships are empirically difficult to establish due to a lack of data and existing research, increasing the urgency to research the impact of low academic
achievement on and with English language learners (Solórzano, 2008). Until we have developed a full assessment of the practices and data from ELL students, high-stakes testing and accountability will continue to be biased against this subgroup of learners. To provide ELL students with a fair and equitable chance for success, accommodations that affect student understanding of learning tasks should be coupled with setting accommodations to ensure equality in educational assessments. English language learners must still be challenged with a rigorous and appropriate curriculum paired with literacy development to close the achievement gap.

While the preponderance of research focuses on English language learners enrolled in U.S. schools for the majority of their formal schooling, newcomer ELL students face an even more daunting task of complete language acquisition while acclimating to a new school infrastructure and culturally acclimating to the socioemotional and cultural demands of living in a new country. The term newcomer refers to students who have lived in the United States for less than 3 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). I found the body of literature on the impact of acculturation and assimilation into American schools and the impact on student achievement for newcomers lacking. Until I selected the participants for my study, I did not know if I would have any newcomer participants. Nonetheless, this is a clear area in need of additional research in future studies.

National standardized testing is linguistically complex and administered in English; therefore, it is extremely difficult to determine the true extent of student achievement when language barriers may inhibit students’ ability to demonstrate their
knowledge. Nationally, ELLs score an average of 20-50 percentage points below native English speakers on state assessments of English and other content-area subjects; these students often fail to meet proficiency goals (Menken, 2010). Due to testing and accountability pressures, “teaching to the test” has become a widespread practice in U.S. schools. This focus on rote memorization and testing skills further widens the achievement gap for ELL students by denigrating the quality of literacy instruction itself. In the current state of test design, language barriers make it virtually impossible to yield valid measurements of what ELL students know and can do, and continued academic failures continue to oppress this group of students.

**Online Opportunities for ELL Students**

As distance education continues to thrive as a popular model of instruction, researchers have begun to study the ability of English language learners to achieve academic success through this medium. Asynchronous online discussions are a key component of many online courses. There are key issues in literacy development when considering English language learners and their role in the online classroom. To ensure equitable access, all teachers must understand their content and acknowledge that language and literacy are key components central to learning (De Oliveira & Olesova, 2013). Moll et al. (1992) charge that teachers must embrace students’ multicultural backgrounds as strengths and build upon their abilities, capacities, and aptitudes, what they call “funds of knowledge.” In a study of 29 teachers and teacher candidates, two major themes emerged regarding the literacy development of ELL students: learning issues related to the student and learning issues related to the teacher. Student-related
issues included the influence of cultures and home languages, different cultural patterns of interaction, and personal experiences as—and with—other ELL students (Levy, 2011). These issues emerged throughout key points made by students in the online discussions. Teacher issues emerged when looking at the use of academic language versus conversational language. It can be challenging for ELL students to access academic language when they lack prior background knowledge in a particular content area. Culturally relevant teaching methodologies and a wide array of strategies are also essential to academic success for ELL students in the online setting. ELL students need a safe environment to practice the transference of their first language skills to English (De Oliveira & Olesova, 2013). Assessment and evaluation are ongoing processes that should focus on student progress, achievements, and areas for improvement. Feedback is essential for the ELL student to continue to develop language skills in the asynchronous environment.

**Conclusion**

Online learning has become a common method of instructional delivery in schools across the nation, with the promise of increased opportunities for customized content and individualized instruction. Online learning is a chameleon that is constantly being adapted to meet the needs of the 21st-century learner. Online learning courses are offered for initial credit, course credit recovery, and as a flexible option to expand curricular access. With proper implementation and management, online learning is an approach that can encompass all students and accommodate all learning styles. Given the wide range of design and scope of online learning opportunities, this medium appeals to
many 21st-century learners. Students use online learning opportunities for initial credit or credit recovery for lost credits. There could be students who utilize the online setting for both ends of the learning spectrum, both initial and recovered credits. The flexibility afforded by technology offers virtually limitless learning opportunities.

Credit recovery is most often offered as an online learning opportunity. Student performance, or failure to perform, has created an influx of students into credit recovery programs in high schools nationwide. The role of caring in the mission of a school directly impacts levels of student success or failure. While initially designed to close achievement gaps and help students get back on course for graduation, credit recovery in many areas has become racially divided and serves to widen the disparity between races and achievement. To avoid credit recovery courses from being viewed as a “dumping ground” for struggling students, schools must work diligently to provide quality professional development for facilitators of online learning and teaching and ensure that differentiated instruction is tailored to the need of each student. They also must ensure that online learning approaches are assessed regularly. As part of this assessment, researchers need to understand the firsthand experiences of students in these programs.

Online learning provided through credit recovery can be a pathway for students who may not experience academic success in the traditional setting to achieve growth and mastery of academic content. Online learning options have proven to be a useful tool in combating high school dropout rates and increase on-time graduation. Studies by Levy (2011), Rickles et al. (2018), and Viano (2018) all demonstrate the positive power of credit recovery as an intervention tool when implemented with fidelity to ensure
academic achievement and content mastery. There is an ongoing need to continue studying best practices for online learning and teaching and develop a deep understanding of the students who participate in online learning classes. The needs of students and strategies that apply to an Advanced Placement online class vastly differ from the needs of a student who is recovering a basic math credit; however, both must be rigorous and relevant for the individual student to ensure achievement. Credit recovery programs must evolve to include specific instructional strategies for second language learners to ensure equity and access for all credit recovery participants. High-quality instruction is not one-size-fits-all. Online learning and credit recovery allow educators to create individualized learning opportunities for all students to achieve academic success and close the racial divide.

Based on a review of the existing literature, we know that online learning has become a widespread flexible learning tool for all learners. The research shows that schools are utilizing this format in a variety of ways. Researchers have identified the use of credit recovery in the online setting as a popular option for assisting struggling learners in staying on track for graduation. However, there is limited research on the impact of online learning and credit recovery programs on the educational experiences of English language learners. While I found research illustrating that many minoritized students participate in credit recovery, I could not identify the impact or effectiveness of this medium for English language learners. Moving forward, my research will contribute meaningful context to the scholarly conversations by examining the experiences and perceptions of English language learners who are engaged in these settings. In this way, I
will add critical data to the body of research that allows educators to make more meaningful and informed decisions for future student participants.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I begin by sharing the design and results of two pilot studies conducted both to practice my interview technique and refine my interview protocol. Following this, I share the purpose of this study and my research questions. Third, I discuss the setting and sample population for the study. Fourth, I explain the data collection process, including interviews (face-to-face and virtual), limited observation opportunities, and document analysis. Next, I share the analytical framework for the study which was based on Latinx schooling experiences, credit recovery best practices, and the impact of the ethics of care. Last, I conclude with ethical and trustworthiness considerations, and limitations of the study.

Pilot Study

To assess whether my topic would be interesting and my preliminary research protocols generative, I designed a pilot study to collect data regarding the circumstances that necessitated a recovery model for Latinx students and better understand their perceptions of the experience. I sought to ascertain levels of student achievement using this model. I designed a pilot study that entailed interviewing two senior Latinx students who had utilized credit recovery to stay on track for graduation. By conducting face-to-face interviews, I collected data about the perceived impact of credit recovery on the academic and social experience from the student perspective. I used this information to
refine my interview protocol for the students participating in my study. I felt it was important to understand the realities of this learning option and how it can be improved to meet the needs of not only second language learners but for all learners.

In an earlier pilot study, I conducted interviews with two school-based facilitators for credit recovery. Gaining insight and perspective from their daily interaction was extremely beneficial in helping me understand the program, its strengths, and areas needing improvement, as well as sharing their passion for working with at-risk populations to succeed. By conducting face-to-face interviews, I collected data about the perceived impact of credit recovery on the academic and social experience from the student perspective. It is important to understand the circumstances that led to participation in this program and the perceptions of actual student experiences in the program. I was also able to conduct several brief classroom observations of different groups of students working in credit recovery labs. I observed one lab during the school day. Those students worked throughout the time I observed but seemed more reluctant and reserved. I observed an after-school session, and those students seemed much more relaxed and interactive with the facilitator. Moving forward, I was interested to see if this was an exception or if this is representative of typical interaction patterns in the credit recovery setting.

Moving forward, I refined my interview questions to be less restrictive. I learned that I need to expand my wait time and let the student set the interview pace. Working with current seniors allowed me to practice my interview skills and reflect on my positionality and gain input from students about ways to mitigate my position of authority
concerning my data collection process. Viano (2018) attributes the challenges of understanding students’ experiences in credit recovery to a lack of data collection and overall framework to study this phenomenon. Specifically, I am interested in English Language Learners (ELLs) and their experiences as I have observed firsthand as a classroom and ESL teacher some of the limitations that language barriers can cause in the academic advancement of these students. Ensuring that rigorous academic content is delivered concurrently with language support can create obstacles that may facilitate the need for ELLs to recover credits through credit recovery (Johnson, 2019). This research study allowed me to examine the intricacies of credit recovery for ELLs and expand the research base on this topic.

To comply with state and federal social distancing mandates, I adapted my interviews to a virtual format. I selected two seniors as pilot study participants; I have had both a teaching and administrative presence over the last 7 years with both students. This long-term, trusting relationship helped me to get good feedback on my questions and role in the study. I also wanted to test the impact of my positionality and relationships on their ability to answer interview questions openly and honestly. I believed that the rapport we have developed over time helped them feel comfortable giving constructive feedback on not just the topic of credit recovery but also the design of my interview questions and techniques. The COVID-19 global pandemic had a profound impact on all facets of life, including school closures and quarantines. State and local directives for social distancing and fear of this unknown virus changed the way we conducted everyday life for the next
year. I found the virtual format challenging, given the environmental distractions that accompanied the state-mandated stay-at-home order.

Additionally, concerns and uncertainty surrounding the anomaly of school closure were paramount to the participants. A good portion of the interview time was spent on discourse not related to credit recovery and my interview protocol. The pilot study process affirmed my need to reflect on my positionality carefully to ensure it did not unduly influence my student interview response data. I continued to address this issue moving forward in my reflexivity journal. Throughout the journaling process, I found meaningful connections linking the social/emotional impact on both the student and myself as the researcher. Anecdotal notes made in the journal helped me remain focused on each student’s individual circumstances and the impact on the student experience.

My pilot interviews were not particularly fruitful in providing specific feedback on the credit recovery process overall. However, I did gain a deeper understanding of how environmental and social-emotional factors impact success. In this small snapshot, I saw the devastating effect of low expectations for second language learners. The students both had strong opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of participation in credit recovery and its impact on their high school experience. As I reflected on the distraction that was ensuing in the background of my interviews, due to unprecedented circumstances, I thought of the daily chaos that many children likely face for a variety of reasons. I created questions that I felt were broad enough for all students, but this small experience reminded me that “one-size-fits-all” would never be the norm in public education—or life. In reviewing my questions for the interview and the observation
protocol, a key takeaway was to ensure that I conducted each interview and observation with a clean slate. My own thoughts and experiences could not be allowed to lead my questioning. As a result, in my study, I narrowed my focus and determined what factors lead to credit recovery and how best to navigate supporting students through the journey back to graduation with their cohort.

**Study Design**

The overarching purpose of this study is to understand the nature of the credit recovery program at Central High School and to understand the perceptions and experiences of English Language Learners (ELLs) who were currently enrolled in online credit recovery programs there. The following research questions drove this study:

1. What is the nature of the credit recovery program at Central High School?
2. How do current and former students perceive their experiences in the credit recovery program at Central High School?

To answer the above research questions, I conducted a basic qualitative study using an interpretive framework; this makes sense because my overarching goal was to understand the individual constructed reality of credit recovery for Latinx students. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined the purpose of this type of study as enabling researchers to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. For my dissertation study, I used interviews and observations for data collection. I gained a deep, reflective understanding of the perceptions of students who participated in credit recovery. My target participant group was ELL students enrolled in credit recovery courses or who had completed a full semester of credit recovery.
I planned to conduct face-to-face interviews to obtain data, using a “conversation style” of data collection that allowed me to determine what is “in and on someone’s mind” (Patton, 2015, p. 426, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). The realities of COVID-19 and school closure created the need to conduct virtual interviews with some participants on Google Meet. All interviews semi-structured with flexible questions to fully explore the student experience and conditions that led these students to participate in credit recovery. I genuinely believe the credit recovery story is a deeply personal one. The circumstances that lead to course failure can be emotionally compelling and deeply personal, making individual interviews an appropriate form of data collection. For example, Barnett’s (2016) study of the at-risk student’s perceptions of care in online learning uncovered myriad life circumstances that led to the endangerment of graduation. I will continue to explore perceptions of care in online coursework and the impact on student achievement and social-emotional health.

**Setting**

I conducted the research for this study in a traditional high school setting in a small, rural public school in the U.S. south. The student population is approximately 650 students, of which 178 identify as Hispanic/Latino. Credit recovery is conducted in two school-based computer labs on campus. There are typically two staff members in each lab—one certified teacher and one classified teaching assistant. I conducted the in-person interviews in a neutral location to help negate my positionality as an administrator in this building. I conducted virtual interviews via Google Meet. I was aware that my position of authority was a mitigating factor in data collection. I discussed this in-depth with
participants to assess the impact and additional ways to negate my positionality. I completed the IRB process as well as the district requirements required for student interviews. Due to the nature of the topic and the rapport I have with the student body, I was confident that I conducted student interviews in a non-threatening way that allowed them to speak freely about their experiences with credit recovery. I do not feel that the students realized the role that credit recovery plays in graduation rate accountability for me as a school administrator; therefore, I did not feel students believed that there was neither an advantage nor disadvantage to me in the nature of their responses, which encouraged honest and forthright dialogue. I continually assessed the responses and body language of my participants throughout the interview process. I remained open to suggestions that made them more comfortable and able to speak freely. I remained diligently mindful not to let my position or my own ethnicity be a limiting factor to my data collection.

Sample Population

The sample population for this study included 10 Latinx students who were currently participating in or were past participants of credit recovery at Central High School. Student participants were in Grades 9-12, recovering credits from core content areas such as English, Math, History, and Science. I also interviewed two adult credit recovery facilitators at Central High School and gained additional insight into the advantages and disadvantages of the credit recovery model in their schools.

Student participants were drawn from a pool of students who have previously experienced course failure in either an End-of-Course (EOC) assessed subject such as
English II, Math I, or Biology, or from a North Carolina Final Examination (NCFE) assessed course which includes additional Math, English, Science, and Social Studies courses. Credit recovery is traditionally assigned the semester immediately following course failure; however, due to school closure issues with COVID-19, there may have been an extended semester gap for selected students. Credit recovery efforts were maintained to the best of the district’s ability during school closure. Still, due to various factors, many students have had to suspend completion until the return of school in the fall.

EOC courses require the state-mandated final examination for accountability measures. Many students have struggled to demonstrate proficiency on this exam, even with the additional support provided by credit recovery. NCFE courses seem to have more success when retaking the final exam. To study these differences in outcomes, I chose participants from both EOC course recovery and NCFE.

I conducted interviews with credit recovery facilitators to clarify the expectations and responsibilities students face for the satisfactory completion of credit recovery requirements. By ascertaining the adult perspective of student support in this program, I gained a deeper understanding of what is beneficial to student success and what factors may impede it from the facilitator’s perspective.

**Data Collection Methods**

I employed data collection practices that helped enhance the validity, accuracy, and reliability of the research findings. Before conducting research, I received approval through the Institutional Review Board at The University of North Carolina at
Greensboro. Primary data collection is critical to conducting quality research analysis. I conducted face-to-face and virtual interviews with current Latinx credit recovery students. I used my interview protocol to ascertain the perceptions of the Latinx credit recovery experience. I examined the attributes to success and barriers these students face. I sought to understand better the impact of credit recovery on the path to graduation and future goals.

Originally, I planned to conduct observations in the credit recovery classroom using an observation guide. The observation guide was designed to examine the setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and the impact and influence of my own behavior. I was unable to observe fidelity given the confines of COVID-19 mandates. School was fully remote for a portion of my research period. When students returned to campus, the credit recovery setting interaction was extremely limited due to social distancing and other safety measures.

**Interviews**

I interviewed 10 Latinx students who were enrolled in credit recovery during the school year or have previously participated in a credit recovery course. This included students in both the first and second semesters of the traditional school year. I interviewed each student for approximately one hour. I planned to conduct the first interview at the onset or middle of the credit recovery process. I then planned to complete the second interview at the end of the semester. I chose this design to gain insight into the students’ perspectives both during the process and to understand the students’ satisfaction level with the experience at its completion or when they withdraw from the credit
recovery process. Due to school closure and access to students virtually, most interviews were conducted at the end of the first semester and the beginning of the second semester. This study allowed the opportunity to collect information from students who were successful in the program and those who were not as successful. In-depth inquiry into the overall experience from a select sample of participants will yield more meaningful data than snapshots from a broad range of students across districts.

I conducted interviews in a neutral place on campus (most often the student commons) and audio-recorded them for transcription purposes. I used open-ended questions designed to elicit student-led conversation about the credit recovery experience from the perspective of Latinx students. I collected valuable data on the circumstances that necessitated the need to participate in credit recovery and the positive and negative aspects from the student’s perspective. I gathered input on what measures students felt needed to be put into place to improve the credit recovery process moving forward.

Observations

In addition to face-to-face interviews with student participants, I also planned to conduct classroom observations of students in the credit recovery classroom. I hoped to gain insight into the students’ ease of use and ability to access the content in the online format. I wanted to see how the technological component of credit recovery impacts student performance. The sterile social-distanced classes of six or fewer made the observations lack authenticity. Students were masked and unable to interact within six feet. This made my observation protocol ineffective, as I had planned to look for both overt and subtle influences that may affect social-emotional learning or academic
performance. I was looking for activities and interactions of Latinx students with their peers and the conversations that occur both between students and student-teacher communication. What I observed was a classroom climate and culture severely impacted by unprecedented circumstances. The labs were quiet, and the only interactions were between a student and the facilitator. Having to repeat a course due to academic failure can create self-esteem and anxiety issues that may adversely affect academic performance. While this may not be overtly observable, I had hoped to observe subtle nuances in behavior that may provide data to aid in a comprehensive overview of the experience. I did hope to observe the presence or lack of care and relationships on the student experience in credit recovery. I most definitely saw the critical impact of a caring relationship between the facilitators and the students.

I did manage to conduct minimal observation in the credit recovery lab setting during the day in normal school sessions and the fifth block (3:30-5:30) after-school session. For students who use credit recovery during the regular school day, the flexible lab setting contains students in credit recovery courses, North Carolina Virtual Public School courses, Randolph Community College courses, and district-based iLearn courses. Normally this is a social setting with students who may traditionally have academic struggles and high-performing students academically. In the afterschool sessions, the only students who participate are the credit recovery students. Observations were designed to study the impact of social dynamics on student participation. To effectively apply my observation protocol, I needed access to the labs with schools back in full attendance.
mode. Paired with interviews, this would have given me the most comprehensive picture of credit recovery and how students function in this alternative learning environment.

**Document Analysis**

To understand the nature of the credit recovery program, I conducted a thorough document analysis of the credit recovery and APEX curriculums. I examined the board policies regarding the recovery of credit and compared the processes and procedures at Central High School to those across the state and nationally. I examined student progress monitoring documents provided by the credit recovery facilitators at the school. This analysis, combined with facilitator interviews, strengthened my understanding of the credit recovery mission and how the specific programs function within the Central High School.

**Analytical Framework**

While an understanding of Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides important theoretical foundations for conducting this study, three areas of the research literature provide the analytical framework I used as a lens to analyze the data I collected and how I made meaning of that data. See Figure 1.

What I learned from the literature provided this framework with a rich understanding of the foundation and evolution of the credit recovery process. I analyzed the mitigating factors and potential components that were be lacking for students in the credit recovery program through the ethic of care lens. I gained a more in-depth interpretation of the Latinx students’ perception of care and its overarching impact on success or failure in credit recovery and mainstream education classes.
Ethical Considerations/Trustworthiness

Qualitative data analysis is a fluid process that requires the continual analysis of participant responses and their meaning. Upon completing the participant interviews, I used a transcription service to transcribe the data, ensuring that I accurately represented the interview conversations. Throughout transcription analysis, I developed codes that allowed me to address my research questions. I used the transcriptions to code the responses looking for topics, keywords, and phrases to better derive meaning. This allowed me to develop themes across the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2016). Creating descriptive labels (codes) assisted me in disaggregating personal data shared,
which can be complex, particularly when considering the social-emotional issues that may accompany course failure.

To monitor and mitigate my positionality in the interview process, previously having been an ESL teacher, I maintained a reflexivity journal to document the impact of my preconceptions of the process and the Latinx student experience as a whole. This ongoing reflection assisted me in staying focused on the student experience as it is relayed to me in the interviews without bias. On several occasions, I had to reflect on removing my own background knowledge to focus only on what the student reported in the interview.

All interview and observation data were kept confidential and reported anonymously through the use of pseudonyms. I completed IRB training and followed all university and district guidelines to protect the rights and privacy of my participants. The students selected for this study participated on an entirely voluntary basis, with parental consent as age-appropriate. Participants were also free to withdraw at any time during the research. Ensuring the comfort of participants was a key factor in ascertaining a true and accurate representation of the authentic experiences of Latinx students in credit recovery.

I triangulated the data collected from student interviews, faculty facilitator interviews, and limited classroom observation data/document analysis to ensure trustworthiness. By triangulating multiple sources of data collected through interviews and observations, I compared and cross-checked data to ensure a thorough representation of the Latinx students’ experiences and perceptions. This triangulation is a strong and
effective strategy to increase the trustworthiness of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I engaged in critical self-reflection regarding my assumptions, biases, and relationship to the study that may impact my findings. As a former English as a Second Language teacher, I came to the table with a strong belief in this subgroup of learners’ academic potential and abilities. As an ESL teacher in Kindergarten to eighth grades, I worked closely with students and colleagues to break down stereotypes and obstacles that many second language learners face. While I was not an ESL teacher in this particular school setting, my feelings and experiences about these students had to be carefully monitored not to sway my interpretation of the data. It was imperative and often challenging to ensure that I did not allow my experiences in teaching this subgroup of learners to impact my impartiality in observing and interviewing them. As a former ESL teacher, I had prior knowledge of the language obstacles they may have faced leading them to credit recovery. I could not allow myself to impose that onto the students participating in the study. It was also critical that I kept the perspective that my own learning experiences are vastly different from a non-minority student’s learning experiences.

Additionally, my administrative role in this school affected my positionality. It was not my intent to effect change during the study but gain insight into the actual student experience to improve future endeavors in credit recovery. My position as a White female principal could have impacted participants’ willingness to be forthright, so I was diligent in providing clarity on the intent of the interviews. I assured all participants
that I was solely collecting data and in no way evaluating their performance. I relied on the relationships I had developed supported by the ethics of care to create a conducive environment for interviews. Critical researchers must consistently consider the insider-outsider status impact on the research process. These status issues can impact the kinds of stories a participant will share with the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rigorous, ethical reasoning is critical to designing, conducting, and reporting a credible and trustworthy study. I kept a reflexivity journal to note times I identified and/or challenged my own preconceived assumptions. I wrote about the differences and similarities and how that impacted my train of thought in the interview process. I used the knowledge gained from this ongoing document to inform my research analysis to create a comprehensive understanding of the Latinx credit recovery experience. Throughout the interview process, I strived to demonstrate caring reflexivity by developing research relationships that recognized and honored the participants within their specific context (Rallis & Rossman, 2010). To enact this, I shared my experiences and respect for the journey they have traveled as a second language learner with students. I collected, analyzed, and reported their perceptions and experiences to facilitate best practices for instruction for this subgroup, as ultimately, the goal of my study was to better understand the credit recovery experience through the eyes of Latinx students and add to the body of literature informing best practices.

As a final measure of trustworthiness, I used member checking. I shared tentative interpretations from the initial interviews in brief follow-up conversations with the participants for clarification and elaboration. By engaging in respondent validation, I
solicited feedback on my emerging findings and ensured that my own bias or misunderstanding had not skewed the collected data. I wanted to assure my participants that my findings would adequately reflect their responses and to be able to expand on any issues we discuss. Using member checking helped to ensure internal validity and reduce the possibility of misunderstanding or misrepresentation of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Limitations**

As with any sampling of students, I was limited by the data provided by my participants. This study was a small sampling from one rural public high school. The interview process was severely impacted by school closure and subsequent modification of the school day due to COVID-19. Given the varying circumstances that lead a student, particularly a second language learner, to credit recovery, researchers cannot make assumptions of equivalency between the sample and the remaining population. The sample population was also a limiting factor, as the number of Latinx students participating in credit recovery in any given semester varies. To avoid any issues with participants’ willingness and with students giving guarded responses because I am an administrator in the school, I constantly reflected on the conversations and my positionality. I worked diligently to select a time during the school day conducive to their academic and transportation schedules to ensure willingness to participate, as time is challenging for many students. For remote students, we used a virtual format, which can compromise reading body language and the general comfort of a face-to-face conversation. Admittedly, the students were much more at ease with the virtual format
than I was, which I attributed to their comfort with social media and technology resources readily used by their generation. Upon completion of all the interviews and subsequent coding and analysis, I presented my findings to share the individual and collective perceptions of the credit recovery experience in addition to my own growth process through my reflexivity journal.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

In this study, I examined the perceptions and experiences of Latinx students in the credit recovery program. To fully understand their experiences, I first conducted a thorough analysis of the tenets of credit recovery programs and observed in-person and online instruction to understand the nuances of this specific program at Central High School. I also conducted interviews with current and former students. The purpose of this chapter is to report the findings of the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the credit recovery program at Central High School?
2. How do current and former students perceive their experiences in the credit recovery program at Central High School?

I begin by describing the nature and design of the credit recovery program at Central High School. After that, I share information about the Apex Learning platform used at Central High School. I continue by sharing the significance of the student/teacher relationship regarding student achievement. Then I examine the experiences of initial credit loss and the credit recovery from both the student and facilitator perspectives. I conclude by examining the impact of self-motivation on student achievement and how the college- and career-ready mindset factors into credit recovery outcomes.
The Nature of the Credit Recovery Program

As noted in the research, credit recovery was developed in response to the growing number of high school dropouts, particularly with vulnerable student populations. Throughout my analysis of the literature for credit recovery, the preponderance of studies acknowledged credit recovery as a critical tool for student achievement. Rickles et al. (2018) identified the use of credit recovery across the nation as a way to get students back on track for a timely graduation and keep them in school. The International Association for Online Learning (iNACOL; iNACOL, 2011) defined credit recovery as a means to passing and receiving credit for a course that they had previously been unsuccessful in earning credit towards graduation.

There is no one-size-fits-all definition of credit recovery as the concept is subjectively implemented in schools across the United States. Credit recovery is broadly defined as a strategy for helping students regain lost academic credits by retaking the class in an alternative format (Malkus, 2018). It is an instructional strategy to help students demonstrate mastery of a subject’s content standards when they have experienced failure in the initial course. Many competitive learning platforms provide similar support systems.

Central High School utilizes the Apex Learning platform enrollment. The primary goal is to ensure that students stay on track for timely graduation. For example, while conducting interviews at Central High School, both students and staff attributed increased graduation rates to the availability of credit recovery courses. And the data support these perceptions. For example, in the 2020 Fall semester, 25 students regained a lost credit. In
the Spring 2021 semester, 28 students were on track for credit recovery. The number of
credits attempted in recovery varies from semester to semester, with this 2020-2021
school year having lower enrollment in the program due to implications of COVID-19.
Any student who fails to gain credit during the ongoing school year will be eligible for
summer recovery. Mrs. Sylvester, the Credit Recovery Facilitator, spoke to the critical
nature of the program:

This is the only way for many of these students to rise above their failures. They
have to see a path and have someone guide them and encourage them. Apex
allows me to break it up and give them manageable chunks, so they don’t feel
overwhelmed. Also, they realize that they can do the work if they stick with it.
Not that it’s not hard. It is definitely a challenge. We stay until 6:00 p.m. or later,
many days-sometimes Saturdays. Whatever it takes. Sometimes we don’t make it
in time for graduation, so they stay all summer. Then we have mini-graduations.
There is no perfect answer, but this is a way to make them succeed.

In my former role as an assistant principal, I observed a student who completed
the program during the summer. That student and his family came to the mini-graduation
where the credit recovery facilitator and principal spoke to the dedication and
perseverance that the student had shown. We all wore graduation regalia, and the student
was presented with his diploma in front of his family. While it lacked the grandeur and
pomp and circumstance of the whole-school graduation, it was a powerful display of the
school’s mission and vision of putting students first in all we do. It was also a very
personal moment that celebrated the perseverance of the student. That event happened at
the end of July in my first year as an administrator; it was, perhaps, one of the most
compelling and humbling moments of my career. The tears of pride that that student felt
as he overcame failure to get that degree spoke deeply to the heart of my educator’s soul. It also sparked the passion for studying credit recovery that drove my doctoral studies.

**The Apex Learning Platform**

Poor attendance is a major factor in course failure at Central High School. The Apex Learning platform is designed to allow students to be active participants in their learning rather than passive recipients who are often disengaged. One of the best proponents of student engagement is the ability to self-pace. Students do not have to operate under the time constraints and peer pressure experienced in the traditional classroom setting. The Apex program is a layered support system for academic vocabulary, guided reading, and language supports, critical for second language learners. The literacy and language support, along with basic academic supports, directly benefit all learners considered at risk.

Each unit begins with a brief video overview of the objectives to be covered. Students then complete the content study modules where course information is taught. Students then complete a mastery quiz and close with a reflective journaling entry. Figures 2-5 are excerpts from a World History recovery module for reference. Students can listen in English or Spanish and work through the models at their own pace. The images provide a snapshot of what a typical unit may entail to understand the Apex credit recovery experience better.

First, Figure 2 is the unit overview, which sets the stage for the learner and establishes objectives for the module. It uses user-friendly language and engaging
graphics to hook the learner and prepare them to engage in learning with clear expectations.

**Figure 2.**

*Unit Overview*

**What Is World History?**

**What Tools Do Historians Use to Examine the Past?**

Sailors use the stars and a compass to make their way through the sea. Astronauts use computers and powerful navigation systems to explore space. You might use a GPS — Global Positioning System — in your car to get to a new restaurant.

But what do historians use to make sense of the past? When there’s so much information to consider in the course of human history, how do they choose what to focus on?

In this activity, you will examine the different ways to learn and study history. You will consider history through a variety of tools, such as looking at different regions, political systems, cultures, and more.

**Objectives**

- Analyze the common themes, periods, and regions studied in world history.
- Understand how historians interpret the past and how their interpretations may change over time.
- Write a narrative of your own personal history using the concepts of theme and period.
Next, Figure 3 shows a sample from a content learning module, where students are remediated on objectives of which they did not demonstrate mastery in the traditional classroom. The guided practice in this section of the module allows for students to recover content with support.

**Figure 3.**

*Content Learning Module Sample*

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**Understanding the Big Picture**

**What Questions Do Historians Ask about Human History?**

Twenty thousand years ago, the Earth was very different than it is today. The world was experiencing an ice age: a period of extreme cold. Parts of the world that are warm and temperate today were covered in snow and ice. Huge animals like mammoths and saber-toothed cats shared this territory with early humans. How were these ancient humans similar to people living today? How were they different?

These are two of the most fundamental questions we can ask about human history. History connects us to our past and shows us how we have changed. In this course, you will explore the people, events, and civilizations that have combined to make the world what it is today.

In 20 words or fewer, how do you think human life has changed over the past 1,000 years?

Type answer here...
Thereafter, Figure 4 demonstrates a sample quiz page from the module assessment. Students are given immediate feedback on the correct answer as well as justifications for the incorrect response. The quizzes are short in length, and multiple format questioning with graphics assist student understanding.

**Figure 4.**

*Module Assessment Sample Quiz Page*

In the module wrap-up (see Figure 5), students have the opportunity to reflect on the content and make real-world connections to the content. Generally, these are writing
or other open-ended formats for the expression of knowledge. The Apex format accommodates multiple learning styles within a module to meet the needs of all students.

Figure 5.

Module Wrap-Up

Write Your Own World History

Use the Concepts of Theme and Period to Write a Personal History

The history of the world is a huge topic to study. Writing about world history is an equally daunting task. How does a historian decide what events or facts to include when he or she is writing about the past? Actually, the choice of what to include (or not include) in history is one of the biggest challenges faced by world historians. Many historians tackle this challenge by using "big ideas" or themes to link together important facts and events, hopefully making this big topic a bit easier to understand.

In this activity, you will practice being a historian by writing a brief history of your own life. Just as historians do with world history, you will use the concepts of theme and period to organize your writing.

Directions

1. Click on the journal icon to view your assignment and see how it will be graded.
2. Submit your completed assignment to your teacher for grading.

How Apex is Implemented at Central High School

In Central High School, students use the Apex Learning digital curriculum to remediate and allow the opportunity to regain lost credit through the completion of
modules and content assessments. While it varies from district to district, credit recovery in this school does not supplant the original grade or impact grade point averages.

The learning platform is student-paced and completed online. Students complete coursework in one of two flex labs on campus during the school day, after school, and during COVID-19; many students completed credit recovery from home. Central High School structures credit recovery to be completed on campus as much as possible to ensure students have access to facilitators and content teachers as the need for help may arise. Due to the varied offerings for credit recovery and student fluidity in a given course per semester, the courses are online at Central High School. The online format allows students to work at their own pace and retake modules as needed to demonstrate mastery. This option is essential to student success at Central High School. For example, one student, Diego, shared,

For me, it was very important to have many tries because I had to listen to the page in Spanish, and then I listened in English and then sometimes again in Spanish. But many times, I had to do it over and over until I felt ready to take the quiz. I didn’t feel rushed or pressured like I did in my big class. Sometimes I felt dumb, but Mrs. S helped me see that the class was just for me and what I needed, and everyone else didn’t matter.

There is a quiz at the end of each module, and after all modules, there is a final exam. The final review comes with study guides and checklists. The Apex program encourages students to review extensively and go back and complete self-check modules for areas that they may feel less prepared to answer. The program is designed to strategically provide as much or as little support as needed depending on each student’s learning style and needs.
In my interviews with the two program facilitators, Mrs. Sylvester and Mr. Brooks, they explained that students are assigned modules based on what specific content standards they failed to demonstrate mastery in the initial enrollment. While Apex allows for school discretion in implementation, the program facilitators at Central High School work collaboratively with the content teachers in weekly professional learning team meetings to determine the number of modules needed for completion to demonstrate proficiency and regain credit. They also discuss student progress and remediation needs as they arise. Both facilitators shared in their interviews that this collaboration was critical to plotting a course for success for recovery students.

The Apex learning system allows each system and school to set parameters for the completion of a module. Throughout the facilitator interviews, I discerned that the modules are differentiated to meet student needs and circumstances. This may vary from school to school within the district, which is a point of criticism I found in the literature regarding credit recovery as a whole.

For example, Mr. Brooks shared that many of the students that are regaining credit due to absences were academically capable of completing the work but failed to meet the district standards for promotion. He shared that those students traditionally complete all modules promptly once they realize that is the only hindrance to regaining credit. Conversely, he shared that many second language learners and exceptional needs students struggled with the academic requirements; therefore, they may have a modified number of modules more appropriate to their specific learning circumstances. He was quick to point out that this was differentiation and not a watering down of the program.
He requires 100% effort from all students but is also aware of their individual needs and meets them where they are to move forward. Mrs. Sylvester echoed this, saying,

Mr. Brooks and I are very different and relate to kids in different ways. But we are a team. We get to know the kids, find out what they need and which of us can make a stronger connection. Sometimes it’s him. Sometimes it’s me. Sometimes it’s both. Sometimes they don’t seem to want to deal with either of us. Then we work with counselors and advocates, administration, teachers, parents, sometimes even their friends. Whatever it takes to make it happen. We never give up on a child.

These sentiments rang true to me as I interviewed varying students. Some reflected on a love/hate relationship with the facilitators but admitted that in the end that they knew that it came from a good place of wanting them to succeed. I concluded from the interviews that no two students had identical experiences in credit recovery but overall felt that they received comprehensive services to ensure content mastery needed to regain the credit. As an administrator at Central High School, that commitment is embedded in the culture and continues to drive continuous school improvement. Our vision for credit recovery is to offer a rigorous differentiated alternative to regain lost credits. While skeptics question the validity of recovery courses, I have witnessed firsthand the overwhelming effort of the teachers, facilitators, and students to meet or exceed the expectations outlined in recovery coursework.

Students at Central High School have two flexible labs dedicated to distance learning. Students who are enrolled in credit recovery are assigned a block in their daily schedule to work on module completion at school with a facilitator’s assistance. Some students are recovering multiple credits or are on a tight schedule for graduation, so they
have to complete credit recovery in a fifth block after school. Students have the entire semester (90 days) to recover a course credit. Depending on the number of modules needed for mastery, the student’s motivation, and the course’s difficulty, a student may take the entire 90 days. Other students may have fewer modules and finish as quickly as 3 weeks. Each situation is different, as the program is intended to be a differentiated support system to help at-risk students not only gain credit but rebuild confidence that may have been shaken by course failure. Leo (12th grade) completed credit recovery following the second semester of his freshman year. Reflecting on that experience, he shared,

It seems like forever ago. It really shook me up to fail a class. That really didn’t happen like that in middle school. You just got passed. So when I realized that I had actually failed and was behind, I was surprised. Also, my parents were mad that I wasted time in class and wasted the opportunity. They are big on school. Failing and disappointing them really made me feel bad about myself. When I started credit recovery, it was slow. I didn’t want to do it and wasn’t sure I could. Mrs. Sylvester stayed on me, breaking into parts that weren’t so big. I started knocking them out, and before I knew it, I was done. I wish I hadn’t wasted time in the regular class. I never made that mistake again.

Conversely, Juan participated in several credit recovery courses during his time at Central High School. At the time of the interviews, he had just completed an English recovery credit. His view on credit recovery differed from Leo’s in that he felt it was an equally acceptable format for gaining credits. When I asked him about his feelings about recovery classes, he replied, “I’m not really a big fan, but it’s the way to be sure I graduate.” He did concur on the importance of the support of the facilitator. He referenced her progress monitoring and accountability as an important key to success:
She pushed me, encouraged me, fussed at me, you know, whatever I needed. I tried to mess around, and she called me out. She gave me the work she knew I could do. You couldn’t play her. It was better for me than the regular class because I could do one module at a time. I didn’t get left behind because it was just me doing my own thing. I didn’t have to worry about the rest of the class.

Diego utilized credit recovery as a newcomer as a way to get on track for graduation. Although formally schooled, coming from another country, many of his credits did not align for graduation requirements. His situation is unique in that he did not necessarily experience course failure before credit recovery. Credit recovery served as a vehicle for demonstrating mastery in courses required for graduation so that he could graduate with an age-appropriate cohort. Diego voiced his desire of love of English language acquisition several times during his interview and referenced the critical importance of the translation component of the Apex learning platform sharing:

Connecting with my teachers is sometimes very hard. We use Microsoft Translate to talk, but it’s still, you know, not the same. I learn more English every day, but in credit recovery, I can listen in Spanish as many times as I want to, and then I can do the work. Sometimes I try to do just English, but I am not ready for that yet. In this class, I can show I know the stuff, it’s just the language. I don’t feel lost here.

The impact of COVID-19 has reshaped the lab setting at Central High School. District restrictions for social distancing have limited lab capacity to 10 students. In a non-COVID setting, these labs would be at capacity during the entirety of the school day and the fifth block, averaging 20-25 students a block. Students were required to remain six feet apart, and Central, being an older school, had smaller classrooms which severely impacted capacity. A grading option was provided by the state that allowed students to
take a pass for the course, or a WC19 which withdrew them from the course without a failing penalty. Neither option had an impact on their GPA. The creation of the PC19 (PassCovid19) grading code in the Spring of 2020 allowed many students to pass a course that before COVID-19, they would have likely lost credit. Much leniency was given in grading and participation in the initial onset of school closure, which reduced the Fall of 2020 credit recovery enrollment numbers. Students in this school have been on a hybrid 2-day present, 3-day remote schedule since the Fall of 2020. Credit recovery enrollments have increased throughout the 2020-2021 school year; however, many students complete school fully remote, including credit recovery. Remote attendance dramatically impacted the way students completed credit recovery, with poor student work production. One of the overarching themes in my interviews was the critical nature of facilitator support in the credit recovery setting. Students struggled with module completion working from home, and the isolation of being fully remote was voiced repeatedly throughout the 2020-2021 school year. Students failed to complete recovery credits or scrambled to complete them coming in for remediation in the evenings. Some students have completed the modules remotely, with support from facilitators on Google Meets. Others have suffered setbacks due to the lack of access to face-to-face instructional support on campus. The lab setting remains fluid for students to access computers and have facilitator support throughout the school day and an additional 2-hour block after school. Additionally, students have access to the modules 24/7 and may work sporadically throughout the day as their schedules allow. Face-to-face connections
and building relationships to provide support continue to be critical in the success of credit recovery.

The following photographs show a lab setting with social distancing measures in place. These labs are open for mixed participation for credit recovery and other distance learning students utilizing NCVPS or community college courses. The first photograph is of a first block mixed credit recovery class (Figure 6). Only four students are present with the facilitator. The first block has historically low attendance due to tardiness and attendance issues associated with the 8:00 a.m. start time. Three students are recovering a course, and one student is completing an NCVPS course for initial credit. The facilitator monitors progress and assists as needed.

Figure 6.

*First Block Flex Lab for Credit Recovery and Distance Learning*
The students in the second photograph (Figure 7) are participating in credit recovery in the fifth block after school (3:30 p.m. to approximately 6:00 p.m.). Each student is working on a different course. A facilitator is present but off-screen in the photo. Students in this setting come and go flexibly as their personal time dictates, given this is an after-school opportunity. This is quite often the busiest time slot for credit recovery, especially for students who have four additional classes and cannot access the flex lab during the school day.

**Figure 7.**

*Fifth Block Flex Lab for Credit Recovery and Distance Learning*

The third photograph was taken during the second block lab (Figure 8). During COVID-19 school closure, several students opted to complete remote learning in the lab setting for health and safety concerns. While traditional classroom sizes were also
dramatically reduced, students with existing health conditions felt more comfortable working in the lab setting. Space was available due to the proportion of students who opted to remain fully remote once school re-opened. Third block credit recovery students completed modules with the help of Mr. Brooks in the ESL classroom (Figure 9). This afforded support from both the facilitator and language support from the ESL teacher. This is a planning block for the ESL teacher, as credit recovery does not supersede ESL services.

**Figure 8.**

_Section Block Flex Lab for Credit Recovery and Distance Learning_
One of the challenges of researching credit recovery is the vast differences between programs within a district, state, and across the nation. While online credit recovery is now common practice in traditional public high schools, the guidelines for implementation are subjectively interpreted by district leadership teams. This study was conducted in a rural district in a diverse, low socioeconomic quadrant of the county. The credit recovery program in this district is tailored to the student body it serves, which is concurrent with Levy (2011) and the impact of poverty, migrant school disruptions, and language barriers on academic achievement.

In interviewing the facilitators of credit recovery at Central High School, I noted a deep-rooted commitment to the success of credit recovery and supporting students to meet their student’s academic and emotional needs. Both facilitators had prior experience with credit recovery in other districts. Mr. Brooks previously worked in a high school
with twice the Central High School student population, so he implemented credit recovery on a much larger scale. He also had experience with a differing approach to the module completion process. The module completion number was on a sliding scale based on the level of course failure. That perspective was helpful in refining practices and maximizing credit recovery at Central High School. Mrs. Sylvester is vested in the community and has the trust and buy-in from students and parents to push students to reach their potential. Together, the two facilitators create a united front dedicated to student support and success that I feel is unique to this school. Students spoke to the lack of connection as a key factor in course failure, so providing that connection in credit recovery is an essential restorative practice.

The lab design is a mixed roster designed to allow flexibility in student scheduling to maintain access to the necessary courses to stay on track for graduation. Students are scheduled into credit recovery during the day as their schedule allows, ensuring they continue to take the required courses to move forward while also regaining lost credits. For students who are able, credit recovery is scheduled as a part of their daily schedule. Students who have failed multiple courses do not have the same luxury of time and must participate in credit recovery after school. School counselors work collaboratively with student advocates to ensure that each student’s program of study plan will meet the graduation requirement for their 4-year cohort. Fifth blocks are added as needed to catch students up with their same-age peers. The fifth block after-school option is particularly critical for students having to maintain a full course load and recover credits simultaneously to graduate. While the variance in enrollments does not
allow for any collaborative cohorts by subject, the scheduling benefits merit the potential negative of being the only one in a particular recovery course in a given block.

Counseling sessions are conducted individually at Central High School, where multiple stakeholders review each student’s transcript and plan of study to ensure all graduation requirements are met.

Students indicated comfort and a sense of familiarity with the credit recovery program that exuded the confidence necessary for successful completion of the assigned courses. This was evident throughout the interviews in students’ demeanor as they spoke about their credit recovery experiences. Rose spoke to the motivation and success of credit recovery, sharing:

I watched people coming into the lab and really just wasting the time. I realized that I could do it, and in seeing them waste time, I wondered if that is what I looked like in my regular class. It really motivated me to get it done and get a grip on myself. I didn’t want to disappoint Mrs. Sylvester or my JROTC team. It made me believe in my own self like they believed in me.

Diego shared similar feelings about his ability to use the translator to support his language acquisition and comfort using that in the lab setting. He shared his love of learning English and his desire to use it fluently with his teachers and peers and being “able to just fit in,” Leo shared that Mrs. Sylvester was “just like my mom, always wanting me to do my best.” While this comment was voiced as a complaint, the sly smile on his face said otherwise. He also shared the importance of the ability to repeat modules:

That’s one thing I really liked about credit recovery, you could do a module as many times as it took to get it right. I didn’t get behind the teacher or lost in front of my friends. No matter what the class, we all know you come in and do the
work, pass the modules. The teachers are there if you need them, but they don’t hang on you. It’s less pressure. I mean, I put the pressure on myself to get it done because I want to graduate.

While not every student necessarily loved participating in credit recovery, all of them indicated gratefulness for the opportunity to regain lost credit and felt accountable for recovering the content lost in the initial course. Leo shared his strategy for working through more challenging modules:

Most of the modules I could power through, but some were way too long and so much reading; I always saved those to last. The hard ones and the boring ones. And then Mr. Brooks would jack me up about leaving all that to last because I would try and mess around on my phone. He would always help me work through them, especially in history. I know he was just looking out for me, even though it got on my nerves sometimes.

Only one student, Ivan, indicated that he failed to succeed in credit recovery the first time but attributed that to his own attitude and work ethic. In a subsequent enrollment, he successfully recovered two courses. Ivan shared that he felt that there were multiple reasons he had to participate in credit recovery and failed to be successful on his initial attempt:

I don’t really like science. I messed around with my friends. And Mr. P went way too fast and way over my head. I needed him to slow down. But I didn’t tell him, so that’s on me. My attitude wasn’t the best, and I didn’t want to do science the first time. Then I didn’t want to take it again in credit recovery. So I failed again. I wouldn’t work, even when they tried to help. I thought I was going to drop out of school, so I thought, who cares? The counselors really pushed me to stick with it, and I got involved in sports—played soccer, and then I realized I was being dumb and wasting a chance. My mom was so happy when I started doing my work and getting back on track.
The power of student advocates and finding a connection to school is evident in Ivan’s story. Making that connection with sports and feeling connected and supported by counselors sparked his motivation and desire to succeed.

Perceptions of the Credit Recovery Experience

As previously stated, one of the major purposes of this study was to examine and understand the perceptions and experiences of English Language Learners (ELLs) who were or are currently enrolled in online credit recovery programs at Central High School. My original plan for data collection was to conduct 10 interviews with Latinx students who were enrolled or had past enrollment in online credit recovery courses. I also interviewed the two program facilitators of the credit recovery at Central High School. I included the two credit recovery facilitators to ensure that I gained a comprehensive view of the program from both the student and adult perspectives. COVID-19 altered my original plan for interviews, which led to the use of Google Meets for some data collection. All interview participants were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Intertwined in the individual stories, I found three common themes emerged: the importance of teacher/student relationships, student self-motivation, and the career- and college-ready mindset and its impact on student performance. I used these three common themes to organize my findings.

Significance of Student/Teacher Relationships

Students who participate in credit recovery have failed to gain credit for course completion. Once the failure is recorded, counselors meet with students to ascertain whether it is necessary to restart the class for the next semester, in which case the student
repeats the entire course in the traditional setting to earn credit. Course restarts are most common for students in foundational courses where skill acquisition directly impacts success in the next level course (for example, Math I is required to move ahead to Math II). If students do not master Math I content standards, their ability to progress in Math II would be hindered. For this reason, course restart would be a more appropriate course of action than credit recovery.

Conversely, other courses such as history, science, and electives are more independent curriculum whose content can be mastered without the graduated registration process. Throughout the interview process, all student participants referred to the impact of student/teacher relationships in different contexts and their academic achievement outcomes. Their narratives spoke both to the circumstances that led to initial course failure and the academic outcomes of credit recovery enrollment. I divided this section into two sub-sections examining each setting’s impact: the initial credit classroom and the credit recovery classroom.

**Initial Credit Loss Classroom Experience**

My student interview protocol began with introductory questions that allowed students to share their experiences over the years across elementary, middle, and high school. This gave me insight into their academic journeys and their general disposition regarding schools. Then we transitioned the dialogue to focus on the first time they experienced course failure. Most of the students experience their first loss of credit in the ninth or 10th grades. All 10 students in the participant pool had to recover a science credit, and eight had to recover a history credit. Two of them participated in credit
recovery for a math class. Only one student experienced course failure in an English class.

As students shared their failed courses and subsequent credit recovery, I recognized that science and history were common stumbling blocks. Leo (12th grade) shared that he had to enroll in credit recovery twice to gain Earth and Environmental Science credit. This experience is not typical in Central High School, so in probing further, Leo shared,

I had to do it (credit recovery) for science and math. Yeah, science and math. I don’t know why it was those two. It’s like, when the teacher talked, it went in one ear and out the other. I might think I was getting it, so I didn’t ask questions, then I failed everything. The teachers don’t even notice. I mean, I don’t like science, at all, not even a little bit. But math, I’m fine with doing it, but the teacher didn’t know I didn’t know it. It’s like they didn’t care if I failed, especially since I had done credit recovery before.

Manuel (11th grade) shared a similar frustration about his struggle with instruction in the regular classroom setting:

So for my science teacher, he talks too fast and all. We can’t finish taking notes in time, and he just talks so much. The words, science vocabulary like words, are hard for me to write down and understand, and he just keeps going forward, and I give up. Then when I got behind, I felt like I could never catch up.

As we continued to talk, Manuel shared that the teacher seemed to have a timetable for instruction and was only teaching to the students who wanted and could learn. That same feeling was supported by statements made by Isabella (11th grade):

When I was a freshman and stuff, it wasn’t the teacher’s fault—it was mainly me. Back then I was very immature, and I made a lot of bad decisions in my life. And
then, in the second semester, I made the worst decisions of my life. Like, I would leave class and not go back. I didn’t concentrate or pay attention when I was in class. I used to fall asleep on purpose and stuff, but the teacher wouldn’t say anything to me. They didn’t call my parents because they didn’t, you know, couldn’t talk to them in English. It really wasn’t the teacher’s fault, though; it was mine and my choices. I just wish someone had stepped in sooner. My parents thought I was doing good in school because I told them I was. When I got to JROTC class and they started, you know, making me do everything, I started to make better choices and believe in myself. Those teachers helped me see if I did credit recovery, I could still graduate and be somebody. That I already was somebody worth knowing.

Isabella was among several students to identify a lack of expectations as a trigger for course failure. Alex (12th grade) referred to the importance of positive relationships and high expectations:

For me, I think I would do better the first time if my teachers really got to know me. Not talking personal, but understanding who I was and what kind of learner I am. It’s embarrassing because I have to go to special classes for reading. People act like I’m dumb—which I’m not. And my parents want me to do good in school, so there is a lot of pressure. My parents expect a lot, and some of my teachers do and some don’t. I don’t do good in the classes where they let me slack off. I had to do credit recovery in the classes where teachers let me get away without doing the work. Now Mrs. Wilson (ESL Teacher) she really makes me do stuff, always checking on me, not taking excuses. She talks to my parents all the time about school. I know she cares about me. It matters to her and makes it matter to me.

When teachers fail to connect and develop relationships with students, academics inevitably suffer. The lack of connection affects not only the social/emotional well-being of the student but hinders their ability to function academically. Diego (12th grade) is a newcomer student from Mexico, only having been in the United States for less than 9 months. Diego was formally schooled in Mexico and is very bright but comes from a home where no English is spoken. He struggles to adapt not only to a new country, new
cultural norms, new school, and friends but also to master a second language. Diego is very shy and reluctant to practice his newly acquired English skills. To participate in this interview, Diego requested an electronic translator so he could speak freely in Spanish. Diego expounded on Manuel’s comments about communication:

I think the teachers are afraid to try and talk to me because my English is bad. My parents have a hard time understanding the emails from the teacher, and no teachers call them. They get the messages from the school on the phone in Spanish, but those aren’t just about me. It’s hard because they came here for me to study, to make a better life, you know what I mean? They want me to do good, and they work all the time to make sure we can stay here. School is hard, but I love to learn the language of English. I want to be able to talk to my teachers and let them know who I am.

There was an overarching need for connected relationships and high expectations in listening to student experiences and perceptions regarding initial course failure. Without these components, these students could fall through the cracks and lose the initial opportunity to gain credit. While several participants attributed it to a lack of commitment and maturity, their responses exhibited a clear yearning for the teacher’s acceptance and encouragement.

**Credit Recovery Classroom Experience**

Moving forward in the interview protocol, I asked participants to share their credit recovery experiences and contrast those to that of the initial course enrollment. At Central High School, two credit recovery facilitators supervise the credit recovery technology labs. Mrs. Sylvester is an older African-American female with a gentle temperament and a passion for students. She is known and well-liked by students and staff across the school. Mr. Brooks is a younger White male that is also the school athletic director and
football coach. His athletic connections and easy-going personality also make him popular with the students. They work in tandem to supervise students in credit recovery, community college dual enrollment courses, and North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) courses. In blocks where labs are at capacity, they split up and use the overflow lab, with Mr. Brooks taking the community college and NCVPS students and Mrs. Sylvester keeping the credit recovery students. Mrs. Sylvester also facilitates fifth block credit recovery, an after-school session from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. for students to complete credit recovery modules. She also runs the credit recovery lab throughout the summer months. While Mr. Brooks and Mrs. Sylvester’s personalities are very different, their mission is united to help students complete their credit recovery modules successfully.

Mrs. Sylvester is a classified employee who has worked in several districts and has been with Central High School for 14 years. Over this time, she has developed a strong credit recovery learning environment with high expectations for student success. All interview participants spoke to her commitment to credit recovery completion. Some viewed it as the caring push they needed; others said it was annoying to be held to high accountability standards. By comparison, several students preferred the laid-back approach of Mr. Brooks. Working together, Central High School’s credit recovery can provide targeted support based on the needs of the individual student.

Due to the variable make-up of student course enrollment in the credit recovery labs on any given day, the students work independently with support from the facilitators.
The most prevalent indicator of success by participants was the ability to self-pace.

Manuel compared the pacing from the traditional setting and credit recovery sharing,

In physical science class, I struggled to keep up. He talked too fast, and I couldn’t take the notes fast enough. He just kept going, and I got lost. I got behind and had to stay after school a lot. That was hard because I have to work—at Burger King—and I can’t stay. But I liked to stay because I could do it once we slowed down. In Mrs. Sylvester’s I can do the modules at my own speed and replay them when I don’t understand. Sometimes it slows me down, but on the easier ones, I can make up time.

Probing into the facilitator’s role, several students shared similar feelings regarding self-pacing, adding that the facilitator was a key component to staying on track. Miguel shared,

It’s not too complicated. She opens the modules and I work as I go. I do have due dates, but if I get behind, Mrs. Sylvester can adjust them to take the pressure off. She checks on me all the time, tells me to get off my phone and do my work. I don’t like it, but I know she is right. And I always get caught up because she’s checking in on me and helping me if I need it. She always says she won’t let me fail.

Sofia shared a similar experience regarding the facilitator relationship:

She used to really bad get on my nerves. Sometimes I would just not do my work because I was so tired. I worked at night and just didn’t care. At first, I didn’t do it because she was nagging me. But after a while, I realized she wasn’t going to give up, and it wasn’t to be mean, it was because she said I had potential. Once I changed my attitude, I could do the modules with help from Mrs. Sylvester. I liked Mr. Brooks, but he wasn’t tough enough on me. I needed someone to say- Sofia-you can do this. Then I did. I had another class to do credit recovery the next year, and I recovered the credit in the first quarter because I understood that failure wasn’t an option. I love her now, and she is one of my people here at school.

One component of credit recovery that was only briefly explored was the lack of a content-certified teacher to assist with assignments. While Mr. Brooks is a licensed CTE
Business teacher and Mrs. Sylvester has many years of experience as a classified support staff member, neither could be expected to be fluent in the content standards of all subjects. To address this, students complete Apex modules that are designed to reteach content and then assess. The lab facilitator’s role is to ensure students stay on track with deadlines and assist as able. Of all of the students interviewed, only Alex indicated that credit recovery was a more challenging environment, stating,

“It’s just that you didn’t have that support anymore. You know that one certain teacher that you could ask and they could answer how to do specific problems or questions. That made credit recovery harder. Also, Ms. Brady (EC teacher) wasn’t in there to help me like in my push-in (inclusion) class.

Probing deeper along these lines, I asked Alex why he felt like he failed to get initial credit if the inclusion class was a more desirable setting for him. He hesitated to respond, finally saying, “I just wasted that time.” Circling back to the notion of high expectations, I asked Alex to expound on the impact of his relationship with the initial credit teacher and whether there were high expectations for success, to which he replied, “not really.”

Often behavioral issues can cause academic setbacks. For example, Sofia had to complete multiple credit recovery modules due to her inability to function in the regular classroom setting. Even with an exceptional children’s behavior plan in place, her continued school discipline issues and absences led to multiple course failures. Her first experience in credit recovery was challenging, as those behaviors tried to manifest in the lab setting. Her initial recovery attempt was unsuccessful. The second semester she had two courses to recover, which added pressure to an already volatile situation. For Sofia, separating her from the larger lab with a smaller group with Mr. Brooks was the key to
her success. With a smaller audience and her perception of less judgment, she was able to work through the modules and gain credit for both classes that semester. Sofia admits,

I didn’t want to do the work in regular class. Kids and teachers expected me to be bad, so I was. I had a lot going on at home, and I was angry all the time. People don’t understand, you know, what it’s like for me, I always get compared and judged, and it makes me so mad. I’m smart. I just don’t like being pressured, and I can’t keep up with the reading because of the language you know. School wasn’t a big deal where I came from. I had to get used to the way you do it here (United States). In the lab, I can just do the modules. I listen in Spanish and then in English, that helps. And Mr. Brooks watches me but doesn’t ride my back. He gets me.

Facilitator Perceptions of the Student/Teacher Relationship

While conducting student interviews, each student spoke to their own perception of the facilitator’s role in their levels of success with credit recovery. While some students expressed resistance to the accountability set forth by Mr. Brooks and Mrs. Sylvester, which is not atypical of students in their teenage years, they all acknowledged the need for an accountability standard and monitoring.

I conducted multiple interviews with both facilitators at Central High School, once in a general sense and then a follow-up to dive deeper after conducting student interviews. Mr. Brooks had experiences in two different districts with credit recovery. Although very different in design, he shared,

It comes down to relationships. It’s got to be transparent-kids have to have a goal—and it has to be realistic. It has to be feasible and can’t be the same for every kid. And with the generation we have now, there has to be some reward at the end of the tunnel. Like, “Hey, this is your goal. You take a step, and I’ll take a step. I’ll meet you there. We can make it happen together.” Kids have to know there is something in it for them, and that means showing them that recovering this credit is a step closer to walking across the graduation stage.
Mrs. Sylvester has a shared belief in the power of positive relationships. She spoke to the many students who come to her feeling defeated or somehow less than their peers due to course failure. She was visibly emotional about the negative self-concept and the resistance to complete course modules as a result. She uses firm and consistent reinforcement to get students to stay on task “because if I argue with them, they’ll shut down on me.” Mrs. Sylvester notes that students often do not want to complete the module and prefer to be on their phones. Instead of battling that, she opts to allow students to use their phones to take notes and look up information relevant to the module. That give-and-take helps forge the gap of resistance and allows time to develop relationships. She expounded on this, sharing,

One student refused to do any work outside of my class. One day we had a one-on-one conversation, and I asked him why he wouldn’t do the work. He was quiet for a long time and said, “I don’t have nobody at home to help me. When I do it, nobody can/will check it. When I am here with you, you check on me and make sure I got it. You make me feel like I can do it, so I keep working. It matters to you, so it matters to me.”

Mrs. Sylvester shared this is a common situation where students, especially second language learners, do not have a strong support network at home. This lack of support can be due to language or environmental, or emotional issues at home. She did share that most parents of second language learners support their children’s education but often are hindered by communication with the school in their native language. This obstacle was mentioned throughout the interviews by students and facilitators as an area in need of attention.
Student Self-Motivation

Self-motivation is a fluid thing in a traditional high school. Many students are highly motivated to maximize their high school experience to be better prepared for post-secondary schooling. However, a large portion of students lacks the motivation and vision for the future. School attendance in North Carolina is compulsory through age 16. If asked why they come to school, many students would say they do not have a choice. A student’s home life can greatly impact their motivation in school. Parental support or a lack thereof plays a large role in student success. In Central High School, the free/reduced lunch rate is approximately 68%, indicating a large segment of the student body with socioeconomic challenges, which may impact student achievement. Six out of 10 students interviewed maintained a part-time job in addition to school and home responsibilities. While not a question on the interview protocol, several students volunteered that their parents did not finish high school. For three, it meant their parents were supportive and encouraging their children to graduate. For one, he felt like his father felt school was unnecessary, as he never graduated. As I conducted the interviews, the topic of student self-motivation was recurrent throughout the conversations. Students shared what role motivation played in course failure as well as in the credit recovery setting.

Self-Motivation and Initial Course Experience

Talking with students about a course failure was a delicate balance. Some students were able to openly acknowledge course failure and ownership for their role in
credit loss. Others leaned toward a shift of responsibility to the teacher. This was a critical component of student perception to unfold.

Ivan (12th grade) had multiple course recoveries over 4 years at Central High School. He shared that some of the course failures were due to excessive absences. Before COVID-19, absences were a key factor in attaining course credit. Students with excessive absences had to complete credit recovery modules to balance the content they may have missed. Ivan also shared a checkered history with behavior suspensions and a general dislike of school and the authority structure. Once we worked our way through those pieces, he shared that credit recovery itself was neither “too hard” nor was the initial course. Ivan stated, “my biggest problem was I missed too much school, I got behind, and didn’t care if I caught up.” Several students shared this overwhelming feeling, and Diego (12th grade) felt added pressure as a newcomer. The credit recovery modules afforded Diego “time to catch my breath without everyone looking and waiting. I could do Spanish and English without holding everyone else back.” Ivan is at the point where credit recovery will allow him to graduate on time with his cohort, and the importance of this is evident in his voice. He was clear to say that his own choices and lack of commitment had led him to credit recovery and that he understands the opportunity he has to correct his path and be on track to graduate.

Alex was identified as Specific Learning Disabled in reading in the fifth grade. He has also qualified for English as a Second Language services since Kindergarten. Learning a second language and managing a learning disability made the road to academic success a challenging one for Alex. While he had additional support along the
way, he had to learn to use his accommodations and modifications to his benefit. Alex admitted that he felt his classroom teachers were easier on him because he had, in his words, “special needs.” He also stated, “I could have done more than they asked me; they just didn’t ask me.” Up to high school, he said he mostly got by with C’s and D’s. When he got to high school, he said things were different. His high school ESL began to push him to think about a career path and what he needed to do to be ready at the next level. Jokingly, he stated,

She’s worse than my Dad. She is always talking to my teachers and checking with me to make sure I get it all done. She always says I can be whatever I want to be and to quit being lazy and faking out my classroom teachers that I can’t do the work. Sometimes I do that because I don’t understand, but sometimes it’s just because I don’t want to do it. She doesn’t take any excuses off me. Sometimes I wonder why my other teachers do.

Across the board, students shared that they felt they were more mature and now able to see that they lacked motivation and wasted time in the initial credit classroom. Isabella referenced sleeping in class, whereas Sofia attributes her poor behavior choices as evidence of her lack of motivation. Leo and Miguel both referenced keeping a low profile and dodging expectations, subsequently failing the course.

Additionally, a student’s comfort level with a specific content impacted motivation. Leo referenced his dislike of science as a direct factor in his need to complete credit recovery for two separate science courses. He repeatedly stated, “I hate science worse than anything.” Ivan references the struggle with the “big words” in science, indicating that academic vocabulary was putting up roadblocks to success. Along the
same vein, math seemed to be a more favorable subject, with several references to math being universal and language having less impact. Diego shared his math perception,

Math is easier for me, you know? Realistically you don’t have to be good at English to do math problems. You just work out the equations. The word problems are tricky, but I can use the translator for those words, and then I know how to do the math. It feels normal, you know what I mean?

Multiple students referenced the language barrier as a mitigating factor to pacing in the initial classroom. Sofia shared,

It’s not like I’m not smart. It just takes me longer sometimes to get through all the words and directions. Then I get frustrated and just want to quit. That is when I usually get in trouble, and I lose my cool. I’m learning now that’s not the way to handle it. It’s just hard sometimes. Speaking another language isn’t a bad thing. I will be able to use that one day. My counselors said so.

Students identified as English Language Learners (ELL) in this district have indicated that another language is the primary language spoken at home. It is important to be aware that only two participants in these interviews came from another country. While their ELL status is certainly relevant, they have been formally schooled in the United States since Kindergarten. Their abilities to complete content work are evident as they transition into the credit recovery environment.

Self-Motivation and the Credit Recovery Experience

After breaking the ice with introductory questions and gaining contextual background on the circumstances that led each student to participate in credit recovery, I sought to identify attributes that may have contributed to their success or failure in credit recovery. This is where students began to talk about the role of self-motivation. While
they were a little less specific about failure in the initial course, saying things like “it was on me” or “I didn’t care then,” there was a definite upswing in ownership for the completion of credit recovery. Miguel shared his struggles with multiple course failures and that he participated in credit recovery both during the school day and during the fifth block. He shared that his lack of motivation was the primary cause of course failure and not his lack of ability. Miguel further explained,

> Once I got into credit recovery, I just knew I had to do it. Last chance, you know? Mrs. Sylvester set up my account, and I just had to read and answer questions. It was sort of boring, but that was my fault. I already had a chance to pass before and didn’t do it. She stayed on me to stay off my phone and focus. Reminded me all the time that I was smart enough to do it. Sometimes I gave her an attitude, but it never stopped her from making me do it.

We also compared the rigor of the work in the classroom versus the rigor in credit recovery. In Miguel’s situation, he recovered multiple classes. He said that some were easier because he had access to outside resources. When I asked for clarification on “outside resources,” Miguel slyly stated,

> Well, not going to lie … A lot of the answers were on like Socratic and Quizlet. You can Google almost anything. It really helped me get through the modules, and then I could remember it for the tests. I felt like I learned more that way than trying to take notes and being lost in class. Also, I could do it my speed. Taking longer doesn’t make me dumb, it just means I need more time. Credit recovery gives me more time.

Time was the main factor motivating Manuel in credit recovery. When discussing the regular classroom, he referenced multiple times being rushed and falling behind. He shared this comparison,
It was like in credit recovery, I could breathe. I knew what I had to do, and I knew I was on a timeline—but it wasn’t the same as being pressured in the classroom. No one else knew what I had to do, so I could focus on myself, and Mrs. Sylvester and Mr. Brooks were constantly encouraging me and checking on me but in a good way. It’s hard to explain—it’s just different. In credit recovery, it was about me against me. I knew I could do it then.

That personal encouragement on an individual level is key to building self-motivation for some students. Having that positive daily two-way communication is vital to keeping students on track. Leo shared this example:

I knew I could do it, but I would let myself get lazy. It felt like Mrs. Sylvester was always on me, and I acted like I didn’t like it, but I know I needed that push. I can’t fail anything now and still graduate on time. Also, I can be a good student there, and I don’t feel that in my other classes as much. Also, I like that she makes me get it done, so I don’t have to take it all home with me. So much stuff going on at home. She makes me be better at getting it all done. Some days she doesn’t even have to remind me anymore. I just want to graduate, and I’m not giving up.

With Diego’s newcomer status, his credit recovery experience is about gaining equivalent credits to his Spanish schooling to be grade-appropriate and join his cohort. Having limited English proficiency is challenging, and he has relied heavily on technological support to navigate his work. The Apex modules translate where he can hear both English and Spanish versions, which empowers him to take more risks with his proficiency in both social and academic use of English. Diego did share that parent contact with the school helped keep him motivated. His teachers made sure to send home messages and updates in Spanish to ensure effective two-way communication.
The awareness that their behavior needed to change was prevalent in many students. Both Isabella and Sofia noted that they did not do what they should have initially and would not waste the chance to fix it in credit recovery. Sofia shared,

Getting suspended for behavior was as good an excuse as any not to do my work. I even told my parents I couldn’t do the work while I was suspended. When they found out from the school that wasn’t true, I was even in more trouble. Now I can see that was a waste of my time, and I made it harder to catch up. But I want to graduate and go to community college. I don’t want to be a dropout.

Along similar lines, Isabella reflected on her early choices in high school during our interview. She attributed the self-motivation she found to her participation and involvement in the JROTC, sharing,

The Colonel pushed me to be more than I was being. He also let me know when I disappointed him. That was an awful feeling, and I knew I had to be all I could be. Now I want to go into the military when I graduate. I used to be embarrassed about my bad choices, but the counselors here helped me see that it is just part of my story. And I will be better from learning from those mistakes. I also want my sister to be able to look up to me and not do all the dumb things I did.

Self-motivation can be challenging or empowering for students. Across the board, interview participants clearly identified their need to persevere and get back on track. Recognizing the goal of graduation was still attainable allowed each of them a fighting chance to succeed. Mr. Brooks spoke to the importance of motivation, stating,

With credit recovery, it’s amplified, because many times they are coming from a bad situation, home life, or are missing resources or the motivation to succeed. They are feeling like a failure because—well—they just failed. So in my credit recovery class it’s imperative to find success early, very early in the semester, to get the student buy-in to finish. You have to start with the end game in mind.
Conquering that sense of failure and the embarrassment or shame that accompanies course failure is a vital component of the facilitator’s job description. It ties back closely to the importance of building positive relationships because for many children to believe in themselves, they have to know someone else believes in them first.

**Career- and College-Ready Mindset**

The premise of credit recovery is to help students regain lost credit and get back on track for timely graduation. Using the Apex software, students have the opportunity to demonstrate the academic proficiency needed to advance with their studies. In Central High School, there has been a concentrated focus on reducing the dropout rate and ensuring all students graduate career- or college-ready. When looking at the Latinx population within Central High School, many students would be first-generation college students. Many aspire to go into a trade industry that may be better suited to a community college or trade school versus a 4-year university. In Isabella’s case, the military was the end goal for her credit recovery gains. She found that drive and self-motivation in her JROTC classes allowed her to use credit recovery in a meaningful way. Isabella shared,

> Lots of girls my age get pregnant and drop out of school. All they want to do is get married and have babies. I want to be a mom one day too. But I also want to do things my kids can look up to and be proud of. I never believed I was good enough for the Army. But the Colonel and First Sargent showed me a different path. They said I had to do the hard work-get back my lost credits, but that it was never too late. Now I know I can do anything.

Not all students have that vision for post-graduation, particularly those trying to balance credit recovery along with their regular course load. Miguel shared that he told his parents it was just a regular class the first time he was in credit recovery. In a later
semester, he had to recover another credit, and his parents met with Mr. Brooks and realized he had used this program before. Miguel sheepishly shared,

They were pretty mad I failed and didn’t tell them. But now they just want me to graduate and be able to get a good job. I don’t know what I want to do, but my cousin is really smart and is pushing me to at least go to community college. My school counselor talks to me all the time about options. It’s crazy to think I have options now when I felt like such a failure before. I just want to do a job I like and make good money. I know graduating will help me do that.

Sofia was more reluctant to talk about her future goals and ambitions. When asked the goal-setting questions on the protocol, her answers were shorter and somewhat defensive. I left that and revisited it in a subsequent conversation. She shared,

It’s hard for me to talk about the future. I never thought I would graduate. I was always going to drop out at sixteen. I wanted to run away and start a new life. But the longer I was here, the less I wanted to quit, and now that I can see the end in sight, it’s scary. Like I don’t know what I should do. I’d like to do hair and make-up, I’m good at it, and it relaxes me. My counselor set up a meeting with the cosmetology school in town. I want to talk to them, but I’m scared too. I don’t want to look dumb. And honestly, I’m scared to leave here. People here push me to be better. People believe in me. Out there, I have to do it myself. I know I can, it’s just scary.

Many Central High School students already work a part-time job additional to school, which is often a mitigating factor when students experience course failure due to time management. Financial needs make this a necessity for many families, so it is a barrier that the school must overcome with strong support structures. Alex shared that since turning 18, he has worked from 4:00 p.m. to closing (10:00 p.m. or later) at a local auto supply store. He discussed the implications, sharing,
Part of the reason I could get this job is because I’m good with cars. I always helped my Dad fix cars, and I like to do that. I know a lot of parts, and I speak Spanish and English, so they really wanted to give me the job. I think working there will help me make my own car business one day. Maybe I can do community college and get a two-year degree. Nobody in my family even finished high school. It’s hard to do homework though, because after work I am tired and I also work on the weekends. That’s how I think I failed the first time.

The challenge of transitioning into the world outside of school is daunting. Students who faced course failure can have increased anxieties about their life after high school. The overarching goal of credit recovery is to help students regain the credits necessary for graduation to have choices moving forward. While not all participants had a clear plan post-graduation, each expressed a clear vision for completing graduation requirements and receiving that high school diploma.

A primary focus of this study was to understand Latinx students’ perceptions of their credit recovery experiences. By first talking about the circumstances that led to initial course failure, a recurring and disturbing lack of high teacher expectations from these students emerged. Due to my positionality and the relationships I have built with Central High School students, I felt I received honest feedback and was able to have frank discussions about the impact their race played in their academic success. Students shared that the language barrier is more of a constructed perception with teachers, again referencing that most were born in the United States. While academic vocabulary still proves challenging, students shared that they did not feel they were pushed as hard as their non-Latinx classmates. They also spoke to the communication obstacles with their parents, and that often they were able to manipulate that to avoid work completion. This aligns with Callahan’s (2005) assertion that academic growth is directly tied to variances
in attitudes and expectations and weak student-teacher relationships. Throughout the conversations, the students also referenced their own maturity and commitment to school as a barrier to their academic success.

As we moved into the protocol questions specific to credit recovery, I wanted to gain a better understanding of how the students perceived the academic quality of credit recovery compared to the regular classroom. A common reply was that it was “easier,” but that was attributed to pacing and the ability to use translating software, and the one-to-one support from facilitators. Several students were able to recover credits quickly in the first quarter, which indicated to me that they already had some foundational understanding of the content from the initial course enrollment. Others struggled to complete credit recovery within the semester timeline. Powell (2018) argues that credit recovery may be a “watered down” and even more oppressive segregation of minority students. My study participants did not share any perception of segregation through the credit recovery experience. Most supported Viano’s (2018) assertion that more personalized and individual support provided in the credit recovery setting led to more successful outcomes.

The most common theme across the interviews was that credit recovery served as a tool to get back on track for graduation. I sensed varying levels of satisfaction with the actual program but a genuine appreciation for having the resource and options available to make graduation a reality again. That sense of hope was strong in all interviews, coupled with the genuine desire to create a path to a successful future.
Summary

In this chapter, I shared the nature of credit recovery programs and their purpose in traditional high schools. I focused on the perceptions of Latinx students regarding their experiences with credit recovery. The interview process looked at the journey from course failure to credit recovery through the lens of Latinx students. I also refined my understanding of the student responses about credit recovery by interviewing the two credit recovery facilitators at the school. While each student had a unique story and journey that led to participating in credit recovery, several themes emerged.

First and foremost, students spoke to the importance of meaningful relationships between students and teachers. This was viewed from both a positive lens and one with a negative impact. All students spoke either to the motivation that a positive teacher relationship provided or the damage caused when a lack of connection with the teacher was noted. Several noted both circumstances, often where a negative relationship or lack of relationship contributed to course failure, and the positive connections in credit recovery allowed achieving academic success. Additionally, the interpersonal connections with counselors and support staff were noted. All these factors are positive indicators for success.

There was also significant weight given to self-motivation by respondents. The students and the credit recovery facilitators interviewed noted that lack of self-motivation was a large contributor to course failure. As students advanced through high school and matured, that motivation for many grew as well. The interview participants were richly reflective about themselves personally and gave credence to their ability to self-motivate
with the finish line of graduation in sight. Even students who failed to regain credit on the first try in credit recovery admitted to their own motivation as a factor. The ability to own that behavior and see the cause and effect of course failure and credit recovery empowered students to move forward academically.

Working in tandem with the desire to graduate is the vision of students being career- or college-ready. While the push is for all students to pursue education beyond high school, the reality is that not all students are destined to attend a 4-year university. An additional reality is that career opportunities outside of a 4-year university track are abundant. Many Latinx students in Central High School and the rural district where the school is located will be the first generation to graduate high school or attend post-secondary schooling. The school’s mission is to ensure students are college- or career-ready and that they leave Central High School with a high school diploma in hand and a plan for the future. Credit recovery provided an avenue for attainment. I discuss the impact of these findings in my next chapter.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the prior chapter, I addressed the research questions by sharing the findings from the data collected and analyzed. In this chapter, I reflect on and discuss the implications of my findings related to the literature, inform recommendations for future practice, and build toward suggestions for further research. Additionally, I address the impact of the global pandemic that unfolded during my data collection and its impact on my study and the participants before closing with final thoughts.

Discussion

The credit recovery program at Central High School is an online student-paced remediation model; therefore, the access and equity of online learning as an instructional medium was of significant importance to my study. Students who experienced course failure in the traditional classroom are often enrolled in online credit recovery to recover credit and stay on track for timely graduation. While this may give this appearance of equity and access, the research demonstrated potential barriers for minoritized children when working in a virtual class, including access to technology on a routine basis, comfort with navigating online learning platforms, and the lack of face-to-face instructional support with the content being recovered. The impact on immigrant students is also noted, as many lack formal schooling credits from their native country. The literature references substantial concern for at-risk minoritized populations being further
marginalized by programs like credit recovery. The impact of COVID-19 and school closure exacerbated equity concerns and access to technology and teacher support for at-risk populations. Over 40% of the student population at Central High School opted to be fully remote learners for the 2020-2021 school year due to safety concerns and potential exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Over half of the learners that chose remote were Latinx students. Many attributed the need for remote learning to childcare concerns for younger siblings during school closure. Latinx students also suffered from rolling quarantines when family members tested positive. Homes with extended families and shared childcare responsibilities made this group of students particularly vulnerable to quarantine and subsequent illness. Additionally, most of the Latinx population that accessed school remotely had limited adult access in the home due to work responsibilities and language barriers for parental support. Each student was issued a Chromebook from the school and an Internet hotspot if needed; however, multiple students in the home needing internet access during the school day with limited bandwidth made access an issue. These factors contributed to issues of student success throughout the 2020-2021 school year.

My interview protocol was designed to ascertain the student perceptions of attributes to their success or barriers preventing success. Powell (2018) references credit recovery programs being subpar curricula choices that ill prepare students for post-secondary success. One common concern throughout the literature was the equity and access to use technology effectively as a medium for instruction. In the Central High School district, not all schools have equitable access to devices, and in Central’s
quadrant, there is less access to devices and poor Internet service from the provided given the rural setting. Even when provided with an internet hotspot, some rural home locations were unable to access the Internet. Combined with the impact of low socioeconomic status, many of Central’s students only access technology while on the school campus. Despite these factors, the study participants at Central High School indicated in interviews an appropriate comfort level with technology as a learning format. Many of the students I interviewed shared their experiences pre-COVID, as this school year was an unprecedented experience. The comfort level with this online format for learning most surely would vary from school to school and across demographic and socioeconomic settings. This study provides a snapshot of one rural school experience at Central High School. While students are comfortable with the technological aspect of the course delivery, several students interviewed indicated the content was not as rigorous as that in the initial course in the traditional face-to-face setting. Several interview participants indicated that they knew how to complete the modules quickly and use internet resources to circumvent some of the work. This aligns with Viano’s (2018) study, where just under half her participants rated the quality of resources materials much lower than the traditional setting. I think that the rigor level depends on the factors that led the student to credit recovery initially. If it was a lack of motivation or some other internal reason, students move quickly through the modules. These students could be successful in the initial class enrollment. However, many more struggle with the content and mitigating factors such as language barriers that have to work diligently to demonstrate mastery in credit recovery. Malkus (2018) asserts in his study of credit recovery participation in U.S.
high schools that credit recovery has become a second track to completing an inferior education. In probing deeper, several students did indicate that they felt it was easier and could use support resources to circumvent the full module of instruction. I think that the interview findings at Central High School supported and refuted Viano and Malkus’s claims, dependent on the circumstances of each individual learner.

The importance of meaningful student/teacher relationships was a common theme throughout the interviews. In the literature, Callahan (2005) and DiPietro et al. (2008) found that the quality of student/teacher relationships was a key indicator of success. The risk of unequal outcomes that tracking minoritized students into credit recovery raises grave concerns with researchers such as Malkus (2018), who noted the lack of an increase in high school test scores for credit recovery participants. In Central High School, students only enroll in credit recovery for state-tested courses after two failed traditional classroom attempts. The failing assessment score is logged with the state, and the student does not have to retest following mastery of the credit recovery module. They recover the credit but do not accumulate grade point average points. Much of the student data collected in this study referenced the lack of positive relationships as a factor in initial course failure.

Students spoke to the lack of engagement and connection with the teacher or course in the initial classroom setting during the interviews. Many students took partial or even full ownership of that lack of engagement, but several students felt ignored or discarded by the classroom teacher. Several students intimated they felt this was due in part to their ethnicity. Students also spoke of the pressures to keep up with their native
English peers and struggles with academic vocabulary causing them to fall behind in the initial course. In the credit recovery classroom, students felt less pressure with the ability to self-pace; however, the lack of a content teacher still left students with a disconnect on the instructional support of face-to-face instruction. The accountability of the facilitator support was a common indicator of students successfully completing the modules. Students also identified that personal connection with the facilitator as a critical social-emotional support critical to success. Throughout school closure and reduced occupancy, Central High School facilitators worked diligently to stay connected with credit recovery students, arranging times for students to come to campus for the face-to-face support critical to success in credit recovery.

One of the interview participants was a newcomer immigrant student utilizing credit recovery to gain initial credit equivalent to his native schooling. This participant shared his struggle with transferring knowledge from his native language and schooling to equivalent courses in an American school. This is an added stressor and can be overwhelming for many students. At Central High School, the ESL teacher works closely with newcomer immigrant students to layer in extra support and ensure students stay on track.

Their perception of credit recovery shared a more personal and meaningful connection and higher student accountability and expectations in the credit recovery classroom. The literature combined with this study school indicates that student/teacher relationships play a definite role. In Central High School, the need for improved relationships is apparent in the traditional classroom. Marginalized students are falling
victim to what I feel are mostly unintended microaggressions by staff members. The need for targeted professional development for the academic and social-emotional best practices for minoritized students emerged throughout the interview process. More research is needed to determine how additional schools in varying areas would align. The research is limited on Latinx student experiences and perceptions of online learning and, more specifically, the credit recovery experience. While credit recovery is not a new instructional intervention, the inconsistencies in implementation across the nation made it challenging to generalize findings based on the literature. Researchers have begun to look at the impact of these interventions on marginalized students, and skeptics question the value of the recovery process.

Students in advanced placement and community college students worked alongside credit recovery students in the lab setting at Central High School. Powell (2018) speaks to the inadvertent creation of a White advantage in her study of a credit recovery setting. The school in this study separated high and low-performing students in an attempt to preserve individualized support for vulnerable students. The end result was the creation of an environment for White students to get further ahead at the expense of at-risk (mostly racially minoritized) students. In Central High School, the lab was primarily credit recovery, with only a few students completing advanced coursework. Many of the advanced course participants had opted to be fully remote during the 2020-2021 school year. However, no Latinx students interviewed in this study indicated any sense of reduced support or the need for competitive attention. This was not a direct interview question, but the students’ responses demonstrated no issues of competitive
attention towards the advanced curriculum students in the lab. This area would be of interest to compare in an urban setting versus the rural location of Central High School.

**Implications**

In this study, I examined the impact of a common academic intervention in public high school, credit recovery, on the Latinx population in a rural high school. In doing so, I learned more about the conditions that contributed to the need for credit recovery and what the credit recovery experience was like for Latinx students in this school. I also learned what practices needed to be modified to improve students’ academic achievement and how to improve social/emotional barriers that may have arisen regarding race and/or academic performance. Three veins of thought emerged in my research:

1. What caused the initial course failure?
2. Does credit recovery really work?
3. How can we make it better and also avoid the need for recovery?

This study was small in number and focused on one glimpse of a nationwide phenomenon of course failure and recovery with a specific focus on marginalized students. In my review of the literature, there were multiple references to the continued stratification and racial oppression of programs like credit recovery (Powell, 2018). Malkus (2018) speaks to the low expectations of credit recovery programs and the dangers of tracking minority students into a path destined for failure. Even though this study was just a small sampling, the insight gained from student and facilitator interviews was vital to improving the opportunities for Latinx students at Central High School and
providing insight for other districts implementing credit recovery and support structures for Latinx students.

**Initial Course Failure**

Course failure is not unique to Latinx students at Central High School. Credit recovery classes include a diverse mix of Latinx, White, and African-American students at this particular high school. However, the interviews shed light on the need to increase instructional supports for English language learners in the regular setting, regardless of their ESL status. The study revealed the need for improved student/teacher relationships and two-way communication with parents. Language barriers for home communication were prevalent among interview participants. It also clearly identified the need for clear and well-defined expectations for student performance.

Given the unique circumstances that have emerged since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, the need for high-quality online learning became paramount due to rolling school closures. Far preceding the pandemic, Cavanaugh and Clark (2007) supported the need for online learning options as a means to improve equity and access to curriculum, alleviate crowded schools, and allow for differentiated pacing and settings for vulnerable students. School closure resulting from COVID-19 and the scramble to provide a basic sound education virtually has brought online learning to the forefront in education.

The students in this study have been saddled with additional stressors with financial instability due to job loss and the lack of access to technology and resources to participate in remote learning. By networking with local providers and the use of federal
aid, the district has been able to get Chromebooks out to students and provide Internet hotspots as needed. However, due to the rural setting of Central High School, even the hotspots have connectivity issues with cellular towers. These factors continue to jeopardize the academic success of Latinx students. In this particular district, schools resumed in August of 2020 in a hybrid model with students attending face-to-face 2 days a week and completing the other 3 days remotely. All study participants opted for this choice and have access to the labs intermittently dependent on quarantines. The traditional classroom has morphed into a hybrid classroom, and students across the board have suffered academic setbacks.

**Credit Recovery Impacts**

The credit recovery numbers were lower for the start of school in August 2020 due to the issuance of a grading option that was equivalent to a pass or fail due to school closure for COVID-19. Many students benefitted from the ambiguity of school closure and the grace that had to be given regarding course credit. However, as the year has progressed, it is evident that the content mastery that should accompany the passing grade is deficient. As a result, Central High School has had many course failures in the Fall of 2020 and an increase in credit recovery courses for the Spring of 2021. I reiterate that the circumstances that the interview participants may be experiencing during this school year in credit recovery are unprecedented; however, the presence of low expectations and rigor and embedded discrimination are not unique to COVID-19.

When considering the question, “Does credit recovery work?” the answer is multi-faceted. The Latinx students I interviewed for this study were successfully able to
recover the credits needed for graduation. Overall, they shared that it was a positive opportunity to get on track and graduate. However, it is equally important to note that students indicated it was not always as academically rigorous. The more technologically savvy students could access online supports to circumvent the learning modules and move quickly through the process without truly mastering the content. Skeptics in the educational field assert that credit recovery is a watered-down curriculum and mediocre at best and does not accurately reflect content mastery. Looking at this sampling of students, the study demonstrates measures of truth in both arenas.

**Improvement Strategies**

This study aimed to understand the perceptions of Latinx students in credit recovery to develop and implement strategies for improvement for all students at Central High School. With the Latinx population representing the largest ethnic minority population in the school, the urgency for support for this subgroup of learners was an imminent priority. The opportunity to speak candidly with students who have participated or are currently enrolled in the credit program provided targeted insight into the successes and needs for improvement already in place in the school. To improve the credit recovery experience for Latinx students, school leadership must ensure that all staff is current in the best practices for second language learners.

In both the regular classroom setting and the credit recovery setting, the need for meaningful relationships between teachers and students was apparent. All students indicated that the relationship played a role, both positively or negatively, in student success. Students who felt connected to their teachers performed better academically and
had better attendance. Students who felt disconnected admitted to disengaging from class and developing poor work habits as a result. Even students who struggled academically felt engaged and connected with the teachers who were connected to the student and maintain positive two-way communication with the child and their parents. This is a fundamental practice for all educators and cannot be overlooked, especially in today’s uncertain times of school closure. The basic foundation of the student/teacher relationship is care. Valenzuela (1999) describes authentic care as relationships rooted in a sense of reciprocity, responsibility to the collective, and trust. Noddings (2012) suggests that caring is a relational interaction—“a connection between two people, the carer and the cared-for” (p. 772). Three essential components must be present to embrace Valenzuela’s authentic care in credit recovery: care theory, social capital, and the Latinx cultural construct of education (Newcomer, 2018). The importance of care and meaningful relationships was evidenced throughout the student interviews conducted. Valenzuela’s social capital is the exchange of trust and solidarity between teachers and students. This directly correlates to the study findings shared by participants about the vulnerability experienced in course failure and recovery. Finally, the cultural construct of education aligns with cultural sensitivity and diversity, that when lacking, causes feelings of isolation and students exacerbating poor academic performance.

For Latinx students, the impact of language acquisition emerged as a need for support. Gonzalez and Ayala-Alcantar (2008) reiterate the importance of cultural sensitivity and the tendency to overgeneralize about a culture. This aligns with study participants sharing the lack of communication assumptions and efforts by teachers to
communicate with parents and low communication standards for Latinx students in the classroom. Despite varying levels of fluency and participation in ESL for support services, all interview participants noted struggles with pacing and the challenging academic language that accompanies higher-level coursework. Teachers cannot make assumptions about fluency based on a student’s use of BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) language versus CALPS (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) as an indicator of support needs. English language learners can develop BICS communication skills after 1-2 years in the United States. What teachers can observe on the surface may appear that the child is fully fluent in the English language. However, that academic language that is more complex is needed to function in decontextualized settings and may take 5-7 years or longer to develop. Without any English spoken in the home, this becomes even more difficult for English language learners to navigate.

Figure 10 illustrates the differences between BICS and CALP using Dr. Jim Cummins’s (1981) iceberg analogy. It further illustrates that some students may develop CALP language skills into adulthood. This is of utmost importance for teachers to understand and differentiate instruction to support in the regular setting to help prevent course failure.
While the research of Cummins (1981) is certainly not new, the relevance could not be more pressing. As diversity increases in the schools, a sense of complacency can creep in that causes assumptions about second language learners resulting in a failure to provide the best practices to meet their needs. Continued professional development and focused goals to implement best practices are paramount for the success of Latinx students in school.

When course failure becomes a reality necessitating credit recovery, program facilitators must monitor and support the student’s individual progress in the modules. While the quality of the modules was not a focus of this study, the need for academic and
emotional support for credit recovery students was a primary takeaway from participants. In Central High School, interview participants indicated that the two program facilitators were genuinely invested in their success and provided support and encouragement to ensure that credit recovery was completed successfully. However, as previously stated, this is a small glimpse into one school. The need for consistency and training on best practices for credit recovery should be implemented into all secondary school improvement plans. This included explicit language acquisition and instructional strategies for classroom teachers. It also includes the need for culturally responsive leadership that embodies inclusivity in the school mission and vision. The interview participants created a clear picture that credit recovery is not for lost causes and giving up, rather an opportunity to recover and rise above times of academic hardship. One of the greatest implications for me as an educator is to recognize and celebrate the tenacity and grit of this talented but marginalized population by understanding and improving the instructional practices in place to prevent course failure and ensure academic success in high school and beyond.

**Recommendations**

In addition to understanding the circumstances that led to course failure and their experiences in credit recovery, I also sought to identify attributes to their success and failure and examine potential suggestions for improvement from the student perspective, as well as ways to help with goal setting moving forward. For initial course failure, I hypothesized that students might blame the teacher for their lack of success. My hypothesis was proved blatantly unfounded by interview participant responses.
Overwhelmingly, the students took ownership of their course failure in sharing their experiences. I did pick up on racial micro-aggressions by teachers that students seem to accept as a reality of being an ethnic minority student. Examples include a failure to communicate with parents using a language barrier as an excuse or not encouraging limited English students to participate, so they did not “embarrass” them. Upon further questioning, the students did not indicate that was a significant factor in their success or failure, but as an educator and a parent, this gave me significant pause. Additionally, I felt an emotional impact in the interviews that body language and expressions spoke to the damage un-intentional comments and behaviors had on these Latinx students.

Four students interviewed said that the classroom pacing in science and history was not conducive to notetaking. They indicated the need for perhaps an outline or skeleton notes to assist them in navigating the academic language. This is an accommodation common to ESL students who are still actively identified by WIDA standards, but most of the students interviewed had exited ESL and no longer received classroom modifications for success. Johnson (2019) speaks to the achievement gap for English language learners attributing the limited exposure to academic content outside of the school setting as a strong mitigating factor. As a former ESL teacher, I personally saw students “exit” by the WIDA standards who still desperately needed support to navigate the academic setting. I also witnessed firsthand how hard ELL students work to assimilate with their peers. While on the surface they appear as fluent as their non-Latinx peers, they struggle with accessing the more difficult academic language. In the individual interviews, students were willing to drop that shield and admit that language is
still a factor in their success. My background as a former ESL teacher helped facilitate
deep probing conversation that spoke to the impact of losing ESL modifications
prematurely and the academic struggles they faced without those supports.

Hispanic/Latino students now comprise the largest ethnic minority group in U.S.
public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) and also are the largest ethnic
minority group at Central High School. While this district and school have made a
concerted effort to provide instructional support and professional development for
teachers, there is a clear need for continued work to implement best practices for English
language learners. No students interviewed leaned towards issues of discrimination or
segregation during the interviews. That does not mean that the staff of Central High
School and its district as a whole do not need ongoing professional development on how
to serve Latinx and other second language learners. The students currently served in the
ESL program indicated high levels of support from that teacher and also that the
classroom accommodations and modifications provided by their ESL status are essential
to their success in the classroom. The need for scaffolded support and rigorous
appropriate expectation for English language learners became apparent throughout the
study. This aligns with the assertions of Krueger et al. (2016) that specific practices must
be implemented to empower English language learners to maintain continuous language
acquisition while concurrently mastering academic content. This cannot be emphasized
enough based on the interviews and student achievement data at Central High School.
School to District Leadership

Additional recommendations start at the school level and lead to district leadership. Beginning with the Latinx students themselves, I encourage self-advocacy and taking a stronger stance in identifying the need for support. Prevalent among interview participants was acknowledging that they used their ELL status as a crutch or excuse to dodge accountability that resulted in course failure. At the end of the study, I charged each of them to demand better for themselves and hold themselves to a higher level of self-worth. This self-accountability is an important habit for these young adult learners to develop. Teachers must understand and facilitate mutual trust and inclusivity in the classroom, celebrating the cultural diversity not just of Latinx students but from all walks of life.

Classroom teachers need to remain current in educational theory and best practices for English language learners. As this population continues to grow in this area and across the nation, teachers cannot rely on outdated training and strategies replaced with more effective and current practices. This also speaks to the need for school administrators to keep support for English language learners as a vital part of the school improvement plan and school mission. Inclusivity should not be optional; it should be ingrained in the culture of a school. Additionally, school leadership must analyze and evaluate the students in credit recovery and take the time to understand the circumstances that led to course failure. The need for intervention before the need for credit recovery is imminent. While this study focused on Latinx students, each student has a unique story and events that led to course failure.
This would involve school counselors, student advocates, lead teachers, college counselors, school social workers, school nurses, coaches, and any other employees that have connections to students. The importance of the student/teacher relationship was apparent throughout the study, and layering in additional support staff is a powerful support. Parents or guardians must play an active role in promoting school success also. Positive two-way communication is the key to parent involvement. While family circumstances may not always be ideal, having the support of a child’s caregiver is an essential component. It also requires the full support of district leadership with resources, training, and feedback on how to improve as a school. School-level administrators need to align their school mission with district goals to ensure buy-in and support. Every stakeholder plays a role in the success or failure of a student. Course failure is not something students actively seek out. It is a reaction to circumstances that may be within or completely out of a student’s control. As a school, we are responsible for banding together and providing each child, regardless of circumstance, the most comprehensive educational opportunity available.

High school is a unique time in a student’s life. They are learning to be independent and inching closer to adulthood. This can be exhilarating and terrifying for students at the same time. It is easy for educators to assume that students are ready for the next steps in life. It is also easy for some to assume that course failure is a deliberate act on the student’s part. For at-risk credit recovery students, no such assumptions should be made. No two interview participants had the same circumstances or reasons they lost initial credit. While there were similarities in their stories, each had unique needs to be
able to progress academically. The use of the Apex learning platform is a district
decision; however, at the school level, time needs to be invested in understanding the
different course modules and finding strategies to provide support as students navigate
through credit recovery. It cannot be a water-down version of the original course. All
students deserve a high-quality educational gain from every course they master. The
strongest recommendation that results from this study is the need for reflective practice
by all stakeholders. We consistently ask students to do more and think about what they
could do better. We must do the same to “Keep students first in all we do,” which is the
mission of Central High School.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Aside from the previously mentioned small scale of this study, several factors
may have limited this study. In my original proposal, I intended to conduct classroom
observations both during and after school in the credit recovery setting. While I was able
to spend small amounts of time in the credit recovery labs throughout the study, the
realities of the school schedule and administrative demands during the COVID-19
pandemic made it unrealistic to carve out uninterrupted time to observe students for
longer periods of time and/or more often. Many of the students I interviewed have been
subject to multiple periods of 14-day quarantine due to exposure or sickness. The hybrid
remote learning schedule only allows students on campus 2 days a week, and Central
High School had to close for four 14-day periods during my study. However, I was able
to glean valuable information about each student and their home life and its impact on
their schooling. Several interviews I conducted virtually, and the interruptions and lack of
a quiet space to talk, while not troublesome to our interview, certainly would impact a student’s ability to complete schoolwork at home. Many of the students I interviewed had part-time jobs picked up during school closure, so the notion of a traditional school day has become obsolete during this hybrid school year. Many things that may have never come up in a traditional interview during a “regular” school year helped me to understand better the social/emotional and cultural factors that impact student performance at school.

Additionally, the pool of applicants was lower in the fall semester as well due to COVID-19 grading requirements. While I still had ample students who fit the criteria for the study, several did not have a current credit recovery class to reference because of the PC19 (PassCovid2019) grading option. I also discovered that the grading option gave some students a false sense of expectations for the Fall 2020 semester grading scale. As the semester came to a close, many students held out hope for that option again since the school was still in a non-traditional mode. However, traditional grading resulted in an increase in course failure/credit recovery enrollment for the spring of 2021.

Based on the data collected in this study, several areas emerged that are worthy of additional research. All of the students interviewed indicated their parents expected them to attend and do well in school. As I talked with students in the introductory portion of the interview protocol, they shared small parts of their personal lives related to cultural influences on their view of the school. For example, when we talked about course failure, the male students interviewed shared that their parents, particularly their fathers, expressed extreme disappointment in their school performance. The female students said that it was not perceived as that important in their family. This implication that female
success in school versus male performance in school emerged again when we discussed goal setting. All male students indicated they wanted to graduate and pursue community college or trade school; however, the females spoke about marriage and raising a family. Again, this sample size is a limiting factor, but it merits additional research to determine if cultural expectations play a strong role in student performance in high school.

Second, the overwhelming majority said the role of the teacher/student relationship was a major factor in student success. While this is already a topic of much research, there is a need for a more focused study of Latinx students and their relationships with teachers, as well as the role of language and communication in that relationship. No teachers at Central High School are bilingual, which leads me to question the development of student/teacher relationships for newcomers who have limited to perhaps no functional English skills. The use of translation software, which I used with the newcomer I interviewed, is choppy at best. It took a certain level of trust built over time for him to be willing to interview for the study. More study needs to be done on how newcomers navigate building relationships when the language is a firm barrier.

Third, there is a clear need for consistency, at least within a district, to ensure credit recovery is equitable. In Central High School, I was fortunate to encounter two highly motivated, experienced facilities driving this program to success. However, I acknowledge the reality that it is probably not the case across the board. More studies should be conducted to see what practices are across the district and state and how those practices impact student outcomes and dropout rates. The graduation rate has risen from
88 to 97% over 6 years at Central High School due largely to the credit recovery program and mastery learning approach.

Finally, there is still strong debate on the quality and rigor of the credit recovery curriculum. Due to the narrative nature of the interviews, my participants chose to focus on other aspects of their experiences. While there was some mention of the credit recovery being less rigorous and easier to complete, I did not gather conclusive evidence to speak to this issue. A thorough investigation of the different software modules systems used and comparison to the Standard Course of Study would determine if the credit recovery program adequately assessed those standards for proficiency.

**Final Thoughts**

As I began this study, I held the belief that as a former classroom teacher, English as a Second Language teacher, and current school principal, that I had a fair understanding of student perceptions of school and best practices for reaching all learners. I chose the word fair because I do not presume that I will ever stop learning new and innovative ways to reach children. What I learned throughout this process was that the layers go so much deeper than even I, with 26 years in education, realized. I was humbled by the honesty and trust the interview participants placed with me and charged with the knowledge that we have to work even harder than we thought to meet the needs of students today.

With most of my teaching career in elementary and middle school, the transition to high school presented new learning opportunities for me as an educator. The concept of credit recovery was new to me and became a prominent area of interest for me. When I
began the doctoral journey, my immediate thought was to research credit recovery. I wanted to understand its origin and purpose and also what led students to need such an intervention. As an administrator, I observed the program and the commitment of program facilitators and content teachers to help students during their planning and after school to master the modules needed for course credit recovery. That was the beginning of my understanding of the impact of student/teacher relationships at the high school level. I came from the primary setting, where most students love school and their teachers. It was a new concept to understand how students could disconnect from a course to the point of failure, only to have to complete an online version of the same course.

It was genuinely surprising to me the maturity the study participants had when it came to ownership of the initial course failure. While I expected that deep down, they knew they had culpability, I did not expect the forthcoming admittance. It was refreshing and disheartening at the same time. If a student can willingly give up, how did we, as educators, allow that to happen on our watch? What supports did we fail to put in place to ensure that students felt they had a fighting chance? Credit recovery itself is proof that in the right conditions, mastery was possible. I am not naïve enough to say that you can force a child to be successful if they are determined to do otherwise, but in this group of students interviewed at Central High School, not one child truly wanted to fail. They simply didn’t know how to advocate for themselves. They lacked the self-esteem, self-worth, and knowledge to access the support they needed.
I chose to do my study on Latinx students because, as a former ESL teacher, they were already a group of students that I knew suffered discrimination and oppression in our school system and society. This is a group that I had a deep personal connection to as a former second language learner educator. As I conducted interviews, I began to wonder about every other child in credit recovery and what hearing their stories would unfold. I looked at the make-up of our classes to see if minorities were being tracked into credit recovery. That is not apparent at this time in this particular school, as each group was a relatively balanced blend of our student demographic. It left me thinking about previous years and what those classes looked like, and what the make-up of other classes at other schools may be like. Working in a small rural district can limit one’s global thinking without a concerted effort on the educator’s part to remain current and learn what is happening in schools across the nation and not just our small pocket of a state.

With five years of administrative experience as an assistant principal and assuming the role of principal during a pandemic, I have much to learn. What the pandemic has taught me about education is that we must rally around students regardless of circumstances. We must always tend to their social/emotional well-being as well as their basic living needs. After that, we must provide the highest quality, sound basic education possible, equitably across the board for all students. In saying that, I reflect that the pandemic truly had no impact on those facts. All of those things are the primary professional and ethical responsibilities of educators every day. The pandemic changed the way we did things, but not the essence of what we do. In fact, I would wager that
some of the finest moments of teaching have occurred in the compassionate, flexible, dedicated teaching that has occurred since March of 2020.

My personal goal is to continue the work I began in this study and make a deliberate and concentrated effort to fully understand the circumstances of every child in Central High School in credit recovery. Armed with that knowledge, I want to provide targeted support in the content classrooms to support students and reduce the need for credit recovery in the future. I want to be sure that our school sends a clear message that student success is the only option and that no child will ever receive less than our very best. I then hope to network with my sister high schools in the district to facilitate a collaborative professional learning community focused on sharing best practices for success in credit recovery, reducing the number of initial course failures across the board.

As an administrator, I have to think globally for the good of the school as a whole. As a researcher, I was able to look at one child at a time. Moving forward, I will work earnestly to remember to blend the two approaches, making my school stronger one child at a time. This process has afforded me great inspiration and renewed vigor for excellence in education. The words of American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1938) ring true “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.”
CHAPTER VI
EPILOGUE

During the period of time between submitting my dissertation to my committee and conducting my oral defense, the Class of 2021 graduated from Central High School. In the 2 weeks prior to graduation, one of the students who participated in my study submitted a staff shout-out\(^1\) to Mrs. Sylvester, one of our credit recovery facilitators:

*I am nominating Mrs. S because without her I wouldn’t be where I am. IF I graduate it will be thanks to her. I owe her a huge thank you for everything.*

Moving forward to the graduation ceremony, as I watched the graduates fill in their rows from my vantage point on the stage, I saw this student leave the procession to embrace Mrs. Sylvester. Both student and teacher had tears streaming down their faces. In that moment, I saw the impact of teacher-student relationships and the fruition of the credit recovery program in real time.

Throughout my defense, my committee and I discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the credit recovery process and whether and how it truly impacts the mastery of learning in a given subject. I was challenged with the question, “Do you feel credit recovery is a positive option for students?” I was able to answer with a definitive yes, but with two qualifications: That the quality of the program correlates to the quality of the facilitators and the commitment of school leadership to make the program a

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\(^1\) For reference, the shout-out is a weekly school social media submission where students and staff are recognized for positive impacts. These are completed for students and staff, by students and staff.
success. Mrs. Sylvester and Mr. Brooks embody the ethic of care that is critical to restoring student confidence and promoting student success and ultimately ensuring that students have a true chance for a brighter future.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

INTERVIEWEE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Students
   a. Ethnically categorized as Hispanic/Latinx
   
   and

   b. Currently enrolled in credit recovery program
   
   or

   b. Past credit recovery program participant

2. Are adult facilitators for the credit recovery program
   a. currently
   
   or

   b. formerly

RESEARCH QUESTION:

What are Latinx students’ experiences in credit recovery programs?

• To what do participating students attribute their success?

• What barriers discourage students’ efforts to complete credit recovery courses?

INTERVIEW & PROBING QUESTIONS:

Introductory Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

2. What has been your experience as a student over the years (elementary, middle, high)?

3. Do you remember the first class that you failed in high school?
   a. Did you retake the course or recover it in credit recovery?

4. What credit recovery class(es) are you taking?

5. What is your goal for taking credit recovery classes (learning or just getting through it)?

6. What has the credit recovery process been like for you?

7. What is a typical day like for you in the credit recovery lab?
   a. Can you give me examples?

Attributes to Success/Barriers

1. Do you classify yourself as a motivated learner? Why/Why not?
2. What were your experiences in the traditional class that caused you to fail the course that you are now recovering?
   a. If you could change anything about that experience, what would it be?
3. What was the response of your family when you failed the original course?
4. What strategies can you use to make sure you successfully complete your course?
5. What supports do you need to be successful?
6. What do you think is the expectation for you in this lab? (expectation from teachers, counselors, principals, peers)
   a. Why do you feel that way?
7. What have you found to be challenging in working through your credit recovery course?

**Goal Setting**

1. Have you discussed goals toward graduation and course completion with anyone at school? How did the conversation go?
2. What actions has your credit recovery teacher taken that motivate/support you during class?
3. What advice do you have for other students who may need credit recovery?
4. What are your future goals?
5. How can credit recovery help you meet your future goals?

**Conclusion**

1. What else would you like to share with me about the credit recovery program?
APPENDIX B.

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Observation Guide

Physical Setting
Is this session conducted during the school day or in an after-school setting?

Participants
How many students in this setting are completing credit recovery?
Are there additional students in the setting that are completing other coursework or advanced coursework?

Activities and interactions
Are students working together or independently?
What are the facilitators doing during the time of observation?

Conversations
What is the content of conversations in this setting, or are students/facilitators interacting with one another?

Subtle factors
How do subtle environmental factors appear to influence the work habits of students?
Are there notable physical signs of emotion or frustration/success?

My own behavior
You are as much a part of the scene as participants. How is my role as an observer impacting the scene?

(Note thoughts on positionality and observations)