A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SECONDARY TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS
REGARDING GRADE INFLATION IN ATLANTIC STATE

by

Jason Ashby Attig

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. David Vacchi, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Dr. Roger Stiles, EdD, Committee Member
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this hermeneutic-phenomenology study was to describe secondary teachers’ experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in an Atlantic State school district. The research focuses on teacher experiences, experiences defined as the conceived ideals influenced by factors that impact teacher attitudes concerning the mandatory inflation of students’ grades. Silverman’s extension of social constructivism theory guided this study by exploring the central research question, what are secondary teacher experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation policies in Atlantic State? Teacher experiences are defined as the conceived ideals influenced by factors that impact teacher attitudes concerning the mandatory inflation of students’ grades. The sample pool consisted of 12 teachers at three secondary schools within the Big Mountain School District. Data was obtained via semi-structured interviews, journaling, and focus groups and was analyzed using Moustakas’s phenomenological reduction process. Findings reveal that teachers strongly believe that grade inflation is supported at the administrator and district level to appease local communities and to avoid being on the list of state-managed schools due to poor performance. Teachers also strongly believe that the grade inflation policy is harming the district’s most vulnerable students by advancing them even though they have not demonstrated sufficient knowledge acquisition during a school year.

Keywords: grade inflation, teacher perception, mandated, experience
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to those that prayed and to those for whom I have prayed.

And to all those that sacrificed – 103, 125, 225, 209, and 1052.
Acknowledgments

The acknowledgments page goes to all those who went before me.
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.................................................................................................................................3

Dedication...................................................................................................................................4

Acknowledgments.......................................................................................................................5

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION...............................................................................................10

  Overview...................................................................................................................................10
  Background.................................................................................................................................11
  Situation to Self.........................................................................................................................20
  Problem Statement.....................................................................................................................22
  Purpose Statement......................................................................................................................24
  Significance of the Study...........................................................................................................24
  Research Questions...................................................................................................................27
  Definitions..................................................................................................................................29
  Summary....................................................................................................................................30

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW....................................................................................32

  Overview...................................................................................................................................32
  Theoretical Framework.............................................................................................................33
  Related Literature......................................................................................................................36
  Summary....................................................................................................................................66

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS....................................................................................................68

  Overview...................................................................................................................................68
  Design......................................................................................................................................69
  Research Questions...................................................................................................................73
 Setting ........................................................................................................... 73

 Participants ....................................................................................................... 74

 Procedures ......................................................................................................... 76

 The Researcher’s Role ....................................................................................... 79

 Data Collection ................................................................................................ 80

 Interviews ......................................................................................................... 80

 Journal Prompts .............................................................................................. 84

 Focus Groups .................................................................................................... 86

 Data Analysis .................................................................................................... 90

 Trustworthiness ............................................................................................... 92

 Credibility ......................................................................................................... 93

 Dependability and Confirmability ................................................................... 94

 Transferability ................................................................................................. 95

 Ethical Considerations ..................................................................................... 96

 Summary ........................................................................................................... 97

 CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .............................................................................. 99

 Overview .......................................................................................................... 99

 Participants ....................................................................................................... 99

 Bobbie ............................................................................................................... 99

 Terri .................................................................................................................. 100

 Chase ............................................................................................................... 100

 Michelle ........................................................................................................... 100

 Morgan ............................................................................................................ 100
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview .................................................................. 127

Summary of Findings .............................................. 127

Discussion .............................................................. 129

Empirical Literature Discussion ............................... 129
Theoretical Literature Discussion.................................................................131

Implications......................................................................................................132

Theoretical Implications .................................................................................132

Empirical Implications ...................................................................................136

Practical Implications .....................................................................................139

Delimitations and Limitations.........................................................................143

Recommendations for Future Research........................................................145

Summary...........................................................................................................146

REFERENCES .................................................................................................148

APPENDICES .................................................................................................168
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic-phenomenology was to describe secondary teachers’ experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in Atlantic State. Atlantic State began compulsory grade inflation in June of 2014 to respond to concerns of student achievement and academic promotion of grade levels, high school graduation rate percentages, and perceived secondary school success as demonstrated in state-issued report cards for high schools. Despite this state-wide policy’s good intentions, the effects arguably hurt students and perpetuate poor education in the state. Global educational reform, including policies surrounding those of the United States educational systems, are enforcing practices of mandated grade inflation with hopes of maintaining or surpassing current levels of educational stature or eliminate the perceived knowledge gap associated with students’ standardized testing scores and overall student grade point average (Kostal et al., 2016; Oleinik, 2009). The Atlantic State Board of Education forces teachers to make choices that may conflict with legal precedents, such as manually adjusting students’ grades to skew secondary school success measurements as described on state-issued institutional reports. The unfair advantages to students who achieve better than a 50% mark in the first nine-week period, the possible deflation of grade values, and the deception of school ratings based on inflated graduation rates are all viable concerns of teachers when conforming to the state’s policy.

The paucity of literature concerning the problem of teacher perception of grade inflation necessitates research. There is abundant literature surrounding the topic of grade inflation concerning standardized test scoring, comparative content mastery, and various other deficiencies or benefits of grade inflation policy; however, very little is available concerning
teacher experiences with end-of-course mandated grade inflation (Ali et al., 2016; Kostal et al., 2016). This study analyzed teacher experiences with mandated grade inflation. Chapter one focuses on the background of the issue, supporting the need for research through historical, social, and theoretical contexts. Furthermore, the following chapter discusses the relation of the topic to me and the format for the study’s construct. Within the chapter is a discussion concerning the construction of the study finds basis in the rationale, purpose statement, and the significance of the study, with a concentration on the empirical and practical significances of the study. Inclusion of the research question and offset questions conclude the chapter and advance the study to the related literate of the subject located in chapter two.

**Background**

The following section provides background context, including the historical, social, and theoretical backgrounds to aid in framing this study. Historical, social, and theoretical background allows for further development into the understanding of teacher perception regarding grade inflation.

**Historical Context**

The use of letter grades to symbolize student mastery was not common practice until the 1940s, and even as late as 1971, only 67% of primary and secondary schools in the United States used letter grades as a measurement of student achievement (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). It is helpful to contextualize the subject to appreciate the relatively young and regularly changing nature of grading systems and the decline in student content knowledge while maintaining higher marks of progress (Gruhlke, 2018; Lanning & Perkins, 1995). Kamber and Biggs (2003) further dissected the issue surrounding grade inflation by evaluating the issue, and the authors stated that the inability to award a grade higher than an A puts limitations on the grading system. Kamber
and Biggs (2003) suggested that by granting an A for what was previously a B minus effort, the grading system loses the capacity to recognize what is A-level work.

Part of the evidence presented for a decline in American higher education is the ever-present issue of grade inflation (Blum, 2017; Boleslavsky & Cotton, 2015). It was the early 1970s when the issues surrounding grade inflation first began to appear in the literature. Goldman (1985) suggested multiple reasons for grade inflation, including the lack of resources for remediating students and increasingly permissive grading policies, partly influenced by selective service draft issues during the Vietnam conflict (Goldman, 1985). Bejar and Blew (1981) examined grade inflation in relation to the validity of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) during the 1980s. The authors conducted the study to establish the existence of grade inflation and show that college students' abilities have remained constant despite K-12 grade inflation. The gathering of data, utilizing two styles of analysis, longitudinal analysis of selected characteristics of SAT scores and grade point average (GPA) over a fifteen-year period and analysis focused on selected schools to evaluate the effect of grade inflation on the validity of the SAT scores in those schools. Bejar and Blew (1981), Kobrin et al. (2006), and Sparkman et al. (2012) concluded that the SAT had become a valuable tool for predicting academic success in college, perhaps more so than high school GPA and increases in GPA were due to grade inflation since there was no concomitant increase in SAT scores.

Woodruff and Ziomek (2004) also examined high school grade inflation from 1991 to 2003 as compared to the America College Test (ACT). Comparing High School Grade Point Average (HSGPA) to ACT assessment scores over the years 1991 to 2003 indicated that the presence of grade inflation had increased over these 13 years. That is, HSGPAs increased without a concomitant increase in achievement, as measured by the ACT. Woodruff and
Ziomek’s (2004) findings demonstrated that grade inflation over the 13 years varied between 0.20 and 0.26 on an HSGPA scale of 0 to 4 within their study. The historical data suggests that grade inflation occurs within the United States’ educational system (Stohs & Clark, 2015; White & Heitzler, 2018). Woodruff and Ziomek’s (2004) study also analyzed grade inflation and grading standards and surmised the differentiation between the subjects, stating that grade inflation is an increase in grades over time for the same level of student achievement, while differential grading standards result from different schools assigning different grades at the same time for the same level of student achievement.

The recognition of grade inflation throughout the educational system, the addressing of concern or speculation surrounding the need for grade inflation in secondary schools, and the artificial increase of grades centered around a students’ mastery of content as compared to standard test results, leads researchers to question to what extent is the mandating of grade bolstering becoming more and more prevalent in high schools.

**Social Context**

Boleslavsky and Cotton (2015) suggested that lowering grading standards intends to inflate students’ grades for the perceived notion of an increased learning institution’s reputation. The authors discussed that the higher grading trends reflect deteriorating grading standards that allow students to receive higher grades for lower quality work. Weak grading standards can compromise education quality and integrity, allowing schools to use strategic grade inflation to manipulate evaluators’ perceptions of their graduates. Therefore, there is a measurable concern to expound upon research focusing on mandated grade inflation within Atlantic State schools as circumstances surrounding grade inflation have shown an increase throughout the last five to six decades.
Pattison et al. (2013) examined the concept that grades are the fundamental currency of our educational system and signal academic achievement and non-cognitive skills to post-secondary institutions and the students themselves. Grade inflation compromises the signaling value of grades and undermines the intended capacity of the reflected value of the grade. Pattison et al. (2013) challenged the definition of grade inflation and argued that to understand grade inflation, an examination of the signaling power of grades must occur:

Analyzing data from four nationally representative samples, we find that in the decades following 1972: (a) grades have risen at high schools and dropped at 4-year colleges, in general, and selective 4-year institutions, in particular; and (b) the signaling power of grades has attenuated little, if at all. (p. 261)

More recently, grade inflation in public schooling has increased in recent decades as examined by Gershenson (2018), who studied student-level data for all public-school students taking Algebra 1 in Atlantic State from the 2004–05 school year to 2015–16 and had access to course transcripts, end-of-course (EOC) exam scores, and ACT scores. According to the author’s findings, a substantial number of students who received high marks also did poorly on the EOC as more than one-third of the students who received Bs from their teachers in Algebra 1 failed to reach a score of proficient on the EOC exam (Gershenson, 2018). From 2005 to 2016, more grade inflation occurred in schools attended by more affluent youngsters than those in the less affluent schools. While the median GPA rose in all schools, GPAs increased by 0.27 points in affluent schools but just 0.17 points in less affluent schools (Gershenson, 2018).

Further analysis of ACT score comparison to student mastery of knowledge also showed that grade inflation accelerated from about 2011 onward, mostly in schools serving advantaged students, therefore, allowing references to the rising occurrence of grade inflation in Atlantic
State since at least 2005 (Gershenson, 2018). States, such as Atlantic State and Arkansas have a non-negotiable policy of mandating teachers to adjust or inflate grades to a 50% mark, regardless of the actual grade the student has earned throughout the first nine weeks of a semester (Goodwin & Holman, 2003; Report AR 5124, 2018). The institution of this policy creates ethical and legal dilemmas for the administrators and teachers working for the school system.

The social ramifications of grade inflation or adjustment led to concern about why grade inflation occurs and the extent to which the state mandated the inflation of grades in Atlantic State’s secondary schools. Walsh (2010) suggested that competition amongst secondary schools plays an integral part in the reasoning behind grade inflation; secondary schools benefit from a higher standard of autonomy when the grade given to them by the state exceeds those of surrounding schools. Educators’ legal dilemmas concerning grade inflation could warrant changes in policies or legislation (SB99, 2018). Grade inflation at the secondary level is not a new practice within the United States educational system, and the method often portrays a system that contains faults within the value of grading practices. According to Pattison et al. (2013), grade inflation to promote artificial inflation of perceived student success or elevation of societal perceptions of achievement concerning institutions of learning has negatively impacted the educational system over the past decade within the secondary level of the United States.

The literature suggests that mandating teachers to credit student successes with inflated grades leads to improvement in student perception of self but demonstrates a valid decline in the mastery of content for students (Ali et al., 2016; Hunt, 2008; Pattison et al., 2013). Based on mastery of content, the measurement of student ability relies upon the individual’s perception of reality. Whittemore et al. (2001) explained that qualitative methodological research establishes validity by demonstrating an explanation congruent with the participants’ construction of reality.
based on their everyday, lived experiences. The reality of teacher experiences and perceptions regarding mandated grade inflation in secondary schools invites a need for research exploring secondary teachers’ descriptions of their experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in Atlantic State. Contributing factors associated with student grade inflation, reasoning surrounding mandatory grade inflation, and the impact associated with mandatory grade inflation include the desire for perceived student success and institutional success. Research and literature support and help maintain the fact that grade adjustment or grade upswing is occurring; however, the lack of discussion of the teachers’ perceptions of mandated grade inflation in Atlantic State is partly due to the lack of research surrounding the issue. The societal effects of grade inflation are visible in the increased number of secondary school students graduating with honors or distinction. Nevertheless, research suggests that the rise of secondary school student GPAs and increases in students’ overall mastery of content during the same timeframe has not increased when compared to standardized test results (Neves et al., 2016; Robbins et al., 2018).

**Theoretical Context**

Rojstaczer and Healy’s (2012) findings demonstrated that, on average across a wide range of schools, A’s represent 43% of all letter grades, an increase of 28 percentage points since 1960 and 12 percentage points since 1988, while D’s and F’s total typically less than 10% of all letter grades. Schools, including those of Atlantic State, grade more harshly than those in other regions, and science and engineering-focused schools’ grades more stringently than those emphasizing the liberal arts (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). This increased harshness of grading may have led to the need for a majority of states to implement mandatory grade inflation in secondary schools, demonstrating a desire to compete with other non- states; suggesting that perhaps grade inflation is necessary to equalize the variances and discrepancies amongst
secondary schools (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015). Goodwin and Holman (2003) evaluated the Arkansas Legislature mandating that the Arkansas Department of Education identifies high schools with the statistically significant variance between students’ grade point averages (GPAs) and ACT performances. A grade inflation index developed and applied to the secondary schools in Arkansas discovered 46 schools that participated in student grade inflation; however, Goodwin and Holman (2003) suggested that the practice of accusing schools of inflating grades based on only one year of data is irresponsible and often overrated yet do admit that the findings are accurate of increased grade inflation in secondary schools.

Foster’s (2016) findings, like research conducted by Rojstaczer and Healy (2012), examined different definitions of academic integrity and ways to create an ethical academy that is comparable to others within the region. Unlike Goodwin and Holman’s (2003) suggested analyses, Foster’s (2016) research indicated that due to the massification and commercialization of higher education, a burgeoning interest in the importance of academic integrity, including grade inflation occurs throughout the United States, perhaps most notably in institutions of affluent, states such as Atlantic State. Sorurbakhsh-Castillo (2018) organized research that demonstrated prevalent grade inflation in secondary schools throughout the Southeast. The ramifications of mandating teachers, especially first-year teachers at the school, to inflate grades manually may influence teacher perceptions of the practice.

Grade inflation, as it influences perceptions surrounding student mastery of content and perceived overall institutional success at the secondary level, provides ample opportunity to question the belief that perhaps anecdotally, unqualified students are being passed along through the system allowing for high schools to meet or exceed state regulation surrounding the qualifications of secondary school successes based on manipulated data. As measured by student
graduation percentage, success rates may be cause for secondary schools to adopt a practice of mandating teachers to not only utilize but also embrace grade inflation to promote perceived student achievement. Therefore, the unrealized gains of increased graduation percentages of high school seniors and the promotion of underclassmen to the next grade level present an inaccurate representation of institutional success, as grade manipulation skews the measurement for the graduation threshold.

The increase of secondary school students and university level students’ grade point averages have shown upward growth over the past several decades, while standardized test scores have not increased in direct proportion to student knowledge; however, there is minimal research surrounding teacher experiences with the mandating of inflating grades at the teacher level (Chowdhury, 2018; Gershenson, 2018). Prior research has documented a human bias toward dispositional inference, which ascribes performance to individual ability, even when considering situational influences on performance (Babcock, 2010). Bar et al. (2009) also addressed performance biases in research, which suggested theories surrounding grade inflation based upon the Cornell Experiment.

The Cornell Experiment developed a new adaptation to the current grade reporting system at Cornell University. The publication of course median grades on the internet and the reporting of course median grades in students’ transcripts were the basis for the new policy, a policy that allowed Cornell University to provide more information to the reader of a transcript and produce more meaningful letter grades. Bar et al. (2009) examined the meaningfulness of letter grades and admissions standards into the post-graduate educational system. The transition from the Cornell Experiment, as interpreted by Bar et al. (2009), allows for an examination of the merit of grades and the variance that occurs from institution to institution, and may influence
correlational results in not only higher education institutions such as university and college settings but also secondary schools throughout the United States (Bar et al., 2009). Previous research and literature suggest the tendency that leads admissions decisions to favor students coming from institutions with lenient grading because those students have their high grades mistaken for evidence of high ability (Moore et al., 2010).

At the Atlantic State University, where for the past decade, analysis of grade inflation has occurred, and in the wake of a 2009 report surrounding issues of grade inflation, grade compression, and systematic grading inequality, transcripts from the university now also provide context. Next to a student’s grade, the record includes the median grade of classmates, the percentile range, the number of students in the class section, and a new measure called the Schedule Point Average (SPA), akin to a sports team’s strength of schedule. Brown, University of California Berkeley, Yale, and other top learning institutions are now implementing standards similar to Atlantic State University, which allows for future consideration of teacher perceptions concerning mandated grade inflation at the secondary level of Atlantic State schools (Nikolakakos et al., 2012). Moore et al. (2010) suggested that higher learning institutions may subject themselves to biases by teachers who overinflate or adjust grades, thus creating a need to comprehend teachers’ perceptions or experiences regarding grade inflation, especially as the state mandates inflation.

Literature and research have yet to address teacher perceptions of mandated grade inflation based on experiences. However, there is an increase in the number of states which mandate grade inflation, and that increase could lead to speculation concerning the teachers’ perceptions of the action of grade adjustment (Oleinik, 2009). Limited published theories focused on the issues of teacher perceptions of grade inflation exist, but the main foci of research
surrounding grade inflation are based primarily on the effectiveness of grade inflation and the overall reasoning surrounding grade inflation, not teacher perception of the issue (Boleslavsky & Cotton, 2015; Carter & Lara, 2016; Feldman, 2019). Goldman (1985) surmised that grade inflation negatively impacted the educational system of the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s, while researchers such as Feldman (2019) and Gruhlke (2018) argued that the societal impact of grade inflation continued to occur well into the 2000s; however, consideration for future research surrounding teacher perception of grade inflation policies of global educational systems may help researchers to understand the issue better.

**Situation to Self**

My motivation for conducting this study focused on the ideas surrounding the long-term effects and possible adverse effects on future academic and life success. Awarding students with inflated grades based on inferior work may lead to an educational and economic decline within the United States as students fail to perform adequately at the collegiate level or in the global workforce. The systematic rewarding of inferior work is ingrained into their psyche. The United States and Atlantic State’s educational system are not as globally competitive as in prior decades, and this is partly the reasoning associated with mandated grade inflation (Torraco & Hamilton, 2013). State-issued directives order the Atlantic State secondary school teachers to manually adjust the grades for those students who fail to meet a certain grade standard. As an educator in Atlantic State, I have firsthand knowledge and experience with mandatory grade inflation and the state mandate’s societal perceptions. Educational institutions within my district implement compulsory grade inflation, creating a misleading perception of institutional and student success within the community. The issues surrounding the mandating of grade adjustments have yet to address concerns focusing on teacher attitudes, perceptions, or experiences of being required to
alter grades and ultimately transcripts; therefore, I will be exploring teacher perceptions (Harris & Hunt Institute, 2014).

An ontological extension style approach as it relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics was the format for my philosophical assumption style of research. When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities. Different researchers embrace different realities as individuals become a part of the study and readers of qualitative research. Qualitative researchers investigate these multiple realities when studying individuals; therefore, I utilized an ontological extension approach for my study. Evidence of multiple realities includes the use of multiple forms of evidence in themes using the actual words of different individuals and presenting diverse perspectives was at the basis of my research.

This research study incorporated epistemological assumptions, those assumptions associated or concerned with the various methods of gaining knowledge and the nature of the knowledge (Goldman & Whitcomb, 2011). Briggs et al. (2015) argued that entities always have logically consistent beliefs, and the emphasis on evaluating attitudes of individuals investigating the epistemic effects of social interactions and social systems allows for research of the perception or belief; therefore, my research followed a social epistemological foundation with a basis in the identification of teacher perceptions about the experience of mandated grade inflation. Researching by social epistemology requires the use of personal resources such as visual and auditory research as an individual seeks to determine the truth of a proposition by soliciting the opinion of others (Goldman & Whitcomb, 2011). The fundamental epistemological approach applied to this study was to solicit teachers’ knowledge with their experiences and perceptions concerning mandated grade inflation at the secondary level.
Axiological assumptions revolve around the researcher’s subjective values, intuition, and the role in the dialog of social construction to interpret the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My research’s axiological perspective focuses on depicting the level of consistency, reliability, or reconstructing and extending the previously held ideas. Teachers’ perceptions of grade inflation research, utilizing an axiology approach that combines ontological and epistemological assumptions, play an integral role in setting the standards and requirements for an acceptable research approach and research techniques. Utilization of an axiological approach allowed for clarification to guide the research’s tone and rigor, allowing me to accurately investigate what is perceived to represent teacher experiences and perceptions.

A social constructivist approach allowed me to seek an understanding of the world in which I live and work; to develop subjective meanings of participants’ experiences. The approach allowed for multiple variations, which enabled me to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into minimal categories or ideas. The goal of my research was to rely on the participants’ views of the situation. Through social and historical lenses, defining subjective meaning is not reliant upon individual episodes but forms through interaction with others, thus allowing for interpretation of historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives. I recognized that my background shapes my interpretation and acknowledge that my interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences; thus, allowing for interpretation of results.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is student grade inflation in secondary level education in Atlantic State misrepresents student knowledge and content mastery. Manipulated grading standards pose a threat to the validity of the teaching and testing of knowledge, reducing the effectiveness of
grades as measurement tools for understanding, thus creating inflated overall perceptions of secondary school efficacy (Ali et al., 2016; Boleslavsky & Cotton, 2015; Ragan et al., 2011; Zubrickas, 2015). The act of student grade inflation threatens the validity of knowledge at the secondary and post-secondary levels (Pattison et al., 2013).

The main issue surrounding grade inflation at the secondary school level is the false representation of school success based on student achievement. Grade inflation results in a possible unwarranted sense of complacency that leads students to underappreciate the value of education and could prevent students from reaching their full potential at the post-secondary level or in the workforce. The decline in a student’s mastery of content, yet promotion through grade levels with inflated letter grades, could cause a false sense of success for the student and the institution (Bercher, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The Atlantic State Department of Public Instruction (2019) distributes grades of success, A through F, to secondary schools based on student graduation rates, student success in content mastery, and overall school performance. Recent research, such as the 2014 School Performance Score, supports grade inflation in Atlantic State; however, there is a paucity of research conducted surrounding the teacher perceptions of the experiences concerning grade inflation implementation as a state or district level policy (Harris & Hunt Institute, 2014; Kostal et al., 2016, Miller, 2014; School Performance Score, 2018). Therefore, conducting a phenomenological study presented a viable research method necessary to address mandated grade inflation in secondary schools as it pertains to secondary teachers’ descriptions of their experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in Atlantic State, contributing factors associated with student grade inflation, reasoning surrounding compulsory grade inflation and the impact related to mandatory grade inflation.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe secondary school teachers’ experiences with mandated grade inflation in an Atlantic State. At this stage of the research, mandatory grade inflation is generally defined as grade pattern changes that directly influence a majority of students in a class who ultimately receive higher grades for the same quantity and quality of work done by students in the past (Pattison et al., 2013). The theory that guided this study was Silverman’s (1994) extension of the social constructivism framework that allowed for a better understanding of the grade inflation process’s contextual factors.

Social constructivism approaches to inquiry intertwine with extension theory in evaluating theories drawn from the social sciences and humanities; on the experiences of individuals and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences in relation to other people (Bergen, 1999; Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Vaughn (1992) and Creswell and Poth (2018), essentially, the extension approach is not about studying or analyzing the adoption of the process, but analyzing the effects brought upon by the action; therefore, allowing for the conduction of research surrounding the perception of teachers involved in mandated grade inflation. According to Saldana and Omasta (2018), the role of theory identifies research into a statement about transferring social life applications to other settings, contexts, populations, and time periods. The theory that guided the study allowed for evaluating teacher experiences with mandated grade inflation and identifying the subjects’ varying views.

Significance of the Study

The study of teacher perceptions regarding mandated grade inflation at the secondary levels of Atlantic State’s educational system may aid in regulating state mandates concerning
grade inflation. Secondary school reputations and communal support concerning adjusted student grades as a measurement of student knowledge and graduation rates could garner potentially unwanted biases or doubt regarding educator effectiveness, student achievement, and overall perceptions of educators and students within Atlantic State’s educational system. The study relates to other areas of research formulated with change regarding the comparison of grade inflation, with references to mastery of knowledge compared to standardized testing results (Rhodes & Sarbaum, 2015; Zhang & Sanchez, 2013). The goal of the study was to help educators, citizens of the community secondary school administrators, standardized test creators, and members of the society concerned with the actual representation of secondary school success become more aware of educators’ experiences and perceptions surrounding the impacts of mandated grade inflation (Dyce et al., 2012; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012; Zimmerman, 2014).

**Empirical Significance**

The significance of the study refers to not only Atlantic State educators, students, and parents, but perhaps to the general population of all those influenced by the United States educational system, as the result of standardized testing influences vast sectors of the global educational system (Boleslavsky & Cotton, 2015; Ragan et al., 2011). Pattison et al. (2013) best explained the concept that grades are the fundamental currency of our educational system, and grade inflation compromises the signaling value of grades and undermines the intention or aim of the concept of grading by limiting the measuring capability or function of the actual grade. Student grade inflation at the secondary and post-secondary levels poses a threat to the validity of the teaching and testing of knowledge. College admission boards rely upon GPA and standardized test results for admission requirements and scholarship opportunities for secondary school applicants (Dyce et al., 2012). Compounding the warrant for unbiased student grades is
necessary to accurately represent secondary school success surrounding uninflated state-issued scores to monitor performance.

Grade inflation results in the global arena, as well as within the United States, have occurred separately concerning the rate of increase and significance, but studies have shown that student grade inflation has occurred in educationally developed nations throughout the globe (Ali et al., 2016; Blum, 2017; Neves et al., 2016). The global interaction surrounding the reliance of grade weight and merit concerning grade inflation occurrences at the university and secondary school systems demonstrates the necessity to evaluate the perception or experiences of those directly impacted by the inflation rate, the educators, and the community. Unbiased representation of secondary school performance is necessary to define secondary schools’ successes and needs, not only in Atlantic State but also nationwide.

**Practical Significance**

The practical significance of the study was to allow for the recording, analysis, and validation of the perceptions and experiences of Atlantic State’s secondary education teachers. The data gained from the research could justify a change in grading policies that would accurately reflect student mastery of content and secondary school efficacy (Moore et al., 2010; Zubrickas, 2015). Data collected from the research could justify changes in the system or garner more support for the current system concerning mandated grade inflation (Moore et al., 2010; Zubrickas, 2015). The practical significance of grade inflation stretches across public educational boundaries. It may present issues for socioeconomically disadvantaged students who are unable to attend or choose schools where grade inflation is more prevalent than other institutions, such as some private schools which are governed by educators who are able to focus student’ strategy
toward college preparatory classes and not state suggested curriculum (Goldman, 1985; Goodwin & Holman, 2003).

**Theoretical Significance**

Theoretical significance intertwined with practical significance and allowed the research to follow a clear methodological path catering to education. Utilization of a case study style of research would allow for a practical approach for the theoretical study as a case study would allow for the collection and analysis of data from one location; however, the research aims to address the perceptions of one or two individuals from several schools; therefore, the research style chosen was phenomenological (van Manen, 2015; Yin, 2018). The study’s theoretical significance aided in understanding the practical and academic relevance by researching earlier studies and expanding the research to promote social change in secondary schools (Groenewald, 2004).

**Research Questions**

**Central Research Question**

What are secondary teacher experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation policies in Atlantic State?

Evaluating the topic’s limited research leads to speculation; therefore, attempting to compare current research to similar data-driven surveys is a moot point. However, the issue of the value of a grade as it pertains to mastery of content or in comparison to standardized testing is a heavily researched topic (Dyce et al., 2012; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012; Zimmerman, 2014). The development of empirical evidence provided from collaboration and practice provided a foundation for using Silverman’s (1994) extension theory style study (Keast & Mandell, 2014). Extension theory, according to Tlale and Romm (2019), allows for an extension of thoughts and
research as the study involves attempting to view engagement of the topic from new angles.
Addressing perspectives of teacher perception of grade inflation through qualitative research and data analyses allows for a complete extension of the topic.

**Research Sub-Questions**

1. What are secondary teacher perceptions of the effects of inflation mandates on perceptions of teacher and school efficacy in Atlantic State?

   Grade inflation is a viable solution to student self-perception issues but entails misleading levels of success and creates ramifications for educators who partake in the process (Goldman 1985; Policy GCS-L-004, 2018). Student success, as measured through misrepresentations of student achievement, paired with perceived secondary school success as evaluated by cohort graduation rates and overall student GPA, creates a false sense of efficacy at the secondary level. Grade inflation utilization to increase the perception of teacher effectiveness and school successes with graduation rates and mastery of content is evident in prior studies (Ali et al., 2016; Carter & Lara, 2016; Gershenson, 2018).

2. What are secondary teachers’ perceptions about the effects of mandatory grade inflation on student preparedness and content mastery?

   Research has yet to define Atlantic State’s secondary teacher experiences and perceptions surrounding the reasoning of mandated grade inflation (Pattison et al., 2013). The Atlantic State secondary schools receive a report card grade evaluating the overall success of the school to educate students; however, research suggests that one-third of U.S. teenagers, at most, leave high school ready for credit-bearing courses; therefore, secondary school grade level inflation impacts post-graduate institutions as well (Gershenson & Fordham Institute, 2018; Zimmerman, 2014; Zubrickas, 2015).
Definitions

1. *Mandatory grade inflation* - No student shall receive a final quarter grade in any course that is lower than a 50. If a teacher determines that the final semester or year grade computed by PowerSchool does not accurately reflect the student’s academic performance, the teacher may override PowerSchool. All final grades are subject to the review of the principal as provided by GS § 115C-288(a), which provides the power of the principal to grade pupils (Report AR 5124, 2018).

2. *Grade inflation* - grade patterns change so that most students in a class, college, or university receive higher grades for the same quantity and quality of work done by students in the past. A corollary to this definition is the same GPA obtained by students with a more inferior academic skill (as measured by the SAT or ACT exams). Another less well-known version of grade inflation is ‘content deflation,’ where students receive the same grades as students in the past but with less work required and less learning (Pattison et al., 2013, p. 262).

3. *Validity* - Whittemore, Chase, and Mandel (2001) explain that qualitative methodological research “validity is established by demonstrating that (...) explanation is congruent with the meanings through which members construct their realities and accomplish their everyday activities” (p. 300).

associated with ‘nature,’ and such humanities as literary criticism and metaphysical philosophy, traditionally associated with culture” (Fishman & Peterson, 1999, p. 92).

5. **Weighted GPA** – the term weighted GPA commonly refers to rigor-adjusted GPAs, and there is no common designation for a GPA while other courses receive weights of zero. Multiple states and high schools include both a scalar-weight adjustment (e.g., for physical education courses, weight = 0) and a bonus adjustment for advanced courses (Hansen, Sadler, & Sonnert, 2019).

6. **International Baccalaureate (IB)** – a worldwide, nonprofit education program founded to allow all students to receive an education fit for a globalizing world. There are four IB education programs, all of which intend to develop students’ intellectual, emotional, personal, and social skills (IBO, 2018).

7. **Advanced Placement Programs (AP)** - a program in the United States and Canada created by the College Board, which offers college-level curricula and examinations to high school students. American colleges and universities may grant placement and course credit to students who obtain high scores on the assessments (College Board, 2019).

8. **Honors Level** - courses that differ qualitatively and quantitatively from standard level courses, and students receive a weighted GPA credit (DPI, 2019).

**Summary**

The issue surrounding student grade inflation by secondary education level instructors to boost overall student grade point average prevents accurate representation of student knowledge and content mastery while posing a threat to the validity of the educational process in Atlantic State. The purpose of the phenomenological study was to describe secondary teachers’ experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in Atlantic State and conduct research
to support reliable, validated data and findings. Observable grading rules allow instructors to screen students’ abilities, provided that certain conditions hold; therefore, grade inflation or compression biases are distinguishable based upon the instructor’s inherent ideals (Ragan et al., 2011). School leadership and school board members of secondary schools and universities should consider teacher perception of grade inflation and the merit and worth of grades to evaluate academic integrity within their school systems. Therefore, this study focused on the coordination of research to assess teacher perception of mandated grade inflation to either garner support or limit the use of grade inflation at the secondary school level of Atlantic State’s educational system.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this literature review was to survey previous studies and relevant scholarly literature in the field and develop an established line of theory from empirical research. Review of the literature allows for contributions to testing, elaborating, or enriching the theoretical perspective and forming part of the emergent research design. An appreciation of previous work in this area serves three further purposes. First, it allows for an understanding of prior research, and according to Boote and Beile (2005), it is imperative that researchers fully understand the literature in the field before performing significant research. Second, primary and secondary data sources serve as the critical components for identifying relevant scholarly work for review, and findings from extant literature help maintain a sense of the topic’s perspective throughout the study. Third, the analysis of the study’s practical and scholarly significances allows for the articulation of variables and phenomena related to secondary teachers’ perceptions of grade inflation.

The literature review details the theoretical framework of the study, provides insight surrounding the ideals of grade inflation interpretation and reasoning, and discusses grade inflation validity in the context of school report cards, teacher bias, and standardized testing. Evaluation of the literature review allows for a connection of the current study, secondary teachers’ perceptions of mandated grade inflation, to intertwine with the related literature surrounding grade manipulation and inflation. Therefore, allowing the researcher to establish and distinguish previous findings in grade inflation while addressing the gaps in literature surrounding teacher perceptions of manually inflating or adjusting grades.
Theoretical Framework

A phenomenological research style was beneficial in gaining insight, exploring the depth, richness, and complexity inherent in the phenomenon. Silverman (1980) proclaimed that phenomenological research provides the necessary scaffolding for disciplines such as philosophy and sociology and aids in the research for other subjects, including psychology, literary theory, and education. Silverman (1994) draws heavily from social sciences and humanities, the study of human societies, and the relationships among individuals within those societies. Silverman’s (1980) earlier research suggested that the individual’s personal factors may influence an individual’s perceptions, including professionals in the field of education. Comparable to Bandura’s (1986) general social cognitive theory, Silverman (1994) detailed the influential theory of cognitive and motivational processes that align with the study of multiple psychosocial functioning areas, such as academic performance and organizational development.

The basis of social cognitive theory is an interactional view of individuals and their environment based upon internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events. Bandura (1997) suggested that behaviors and environmental events overlap and create an interaction that influences one another bidirectionally. Factors including an educator’s unique cognitive functions and affective dispositions affect what types of environments and activities within that environment the individual will choose. Choices and the ongoing process of creating systematic, mutually influenced perceptions emphasizing human and environmental interactions constitute the basis for the social cognitive theory; therefore, influencing future developmental and affective processes (Bandura, 1996).

The utilization of a social cognitive theory approach to the study helped define the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of discrete identity groups, categorized according to
identity salience, and teachers’ sense of responsibility for these identity groups as a function of their efficacy and advocacy beliefs. According to Silverman (2010), the three levels of identity salience are those identities strongly associated with a sense of responsibility, those less associated with the sense of responsibility, and identity-based attitudes that are not part of identity groups themselves. Silverman’s (1980) interpretation of identity and social cognitive theory suggests that a teacher’s sense of responsibility impacts their efficacy and advocacy judgments and their understanding or endorsement of practices. Therefore, district policy may influence teacher efficacy and manipulate beliefs surrounding teacher judgment or perceptions of mandated grade inflation.

The essential construct within the social cognitive theory, according to Bandura (1986), is self-efficacy, the idealized perception or belief of one’s capabilities to perform specific actions based on cognitive processes, including attention, perception, and memory. Self-efficacy, as explained by the constructs of social cognitive theory, is a more significant predictor of future behavior than outcome expectations; however, the guiding element of self-efficacy may hinder or disincentivize performance constraints that may hamper highly efficacious people from putting their knowledge and skills into action; actions such as increasing student grades to represent district policies that require secondary educators to adjust grades manually.

Silverman (1994) defined an outcome expectation as an individual’s judgment of the consequences of behavior, and according to Conroy et al. (2019), environmental factors, not only physical factors but also people’s behaviors, create self-efficacy beliefs. Self-efficacy has a crucial role in developing individuals’ behaviors, and environmental factors such as directives to manually inflate perceived student achievement and perhaps falsely elevate the perception of
secondary institutional success may influence secondary teachers’ judgments and perceptions centering on district policies.

Research suggests that individuals high in self-efficacy will generate and attempt to validate alternative courses of action when they do not meet with initial success, attempting to enhance functions through increased levels of effort and persistence (Bandura, 1986; Silverman, 2010). Self-efficacy also allows for an increased ability to forgo problematic situations, such as those faced by secondary teachers forced to adhere to grade inflation policies, by influencing cognitive and emotional processes related to the situation. Social modeling affects motivation by instilling behavioral outcome expectations in addition to cultivating new competencies.

Teacher efficacy, an educator’s belief, or conviction that one can influence how well students learn, especially those students who have a reputation as being as challenging or unmotivated by external factors such as home environment or intelligence level (Tuckerman, 1995). As a form of self-efficacy, teacher efficacy is a perception based on the teacher’s attitude concerning their capabilities to affect changes that improve student learning. Teachers with higher self-efficacy exhibit tolerance and willingness to persist in working with students who exhibit learning disabilities (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Educators who display a sense of higher teacher efficacy are also more likely to accept guidance and change, which is an essential aspect of their development process; however, research surrounding the extent to which the guidance influences or motivates perceptions of direct mandates, such as grade inflation, is limited. Conroy et al. (2019) expressed that engagement and motivation for learning and change intertwine as involvement encourages motivation; motivation stimulates involvement; therefore, teacher efficacy is vital to understanding educators’ perceptions. Gibson and Dembo (1984) identified the primary importance of studying teacher efficacy, stating that merely believing a
behavior will produce a particular result is a necessary but not sufficient indicator of the behavior: teachers must also believe they can successfully engage in that behavior. Therefore, the ideals that self-efficacy may enforce one’s ability to bridge the gap between beliefs about one’s abilities and outcomes also make it an ideal construct for studying teachers’ engagement in certain behaviors.

**Related Literature**

Analyzezation of related literature allowed for critically critiquing of prior research and findings and inferring interpretations as valid. Historically, the examination of grade inflation perceptions focused on ethical dilemmas, student engagement, and justification for the act of grade inflation; however, a refined analysis of the topic revealed that a broader perspective might be necessary to dissect further the issue of teacher perceptions’ conceding grade inflation. The review’s search procedures include detailed investigations of prior research surrounding grade inflation at the secondary level and the influences or impacts of grade inflation over the past four decades. Considering contrary findings and alternative interpretations also allowed for synthesizing previous research in both qualitative and quantitative literature; justification for the inclusion and exclusion of literature using more recent findings and current philosophies centered upon grade inflation allows for validation of the review.

The current situation regarding grade inflation continues to be problematic for most stakeholders within a school environment, including teachers, parents, administrators, college boards, and communities, concerning biased reports of secondary school success in Atlantic State (Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, 2018). Chowdhury (2018) stated that academic institutions worldwide, including secondary schools, use grades or marks as a fundamental sorting and signaling mechanism for students and that grades awarded to students should be indicative of
learning outcomes. Grade inflation has become a widespread phenomenon within the education system of Atlantic State over the past five decades. Educators, researchers, and the public have varying opinions on the matter, but often stakeholders view grade inflation as an injustice and a violation of an accurate representation of student and institutional success (Chowdhury, 2018).

O’Shaughnessy (2013) reported that only 26% of high school students entering higher education are ready for the next level of instruction and comprehension. Research conducted by Ackerman and Gross (2018) revealed that educators observe that students seem to expect positive outcomes regardless of their work quality, perhaps creating a cultural bias towards the need for grade inflation at the secondary level. A student’s expected outcomes of achieving higher marks may also translate into parental beliefs surrounding the student’s academic achievement and overall perceived success of the educational institution related to student achievement. A dilemma occurs when analyzing grade inflation concerning student content mastery and knowledge; grade inflation lends itself to the opportunity for students to achieve higher letter grades for substandard work (Boleslavsky & Cotton, 2015; Hunt 2008). Perceived student knowledge, as measured by results obtained from standardized tests, contradicts the relationship surrounding the actual knowledge gained by high school students and the relative grade earned. Grades and grade point averages have steadily increased over the past seven decades.

In contrast, performance scoring on standardized testing, specifically the SAT and ACT, has not increased in a proportional relationship, thus illustrating an issue with student content mastery (Babcock, 2010). According to Wongsurawat (2009), grade inflation for the past three decades has shown a steady increase in GPAs in secondary schools, while college entrance exams such as the ACT and the SAT have seen a steady decrease over the past 30 years.
Researchers Ziomek and Svec (1995) investigated GPA and ACT performance over a five-year period and concluded that students with higher GPAs did not always produce higher ACT scores. Furthermore, the researchers found a significant variation of ACT scores with a minimal increase, although the GPAs still showed a steady increase over the same period; even if SAT scores increased, the GPAs increased at a higher rate, and these findings were consistent regardless of gender or race (ACT, 1997; Ziomek & Svec, 1995).

The rewarding of a student’s performance with inflation of grades without an increase in demonstrated knowledge is cause for concern as it creates a misrepresentation of student and secondary school success; school success whose basis for evaluations include student graduation rates and overall student success (Bar et al., 2009; Carter & Lara, 2016). Student grade inflation by secondary school teachers obstructs accurate representation of student knowledge and creates an inflated perception of the student’s mastery of the subject matter. Student grade inflation may also lead to an exaggerated measure of success of the secondary institution.

According to Chowdhury (2018), Goldman (1985), and Kostal et al. (2016), mandating grade inflation as a practice causes severe damage to established educational systems, systems that gauge student proficiency, performance, and competency as markers for measuring the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. The notion of grade inflation stems from an underlying belief that grades, the fundamental measurement of educational success, are more vital than acquiring knowledge during the learning process (Ehlers & Schwager, 2016). Students often infer that the most crucial aspect in their graduation process is not learning, understanding, or knowledge, but the received grade and, more times than not, the students find themselves seeking good grades since these are a prerequisite for the next level of education or job-related success in the workforce (Ehlers & Schwager, 2016).
Motivation and Success

The literature examining successful student learning with contrast to mandated grade inflation identifies multiple variables contributing to grade alteration and inflation. Tucker et al. (2002) argued that motivation is one of the most crucial factors affecting academic achievement. Rather than motivating students to learn, grading has quite the opposite effect. At best, grading motivates high-achieving students to continue getting high grades, regardless of whether that goal also happens to overlap with learning (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). At worst, grading lowers interest in learning and enhances anxiety, and extrinsic motivation, especially among those students who struggle, and research suggests that grading could harm struggling learners in competency-based courses (Elkin, 2016; Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Grades can dampen existing intrinsic motivation, give rise to extrinsic motivation, enhance fear of failure, reduce interest, decrease enjoyment in classwork, increase anxiety, hamper performance on follow-up tasks, stimulate avoidance of challenging tasks and heighten competitiveness (Weidinger et al., 2017). A learning environment stimulates intrinsic motivation and challenges students to seek out material for their inherent interest while at the same time learning to master the content of the essential standards (Christensen et al., 2011). Learning environments flourish, and academic success occurs when fusing motivation and feedback to create a culture of accountability. Educational leaders must incorporate their understandings of human developmental behavior, personalized learning environments, and motivation to ensure students’ academic successes and create a culture that is conducive to learning and achieving. Studies have shown that a student’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is a critical, fundamental component in determining a student’s academic success (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018). The motivation of secondary education level students is a current primary focus for educators and teachers, as demonstrated by Atlantic
States’ educational Policy AR 5124, a policy that aids in student perception of motivation throughout the first and second half of the semester.

**Motivation and Learning Environments**

The idea of motivation is a concept that both psychologists and educators have adopted to help explain differences among learners by identifying the variations in the amount of effort put forth by a learner to better comprehend the subject matter. Lameras et al. (2012) provided evidence regarding the concern about a general lack of motivation among students at the secondary school level; motivating students to learn and become life-long learners is an especially important and challenging task for a teacher and relies on the creation of appropriate learning environments. Lameras et al. (2012) formally stated that motivating students to learn and become learners even after secondary schooling is an essential and challenging task for instructors. The absence of feedback and relevance lends to the obstacles faced by instructors hoping to drive student motivation and using an established learning environment; intrinsic motivation can increase within the student. The intention of Policy 5124 is to create a sense of accomplishment to aid in the motivation of the student who is falling behind or struggling to maintain a passing grade in a course. While students often express a desire for graded feedback, surveys indicate they would prefer descriptive comments to grades as a form of feedback; however, grades are the fundamental markers for student success and perceived feedback (Tucker et al., 2002).

Motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, is a crucial concept to success in the creation of a learning or teaching environment where students are apt to find success (Cole et al., 2017). Seeing others succeed with effort and receiving praise from teachers, often in excellent marks, may motivate peers who observe the praise and increase effort in production and work quality.
Motivation rises when students observe teachers giving praise and high grades, even inflated grades, to others for hard work and excellent performances, traits associated with success in both learning and teaching environment; sustaining motivation occurs when students believe their efforts are leading to better performances (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018; Hall et al., 2016; Kember et al., 2007).

The use of support, such as Policy 5124, allows for a student grade increase to a midterm grade of 50% to maintain a positive increase in student learning and motivation, which is also visible in the social cognitive theory of learning. Motivation is a critical process that reaches fruition through various instruction methods, including providing feedback that indicates the increase of a student’s competency. Positive feedback, such as increasing a student’s grade from an unobtainable low passing grade to 50%, as suggested by social cognitive theorists, can influence self-efficacy and improve a student’s intrinsic motivation to succeed by increasing the confidence level of the student (Bandura, 1986; Spaulding, 2015). According to Cole et al. (2017), self-confidence increased students’ self-motivation level. Leaders and educators should seek to make connections with administrative peers, students, faculty, and parents and utilize Pygmalion motivation techniques. Utilization of the Pygmalion leadership style of motivation, one that incorporates the consistent support, encouragement, and reinforcement of high expectations of followers; compounded with a Bandurian inspired social learning model of motivation, allows educators to aid in student success by offering inflated grades as a systematic approach to increase motivation (Cole et al., 2017).

According to Kember et al. (2007), teaching environments are conducive to motivating students to learn; a proper teaching environment is not only constructed by the educator but is harmoniously adaptive to allow for an increase in intrinsic motivation, the intrinsic motivation
which may derive validity from the inflation of grades. Research suggests that educators should model a motivational style of teaching environment to include eight facets of instructional support to drive student motivation, including establishing interest, allowing a choice of courses, establishing relevance, demonstrating learning activities, teaching for understanding, assessments of learning activities, close student-teacher relationships, and a sense of belonging between classmates (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018; Kember et al., 2007). Assessment of learning activities is merely one pillar of the suggested instructional support of learning; therefore, according to the reasoning behind Policy 5124, a student receives ample opportunities to succeed in the classroom aside from grades.

According to Schinske and Tanner (2014), even students demonstrating consistent mastery for months can incur grade depletion by failing to produce gradable results, as described in the following hypothetical example concerning student accomplishment. Suppose an instructor utilizes a 100-point system, and a student decides not to give effort during the course’s specific period. In that case, the student may receive a zero for that portion, while a similar student who puts the effort on all assignments would receive a grade higher than that of the zero, therefore, which student seemingly demonstrates greater mastery: student A: 0, 100, 100, 100, 100, or student B: 75, 80, 90, 80, 90? Mathematically, student B would have an overall grade of 83%, while student A would have an overall grade of 80%. However, it would appear that the student who has taken the zero has a higher overall mastery of the content, and the fact that a zero or lack of effort during the beginning of the semester could decrease overall motivation as the student’s grade may appear to be unrecoverable.

Mastery of content, according to Policy 5124, should not be the primary basis for student success. Instead of working harder, most students who earn an F tend to withdraw, try less, and
come to school less (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Therefore Policy 5124 helps to curtail a student’s lack of motivation and relies upon General Statute 115C-288(a), which states that if a teacher determines that the final semester or year grade computed by PowerSchool does not accurately reflect the academic performance of the student, the teacher may alter the grade if the teacher is acting in the best possible interests of the pupil. All final grades are subject to the review of the principal as provided by GS § 115C-288(a), which provides the power of the principal to grade pupils.

**Policy 5124**

Policy 5124 illustrates the reasoning behind mandatory grade inflation, which inherently lies in enhancing or maintaining student motivation at the mid-point of the semester by creating learning environments and providing grade enhanced support for students who would otherwise be mathematically unable to pass the class without the grade inflation. School systems like Fairfax County Public Schools and the Philadelphia School District have adopted similar approaches to Policy 5124 in recent years, arguing that they give all students a chance to succeed. These grading policy changes are moving in tandem with national efforts to abolish letter grades and minimize the value placed on Advanced Placement exams and SAT scores in favor of assessments focused on students’ skills, competencies, and work samples.

Grades appear to play on students’ fears of punishment or shame or their desires to outcompete peers instead of stimulating interest and enjoyment in learning tasks (Pulfrey et al., 2011). Grades can dampen existing intrinsic motivation, give rise to extrinsic motivation, enhance fear of failure, reduce interest, decrease enjoyment in classwork, increase anxiety, hamper performance on follow-up tasks, stimulate avoidance of challenging tasks and heighten competitiveness (Pulfrey et al., 2011). Even providing encouraging, written notes on graded
work does not appear to reduce the negative impacts grading exerts on motivation (Schinske &
Tanner, 2014). Rather than seeing low grades as an opportunity to improve themselves, students
receiving low scores withdraw from classwork (Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

**Grade Inflation Interpretation and Rationale**

Students’ success relies upon an awareness in which the students judge whether their
engagement in an academic task matches the standards they have set for successful learning. The
perception that grades are more important than knowledge when determining students’ academic
success is evident in court cases surrounding secondary school grade point average and
admission to higher learning institutions. Lack of academic rigor is an overarching factor that
details the fault of grades not representing competence and the reality that passing grades do not
necessarily mean students have achieved learning outcomes (Bonner, 2016).

Kier and Davenport (1997) examined the ruling of *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996) as it
illustrates the importance of secondary school success concerning university admissions as Texas
introduced for all its public universities guaranteed admission to students with GPAs within the
top 10% of each high school. Texas was one of the first states to implement the 10-point grading
scale, a scale that allows students a better possibility of mathematically passing a course than the
traditional 8-point scale. The policy supports the fundamental concept of rewarding student
grades regardless of standardized test scores or content mastery. The introduction of such
policies allows for speculation beyond universities’ admission procedures, as ranking-based
admission increases the marginal reward of content mastery and effort and may increase
learning.

The Atlantic State Department of Public Instruction (2018) has recognized Big Mountain
School District as a low performing school district for the past seven years, even though all three
secondary schools in the district are mandated to adjust or inflate student grades (General Assembly 2017-2018 Report; Policy GCS-L-004; Report, AR 5124). However, opponents of ranking-based admissions suggest that secondary school student grade inflation may incentivize strategic behavior to manipulate the ranking variables at the school level (Fajnzylber et al., 2019; McCabe & Powell, 2004). Fajnzylber et al. (2019) provided relevant findings that secondary schools inflate GPAs in order to improve their students’ prospects, stating that their findings indicated that some schools opt to artificially inflate student GPAs, with no visible increases in student effort or learning; thus, increasing the schools standing in the educational market.

**Grade Inflation Validity**

Murray and Howe (2017) examined secondary school success evaluation flaws through school report card usage and argued that school report cards fail to measure and represent school quality and validity. The concern of precise validity in the measurement of secondary school success, which fails to address profound differences in capacity and school resources meaningfully, supports the belief of mandatory grade inflation as a possible means to create artificial increases in school performance. Despite the proliferation and variation of school report cards, according to Murray and Howe (2017), school report card letter grades tended to hide rather than reveal achievement gaps and concluded that relatively little credible research on how these state systems validly measure school quality. The practice of mandated grade inflation allows students to perform well below par and rewards the student with a 50% mark at the midway portion of the semester. Students who receive an inaccurate representation of an actual grade with one of 50% have increased the chances that the student passes the class and allow the student a more probable chance of graduation than if they failed the class. Inaccurate
representation of student grades and success supports the belief that mandated grade inflation may be part of secondary schools’ overall performance issues.

Grade inflation, a uniform and upward shift in grades without commensurate knowledge acquisition, fosters and reinforces an inflated perception about one’s knowledge, skills, and competencies (Goldman, 1985; Robbins et al., 2018; White & Heitzler, 2018). Therefore, can the same false sense of fostering and reinforcement of perceived knowledge link to the success of the secondary schools. Does grade inflation, directly and indirectly, allow for a perceived misconception of secondary school success as judged by the success of the students who attend the school. The markers for secondary school success in Atlantic State include student performance, growth, and graduation rates (Ladd et al., 2018; Report Cards, 2018).

Graduation rates as a marker for secondary schools’ success also threaten the validity of grading practice to help meet graduation goals and student promotion, creating a need for research to examine graduation rates of Atlantic State high school students. Increasing the high school graduation rate is a top priority for education, both locally and nationally (Rinka et al., 2016). For example, Atlantic State’s ABC’s school reform and accountability model, operating in the Atlantic State’s educational system circa 1996-97, had limited success until 2006 when secondary school protocol and success rates were introduced to the requirement to calculate graduation rates and to hold schools accountable for their graduation rate. Before 2006, a primary focus of Atlantic State’s ABCs was raising standards, including raising graduation requirements. Research for Action (RFA), an independent, non-profit educational research organization that seeks to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved students, was commissioned to evaluate changes in student outcomes and graduation during the first three years of the project Leadership
and Investment For Transformation (LIFT). The LIFT initiative included three goals, with the primary goal being that 90% of Wake County High Schools (WCHS) students will graduate on time, with on-time referring to a student achieving graduation according to a standard four-year graduation cohort and Wake County ranks in the top 20 largest school districts in the country as of 2017 (Kim et al., 2015; Norton et al., 2016; SREB, 2018). The high school graduation rate increased by eight percentage points from 2011 to 2016, and the percentage of ninth graders progressing to 12th grade in four years increased from 71% in 2011 to 78% in 2016, demonstrating secondary school accomplishment in increasing graduation rates as suggested by the state. Nevertheless, there was not an increase in standardized test scores for the same period, thus creating a cause for investigation (SREB, 2018). The extent to which secondary schools achieved the perception of success from the public view is a direct representation of grades that are manually adjusted or inflated by educators and hence increasing actual student GPA; therefore, administrators mandating teachers to boost grades at the secondary level may create perceptions and experiences in the educators who are taking part in the issue.

**Standardized Testing.**

Miller (2014) also examined mandated grade inflation comparison to standardized test success, speculating that students of today, on average, are genuinely more educated and have more knowledge than students of past decades, stating that students today are more competent than those of prior decades. However, Bercher (2012) suggested that awareness of what one knows or does not know defines learning and that students can adjust their educational performances when they are cognitively aware that success lies in the given effort toward a task (Huff & Nietfeld, 2009). Logically, more intelligent students earn better grades; however, standardized test scores do not support this elegant and straightforward hypothesis. Tucker and
Courts (2010) stated that today’s students might be more productive learners due to the immediate availability of technology that enhances study skills and argue that increases in GPAs over time may be grade improvement rather than grade inflation. Tucker and Courts (2010) cited factors such as more effective learning-centered teaching methods; however, research continually points to grade inflation as the primary factor for increased GPA, for if student knowledge and the advancement and availability of technology were the primary cause, then by reasoning, an increase in standardized test scores would be visible. According to Miller’s (2014) findings, SAT scores rose only 1.6% between 1990 and 2010, and ACT results indicate that only 25% of all ACT-tested high school graduates meet all college readiness benchmarks.

Speculation on the premise that student grade inflation occurs to bolster perceived secondary school institutional success allows for examining perceptions surrounding mandated grade inflation. Since it is inconceivable that ACT or SAT scores are being manually inflated or adjusted, the direct explanation concerning teachers’ and administrators’ attempts to increase school reputation falls primarily on the increase of student grades and corresponding increases in student overall high school GPA or academic success. The research concludes that high school GPA is a more reliable predictor than either standardized test score measure (SAT or ACT) regarding first-year higher learning success (Beard et al., 2018; Kuncel & Hezlett, 2007; Kurlaender et al., 2018). If high school GPA is the primary influencer of student success as first-year enrollees at colleges and universities, then grade inflation during the secondary school level may misrepresent the actual success factors of the student and, again, might be a cause for concern when examining the overall success of secondary schools, including those in Atlantic State.
**Student Success and Promotion.**

Kurlaender et al. (2018) examined yet another flaw in mandating secondary students’ grades by analyzing secondary school GPA and standardized test results of students who completed their first year in college. The researchers formulated a standard validity approach to investigate the relationship between 11th-grade assessments and college outcomes. Specifically, the research examined correlations between high school GPA and SAT scores while controlling for other variables and first-year college or university GPA. If the secondary school teachers manually adjust or inflate grades of the subjects, it may lead to a skewing of the validity of the results and an over-inflation of student success, and perhaps unrealized issues concerning the secondary schools’ overall success in the study.

According to Edwards and Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (2016), states should monitor the percentage of students who successfully advance from one grade to the next, measuring grade-level progression. From 2011 to 2016, the percentage of ninth graders who reached 12th grade on time increased by seven percentage points. In 2016 the high school progression rates in SREB states ranged from 74% to 89%. The estimated graduation rate for the SREB region in 2011 was 78%, 1 point below the national rate. By 2016 SREB’s graduation rate increased to 86% and exceeded the national rate by 2 points. Fifteen SREB states saw their high school graduation rates rise during this time by between 3 and 15 percentage points. Since 2014, SREB has reported the federal Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), based on actual counts of cohorts of students. Before then, states reported data for a federal calculation that yielded an estimated rate (SREB, 2018). In Atlantic State, the high school graduation rate increased by eight percentage points from 2011 to 2016. The percentage of ninth graders progressing to 12th grade in four years increased from 71% in 2011 to 78% in 2016; however,
the average ACT subscore for math for the class of 2017 decreased to 19.3, down 0.2 percentage point, compared with the class of 2015. While acknowledging a decrease in student content mastery, this increase in secondary student graduation rates warrants recognition of the institutional implications of grade inflation.

**Institutional Implications**

Ehlers and Schwager (2016) argued that secondary school grade inflation also tarnishes the school, educators, and students’ reputation, stating that a plausible form of the cost associated with inflating grades is reputation loss. Schools that seem to have inflated grades are subject to scrutiny as the school’s graduates of the next generation face less-favorable standings, standings that some secondary schools attempt to address through the use of unrecognized grade inflation tactics surrounding honors classes (Ehlers & Schwager, 2015). Grade inflation concerns at the school or district level are also visible in the research conducted by Herron and Markovich (2017), who stated that one significant consequence of grade inflation is the masking of true student abilities. If student success is overinflated as a result of grade inflation, then perhaps the actual, comprehensive achievement of the secondary school is also overinflated; hence the concern surrounding grade inflation at a secondary school secular level and not merely on a student-by-student basis level. Stohs and Clarke (2015) inferred that concerns regarding honors programs to aid in increasing student GPA (weighted) might stem from four interrelated issues: admissions, retention, course grading, and graduation requirements and rates. All four issues address the policy of mandatory grade inflation; for example, retention and graduation rates are likely to suffer too, reflecting poorly on a secondary school’s reputation and overall school report card. Joyce (2016) suggested that instructors may feel pressured to inflate grades to improve
student evaluations of their teaching; therefore, creating false inflation of the institution’s success.

The American Bar Association censured and fined the University of Illinois College of Law for reporting inflated grade-point averages and law school admission test scores of its students to improve its position in rankings of law schools. The University of Illinois reported false information about incoming students’ GPAs and LSAT scores for the entering classes of 2005 and 2007 through 2011 (Smith, 2012). For example, 109 student test scores and 58 student GPAs were altered: thus, demonstrating the competitive nature of secondary institutions regarding GPA and standardized testing accomplishments, such as the University of Illinois class of 2011 (Smith, 2012).

According to Elkins (2016), grading is an essential element of the learning experience and aids in the development of self-regulated learners. The connection of grading specifications to mastery learning, competency-based grading, contract learning, and the link to encouraging the growth mindset allows educators to assign a mark based upon the variance in rigor, increase in student motivation, and overall content mastery (Elkins, 2016). To reduce these gaps in achievement between groups of students and help all students reach a higher learning level, Bloom advocated varying instructional methods and time spent on tasks to better match students’ individual learning needs, referred to as mastery learning. The mastery learning strategy consists of helping students identify what they have learned well and what they still need to master by providing them with specific information or feedback during frequent formative assessments instead of a summative assessment that occurs only at the end of the semester. Often the grade is curved or adjusted by Atlantic State’s Department of Public Instruction (Elkins, 2016). Formative assessments, in this case, would occur more frequently throughout the semester and
thus prevent students from failing to produce effort for the first nine weeks of the semester and be rewarded with an inflated grade with intentions of aiding the student in possibly passing the course.

The broader distribution of grades under curve-adjusted grading could simply create the illusion of legitimacy in the grading system without any direct connection between grades and achievement of learning goals. The more productive route is to push for alignment of more reliable, criterion-referenced grading systems in which instructional goals, assessments, and coursework validate student learning.

Global Rationale

Grade inflation is not merely a one-off idea that occurs within the United States; it is a global phenomenon that impacts a worldwide educational system. Practices regarding teacher perception matriculating from mandated grade inflation practices in secondary schools is a visible trend seen not only within Atlantic State but also in the United States and globally. According to Hübner et al. (2020), school grades and standardized achievement do not always have a prominent level of correlations, suggesting that one dominant factor contributing to such differences is variations in grading standards.

Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson (2015) conducted longitudinal-based studies and concluded that grade inflation, the average mark given at one point in time, which is significantly higher than the average mark earned by students at an earlier point, is a worldwide practice. Research undertook by Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson (2015) and Gruhlke (2018) surrounding grade inflation in the United States, for example, showed high school grades inflated by as much as 12.5% between 1991-2003 and university grade inflation during the same period
utilizing a grading scale where A’s and A minuses are now the most frequently awarded grades, comprising 43% of all grades, up from 31% in 1988 and 15% in 1960.

Grade inflation also occurs in the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Israel, Sweden, and other countries, where research demonstrates a drastic increase over the past decade. Herron and Markovich (2017) concluded that 80% of German students enrolled in comparable secondary schools graduate with one of the top two grades. However, like grade inflation results in the United States educational system, global student achievement results demonstrate no increase in student achievement on standardized test scores relative to GPA increases over the past decades. Exploring teacher perceptions surrounding mandated grade inflation and the perceived lack of content mastery and knowledge allows for clarification for the utilization of the practice at the high school level (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015; Gruhlke, 2018; Nata et al., 2014).

**High School Grade Point Average**

Vulperhorst et al. (2018) additionally supported the findings of Kurlaender et al. (2018) and Gruhlke (2108) when conducting research and dissecting high school GPA and student success in college. Vulperhorst et al. (2018) took it a step further by questioning the methods used to calculate high school GPA as a deterring factor of collegiate success, addressing the variation in high school GPA calculations as the average of all grades and not merely core class grades. Even though high school GPA may summarize all grades into one representation that reflects the overall achievement score of a student, and as a variable with minimal room for errors in measuring, the sum of all grades relies upon different standards of achievement as if the overall GPA may contain manually inflated or adjusted grades; therefore, allowing for miscalculations of student success and perhaps inflated perceptions of institutional success (Gershenson, 2018; Walsh, 2010). Institutional success, according to Vulperhorst et al. (2018), is
driven by college admissions concerning student achievement and finds merit in the facts that, according to the research, colleges and universities are more apt to accept graduates with different high school diplomas and the admission procedures for students who enter with various secondary school diplomas. The variation in acceptance, based on the reputation of institutional success at the high school level, which finds grounding in overall student achievement, likened to student high school GPA, adds credence to the research suggesting that grade inflation influences not only the student or community but the institutions as well. Therefore, it may appear to be in the high school’s best interest to mandate grade inflation with the desired result of bolstering perceived institutional success.

**School Report Cards**

Institutional success at the secondary level in Atlantic State finds merit in the DPI credentials. The Atlantic State’s school report cards provide information about the school and district-level data in multiple areas and are a valuable resource for parents, educators, state leaders, and researchers (DPI, 2019). The report cards include student performance and academic growth, school and student characteristics, and other relevant details, including overall success based on student retention and graduation rates. According to Gershenson (2018), grade inflation may have the political consequence of encouraging the public to overestimate the secondary school’s success, even though the school is failing to meet expectations and would benefit from reform. Grade inflation may contribute to a more general sense of complacency about schools and explain why parents and educators tend to report satisfaction with their school yet feel grave concerns about the state of the country’s education system (Gershenson, 2018; Sorurbakhsh - Castillo, 2018). College admission boards rely upon GPA and standardized tests for admission requirements and scholarship opportunities for secondary school applicants, thus reemphasizing
student GPA’s perceived importance (Bar et al., 2009; Gershenson, 2018; O’Halloran & Gordon, 2014; Stansfield, 2011).

Secondary schools in Atlantic State observe regulatory guidelines set forth by DPI to evaluate and assess secondary schools’ successes, as evident in the school’s state-issued report card (DPI, 2018). If a secondary school fails to meet required student graduation rates, student grade level promotions, or demonstrate an increase in student knowledge for the school year, the secondary school receives a report card grade of C, D, or F; thus, the selection of schools for the study included three schools who fail to meet DPI standards (DPI, 2018).

Peltzman et al. (2019) reported that school report cards provide information for families and the public to improve the implementation of acts to encourage student success. In compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Atlantic State, publishes an array of educational data at the state, district, and local levels, which allows for direct comparison of secondary schools. State and school report cards effectively communicate data, driving school improvement efforts to support all students, increasing the school’s prestige or reputation (Burnette, 2018; Data Quality Campaign, 2019). Effective use of data is critical to support educators and students more effectively, yet it can create a bias towards underperforming schools. However, with the passing of the Every Students Succeeds Act in 2015, Congress gave states greater flexibility than they had in previous legislation. As a result, the Southern Regional Educational Board states have been able to redesign their accountability systems, including their goals and indicators, to better measure what matters in promoting student learning based on state priorities (SREB, 2018). Issues arise as the ESSA policy’s validity does not describe in exacting detail the process for measuring secondary school success because of defining differentiating priorities and parameters that occur at the state level. Data collection and analysis, in the form of
school report cards, allow for the practical evaluation of secondary schools, including publicly examining data on current performance and trends and disaggregating data to identify disparities in opportunity and outcomes with hopes of school assessment improvements (DPI, 2019). Measurement of secondary school success does not occur in a vacuum, and outside entities often find issues concerning the validity of the measurement standards set forth regarding perceived secondary school success.

**AP, IB, and Honors Level Classes**

State laws governing the mandating of student grade inflation to the benefit of a student, teacher, or secondary school take criticism from outside institutions such as the College Board Advanced Placement (AP) program and the International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, which are not controlled by the state. Programs such as AP and IB forbid the inflation of grades at the secondary school level (College Board, 2019; International Baccalaureate Organization, 2018). However, DPI suggests that any secondary student, regardless of class enrollment, AP, IB, or Honors is subject to the same stipulations concerning teacher mandated grade inflation but caveats it as the institution’s choice on whether to follow the mandate (Report AR 5124; Pseudonym School Handbook, 2019).

During the college admission process, the slightest alteration in GPA can have significant consequences, especially at universities using a high school rank or GPA threshold for automatic admission or disqualification; the importance of high school grades may be increasing as schools shift more toward test-optional and class rank-based admission policies (Hansen et al., 2019). Research suggests that measurement of student achievement by calculating weighted GPAs, especially students’ weighted GPAs in a system where grade inflation is mandatory, has two
significant flaws; not all students take the same courses, and grades are ostensibly measured on an ordinal, not interval, scale (Hansen et al., 2019).

High school grades play a dominant role in education as they motivate students to study, provide feedback to students about their academic performance, and inform college admission committees about students’ high school performance. Research has shown that grades tend to predict college success and, if not better than standardized test scores, and as a result, in recent years, many colleges have placed greater emphasis on high school grades in the college admission process (Hansen et al., 2019). Inconsistencies in grading practices across courses, teachers, and schools may account for differences in grading standards between standard and advanced courses, and GPAs are often adjusted to account for nominal indicators of course rigor in such classes as IB, AP, or Honors level. For instance, the rigor of Atlantic State’s secondary courses, as defined by the State Board of Education, suggested awarding two bonus grade points for AP courses as a statewide policy, awarding a 5.0 grade for B-level work in an AP course, while an A in a standard course earns a 4.0.

The practice of awarding bonus GPA points saw a revamping in 2015, and currently, the state only awards one grade bonus to students for AP and IB courses. The ability to compare the difficulty of various grade-by-course combinations on a conventional weighted GPA scale can support well-informed policy decisions for weighting high school GPAs; however, there is also evidence to support the argument of omitting mandated grade inflation for advanced courses (Hansen et al., 2019; Wehde-Roddiger et al., 2012). If the sole purpose of awarding bonus grade points for advanced course participation is to equate grades from standard and advanced high school courses, research indicates that widely used policies award excess points for advanced courses even in courses that mandate educators to inflate students’ grades.
Issues also arise with the state attempting to place importance on AP or IB courses to validate or increase perceived institutional success or standing. An illustration of the state’s attempt to promote AP and IB testing occurred in summer 2014, with SL2013-360 section 8.27, the General Assembly modified 115C.83.4A to enhance access and encourage participation in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses by appropriating funds to pay for all AP and IB exams for public school or charter school students who enroll in the corresponding AP/IB courses.

As high schools offer more pre-Advanced Placement (pre-AP) and AP courses to prepare students for college academics, students often obtain extra GPA points to help compensate for the rigorous curriculum. AP student testing increased 134% in the last decade, with 1.24 million students taking an exam during the 2019 school year (College Board, 2019). In states where class ranking determines automatic university admission, class ranking fluctuations might influence students’ decisions regarding whether to enroll in AP courses. The students’ decision to enroll in academically advanced courses bears no form of prerequisite in Atlantic State’s educational system. Therefore, enrollment into advanced, academically rigorous courses is not based on gatekeeper courses; however, all students can receive grade inflation in the courses after the mid-semester grading period.

Spisak & Squires (2016) examined findings that honors courses do not adversely affect GPA, providing underlying ideals that teacher discretion to inflate grades, and GPAs, is prevalent in honors or higher-level secondary school classes. Klafter (2019) suggested that grade inflation penalizes genuinely exceptional students, as the grades they earn may appear to be only marginally better than an average student. Grade inflation disincentives demanding work; students perceive that they can easily earn a B grade while they may not achieve a top letter
grade. Grade inflation may allow the average student the opportunity to graduate high school, when according to Baird et al. (2019), in reality; the student may not have the performance measurements or content mastery to receive a passing mark; thus, not only inflating the GPA of the student but also falsifying the graduation and perceived success rate of the secondary institution.

**Institutions of Higher Learning**

Grade inflation is a problem that also impacts institutions of higher education. The individual who achieves a higher grade point average at a given institution may not prove to be a highly proficient professional as judged by another institution’s credentials. Grade inflation is justly two-fold as at the university level, where course instructor evaluations, which could merit a raise, promotion, or tenure, are at the mercy of the students’ evaluations of the instructor. According to Crumbley and Reichelt (2009), one of the more powerful ways to improve professor evaluation is using the leniency hypothesis, where instructors increase evaluation scores by grade inflation and coursework deflation. The resulting paradigm results in a substantial number of professors engaging in impression management by inflating grades and deflating coursework coverage; thus, creating a ratchet effect of dysfunctional techniques that lead to anti-learning and cause an upward spiral in the average grades (Crumbley & Reichelt, 2009). Hernandez-Julian and Looney’s (2016) research also suggested that the global phenomenon of grade inflation occurs at the university level but is also highly visible in the educational systems at the secondary school level. Research conducted by Buckley et al. (2018) suggested that universities rely on the much-needed evaluation of the use and value of standardized admissions tests in an era of widespread grade inflation.
The grade inflation issue is not so much an issue of relevance or observation, but an issue concerning the teachers’ beliefs and perceptions allowed to choose grade inflation in their educational practices as opposed to requiring grade inflation by the school or school system. Hernandez-Julian and Looney (2016) quantified the causes of rising grades utilizing empirical methods underlying quality-price indexes to examine the value of students’ grades as compared to SAT scores. Educators, parents, and students view standardized tests as the universal standard of academic ability since standardized tests are designs, unlike grades, that can measure content mastery and not subject to local assessments of abilities and subject to grade inflation. However, when compared to grades in high school, test scores have proven weak indicators of subsequent academic success at highly selective universities that must choose among a large pool of highly qualified students (Douglas et al., 2019). Hernandez-Julian and Looney (2016) concluded that the interpretation of their research while controlling for student characteristics and course selection was residual grade inflation across the study; demonstrating that grade inflation exists but, there is limited research addressing teacher perception surrounding the phenomenon adequately.

Klafter (2019) furthers the discussion surrounding the reasoning behind grade inflation as university policies of grade appeals processes infiltrated the market and trickled down to the secondary school level. In a time of mass consumer market higher educational influx, the American educational system relied upon grade appeals policies to satisfy students who felt slighted in the grade they received in a particular class (Klafter, 2019). The appeals process is time-consuming and burdensome in education; therefore, educators may simply inflate student grades to circumvent the issue. The perception created, one of cumbersome and clunky time management, that coincided with the teacher’s perceptions of a grade appeals process may also
link student grade inflation and teacher experiences; however, this study focused primarily on the mandating of the inflation procedure. Klafter (2019) finalized the research by supporting a halt to grade inflation, suggesting that grade inflation castigates exceptional students as their grades are only marginally better than the average student. Klafter (2019) surmised that grade inflation disincentives demanding work, inferring that students are aware that they can earn a B grade with relative ease and that grade inflation permits those students who should not graduate in the first place to graduate with at least a B average.

**Teacher Bias**

Feldman’s (2019) research suggested alternate reasoning surrounding grade inflation, centering around the belief that teachers may have an unrecognized internal bias to inflate students’ marks based on variables that contribute to the increased perceived success or reputation of the teacher’s place of employment. As evidenced by Feldman’s (2019) findings, some have criticized grading as subjective and inconsistent, meaning that the same student could receive drastically different grades for the same work, depending on when and who is grading the work. The literature indicates that there are types of assessments that lend themselves to higher levels of grading subjectivity than others.

Hardré (2014) found that teachers’ knowledge of student characteristics is a significant predictor of grading bias and concluded that all teachers are prone to subjectivity elements in grading that takes scores and grades off-target from their original criteria and standards. Research suggests that recalibrating grading practices to fit its original purpose and targets to realign it with standards of accuracy, reliability, and validity is an integral part of dealing with teacher bias (Hardré, 2014; Levinson et al., 2016). However, the utilization of mandatory grade inflation practices in secondary schools may reinforce or encourage teacher grading bias when
dealing with mid-semester grading caused by relational and interpersonal bias factors related to teachers’ and students’ identities and interpersonal relationships. Hardré (2014) described interpersonal bias as a type of personal bias caused by what teachers know about students’ past academic performances and past and present ability assessments. Barrett et al. (2012) concluded that influencing teacher bias might occur directly from factors including raising grades due to student pressure, raising grades due to parental pressure, and raising grades due to administrator pressure. These biases can often translate a teachers’ perception of inflating a student’s grade that has not previously or is not currently placing effort on the coursework.

Grading practices in which teachers choose to inflate points in a grade for students’ may be susceptible to misinterpretation and implicit bias, and often in traditional grading, there is the common practice of averaging a student’s performance over time to formulate a student’s grade regardless of the actual grade (Feldman, 2019). Institutional biases may also exist at the secondary level, as research suggests that institutions adjust grading policies to avert the situation to thwart the perceived prejudices concerning student socioeconomic status or race (Feldman, 2019; Nance, 2019).

Researchers, such as Nance (2019), argued that institutions attempt to create institutional trust, believe that institutional authorities utilize fair decision-making processes, and have all individuals’ best interests in mind, bidding to foster community and student commitment satisfaction. Mandating teachers to inflate grades to appease community worries may create a perception as an attempt to grow the idea of institutional trust and increase favorable standing for the secondary school. Institutional biases are present when institutions’ procedures and practices, which may appear neutral, result in certain groups having an advantage being in favor, and others have a disadvantage or a feeling of devaluing (Neves et al., 2016).
Although the literature provides evidence concerning the existence of grade inflation, there have been few studies within secondary educational research that test the efficacy of teacher perception, with foundations in experiences, to address the issue of mandated grade inflation (Goldman, 1985; Hunt, 2008). White and Heitzler (2018) illustrated that quality student evaluation is time-consuming, complicated, and often subjective and problematic. Secondary school educators attest that they work hard to be fair and accurate in their appraisal of student works and that objective approaches to grading are vital in the success of the student as well as the institution (McLean, 2018; White & Heitzler, 2018). Utilizing survey research methodology, McLean (2018) investigated the grading practices of Atlantic State’s secondary school teachers for obtaining perceived student successes by examining academic and non-academic factors that influenced the final grades of high school students. The results illustrate that the grades teachers assigned are a conglomerate of factors, including academic achievement and non-achievement variables. Secondary school teachers, according to McLean (2018), utilize factors such as zeros for grades, mastery of content, academic performance over time, effort, completion of homework assignments, borderline grade adjustment, student participation and engagement, and student performance from the commencement of the semester to calculate student grades.

The interpretation of the factors allows teachers to issue grades based upon student improvement since the beginning of the year and borderline grades, factors that are subject to teacher discretion yet fail to address the inflation of grades. The leniency or discretion of the teacher to inflate or adjust students’ grades is a viable option for teachers; however, according to the Atlantic State’s policy, teachers are under the direct order of the DPI to manually adjust grades for students whose grade is substandard at the midway mark of the semester (Report 5124).
Teacher Discretion

Teacher discretion concerning student achievement or content mastery relies not merely upon advancing students to the next level due to student effort but possibly inflating students’ grades to a passing level for those students who are a nuisance in the classroom (Barrett et al., 2012). One example revolves around awarding a grade to a problem student or average student; a student receives a higher or passing grade to ensure student promotion from the teacher’s course to the next course. When a student becomes such a nuisance that they require a large amount of faculty time, some faculty may resort to giving a grade to just pass the student to the next level (Barrett et al., 2012). Students who demand extra time or effort from a faculty member may receive an inflated grade hoping that the demand for attention will decrease, and the educator will not have to teach the same student in a remedial credit recovery class.

Although teacher discretion at a school or class level occurs regularly, minimal research is conducted examining the forced inflating of grades. Rauschenberg (2014) addressed the issue of grade manipulation by examining another aspect of grading discrepancy in the format of differential grading. Differential grading, according to Rauschenberg (2014), occurs when students in courses with the same content and curriculum receive inconsistent grades across teachers, schools, or districts. Factors that influence the variation or differentiation of secondary school teacher grading include differences in teacher grading standards, curriculum adherence, and district grading policies. According to Rauschenberg (2014), if differentiation occurs systematically, then various students may receive higher or lower grades relative to other students, despite having similar content mastery or ability; therefore, causing a seemingly innate problem with representation of student and secondary school success. According to Rauschenberg (2014), high school teachers often have significant latitude in determining their
grade distributions, whether intentional or unintentional, and teachers may assign a student’s grade to increase a student’s chances for college admission or scholarship.

State law requires that a student’s EOC test score constitute 20% of the overall course grade, giving students an immediate incentive to perform well on the test. Each district has a formula to convert the scale score to a 100-point converted score that teachers then enter as 20% of each student’s final grade. Since the final exam accounts for 20% of the final grade, according to DPI, the remaining 80% of the student’s overall final course grade relies upon the averaging of the first and second-semester grades (DPI, 2019). Rauschenberg (2014) defended the belief that according to the research, Atlantic State teachers use a student’s test score to determine a fixed portion of a student’s course grade, regardless of whether the score accurately measures ability. Therefore, if the institution or district utilizes policy to force teachers to inflate the first nine-week grade of the semester, the district adjusts 40% of the student’s overall grade by way of the educator.

For example, if a student receives a grade of a 10% mark out of a possible 100% during the first nine weeks of the semester and a 100% mark out of possible 100% for the second nine weeks of the semester, the student’s average for two nine-week periods would be a mark of 55%. However, if the student earns a 10% mark out of 100% in the first nine weeks of the semester, and the teacher manually inflates the student’s grade to 50% for the first nine weeks of the semester and combines it with a 100% out of 100% in the second nine-weeks, the student’s overall semester grade would average to a 75%. The discrepancies occurring within the non-adjusted and adjusted grade calculations are 20 points, which is the defining factor of successfully passing the course with a C instead of failing the course with an F. The mandated adjustment results in the student passing the course instead of failing, earning a higher letter
grade, thus bolstering the student’s overall GPA, or even meeting graduation requirements that would not occur had they failed the course. The increase in the overall GPA of the student who technically failed the class, coupled with the fact that the student should not have passed the class or advanced to the next grade level, demonstrates a secondary issue of an inflated perception of success at the institutional level.

Furthermore, according to Rauschenberg (2014), students who receive artificially higher grades than other students with similar abilities, content knowledge, and environment may have an advantage in college admissions. The college admission advantage could provide an unfair bias or perception of the student’s secondary school success, even masking internal problems at a secondary school whose inflated performance meets the minimum state requirements for success. Additionally, students who have artificially inflated grades may not have the supposed content mastery that is associated with the inflation of the letter grade and, in actuality, may need additional remedial work to relearn material in subsequent years of secondary school or the first years of college.

Summary

Mandating grade inflation or adjusting grades at the secondary level creates an inflated student achievement and perceived secondary school success concerning student progress while masking actual underlying problems within the institution. Grade inflation is not merely an influence of GPA inflation or falsified student achievement; grade inflation is also a trigger that creates a fabricated sense of success for secondary schools or school districts struggling to maintain state evaluated levels of educational requirements. Forcing teachers to adjust grades manually to presumably aid a student who has shown growth over time and progress concerning the mastery of content and knowledge may be acceptable on a case-by-case basis; however,
forcing teachers to adjust grades for the betterment of the district manually is another case altogether. Direct misrepresentation of grades through mandated inflation represents a social distortion effect suggesting that the school’s perceived reputation is more important than the children it services. The student who receives an inflated or adjusted grade, regardless of knowledge or learning, is a victim of injustice, creating a phenomenon for teachers assigning the mandated grades. The literature investigating grade inflation is abundant, but there is minimal research surrounding teacher perceptions of grade inflation. There is a need to research the mandatory grade-based phenomenon occurring in secondary schools throughout Atlantic State, a phenomenon that creates perceptions based on experiences.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to investigate secondary teachers’ perceptions concerning mandatory grade inflation in Atlantic State’s secondary schools. The study relied upon Silverman’s (1994) extension of Bandura’s social cognitive theory and incorporated in-depth structured interviews, journaling, and focus group interviews for eliciting data. Although studies address the multitude of causes and concerns of grade inflation at the secondary and post-secondary levels of educational systems worldwide, there is scant research exploring teacher perceptions of grade inflation (Ali et al., 2016; Chowdhury, 2018; Gruhlke, 2018). Research regarding teacher perception of mandated grade inflation may be lacking as the practice of mandating the manual adjusting of grades is new to secondary education. Teachers who are currently employed by states or districts that mandate grade inflation may also fear possible repercussions for publicly addressing the issue; therefore, research centered around qualitative studies is vital to better understanding secondary teachers’ experiences with mandated grade inflation.

The study addressed teacher perception, conceived ideals influenced by factors that impact teacher attitudes concerning the mandatory inflation of students’ grades, using multiple data collection methods, a lengthy and rigorous analytic process, and various validities and reliability approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hunt, 2008). Chapter three discusses the hermeneutic phenomenological design, setting, participants, procedures, the researcher’s role, data collection techniques, data analysis methods, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.
Design

Qualitative research methods utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenology design encompassed the foundations for the social constructivist style study. Qualitative research relies upon assumptions and theoretical frameworks that guide a study concerning researching the meanings or contexts of a human or social problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research aims to provide a deeper understanding of a specific event or experience rather than a surface description of a large sample of a population and focuses on participants’ derivation of meaning from their surroundings and perceptions. The study is foremost a qualitative study, one that, by definition, attempts to conduct research on a topic where little is known about the phenomenon or where present theories or knowledge may be biased (Cypress, 2019).

Yuksel and Yildirim (2015) suggested that it is vitally important to understand the theoretical framework and foundational concepts of phenomenology before formulating a research question and infer those researchers should have a clear goal for the study as phenomenology allows the researcher to seek to understand how individuals construct meaning surrounding the critical concepts of the phenomenon. Seeking to understand the teacher’s perceptions surrounding the mandate of inflating students’ grades falls into line with what Hegel described as the conscious knowledge associated with perception, sense, and understanding from the person’s experience (Becker, 2018).

Student grade inflation at the secondary school level is a premise for a study concerning teachers’ experiences ordered to adjust or inflate students’ grades manually. Utilizing the context of phenomenology to evaluate the perception of an ideological issue lends focus to research beginning with the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Husserl, Kant, and Hegel’s research helped define phenomenology’s beginnings in the twentieth century (Bevan, 2014; Bruzina,
Husserl (1954) rejected the belief that external forces existed independently of others and that the reliability of information created through the coexistence of objects, in conjunction with a person’s consciousness, acts as the catalyst for phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, reality or realities define the outline of the phenomenon for the study, such as teacher perception with grade inflation in secondary schools.

Duncker (1947) addressed epistemology and phenomenology as the knowledge of experiences through the conscious mind; therefore, providing a foundation from which studies can draw on the inferences made during the research. A researcher aims to describe the phenomenon as accurately as possible while refraining from any preconceived notions or bias while remaining true to facts. Welman and Kruger (1999) stated that phenomenologists should attempt to understand the social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of those involved. The concept of obtaining knowledge through an epistemological approach to a phenomenological study aligns with the manifestation of the data concerning perceptions based on experiences, as is the case with secondary school teachers and mandatory grade inflation.

Qualitative research relies upon assumptions and theoretical frameworks that guide a study concerning researching the meanings or contexts of a human or social problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Errasti-Ibarondo et al., 2018). The study aims to develop a rich and context-bound understanding of an otherwise poorly understood phenomenon. The study’s overall general design allowed for addressing preconceived views of the phenomenon and guides the research toward a framework that focuses on the subjects’ lived situations (Cypress, 2019).

Selecting a qualitative approach aided in establishing validity, as research suggests that qualitative studies can inform the development of theoretically and contextually relevant assessment tools to help alter or solidify the current phenomenon. Whittemore et al. (2001)
explained that qualitative methodological research establishes validity by demonstrating an explanation congruent with the meanings through which members construct their realities. The utilization of a qualitative research approach allowed for focus upon teachers’ experiences and perceptions, influencing behavior. The study was qualitative in nature as, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), the characterizing of the procedures of qualitative research or its methodology includes identifying procedures that are shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing the data.

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study allowed for researching in logical steps while accounting for multiple perspectives from participants and utilized intense data collection and analysis (Appendix A). According to Miron (2016), the foundation of phenomenological research centers around the consolidation of the ideas of the subject and the object, which define the accurate measurements of a phenomenological investigation. Phenomenological research approaches rely upon purposeful sampling to ensure the inquiry will remain consistent with the information within one of the five approaches to inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, this research utilized a phenomenological design to reveal the perceptions of the teachers’ experiences concerning grade inflation.

The collective group provided the data for the research and aided in creating a theme by addressing the participants’ experiences and influences to identify the essence of the phenomenon. A phenomenon research style was beneficial in gaining insight and exploring the depth, richness, and complexity inherent in the phenomenon. Phenomenological research provides the necessary scaffolding for disciplines such as philosophy and sociology and aids in the research for other subjects, including psychology, literary theory, and communication theory (Silverman, 1980). I collected data from teachers who have experienced the phenomenon and
developed a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Teacher data collection allowed for a composite description of the essence of the experience along with creating a foundational scaffold for the perceptions associated with the experiences.

This phenomenological qualitative study explored secondary school teacher experiences and perceptions about mandated grade inflation. Qualitative data, collected from written reflections, in-depth interviews, and focus group sessions, constituted data collection methods. Data analysis, through various means, aided in the investigating of thinking and experiences of secondary school teachers regarding their perceptions of global and local grade inflation issues; hence a social constructivism phenomenological approach was most relevant. Using a phenomenology study design, I examined a small number of participants’ responses before broadening the study’s scope. Because the focus was secondary school teachers from one district, but several schools, a phenomenological approach toward the study was appropriate. This process allowed for verification and interpretation of findings, which added data to the study as participants reacted, agreed, and corrected conclusions.

The nature of the research dictated the rationale supporting the use of a hermeneutic phenomenology style of research. The approach allowed for the definition of a purposeful sample, appropriate data collection, analytically separating the findings, and presenting valid results (Glover et al., 2017; Luciani et al., 2019). The basis of the study maintained a methodological approach to qualitative research and is appropriate to the investigation as selected for the research due to the nature of the study. Methodological research focused on the procedures by which researchers describe, explain, and predict phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative research method, utilizing a phenomenological design, allowed for
addressing the topic of study as categorized by understanding that the investigation of the research relies upon fundamental principles and reasons for the occurrence of an event or process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Research Questions**

**Central Research Question.** What are secondary teacher experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation policies in Atlantic State?

**Research Sub-Questions**

1. What are secondary teacher perceptions of actual secondary school success in Atlantic State, which utilizes manually inflated grades to support student achievement?

2. What are secondary teachers’ perceptions concerning district reasoning regarding the effects of mandatory grade inflation as it pertains to student preparedness and content mastery?

**Setting**

The site of the study included the three secondary schools located within the Big Mountain School District: No Correlation High School (NCHS), Some Correlation High School (SCHS), and Full Correlation High School (FCHS). Big Mountain School District is a densely populated, urban school district located in a central Atlantic State. Big Mountain School District employs teachers with an ethnic composition consisting of 58% White teachers, 23% Black teachers, 11% Hispanic teachers, and 8% Others. The distribution of teacher gender within the district is 72% women and 28% men. The Atlantic State Department of Public Instruction (2018) has recognized Big Mountain School District as a low performing school district for the past seven years despite all three high schools in the district adjusting or inflating student grades per state mandate (General Assembly 2017-2018 Report; Policy GCS-L-004; Report, AR 5124). The three high schools within the district have also failed to meet state other DPI expectations within
the last three years, including cohort graduation rates and the percentage of students successfully completing an end-of-year exam (DPI, 2018). The selection of the sites relied on the foundation that the Atlantic State’s law regarding mandated grade inflation directly impacts the three schools that are currently failing to meet standards of success for secondary schools as set forth by DPI.

The organizational structure of the three schools also influenced the choice of secondary schools for the research design; leadership changes occurred in all three institutions over the last five years, with principal turnover highest at FCHS, which accounted for the replacement of four different principals in the last five years (Report Cards SAS, 2018). The teacher turnover rate at all three high schools also exceeded 33% at the 2017-2018 school year conclusion. According to a draft of the annual turnover report prepared for the State Board of Education, the turnover rate for Big Mountain School District grossly exceeded the state average of Atlantic State for the 2017-2018 school year, which according to a draft of the annual turnover report prepared for the State Board of Education, was 8.1% (General Assembly, 2017-2018). Teacher turnover rates at the selected schools could demonstrate workplace dissatisfaction and mandated grade change may influence the satisfaction rate (Stuit & Smith, 2012). The final influential factors for choosing BMSD were the areas of opportunity for data collection, considerable knowledge of the setting, the concept that the governing body of the educational system of the state mandates grade inflation within the district, and individuals in the selected setting are to provide substantial data (Ford, 2014).

Participants

Samples in qualitative research tend to be small to support the depth of case-oriented analysis fundamental to this mode of inquiry (Moustakas, 2015). For phenomenological studies,
Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended 5 to 25 subjects, and Morse (1994) argued the need to study at least six subjects, further suggesting that adding interviewed participants can cease once saturation occurs. A qualitative research approach mandates attention regarding participant selection arrangements during the study, including addressing sample size, the sampling pool, and sampling methods. Kruger (1998) advised utilizing non-probability sampling to identify the primary participants; therefore, the selected sample base was organized depending upon the purpose of the research and relied upon selecting those who have experienced the phenomenon. Meeting the parameters of reliability and validity when conducting a phenomenological study suggests interviewing four to five subjects per high school for a total of 12 to 15 participants to achieve a reasonable cross-section of participants and to prevent skewing the dynamics of a single site (Cypress, 2017; Sandelowski, 1995).

Participant recruitment followed the participant identification. Purposeful sampling also occurred since focus group discussion relies on participants’ ability and capacity to provide relevant information (Etikan et al., 2016; Ochieng et al., 2018). The sample pool for the study consisted of secondary school educators within the school district, all of whom are required to employ mandatory grade inflation for their courses. Hycner (1999) suggested the research must be able to extend the implications of the findings beyond the participants who participate in the study; therefore, the decision to limit the sample pool of the research to a subset of that population requires necessary implications for the applicability of the study results. The study included teachers who have earned teaching licensure and over three years of experience. Contacting subjects directly via email occurred to question the likelihood of the teachers’ willingness to participate in the study contingent upon IRB approval.
Procedures

Prior to the start of the study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school district in Atlantic State granted proper approval for the study to take place (Appendix B). Administering timeline guides for all parties, including the school district, school administrators, and teachers, occurred once the study was approved and consent was obtained from the IRB. Once IRB approval was obtained, participants received explanations and clarification for details surrounding the projected study, rights, and required consent. I contacted the school district superintendent and asked for an announced meeting to follow the once-a-month mandatory faculty meeting where I asked the faculty to participate. I distributed a hard copy flier to each secondary school teacher at the meeting and briefly discussed my study by word of mouth. The flyer contained my phone number and asked interested faculty to send a text with their name and personal email address. This meeting also identified the following methods and instruments used: locations, times, schedules, participants, data collection procedures, a time frame of the study, procedures to ensure subjects understood the questions, and teachers that will be required to be part of the research. After the participant solicitation process, each participant in the study received consent forms, and requests for electronic signatures of forms occurred before the study. To establish the interview questions’ validity and reliability, I presented my questions to my dissertation committee members, experts in the field of educational research, to ensure clarity of questions and wording (Wray et al., 2017).

BMSD requires every teacher in the district to partake in a yearly self-reflective professional development plan activity to ensure teachers maintain minimum requirements for teacher licensure; interviews occurred after the mid-semester self-evaluation (Bowen, 2013). The research began once all parties have confirmed scheduled dates for the study’s commencement
and verification of research permission from the IRB, school district, and school-level administrators. Participants in the study took part in a three-step process regarding experiences surrounding mandated grade inflation, in-depth interviews, journaling, and focus group participation. The study required teachers to invest approximately 60 minutes in completing the interview. The interviews took place at a site chosen by each teacher to ensure minimal underlying pressure surrounding the interview process. Interviews occurred within a one-week period per school to reduce possible cross-school critiquing or contamination of proposed attitudes before completing the teachers’ interviews. I asked participants to refrain from discussing the conversations with other teachers, hoping to limit the number of biases created by teachers who had yet to participate in the interview process.

I analyzed and evaluated the perception of grade inflation, primarily through the analysis of teachers’ lived experience descriptions of situations involving the mandated inflating of student grades. Detailed open-ended conversational interviews and further discussion opportunities took place during the interview process (Vagle, 2014; van Manen 2015). The participant and I engaged in dialogue that allowed the participant to elaborate on the phenomenon surrounding grade inflation. These dialogues occurred at the teacher’s convenience, on a teacher’s workday, planning period, before, or after school.

I abided by the proper measures to accommodate and ensure teacher privacy and adequate representation of teacher attitudes within completed interviews. The process utilized one hour of time to deliver instructions and complete the interview. Prior to the interview, the subject completed a set of questions concerning demographics. Prior to the day of the interview, I gave participants instructions describing the interview room setup or location. The interview location was outside of the school building to allow the participant to feel more relaxed at their
chosen location. Proper accommodations ensured the accurate representation of individual teacher’s attitudes and ensured the security of teacher privacy. If the subject did not choose a location of their choice, the interview room was constructed to allow for teacher privacy, comfort, and promoted proper completion of the interview. The interview started with basic questions or ice breakers to provide a general level of comfort for the subject. Recording devices allowed for transcription of the interviews at a later date.

Journaling was the next step in the three-stage data collection process. Hayman et al. (2012) suggested that journaling refers to the process of participants sharing thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences through writing and allows participants to share experiences in their natural contexts. Verbrugge (1980) first identified journaling as a primary source of data collection and suggested that data collected from journaling successfully allows for the examination of specific experiences in natural contexts and frameworks; therefore, the phenomenological study concerning teachers’ experiences with grade inflation utilized journaling as one of the three main methods of data collection. Participants took part in a two-week journaling process that began one week before and concluded one week after the nine-week point of the semester when grades are due for each student. Limited coaching occurred during the journaling process.

The study used the technique of conducting research to collect information on a specific topic through focus group discussions of participants gathered in one place and during a specific period. The group consisted of 12 participants. Interaction between the participants and the researcher provided the exchange of experiences, concepts, and opinions among the participants. According to Kinalski et al. (2017), focus group research on phenomenological studies has gained recognition as a production technique as focus groups promote discussions that focus on
the exchange of experiences on the issue under study; therefore, increasing the role of the participants.

Focus group sessions occurred in an area comfortable for the subjects to interact and discuss the research topics and were not in a location not associated with the school district. The focus group section started with instructions and ice breaker questions and proceeded from that point into the scripted questions. The location was chosen by the subjects, ensuring privacy and security. Focus groups, according to Coenen et al. (2012), might generate more disclosure of sensitive information than individual interviews because one person’s disclosure of confidential information encourages others in a group also to disclose this type of information.

**The Researcher’s Role**

I was a human instrument for the study, and I addressed the understanding of relationships, biases, and assumptions that aided in the data collection and provided valid and reliable analysis during the investigation. According to Moustakas (2015), the term co-researcher for participants is more of an accurate representation partly since participants are subject to the analysis of the phenomenon’s essence and the researcher; however, for this study, the term of participants was the norm. The goal was to make the participants aware of their status and role; therefore, I informed participants at the beginning of the study about their role concerning the research questions (Mihalache, 2019).

I also encouraged the participants to openly share their experiences with the phenomenon (Mihalache, 2019). Seidman (2019) reported that it is necessary to build a relationship with participants during the study. By sharing their experiences with the participants, the researcher may build relationships, which may lead to the participants sharing more in-depth, more abundant text with the researcher. Either I knew the participants as I have collaborated with them
at my current school, or I did not know the participants since we had never met before the study. Biases based on the participants’ proximal geographical location were possible, but I attempted to address the bias before conducting the interviews; I kept my subjectivity in reserve throughout the study by setting aside any preconceived notions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 2015).

Being a student and an educator also present challenges concerning biases as the participants were also educators; thus, the focus group aspect of the research was utilized, which aided in reducing bias (Leavy, 2014). Controlling for my bias included implementing procedures allowing participants to review their results to ensure an accurate representation of the data, triangulation techniques for the support of the collected data, and research conducted was peer-reviewed with others in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

Research is a process of understanding issues from procuring information (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). There are multiple approaches to conducting research projects in the phenomenological study of qualitative research; structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups highlight the methods used in qualitative methods. According to Oppenheim (1992), there is no single, superior research method and suggests that choosing a research method depends on the purpose and the type of research questions.

Interviews

Interviews were the primary source of data collection. The study incorporated interviews with participants (12) employed by BMSD. The main goal of data collection relied on structured interviews and the observations of participants. The interview guide was reliant upon prior research developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and expert opinions. A qualitative research interview is a systematic approach to comprehend the world from the subject’s point of view by
uncovering their lived experiences (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Conducting interviews occurred employing the validated and reliable Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015) seven-stage interview process. According to Brinkman and Kvale (2015), the interview process requires a logical sequence of stages, from thematizing the inquiry to designing the study. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) then addressed the next logical steps as interviewing, transcribing the interview, analyzing the data, verifying the validity and reliability, generalizing the findings, and reporting the study.

I asked appropriate questions and relied on participants to discuss the meaning of their experiences. Dunne et al. (2005) stated that there is a need for the interviewer to be self-aware of their position in the research from the beginning and maintain their awareness while engaged in designing the research, collecting data, making interpretations, summarizing the data. Qualitative interviewing, according to Jong and Jung (2015), is a learned process that mandates the interviewer to be skilled at listening and have an innate or learned ability to listen carefully. Therefore, the quality of the information obtained during an interview is dependent upon the interviewer. A semi-structured interview is a compromise between a structured interview and an unstructured interview and allows for use of an interview protocol with some interviewer flexibility to make the interview more conversational (Jong & Jung, 2015). I also incorporated Fowler’s (1993) five aspects of interviewer behavior. Recording of interviews took place in a securely secluded location, with multiple audio recording devices utilized to ensure the proper documenting of all information while transcribing. According to Jong and Jung (2015), audio recording and note-taking are the primary techniques to collect spoken and written data when conducting interviews. Interview participants were subject to privacy and confidentiality, and their names remained anonymous throughout the study. Below is a list of open-ended questions
for participants to analyze during the research process (Appendix C):

- What is your educational and professional background?
- What made you choose the profession of teaching, and how long have you been teaching?
- How does the manual grade inflation mandate in semester-long classes work, in your opinion?
- Describe the relationship between student grade inflation and overall student grade point average (GPA) and standardized testing results at NCHS.
- How has grade inflation helped your students with college admissions or scholarship applications?
- What are your administrators’ rationales for implementing grade inflation policies?
- Describe your perceptions concerning the rationale or need for mandatory grade inflation.
- Describe situations you have experienced that you feel may necessitate grade inflation.
- How have your experiences with grade inflation influenced your ideals of the possible legal or ethical ramifications of implementing the policy?
- How do your past experiences with grade inflation influence your attitude toward future use of grade inflation?
- We have covered facets concerning grade inflation and experiences in our conversation, and I so appreciate the time you have given to this. What else do you think would be essential for me to know about your experiences with grade inflation?

Questions one, two, and three are participant information questions utilized to build amity with the participants and researcher; rapport and relationships between the researcher and interviewee help to elicit the deepest, richest responses from the interviewee (Oppenheimer,
1992). Relationships offer the researcher insight into the meaning of participants’ experiences and how the experiences relate to the phenomenon (Bevan, 2014). Question one focused on the educator’s educational background and current professional background, allowing the participant to expand upon their teaching experiences and create a foundation for scaffolding the remaining questions.

Questions four through six addressed the participant’s knowledge and comprehension surrounding the reasoning of grade inflation. Question four analyzed the participant’s overall knowledge of mandatory grade inflation and set in motion the analysis of the participant’s overall comprehension and beliefs surrounding the program’s efficacy and effectiveness. Questions five and six related to teachers’ perception of grade inflation regarding GPA, standardized testing, college admissions, and scholarship opportunities. According to the research, grade inflation at the global level is occurring without the justified increase in content mastery or knowledge (Baird et al., 2019; Blum, 2017; Carter & Lara, 2016). Grade inflation in secondary schools is also increasing at a higher proportional rate than the increased scores of standardized testing (Chowdhury, 2018; Ehlers & Schwager, 2016; Herron & Markovich, 2017). Mandated grade inflation in semester-long classes to bolster overall GPAs may increase the likelihood of college acceptance and perhaps grants or scholarships; therefore, Atlantic State’s secondary school teachers’ perceptions of mandated grade inflation provided insight into the trend of global grade inflation (Robbins et al., 2018; Stohs & Clarke, 2015).

Question seven related to the participant’s beliefs in the underlying reasoning for the administrative team’s requirement for implementing the policy, focusing on the participant’s comprehension of the mandated policy. Questions eight through ten related to teacher attitudes or experiences surrounding the need for grade inflation and teachers’ possible attitudes concerning
moral or legal implications of grade inflation. The legal and ethical considerations of grade inflation may be cause for concern of mandated grade inflation; studies suggest that teachers, students, and parents could be at risk of violating moral or legal standards when condoning grade inflation at the secondary or college level of education (Ackerman & Gross, 2018; O’Halloran & Gordon, 2014; White & Heitzler, 2018).

Questions nine and ten allowed the participant to share their beliefs surrounding grade inflation, whether supporting or condoning the action and how the participant justified either belief. Questions nine and ten were subject to participant interpretation and addressed teacher biases concerning the socioeconomic differences of the participants’ students within the district. Research implies that grade inflation variations are related to socioeconomic differences in secondary schools throughout the United States (Nata et al., 2014; Neves et al., 2016).

Questions eleven and twelve asked the participant to anticipate future concerns, needs, or justifications for grade inflation, including how grade inflation is not only justifiable but also necessary and warranted. The occurrence of grade inflation, both nationally and globally, has risen over the past several decades, suggesting that grade inflation is the new norm for secondary schools and universities (Herron & Markovich, 2016; Joyce, 2016; Kostal et al., 2016; Miller, 2014).

**Journal Prompts**

The study also included a journaling style method of data collection of secondary teachers’ experiences concerning grade inflation. This qualitative study systematically documented secondary teachers’ responses to writing prompts surrounding the journaling method, asking participants to describe their attitudes surrounding mandatory grade inflation. Journaling allowed the participants to fully process the questions with minimal time restraints or
locational influences; journaling is a technique that considers the participants’ objective learning and emotional experiences and thereby generated greater involvement by the participant (Fortson & Sisk, 2007).

Miles and Huberman (1984) suggested that writing prompts can improve data collection by enhancing and improving knowledge collectively upon experience. Writing prompts via journaling were generated before interviewing participants, allowing participants to gain insight into the upcoming interview portion of the study and again after I conducted the in-depth interview allowing for interviewing and journaling methods to overlap and aided in gathering critical data. Analyzation of a small sample of data occurred to formulate preliminary results regarding the journaling exercise’s findings. Implementation of content analysis procedures occurred to measure the degree to which I counted the frequencies of particular words, phrases, or concepts surrounding teacher attitudes toward grade inflation. Explanation of the journaling method to participants occurred, and respondents had two weeks in total to complete the writing prompts associated with the journaling.

According to Oppenheimer (1992) and Hayman et al. (2012), a writing prompt journaling method of data collection ensures an accurate sampling while ensuring a high response rate and minimum interview bias. Journaling also allowed participants to expand on writing prompts to provide necessary explanations of the prompt while in a relaxed environment, free from researcher or colleague pressure (Oppenheimer, 1992). Below is a list of open-ended questions that participants analyzed during the journaling process (Appendix D):

- How does mandated grade inflation make you feel about your role as a teacher at NCHS?
- How does mandated grade inflation make you feel about the responsibilities of school and district administrators regarding student achievement?
• How does mandated grade inflation make you feel about state administrators and policymakers?
• Describe your experiences concerning grade inflation with an above-level course such as honors, advanced placement, or international baccalaureate classes.
• Describe your perceptions of secondary school report card grades while accounting for student grade inflation.
• Describe the effects of grade inflation on student mastery of content and student grade-level promotion.
• How has grade inflation influenced your perceptions of student achievement?
• How does grade inflation influence your perceptions of the success of secondary schools, while accounting for student GPA and graduation rates?

Focus Groups

I utilized focus group sessions, concentrating on small-group discussions, gathering data, and learning about opinions to guide future actions. Kruger et al. (2019) acknowledged that participants in the individual interviews disclosed more personal thoughts and feelings than those in focus groups, and those focus group participants had a higher degree of an interpersonal climate of their sessions than participants in the focus groups. However, Kruger et al. (2019) emphasized that the utilization of focus groups provides reliable data. Coenen et al. (2012) reinforced the ideals of focus group importance by acknowledging that focus groups generate a more exceptional array of ideas than individual interviews because of coexisting cooperation among the participants.

According to Krueger and Casey (2000), an individual’s self-disclosure tends to be natural and comfortable; however, it requires trust and effort. Ochieng et al. (2018) formulated
that using a focus group to generate valuable data and information is more readily accessible when conducting the research within a homogenous group. Ochieng et al. (2018) suggested the theory that if participants share similar characteristics such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, race, or background, they are more prone to provide honest responses. Challenges arise as the homogeneity of unfamiliar participants can give honest and spontaneous views and can overcome pre-existing relationships and patterns of leadership in the group; however, Freitas et al. (1998) suggested that mixed-gender groups tend to improve the quality of discussions and the discussion outcomes.

Although researchers recognize it is acceptable that between six and eight participants are sufficient for validity, studies have reported as few as four and as many as fifteen participants (Jong & Jung, 2015). I conducted two focus group sessions. Given the small number of participants in a focus group discussion and the general design as a one-off encounter, Blaxter et al. (1996) suggested utilizing multiple sessions with simple research topics. I conducted two focus group sections, allowing participants from all three schools the opportunity to take part in a session. According to Breen (2006), conducting surveys assesses teacher perception, yet a comprehensive questionnaire surrounding teacher perceptions of mandatory grade inflation is currently unavailable. During structured focus group interviews, participants had the opportunity to contribute to discussion while answering ten open-ended questions, and verbatim audio recording transcriptions allowed for content analysis and identification of themes. Below is a list of questions that participants analyzed during the focus group section of data collection (Appendix E):

- Why do you believe there are mandates for student grade inflation at NCHS?
- What effects does mandatory grade inflation have on the educational efforts of
your high school?

- Which students benefit the most from grade inflation?
- How do you feel about grade inflation in higher-level courses?
- How does grade inflation influence learning at the high school level?
- How does mandatory grade inflation influence your beliefs surrounding student achievement and content mastery?
- How do you feel that grade inflation influences the community perception of secondary school student achievement?
- How do you feel grade inflation impacts community views of secondary school evaluations and graduation rates as reported by the state?
- What are the long-term effects of student grade inflation at the high school level?
- What is your overall perception surrounding mandatory grade inflation at the secondary school level?

Questions one through four related to teacher perceptions concerning first-hand experiences of grade inflation at the secondary school and classroom level; according to Gershenson et al. (2018), grade inflation occurs more frequently in secondary school than in the past three decades. Gershenson’s (2018) research validates that most secondary school teachers experience situations concerning grade inflation. Question three forced participants to focus upon and report on the variety of students benefitting from grade inflation, whether for GPA or class promotion. Question four then addressed the participant’s experiences with students’ variations by addressing inflation in upper-level class and the impact of GPA increases in AP, IB, or Honors level classes. The occurrence of grade inflation, both nationally and globally, has risen over the past several decades, suggesting that grade inflation is the new norm for secondary
schools (Herron & Markovich, 2017; Joyce, 2016; Kostal et al., 2016; Miller, 2014).

The act of inflating grades at the secondary school level allowed for insight into both the positive and negative influences on secondary school students’ successes; however, perception concerning grade inflation and content mastery intertwined when describing student achievement (Herron & Markovich, 2017; Hunt, 2008; Kamber & Biggs, 2003; Klafter, 2019; Pattison et al., 2013). Consequently, questions five and six addressed grade inflation related to perceived student achievement, learning, and student content mastery at the high school level.

Questions seven and eight delved into teacher understanding of community perceptions of grade inflation on perceived student success and secondary school’s overall reputation. Grade inflation elevates community perception of secondary school reputation by inflating graduation rates and students’ overall GPA standings. According to Walsh (2010), competition amongst schools, with references to perceived reputation, can and does lead to grade inflation at institutions. Therefore, questions seven and eight addressed recognizing teacher perception of grade inflation relative to community perception student achievement and secondary school success (Schinske & Tanner, 2014; Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, 2018; Walsh, 2010).

Questions nine and ten allowed the participants to share their beliefs surrounding grade inflation, whether supporting or condoning the action and how they justified either belief. The final two questions asked the participant to anticipate future concerns, needs, or justifications for grade inflation, including how grade inflation is not only justifiable but also necessary and warranted. Questions nine and ten were subject to participant interpretation, addressed teacher biases, and allowed for expansion upon any underlying, unidentified perceptions that teachers may be willing to discuss.
Data Analysis

Data obtained via structured interviews, journaling, and focus groups allowed for analyzing the material within a six-step procedure outlined by Moustakas (1994). The study incorporated Moustakas’s (2015) structured method of inductive data analysis. Transcription and data analyses occurred prior to journaling and once again prior to the commencement of focus group interactions. Every individual transcript was re-read at least twice, and the use of memoing identified and highlighted the main points and key concepts to function as the foundation for data collection and analysis. Data analysis occurred after initial interviews, and the following steps addressed and supported the research as verified by research conducted by Moustakas (1994):

1. Bracketing: The method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process. Bracketing allowed for the purposeful recognition of preconceived knowledge or everyday beliefs that might be used to explain the phenomena being investigated. This allowed the researcher to listen and record the participant’s description of an experience in an open manner.

2. Horizontalization: Treat all the data equally; no quote or excerpt is more critical than any other is. Horizontalization began the process of preliminary coding and grouping by listing every quote relevant to the experiencer or phenomenon under investigation. Horizontalization incorporated a portion of the phenomenological reduction process, whereby the researcher gave equal value to all the participants’ statements. The researcher removed all repetitive statements as well as those that did not relate to the research questions.

3. Delimited Horizons or Meanings: Horizons that stood out as invariant qualities of the
experience, returning recursively to the documents and the themes, those themes that could not be delimited through the process of horizontalization were clustered into existing themes.

4. Invariant Qualities and Themes: Clustering nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping constituents into themes; invariant qualities or essence are extracted from those lived experiences' data.

5. Individual Textural Descriptions: An integration, descriptively, of each research participant's invariant textural constituents and themes that allows for the development of descriptive integrations.

6. Composite Textural Description: An integration of all the individual textural descriptions into a group or universal textural descriptions representing the group as a whole.

The process of memoing was essential to the qualitative research process and aided in this study’s research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I recorded in my field notes, recording what I heard, saw, experienced, and thought while collecting and reflecting on the process. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), maintaining the interview process’s validation is essential to the study, as descriptive notes and reflective notes are crucial to the data collection process. Incorporation of triangulation through peer debriefing confirmed data from structured interviews and focus groups ensured the data’s validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Patton, 2015).
Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers consider that dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability as trustworthiness criteria ensure qualitative findings’ rigor (Anney, 2014). Trustworthiness, or creating perceived reliable and valid research, maintained that the study conducted had rigor (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Reliable findings, with proof of reliability and validity, are essential to fundamental qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research relies upon the determination of rigor, and according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the four criteria aiding in the evaluation of quality research and determining rigor are credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that trustworthiness is the determining factor of a research study’s value. Trustworthiness involves establishing four main criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility or confidence in the overall facts of the findings is the first of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria. Transferability, showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts, dependability, showing that the findings are consistent and repeatable, and confirmability, the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the respondents shape the findings of a study and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest, define the remaining criteria of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) research.

The concepts of validity and reliability in qualitative research design have been criticized and found to be dogmatic as a result of positivist hypothetical deductive reasoning; thus, credibility and transferability are more common concepts preferred by qualitative researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, an examination of related literature allowed for creating a contextual framework; an explanation of procedures is available in detail, and preservation of all data occurred to allow further research. Credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability addressed the findings of the study to ensure trustworthiness.
Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described credibility as the truth of a study’s findings or the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified techniques for establishing credibility: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member- checking, with member checking being the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. Credibility achievement occurred through member checking and prolonged engagement with the participants during the group discussion to gain an understanding of how they experienced grade inflation. Credibility also included persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis. Persistent observation refers to focusing on the characteristics or aspects of a situation relevant to the phenomena and aided in validating credibility; therefore, as a researcher, I was mindful of continually focusing on all aspects of the data collection process.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described triangulation as a method for corroborating findings and as a test for validity that ensures the research is rich, robust, comprehensive, and well developed. Triangulation, using multiple data sources or multiple approaches to analyzing data to enhance this study’s credibility, occurred within the study by examining data from interviews, focus groups, and written responses from journal prompts. I utilized peer debriefing during the study, which aided in adding credibility to the research. Peer debriefing, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is a process of exposing research data to a neutral party, one with no interest in the study, to explore aspects of the research that might otherwise remain only implicit within my thoughts. I also used negative case analysis to help maintain credibility during the research. Negative case analyses, researching opposing viewpoints that promote grade inflation mandates gave rise to unexpected findings, strengthening my theory. A negative case, one in which
respondents’ experiences or viewpoints differed from the main body of evidence, allowing for verified integrity of the research findings.

Evaluation of validity through open coding ensured the research process’s credibility as a concept emerged from the gathering and categorical grouping of raw data (Amankwaa, 2016). The goal of open coding was to build a descriptive, multi-dimensional preliminary framework for later analysis. Line by line open coding allowed for the distillation of all data into five themes; five themes were later reduced to three main themes of the reported research findings. Since open coding builds directly from the raw data, the process itself ensured the validity of the work (Jong & Jung, 2015). The use of an audit trail assisted in establishing the reliability and validity of the research study. Audit trails represent a validation strategy for documenting thinking processes that clarify understanding over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of an audit trail ensured recorded data accuracy, prevented fraud, and acted to meet recordkeeping requirements.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish confirmability Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested confirmability audit, audit trail, triangulation, and reflexivity. An audit trail is a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to developing and reporting findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Conformability, using an audit trail, allowed for a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to develop and report findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the research, I utilized an audit trail from the collection of raw data, data reduction and analysis, to synthesis and data reporting. Literature control, prolonged engagement
and member checking, and confirmability through triangulation of the date and time of data collection helped protect dependability. Reflexivity or the attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process also occurred during the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Validation of dependability, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), required the utilization of an inquiry audit. Inquiry audits relied upon allowing an outside researcher, one that was not involved in the research process, to examine both the research study’s processes and products, therefore creating an evaluation of the accuracy of findings, interpretations, and conclusions that were supported by the data. I engaged in self-understanding about the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brought to a qualitative study. The writer addressed their current and past experiences with the phenomenon by evaluating the research data with others in the field. Reflexivity is vital because the researcher not only details their experiences with the phenomenon but is also self-conscious about how the experiences may potentially have shaped the findings, the conclusions, and the interpretations drawn in a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Transferability**

Transferability, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail so that one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. A substantial amount of information regarding every aspect of the research is vital to the trustworthiness of the study and included details like the location setting, atmosphere, climate, participants present, attitudes of the participants involved, and reactions observed that might fail to appear on an audio recording (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
Data saturation, purposive sampling, dense description of the study design and methods, and the findings allowed for verification of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is an aspect of qualitative research that refers to the degree to which qualitative research results can transfer to other contexts with other respondents (Bitsch, 2005; Guba, 1981). Transferability is the interpretive equivalent of generalizability, the idea that occurs, according to Bitsch (2005), when the researcher provides a detailed description of the inquiry, ensuring that the participants were selected purposively, allowing for transferability of the inquiry.

**Ethical Considerations**

As it relates to identity, participants’ protection from harm was of the utmost concern during the study. Ethical considerations in qualitative research rely on anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. Anonymity is a stricter form of privacy than confidentiality, as the participant’s identity remains unknown to the researcher; however, this variable is hard to eliminate as all participants will be able to identify me as the researcher. Therefore, anonymity was created through hiding or altering participants’ names to aid in the avoidance of inclusion of identifiable information in the analysis files, and the utilization of pseudonyms aided in the protection of participants and the school district (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confidentiality ensured that any identifying information was not available to or accessed by anyone but me and maintained, excluding identifying information from any reports or published documents. I did not, not shall I, release any names during or after the study, and referencing of subjects as participant one, participant two, and so forth allows for further confidentially during the study. Given that my research relies on minimal numbers of participants, I reported in such a way to eliminate any opportunity for participant identification.
Sessions took place in an area that will be comfortable for the subjects to interact and discuss the research topics. The location was secure and private as the participants’ information was sensitive and personal. Focus group sessions did not occur in open or high traffic areas, which could have discouraged subjects from talking but also caused potential harm to subjects. Data storage and usage will be secured for three years post-publication and then available for return to the participants or destroyed.

Informed consent aided in abiding by the ethical consideration portion of the research. Informed consent ensured that participants were fully aware and informed about the conduction of the research and that the participants understood the purpose of the project. Notifying participants of the research scheme allowed the participants to understand the utilization of the findings and who has access to the findings. The primary purpose of informed consent was to allow the participants to make an informed decision as to whether they would participate in the evaluation or not; thus, I utilized informed consent at the beginning of my study.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to describe secondary teachers’ experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in Atlantic State. The use of multiple data collection methods, a lengthy and rigorous analytic process, and various validities and reliability approaches in the study allowed for a comprehensive investigation of the issue. A social constructivist approach allowed for developing subjective meanings of perceptions created through the interaction of a qualitative study surrounding secondary teachers’ experiences.

The study incorporated interviews, focus groups, and journaling to collect data from secondary educators from three high schools within the district. The study relied upon numerous interviews and focus group questions to ascertain data surrounding one main research question
and two sub-questions regarding mandated grade inflation. Consideration for trustworthiness in the study included credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The research study included measures to ensure ethical considerations for the district and the participants, including the reliance upon participant anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. The investigation’s overall design transformed me as a researcher by allowing me to become an expert on the topic by utilizing the nature and findings of prior research, developing new knowledge, and recognizing the need for future research to extend the subject.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter was to present the results of data analysis surrounding the investigation into this hermeneutic-phenomenological exploration of secondary teachers’ experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in an Atlantic State school district. The chapter introduces the participants of the study, depicts the results of the data analysis, and summarizes the findings. The study results are displayed in order according to the themes generated through the course of data analysis. The chapter concludes by responding to the central research question and the sub-research questions.

Participants

The study included 12 teachers, four from each school, who have earned teaching licensure and have over three years of teaching experience. Cypress (2017) posited that 12 participants would meet the expectations associated with the credibility parameters. Each participant signed a consent form for participant confidentiality protection during interviews, journaling, and focus group participation. The following participant information utilizes pseudonyms for the actual participants.

Bobbie

Bobbie has been teaching in the BMSD for three years and has been teaching cumulatively for nine years. Bobbie is a specialized teacher of record for exceptional children and in her mid-40s. Bobbie is a White woman, has several children who have gone through secondary schools in BMSD, and has a politically liberal take on the educational practices of BMSD. Bobbie has a bachelor’s degree with add-on licensure for exceptional children’s education.
Terri

Terri has been teaching for six years, all at the same high school within BMSD. Terri is a White woman, married with no children, and teaches several upper-level classes, including IB and AP and lower-level classes. In her early 30s, Terri has been subjected to a high percentage of administrator turnover in her school and has a conservative mindset regarding grade inflation. Terri has a bachelor’s degree in her subject with a master’s degree in teaching from a university in Atlantic State.

Chase

Chase is a female teacher with 15 years of total teaching experience, with 11 of those from two secondary schools in the BMSD. Chase is a White woman, married, with adult children who did not attend BMSD schools. Chase worked in the corporate business world before her teaching career and has a conservative educational practice outlook. Chase has a bachelor’s degree in her subject matter and an add-on specialty licensure for specific subject matters.

Michelle

Michelle is a single woman of mixed ethnicity in her mid-50s who has been teaching in BMSD for seven years, teaching stints in two of BMSD’s secondary schools. Michelle has also taught at the college and university level and worked in corporate settings. Michelle has a straightforward approach to teaching real-world applications in class and often verbally communicates her displeasure with mandated grade inflation to other educators in BMSD.

Morgan

Morgan is a late 20s White man who has taught in two school districts before BMSD. Morgan has been teaching for seven years and has no other work experience aside from the field
of education. Morgan’s residency tenure is strictly that of Atlantic State. Although Morgan has taught in other districts, he has limited knowledge of district policies aside from BMSD.

**Randi**

Randi is a married White woman whose partner also works in the BMSD at a secondary school. Randi has a liberal outlook on politics and lifestyle but is ultra-conservative with her educational system beliefs. Randi has a bachelor’s and master’s degree in her content area. Randi has taught for 20 years, is in her early 50s, and has worked in several educational systems outside of the United States. Randi often compares her experiences at BMSD with those outside of the district, state, and country.

**Jeff**

Jeff is a married White man in his early 30s. Jeff has worked in two school districts in Atlantic State, including most recently for eight years at BMSD. Jeff obtained his bachelor’s degree from a state other than Atlantic State; however, Jeff has only taught in Atlantic State school districts. Jeff is a vocal leader in the school, sits on the School Improvement Team (SIT) for his school, and hopes to advance to the administration level in the next two years.

**Mark**

Mark is a 25-year veteran of BMSD. Mark has taught all 25 years at the same secondary school and is one of the most tenured staff. Mark relies on past knowledge and experiences to shape his current views about Board policies. Mark was teaching for the school district before the grade inflation policy mandate. Mark is a married man in his late 40’s, whose two children attended and graduated from the secondary school at which he works. Mark also is a member of the SIT.
Dale

Dale is a lifetime educator with over 20 years of experience in the classroom. Dale has worked for several school districts within Atlantic state, including five years with BMSD, a seven-year absence from BMSD, and is currently back with BSMD for the past three years. Dale is on the curriculum board for the district and serves as a teacher mentor throughout BMSD. Dale is married with children; however, his children did not attend schools in BMSD.

Bill

Bill is a tenured veteran in education, having spent nine years as a college professor and six years as a secondary school instructor, the last three years with BMSD. Bill is a White man in his early 50s and is married to an educator in BMSD. Bill frequently compares and contrasts college and high school grading techniques and frequently voices his opinion about grade inflation to other staff members.

Darrell

Darrell is a married Hispanic man and has children who have graduated high school but did not attend BMSD. Darrell has 20 years of teaching experience, 11 in a mid-western state and nine in Atlantic State. Darrell’s experience in the midwestern state (one that relies heavily on yearlong classes) gives him an alternate viewpoint to many of the participants. Darrell is a contributing member of the SIT and feels very strongly about possibly revamping the current grading system in BMSD.

Richard

Richard is a White man, born and raised in Atlantic State, who has worked as an educator for his entire career. Richard has worked in BMSD for five years and worked for 20 years in a neighboring district. Richard relies on his vast knowledge of administration policies to guide him
in his opinion regarding grade inflation; however, Richard openly admits to comprehending the reasonings behind grade inflation and the justification for discontinuing the practice.

**Results**

The data analysis process general procedures relied upon preparing data for the analyses, reducing the data, engaging in imaginative variation, and uncovering the experience’s essence. Data obtained via structured interviews, journaling, and focus groups allowed for analyzing the material within a six-step procedure outlined by Moustakas (2015). The data analysis results identified three prominent themes from the research and provided foundational scaffolding for the current and future research.

**Data Analysis Steps**

After completing each stage of the interview process and again after completing all data collection stages, transcription and data analyses occurred. Every individual transcript was read multiple times, determining, and highlighting the main points and key concepts. Data analysis occurred after initial interviews and the following each stage of data collection to address and support the research as verified by research conducted by Moustakas (1994). Table 1.1 illustrates Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological reduction. The process was followed intently, and each section was described in detail to ensure proper rigor and validity were evident during the reduction. Participant acknowledgment and verification of individual transcripts and focus group discussion provided triangulation assessment.
Table 1.1

*Moustakas Six-Step Data Analysis System*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| Bracketing            | • Mitigates potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process.  
                        | • Mitigates the possible effects of unacknowledged preconceptions, which aided an increase of rigor to the research.  
                        | • Allows for significantly enriched data collection, findings, and interpretation. |
| Horizon-tization       | • The first step in the analysis is the process of horizontalization, in which specific statements are identified in the transcripts that provide information about the experiences of the participants.  
                        | • These significant statements are simply gleaned from the transcripts and provided in a table so that a reader can identify the range of perspectives about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). |
| Delimited Horizons or Meaning | • Horizons that stand out as invariant qualities of the experience.  
                             | • Returning recursively to the documents and the themes, those themes that could not be delimited through the process of horizontalization were clustered into existing themes. |
| Invariant Qualities and Themes | • Clustering nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping constituents into themes; invariant qualities or essence is extracted from the data of those lived experiences |
| Individual Textural Descriptions | • An integration, descriptively, of the invariant textural constituents and themes of each research participant that allows for the development of descriptive integrations. |
| Composite Textural Description | • An integration of all the individual textural descriptions into a group or universal textural descriptions representing the group as a whole |

**Bracketing**

Recognition of mitigation of the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process occurred regarding my preconceived knowledge of the phenomenon. The bracketing utilization allowed me to listen, record, and analyze the participants’ descriptions in an open and investigative manner. The use of bracketing mitigated the possible effects of unacknowledged preconceptions, which helped increase the rigor of the
research. Bracketing allowed for more significantly enriched data collection, findings, and interpretations as self-awareness was maintained throughout the research project. Utilization of memoing throughout the data collection process aided in the examining and reflection of my engagement with the data. Bracketing supported the iterative qualitative research process when data collection brought about the need for subsequent additional questions to be pursued during the interview process. Careful and thoughtful bracketing promoted deeper engagement with the material and increased reflexivity during the data analysis stage or the research.

**Data Reduction**

Horizontalization was the following process utilized in the data analysis stage of the research. All data were treated equally, with no quote or excerpt defined as more valid or important than another. The horizontalization process promoted preliminary coding and grouping; listing every quote relevant to the phenomena during the investigation, removing repetitive statements, and grouping similar statement types was possible. After cleaning the data, the remaining parts of the data, or horizons, the textural meanings, or constituent parts of the phenomenon, were identified.

Identification of horizon statements as non-repetitive, non-overlapping significant statements, and are in no order or grouping. Moustakas (1994, p. 95) describes the horizon as “the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinct character.” Analyzation of each horizon and its textural qualities allowed for identifying the experiences comprehensible through self-awareness and reflection. Every significant statement demonstrates to possess equal value; this next step was to delete those statements irrelevant to the topic and others that repeated or overlapped. The remaining statements identified as the horizons or textural meaning were then
examined to identified significant statements allowing for clustering statements into themes or meaning units (Moustakas, 1994).

Once horizons were established, implementing the next steps in Moustakas’ data analysis occurred, including delimiting horizons and clustering consistent qualities and themes. The reduction of experiences to the invariant constituents allowed for clustering horizons into themes; therefore, the grouping of horizons that stood out as consistent qualities of the experience allowed for the creation of themes. Returning recursively to the documents and the themes, those themes that could not be delimited through the process of horizontalization were clustered into existing themes—splitting the translated data independently so that each of the themes has only one meaning—this step of the phenomenological reduction allowed grouping of the remaining data into the existing themes.

Utilizing Moustakas’s fifth step of data analysis and reduction, I was able to identify individual textural descriptions of the invariant textural constituents and themes of each research participant, which allowed for the development of descriptive integrations. The textural descriptions allowed for the explanation of the participants’ perceptions of a phenomenon. At this stage of data analysis, I utilized verbatim excerpts of participants’ experiences to describe the phenomenon, which allowed for a narrative form of analysis to facilitate the understanding of the participants’ experiences.

**Theme Development**

The final step in applying the data analysis relied on Moustakas’ sixth step of composite textural description, integrating individual textural descriptions into thematic categories. Composite textural description allowed for representation of data to the group as a whole and allowed for the segmenting of the data analysis into three main themes. The three main themes
that appeared during the data analysis and reduction process, identifying two initially outlying themes, and considered during the process, later became diluted into the three focused themes.

**Theme One – Inflated School Success**

The primary emerging theme from data analysis surrounding secondary teacher’s perception of mandated grade inflation in Atlantic State focused on the belief that the grade inflation policy created an inflated sense of secondary school success in the community’s view, as defined by grades reported on state-regulated report cards. This belief contrasts with the policy’s original intent, the increase in student motivation and achievement, as initially written. Summarization of the underlying belief was evident in several of the personal interview transcripts, including one interview transcription of Terri that stated:

> It [grade inflation] is because of the district’s report card. Right, they want that report card to look good. They [the district], instead of saying, okay, we had a horrible report card. What can we do to make things better? Now let’s just pass everybody.

Summarizing the theme also occurred in the journal entry and focus group analysis of data, when Chase also stated, “that the school district is trying to improve upon their overall data on certain school report card data that they put out to the general public.” Many of the textural themes fell into this primary category, as demonstrated by incorporating the individual textural description. The overall primary theme, secondary school reputation, or perceived success reported by state report cards as the primary driving force for district implementation was prominent throughout a vast majority of interviews, journal entries and heavily verified during focus group interaction.

Darrell stated that an idealized perception of the secondary school is an integral part of community success both by reputation and economically. Darrell suggested that the community
looks at BMSD as a focal point for selling the community to investors and families, “we want to have good schools, that’s one of those things that bring people in and that brings businesses to the community, we have to have that good report for, you know, for the success of everyone.” Darrell goes on to suggest that there is a possibility that social media and websites also contribute to the influencing of perceived secondary school success for community upkeep, “all these different websites you know for buying houses list, you know, the grades of the district. So, we got to have that good report, and this [grade inflation] is one way of doing it.”

Mark reemphasized the idea that the intent of grade inflation was merely to bolster secondary school perception in the community. Mark mentioned the importance of the school report card at the administration level and how graduation rates and community perception override the belief that grade inflation is to aid the student in content mastery:

The school report card creates pressure on schools to meet goals that, while on the surface, seem to be deceptive indicators of student achievement. For example, they place a large emphasis on high school graduation rates. Now while that statistic could indicate student achievement, it could also indicate grade inflation. There is no real proficiency level tied to the graduation rate. I refuse to consider a state or district-written exam with a massive curve to be an accurate measure of student proficiency. Getting students to earn a high school diploma is the hard part; it is far easier just to pass them through, give them the diploma, and then boast of our improved graduation rate. -And I can’t tell you how many times or for how many years I’ve heard administrators boast of that.

The idea of community perception regarding secondary success is reinforced through the journal and focus group excerpts of Darrell and Morgan. Darrell suggested that societal perceptions of school success may be skewed, “I think we’re doing society a disservice by doing
that [grade inflation], the whole idea of education is to make informed citizens if we’re pushing them out. We’re not giving society any informed citizens.” The belief that student preparedness is not the primary concern comes at the cost of district and administrator levels of policy perception and regulation. Morgan expounded upon this idea in the journal entry portion of the research, suggesting that, “policies mandating grade inflation often spur [sic] from attempting to help cohort graduation rates. Schools and districts are held accountable for this metric, which drives them to create and enact policies and procedures that can help them best meet this metric.” The belief that inciting state policies allow district administrators to achieve the state’s desired results but often overlooks the policy’s original intent is perhaps one of its costs.

Richard insisted that community perception of secondary school success was paramount to student achievement for the district grade inflation policy. Richard suggested that schools are not only competing for community support, but schools are competing against other schools, including private schools, for student enrollment and the financial benefits associated with student enrollment and student achievement. According to Richard, “it’d be that some districts feel more competition from private schools, from other schools, locally public schools and so they feel the need to do what they can to help set themselves apart. That [creates] competition.”

Mark also supported the belief of school competition within a community, illustrating the driving force behind the schools are financial obligations and not so much student success:

Well, we’re competing for the best students, which then helps our school report card, but we’re all [competing] also for the resources and the money that comes with having higher enrollment. Money, money is the keyword.

The district’s original intent, allowing students who are mathematically eliminated from passing the semester at the midpoint a chance to succeed, suggests mandating the policy for all
students. However, district policy does not always apply to students enrolled in AP or upper-level classes. Focus group conversation allowed for the participants to share the beliefs concerning the reasoning as to why not all students, who have below a 50 at the midterm of the semester, are subject to benefit from grade inflation. Mark stated, and several others agreed that the reasoning behind limiting grade inflation policies in upper-level courses stems from the extra GPA weight assigned to upper-level courses. According to Mark, “I think the biggest [reason], at least my personal opinion, it’s because we’re not giving it [inflation] to those levels, due to the fact that we’re giving the honors kid, extra half weighted point, and the AP kids a full letter point towards their cumulative GPA.”

Darrell, however, disagreed with Mark’s statement and brought forth a counterpoint, which summarized that the reasoning behind grade inflation occurring at the College Prep level classes (CP) is based solely on the foundation that students who are in upper-level classes are less likely to fail the course. Darrell explained that “No, it’s just because those classes [upper level] have less failures. Because if they’re already in those classes, AP or IB, they’re going to have fewer failures.” Darrell goes on to discuss that the reasoning behind inflation in CP classes is the staggering rate of failures in the lower-level classes, and he believes that the district-mandated grade inflation at lower-level classes aids in secondary school graduation rates by reducing the number of failures, consequently, increasing the perception of secondary school success. Darrell surmised that grade inflation occurs, “in the CP classes because that’s where we have the most failures.” Richard and Dale concurred with Darrell, stating that if a student is failing an upper-level course at the midpoint of the semester, the student relocates into a CP course that does not receive a boost in GPA for the remainder of the semester and is likely to gain the bonus of receiving an inflated grade of 50 when relocated to the CP.
Morgan expanded on this issue by relating to the intrinsic verse extrinsic motivation associated with most students in an upper-level versus CP class. Focus group discussion led Morgan to state:

I think another thing that you’re battling is, is the intrinsic versus extrinsic. Most of the kids that are taking your CP classes, they’re more on the entrance of the extrinsic side. Whereas your kids that are in your honors in your AP, it’s built into them that they want to get an A, or they want to get a B. I mean, I’ve had students in my honors classes that are worried that they got a 95 instead of a 97. You don’t see that with the CP students.

**Theme Two – Lack of Content Mastery**

Horizontalization and delimited horizon data analysis confirmed uncovering of a secondary theme during data analysis. The secondary theme presented during the data analysis concerned a lack of student content mastery resulting from grade inflation. Jeff summarized the second theme in a journal entry and reinforced the belief throughout the interview process:

Because they [students] didn’t actually master the content, they [secondary schools] pass them along. And now you, you’ve really created a larger gap that we have a harder time closing because we have not instilled the correct curriculum into these students.

Chase also conceptualized the second theme surrounding teacher and school efficacy as stated during a focus group session, “because how I look at it is, it is trying to put a Band-Aid on two major issues apathy and the fact that there are so many students who reach us here who are not prepared for the academic rigor.”

Students not being prepared for high schools’ academic rigor, even in junior and senior-level classes, may stem from lower grade level promotion, creating a chained scale of failing. Terri stated that not only are the students ill-prepared and passed along without content mastery
or even basic skills needed for grade promotion but do so because of administrators and districts attempting to pad the stats of graduation rates and perceived secondary school success. In the opinion of Terri:

I mean, it seems like students are the franchise. And then with the education system already…I mean, I have juniors and seniors that can barely read. I mean, you’ve been unjust in a way; beyond when you got into high [school], [even in] elementary, and middle, no kids fail. But as a result, if you look at the failure rates, they would be catastrophic. The schools are financially incentivized to have those pass rates and have those graduation rates. And as a result, it’s everyone, you know, cooking the books to make it appear a certain way. And you have substandard graduates and grades, you know, BS grades, essentially. Meanwhile, administrators are getting the money, in the funding or hope for funding, based on the numbers.

Mark exemplified the belief that content mastery was of secondary concern regarding district policy to inflate student grades. Mark expanded on this belief through his journal entry, stating that:

They [the district] don’t seem to appreciate the level of apathy that has contributed to, say, a 38-quarter average if they believe that giving -and there’s no word other than “giving” for what we’re doing - a student a 50 instead will help him/her turn it around during the next quarter.

Mark goes on to describe the issue, as not only through the implementation of a 50 at the midpoint of the semester as an issue, but grade inflation also occurred in the last several years in BMSD, stating that:
Grade inflation here, by the way, is not just the mandated 50 for the semester’s first grading period or the watering down of upper-level courses. Since I’ve been teaching, we’ve also gone from a seven-point grading scale to a ten-point scale. Whereas a 70 used to be the lowest passing grade possible, it’s now a 60. Not surprisingly, the year after we implemented that change, we celebrated our amazing improvement in our graduation rates, of course declining to acknowledge that we were now passing students whose final course averages just one year earlier would not have been even close to passing.

Morgan reiterated the beliefs that student content mastery is not the primary goal of the policy, stating that “grade inflation nullifies the need for students to master content because it basically prevents students from failing or, more importantly, productively struggling to grow; likewise, it perpetuates a mindset where learning does not matter.” Morgan was unable to clearly define the district’s reasoning for the policy grading inflation but surmises the district’s belief must do whatever is necessary to maintain prominent standing in the community regarding secondary school success and promotes the idea that content mastery is not the underlying driving force for the policy. “I think grade inflation attempts to circumvent a glaring problem schools face—that students often reach high school with significant, insurmountable learning deficits,” stated Morgan.

Jeff and Bobbie delved further into the reasoning behind grade inflation goals per district policy, reasoning that students are aware of the policy and often utilize it to their advantage. Bobbie recalled that:

Because it’s [grade inflation], you rely on the crutch. And then it’s a learned; it’s a learned process. So, then the following semester, they [students] do the same thing because they know they can, they can do no work, and still benefit from receiving a 50.
Chase reiterated the idea and expanded on the notion of the circumvention of student mastery of content.

It’s like what everyone’s saying. We’re building crutches and, you know, we’re trying to utilize this grade inflation as the motivational, you know, focal point, however, as we’ve seen, or most of us have seen, is, you know, by giving them the 50, we’re not seeing in the next semester that these kids are working to get to a B or an A, or somewhere around there. So, you’re not really driving that overall kind of desire to improve their overall grade with the bumping up to 50.

Another factor surrounding content mastery and teacher efficacy is the misrepresentation of students’ success, as demonstrated on high school transcripts. The misexpression of actual grades, those that have been inflated in the first half of the semester, averaged with the grade other student earned during the second nine weeks of the semester are, by all accounts, a falsified grade that is posted on a legal, educational document. There are no asterisks or footnotes on the transcript to represent that a student’s grades had been altered for the first half of the semester to increase their chances of performing well and passing the class. Several participants, an overwhelming majority of those interviewed, mentioned this in both the interview and journal process. Transcript misrepresentation was also briefly discussed during a focus group conversation, as Bobbie and Michelle concurred that the grade on the transcript was “faulty” and “inaccurate.”

Jeff discussed in a journal entry the belief that student achievement is indeed a misrepresentation due to grade inflation. Jeff expressed that with mandated grade inflation, it is difficult to define the accurate perception of student achievement:
What I mean by this is, since students receive a 50% during the first quarter of the class, we are unable at the end of the course to determine what the student successfully achieved within the classroom. We have created a new scale of student achievement and success within the classroom.

Chase verified the beliefs of other participants surrounding content mastery misrepresentation and creating a new scale of student achievement as discussed in journal entries and other participants’ interviews. Chase described the systematic inflation of grades as an issue that influences, “our society as a whole has put pressure on schools to promote students as early as elementary [school] socially. This puts students at a disadvantage because they are missing the foundation needed to continue their learning.”

Bill summarized that student content master and teacher efficacy are under scrutiny by secondary teachers who are mandated to change mid-semester grades. Simply put, Bill stated that teachers are giving the students a grade without earning the grade, therefore ultimately devaluing the worth of the grade and the worth of the effort put forth by a student who tries to succeed, turn in the work, and still only manage to earn a 50 at the mid-semester:

Well, basically, you’re giving them sort of a free pass for the first nine weeks. That’s the way I look at it. Because, you know, if you give them a 50, I mean, I actually have some students that turn in work and actually earn a 50. Then there are other students that are getting that 50, and they haven’t done anything.

During a focus group session, Mark expressed concern that perhaps content mastery has been subjected to grade inflation before the district mandate. The district mandate is just a verifiable section of concrete evidence to support or justify the grade inflation that occurred over the past several decades. Mark explained:
It’s definitely been proven that there’s more A’s given in the last 20 years than there were, you know, 40 years ago. That’s a fact. And, you know, the content mastery is not the same as it was 20 years ago, for the same grade equivalency. That’s the great point. So, do you think that forces our community or parents or colleges outside of the ‘BMSD community’ to understand that we are bumping these students up to 50 for the midterm? Do you think the community knows that? Do you think parents know that? Do you think colleges know that? Oh, yeah, they know.

**Theme Three – Inadequate Life Preparation**

Secondary school grade inflation impacts students beyond the classroom setting and influences student success post-graduation is the third emergent theme uncovered by data analysis. Students subjected to the policy of mandated grade inflation are often ill-prepared for schooling at the next level, especially at the college or university level, and may have a difficult time adjusting or succeeding in a workplace environment that does not utilize adjusted procedures for employees failing to meet the requirements of the position. Terri summarized the theme of student maladjustments after secondary schools adjust the grade to manipulate the standards by stating:

> When they [students] go into the real world, they don’t have that same safety net [that], people are financially incentivized to make sure you don’t fail. In the real world, that doesn’t happen. You’re gonna get fired; you’re gonna get fired, you’re gonna, you know, fail out of community college, and fail out of university. Because it’s not the same standards are in place.

Michelle agreed that student success post-high school was a concern of students whose grade inflation adjustments might have allowed the student who may not have earned the credits
for graduation to, in fact, graduate. Michelle addressed the issue by merely maintaining that
“grades are bullshit. Just a letter next to a name that says I did something,” but in her words, if
we keep adjusting the grades, then eventually, “you know, at some point in time, it’s [grade
inflation] just gonna come, well it already is in society, it’s going to come back and bite us in the
ass because we’re just pushing through unprepared bodies.”

High school teachers in Atlantic State also perceive that employment success is
predetermined by patterns of apathy in students accustomed to and reliant upon grade inflation
practices in secondary schools. Grade inflation reinforces the safety net for high school students;
however, college, university, and employment opportunities are not subject to the same style
safety net. The lack of mid-semester grade increases at the college or university level or the lack
of a safety net regarding employment readiness skills is a significant component discussed by
Michelle, who suggested that “knowing that grade inflation exists in my district, I remain
unconvinced that our graduates are entering post-secondary institutions with a substantial enough
foundation to secure their success in their first year of college.” Preparedness for life after high
school may be a challenge for students who were recipients of grade inflation practices, as an
unstable sense of security has been provided throughout their high school career.

Bill reaffirmed the idea that teachers may be doing a disservice to the students through
unwarranted grade increases, stating during the interview that, “from a moral standpoint, you’re
not doing these kids any favor for what they’re going to run into when they get into the real
world if you’re continuing to pass them on. The real world is not very forgiving.” Several of the
interviews, focus group discussions, and journal entries addressed morality and legality issues.
The participants were adamant in verifying concerns surrounding legality or morality; the district
administration’s underlying motivation was not for the student’s betterment, and in fact,
acknowledged that the students’ best interest post-high school was not the primary concern of the district.

During a focus group conversation, Randi revisited the ideas of students relying on the mid-semester grade policy as a tool that can, in her words, “be exploited.” Acknowledging that students will be ill-prepared for the next level of their educational journey or the transition to the workplace, Randi stated that:

If you have kids that are getting this [grade inflation] while they’re in high school, and then they’re going to graduate and either go off to college or go into the workplace, they’re not going to have any of these crutches in those places. And they, when they do encounter it, it’s even more of a shock to them.

Data reduction and analysis of interviews focus groups, and journal entries provided evidence which expands upon the idea that the overall perception that theme three encompasses, the belief that the district policy is not aiding students, but more so hindered by the policy and that the policy is setting students up for failure. Jeff and Richard agreed that providing a loophole for grading, such as mandated 50s, does not adequately prepare students for life outside of the high school classroom. Richard expressed concern to Jeff’s comments during a focus group session regarding post-secondary readiness of students:

Well, you did make a good point, and if you go to work, they’re not gonna pay you if you don’t do all the work. If you don’t come to work, you’re not going to get paid. And so, you’re not getting it. And we kind of gave a loophole to some students, and there’s probably a real hard lesson being learned now.

Bill reinforced the concept regarding students being maladjusted as a preconditioned effect of grade inflation. Bill, relying on past experiences and contact with those working as
educators at the university level, described the maladjustment of first-year students entering college for the first semester:

    Well, I’ve got some friends that are involved in the college side of things. And some of them are professors in engineering and in chemistry, and they tell me that these kids are coming up [to the college level], and they’re like, we’re having to give them remedial reading classes. You know, and their motivation can, can get crushed really quick.

Dale reiterated the point, “but, you know, I was talking with a teacher yesterday, and we were both like, we’ve got kids in our physical science and our science classes that are reading on a third-grade level. We were talking about how do we, how do we combat that?”

    Chase reverted to prior conversations by again mentioning that grade inflation is not just at the secondary level but is enforced through district policy, perhaps just more pronounced at the secondary level. Chase expressed concern:

        And I know for sure that the middle schools [passing rates] are based on principal discretion; if a student fails their sixth grade, they can pass them on to seven [th]. And if they fail, seventh, they can pass them on to eighth, so on and so forth. And they’re just continuing to pass these kids on. So, it is starting at the lower grade levels that we’re not, you know, teaching the kids the fundamentals that they need to be successful at the higher level of their educational ventures.

        Bobbie concurred, illustrating that the issue may start even earlier than the middle or high school level. Bobbie suggests that the practice of passing students to the next level, regardless of content mastery, may begin at the elementary level; thus, creating a downward spiral for the student who cannot comprehend the foundational aspects of the curriculum. Bobbie stated:
Yeah, I've taught elementary school; the policy is, you can hold a student back to repeat a grade only once during their elementary school career, and I guess the thinking is, we don’t want a 15-year-old, you know, sixth-grader.

Morgan reaffirmed Bobbie’s statements by suggesting that the act of grade inflation occurs at all levels of K-12 education, but it is most easily recognizable at the high school level. The rationale that the inflation is more significant or more recognizable at the high school level relies upon graduation rate statistics and school report cards, emphasizing financial obligations related to school enrollment at the secondary level.

**Primary Research Question Response**

The research question responses articulate the underlying themes manifested through data analysis, code discovery, and theme inference. Theme induction allowed addressing the primary research question, what are secondary teacher experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation policies in Atlantic State, utilizing all three themes’ components.

Theme one revealed a clear set of beliefs concerning secondary teacher experiences with grade inflation; a set of beliefs centered on the misuse of the grade inflation policy as a crutch for secondary school perceptions of success and not for the original intent of student success. Teacher experiences with mandatory grade inflation relied heavily on the beliefs assimilated in the themes presented from the research. Overall, teachers feel as though the practice of inflation does not justify the means of the action. The perception uncovered during data analysis demonstrates that teacher’s perception of grade inflation creates an inflated sense of secondary school success in the community’s view as defined by grades reported on state-regulated report cards and not for the original intent, the increase in student motivation and achievement.
Theme one presented several viable points of contention for the reasoning surrounding the district mandate, mainly that the school perception in the community is priority number one as it ties directly to community success and secondary school funding. State report cards give value to secondary schools’ perception of success. Real estate and home values tie into the school district’s perceived success as reported on school report cards. The enticement of the community for those seeking to relocate from other states or districts emphasizes high school reputation perception. Mark, during a focus group discussion, suggested competition amongst schools and districts was of significant concern:

So that brings me to a point. Do you think it’s equitable? It’s not the word, but do you think it’s unequal that some districts do it and some districts do not [inflate grades]? Colleges are competing for the same students after high school. It’s apples and oranges, right. I’m in the school acceptance committee looking at class rank, and they don’t realize that this kid was boosted and this one wasn’t?

Darrell reiterated the issue of competition. Darrell mentioned that the top ten percent of the student body could go to a state university tuition-free in some states. Darrell illustrated the point in a focus group discussion:

So, in Faraway State, if you’re graduating from the top 10% of your class, you are automatically accepted into any State University. Free. Yes, that class rank means a lot there. And if I’m going head-to-head with a district that doesn’t do it [grade inflation], then there’s quite the difference. So, considering that and some of the other things, what are the long-term effects of student grade inflation at the high school level?

Graduation metrics as a judgment for success have several critical flaws, including one central point, school report cards may not accurately reflect school achievement. Student mastery
of content and graduation rates are often an inaccurate representation driven by financial motives to justify the grade inflation. Monetary incentives motivate school district administrators when they meet or exceed the growth of student success and cohort graduation rates; therefore, funding from the state and federal level links secondary school successes with concern for graduation rates and GPAs. Therefore, it seems viable that the school and district administrators would advocate grade inflation to aid in the continued financial support of the high school in the district that meets the requirements for the parameters of growth and success. Financial gains are not measured in district and state funding but are evident when addressing student enrollment numbers and federal aid or grants for student enrollment.

Regardless of student success, enrollment plays an integral part in the perception of secondary school success and secondary school financing; the more students enrolled in the school, the more funding the school receives from the state. Teachers are aware of this conundrum, and several spoke to the issue, relying on their past experiences to guide their current beliefs. According to Darrell:

There’s a price tag associated with, there’s a number, a monetary figure, that goes right along with enrollments. Grade inflation keeps students in the marginal area of pass/fail, allowing the school district to aid in keeping the student enrolled and on track to graduate, even if the student does not meet the requirements set forth by the state; hence a grade of a 0 is raised to a grade of 50 after the first nine-week period of the semester. This action allows high schools to maintain failing students on their books for enrollment purposes in hopes that the student can manage to pass the second nine-week period of the semester.
Richard stated what was congruent throughout every interview and journal entry, the overall reasoning behind grade inflation at the secondary level is improving community perception of secondary school. Richard summarized the belief of the group:

I think part of it is perception. I’m not a negative, Nelly. But I do think for the graduation rates and high school; I think we do what we can do, but we kind of pad those numbers. And it’s a perception that we’re conveying to the community, based on how many we have to graduate. And at some point, we need to step back and say, What’s the meaning of this certificate? What’s the meaning of the diploma? The education?

**Secondary Research Question Responses**

Responses to the sub-questions, what are secondary teacher perceptions of the effects of inflation mandates on perceptions of teacher and school efficacy in Atlantic State and, what are secondary teachers’ perceptions about the effects of mandatory grade inflation on student preparedness and content mastery, relied primarily on themes two and three. Themes two and three addressed the lack of student content mastery resulting from grade inflation and tied directly into theme three, that grade inflation in secondary schools impacts students beyond the classroom setting and influences student success post-graduation. Theme two data addressed the lack of student content mastery and teacher efficacy because of grade inflation. Students who would typically fail a class now pass, and graduate and student content mastery are secondary to graduation rate. Teacher efficacy is not able to properly be determined or measured because of grade inflation and students gifted a grade or teachers giving a grade to a student does not reflect effort or mastery, and the compromising of academic rigor creates a domino effect that is unjust in student progression to the next level earlier than high school.
Secondary school grade inflation impacts students beyond the classroom setting and influences student success post-graduation. The grade inflation system often skews post-secondary school success, which relates to employment success or failure as predetermined by inflation patterns. Preconditioning may influence maladjusted students to the effects of grade inflation, and often there is an unstable sense of security. After graduation, the lack of a safety net places stresses on colleges, universities, and workforce employers who are unaware of the societal disservice as the community’s citizens are misinformed. Morgan validated what others in the focus group mentioned:

High schools are basically the place where it’s like the reality check finally, just hit. Where they have been moved on because I have kids who sit in my math classes who have never passed a single EOG, who have never passed a single math class. But, yet now, we are held accountable for them. High schools are being forced to deal with what they cannot fix because grade inflation is simply a band-aid to a problem that began early, early on. But high schools don’t have a choice but to do what they can to fix that graduation rate. Because exactly like what’s been said, it’s our accountability, our money, how many teachers we can potentially have, all of those things that are tied up in that situation.

Participants’ journal entries and interviews accurately reflected the belief that grade inflation provides a crutch for high school students. Focus group discussion also reinforced the belief. Chase suggested that the act of grade inflation not only diminishes motivation but also creates a gap in the student work ethic that translates into failures after high school:

I’d say overall, just overall work ethic. I mean, the biggest thing when we’re talking about throwing out the word crutch, I mean, if you’re continually utilizing Band-aids,
we’re kind of diminishing the idea of work ethic beyond high school [especially] if it’s at the academic level of colleges, or military or even into the workforce.

The belief that participants appreciate and understand the value of work ethic after high school allows for concern during a high school student’s tenure at the school. Jeff summarized several components regarding the relationship between grade inflation in high school transitioning to work ethic and success after graduation:

I believe it’s doing a disservice to the students, especially for their future growth and future job performances. You know, really kind of instilling a lower-end work ethic for future endeavors, depending on where they go within their life path. I’m a big proponent that what you’re able to instill in these young adults in the four years of their high school experience will then allow them to transition those work ethics being held to the standards that we see outside in the university settings, outside into the job settings, that you have to work and grow as an individual continually.

The data collection and data analysis conclusion proved relevant to the study’s main research question and the study’s secondary research questions. Participants demonstrated varying degrees of disdain for the policy, with inherently similar beliefs about why the district institutes the policy. No matter the district’s precognizant reasoning for grade inflation, the participants’ consensus demonstrated that the policy was not in the student’s best interest for one reason or another. Perhaps Mark said it best, and it brought a long pause to the discussion group when he simply said, “I’ve just decided to answer that last question you asked. I mean, just a quick summary, I would say long-term grade inflation has done more harm than good. We’ve hurt more students overall than we’ve helped.”
Summary

The data analysis results surrounding secondary teachers’ experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in an Atlantic State school district uncovered three main themes. The primary emerging theme from data analysis was the perception that the grade inflation policy intends to create an inflated sense of secondary school success in the view of the community instead of increasing student motivation and achievement. Two other themes, grade inflation creates a misrepresentation of student content mastery and teacher efficacy, and grade inflation in secondary schools negatively influences students after secondary school were also revealed. These themes, along with data centering around the participants of the study, aided in generating answers to the research question and secondary research questions. The study results, arranged according to themes, allowed participants’ detailed descriptions to support the findings.

Participant interviews, journal entries, and focus group discussions provided data commiserate with the investigation surrounding the central research question, what are secondary teacher experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation policies in Atlantic State. The study results demonstrate that teacher perceptions of secondary school grade inflation do not benefit the student as the initial policy suggested, but in fact, the practice is detrimental to student success before, during, and after high school.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe secondary school teachers’ experiences with mandated grade inflation in an Atlantic State. This chapter includes an overview, a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, and the implications. I considered the relevant literature and theory in interpreting the implications of the study. Chapter five contains the delimitations and limitations, and as the culmination of the study, the chapter includes recommendations for future research and a summary of the study.

Summary of Findings

The findings addressed the central research question: What are secondary teacher experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation policies and secondary school success while addressing district reasoning regarding the effects of mandatory grade inflation as it pertains to student preparedness and content mastery? The findings also addressed the secondary research questions and allowed for the development of three themes. The three themes that emerged from the data contributed to answering the research questions. Secondary teachers’ perceptions of student grade inflation were that the mandatory grade inflation policy does not accurately help achieve the policy's initial rationale.

The themes reflect the teachers’ experiences with grade inflation. The initial rationale for implementing a grade inflation policy was to enhance students’ intrinsic motivation to succeed in the classroom; therefore, driving the student to better performance. A student who fails to reach a passing grade after the first half of the semester is granted a grade of 50%, thus facilitating the student’s attempt at passing classes to stay on track for graduation by increasing the mid-semester grade to one that, when averaged with the remainder of the semester grades, provide the
student a mathematical possibility for passing the class at the end of the semester. The chance for the student to succeed theoretically increases the intrinsic motivation of failing students and potentially limits tendencies toward academic disciplinary classroom distractions, which contributes to the teachers’ ability to optimize classroom management for instructional delivery.

However, according to the findings, teachers felt as though the practice of grade inflation did not facilitate student success, most specifically student learning. Reflecting upon Silverman’s (1994) three levels of salience, interreacting within Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1986) suggested that a teacher's sense of responsibility impacted their judgments of efficacy and their endorsement of practices, such as mandatory grade inflation. However, teacher perceptions regarding efficacy and endorsement of practices, as tied to the endorsement of grade inflation, was not as prevalent during data collection and analysis as perceptions regarding community views of secondary school success and student content mastery. Teacher perceptions of granting students a gifted 50% at the midpoint, especially to students who are indifferent towards learning or mastering any portion of the course objectives, undermined the grades given to students who legitimately attempt to complete the course material. Students failing to attempt any of the required instructional coursework and learn the goals and objectives of the courses were rewarded for their impassivity. Moreover, students who struggle for other reasons than apathy, indifference, or disinterest, such as those with developmental learning disabilities or language barriers, may fall above the 50% threshold but below the passing mark of 60 and not benefit from grade inflation. The overall outcomes from the study suggest that teachers have a negative opinion of the grade inflation policy; teachers perceive the policy creates an inflated sense of secondary school success for the community. As found in this study, teachers believe that the actual reason for the grade inflation policy is to obtain funding at the district level through an
artificially enhanced sense of success for secondary schools within the community based on teacher efficacy, cohort graduation rates, and perceived student achievement.

**Discussion**

**Empirical Literature Discussion**

The findings from the literature show the importance of grades as an assessment tool for student achievement and academic success. The results of this study corroborated previous research by Pattison et al. (2013), who found that grades are the virtual currency of the educational system, and grade inflation compromises the value of grades. Thus, student grade inflation at the secondary levels poses a threat to the validity of the educational system and inaccurately represents student and secondary school success.

The policy’s original intent was to increase student motivation in the classroom at the midpoint of the semester, enable students to master the content of the subject matter, improve their grades to passing, and offering teachers an opportunity to promote these students to the next level. Christensen et al. (2011) suggested that a student’s intrinsic motivation is a primary catalyst for student success and that failing grades can dampen a student’s motivation to learn, consequently leading to student disengagement. If students’ grades at the midpoint of the semester mathematically eliminate them from earning a passing grade, these students might withdraw from the learning environment and continue to fail. Sometimes these students create classroom management issues for the other students in the class. Therefore, under the grade inflation policy, teachers adjust grades upward to counteract the potential dampening of students’ motivation. The policy mandates that teachers adjust students’ grades below 50% up to 50% for the first nine weeks of the semester. The inflation practice could create a negative ripple effect of inaccurately perceived success for the remainder of the student’s educational career. This study
aligned with previous results suggesting intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are the key to a students’ success in the classroom (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018). However, the research results demonstrate that the policy’s original intent, student motivation, was not the clearly defined denominator of the policy. Grade inflation policy in Atlantic State, Policy AR 5124, in theory, supports student motivation throughout the semester. According to the study’s results, teacher perceptions of the policy showed that the policy’s result was not the intended effect. The participants insisted that the policy is a tool used by the district to enhance community perception of secondary schools.

Researchers (Chowdhury, 2018; Goldman, 1985; Nata et al., 2014) have addressed issues and concerns with student grade inflation but have failed to comprehensively discuss teacher perceptions concerning the mandating of grade inflation policies. The results of this study were consistent with the conclusion that researchers have failed to recognize the outcomes of grade inflation, e.g., the creation of the community’s overestimation of secondary school success as defined by grades reported on state-regulated report cards. As summarized by McLean (2018), Rauschenberg (2014), and Torraco and Hamilton (2013), some researchers have addressed the beliefs and reasoning underlying the intent of grade inflation, but the results failed to include insights into secondary teachers’ experiences with the policy.

The most notable difference in the results of this study compared with other studies was that the previous results failed to capture secondary teachers’ beliefs concerning school district report cards as essential measurement tools of school achievement. This study demonstrated that secondary teachers perceive the use of grade inflation at the high school level creates an inaccurate representation of student performance leading to unfounded secondary school success perceptions by the community. The available evidence does not include assessments of teachers’
lived experiences with grade inflation and perceptions of the policy. Furthermore, researchers have not adequately addressed an underlying dynamic; states and districts financially incentivize schools to achieve expected student promotion rates and cohort graduation by linking federal and state funding to graduation and student success (DPI, 2019).

Theoretical Literature Discussion

Rojstaczer and Healy (2012) found that nationally, A’s represent 43% of all letter grades while D’s and F’s represent less than 10% of all letter grades. Secondary schools, including those of Atlantic State, grade more harshly than those in other regions of the United States as demonstrated in student GPAs, implementation of 10-point grading scales, and lack of a letter grade plus or minus system for GPA calculation (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012; DPI, 2021). Therefore, secondary schools competing for student enrollment and funds may utilize grade inflation to equalize the variances among secondary schools (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015). The current study supported existing research by demonstrating that secondary schools compete for enrollment and funding by reporting overrated student achievement in the forms of higher GPAs and cohort graduation rates on state report cards. O’Shaughnessy (2013) found that less than a quarter of high school students entering college are ready for the next level of instruction. The current study reinforced O’Shaughnessy’s (2013) findings using teacher perception of student achievement and promotion. The current study contributed to the literature by garnering insight into the teacher perceptions of mandatory grade inflation and diverges from the current literature as few studies contain evidence of experiences of those implementing the policy.
Through a review of the literature and theory, the researcher found evidence to support fundamental issues regarding grade inflation at the secondary level and addressed concerns derived from theory regarding the ramifications of the policy. However, gaps exist in the literature and theories about teacher experiences with the policy. The absence of proper research exposed a need to conduct a study on secondary teachers’ experiences with mandated grade adjustment and build an adequate explanation of the emerging issues.

**Implications**

This section includes the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. Implications suggest that using a mandated grade inflation policy at the secondary level creates issues for those who are impacted by the mandate, such as parents, teachers, students, and the community. In this section, the discussion encompasses policy, practice, theory, and future research with specific recommendations for various stakeholders, such as policymakers and administrators. The research implications are critical to pinpoint issues surrounding the grade inflation policy and rectify the shortcomings of the mandate.

**Theoretical Implications**

Theoretical implications of the findings concern the significance of creating a generation of students who fail to reach secondary school goals associated with success adequately. Students who are given a passing grade or teachers promote to the next level of high school without fully attaining the mastery of the content needed to have grade-level promotion are apt to falter in the foundational scaffolding needed to maintain or achieve success at the next level. Students promoted through a course sequence, especially in core subjects, will likely continue to struggle for the remainder of their education because they did not master fundamental content. Student promotion to the following course sequence, especially in core subjects where students
fail to achieve content master for the semester-long course, may cause unforeseen issues with student achievement. Students promoted through the necessary prerequisite courses risk future success in the course and may continue to struggle for the remainder of their educational careers.

This study included many participants who described that students who benefited from grade inflation are at a greater risk of failure after graduation, whether in the workforce or enrolled in college courses. The theoretical implications addressed the inference that the policy is detrimental to students now and will continue to be detrimental to students in future endeavors. The theoretical implications of the study, based on teacher perceptions of the grade inflation policy, reveal the need for a change in the implementation of the policy.

Additionally, issues surrounding students' future success, given inflated grades during high school, are visible after the student graduates. Traditional predictors of college persistence and academic success rely on the student’s high school GPA and standardized test scores as appropriate for establishing admissions eligibility. Researchers have shown that GPA and standardized test scores are the best predictors of college success, student retention and academic performance are the parameters of success (Walsh, 2010). Tucker and Courts (2010) reiterated that the two strongest predictors of student success at the collegiate level were students’ high school GPAs and standardized test scores. Because GPA is a predictor for post-secondary school success, an argument could be made that predicting student success in post-secondary institutions relies upon accurate representation of high-school GPAs. The implications of teacher experiences with grade inflation provide evidence that that students whose teachers adjusted their grades, and therefore, GPAs, likely fail to meet knowledge, content mastery, requirements necessary for next-level success after high school.
Secondary teachers also reported that grade inflation, resulting in grade promotion or passing of subjects without the basic understanding of the required fundamentals, begins much earlier than in secondary schools. However, the policy itself is not officially enacted or mandated in educational settings until the high school level. Research from my study, based on teacher perception of grade inflation, suggests that the study's theoretical implications include creating a set of students who are either promoted to the next level or promoted to graduation status without the skills required to graduate. The research suggests that the gap in student content mastery and knowledge does not merely impact the students and throughout their high school courses but may ultimately influence socioeconomic standings and educational downfalls within the United States for the next several decades. Continuing to promote or graduate students from high school who have not shown academic competence as demonstrated by their grades could create a downward spiral of students toward graduation; thus, lessening the status of high school and college diplomas. A generational gap of students, promoted through the system, without the required or expected acquisition of knowledge, creates an opportunity for failure at a much greater level than that of high school or college studies but could ultimately transition into failures in the national workforce and economy. The next generation of students, those whose parents were beneficiaries of given mandated grades without the commensurate knowledge associated with the grade, may struggle for academic success and expect similar mandating of grades.

Additionally, an increase in perceived teacher efficacy is also a byproduct of the grade adjustment policy. If the policy requires teachers to manually increase a student’s grade at the midpoint of the semester, the practice creates the appearance of teachers performing at a higher level than they are. Official transcripts of secondary students in Atlantic State do not have
indicators, marking, or asterisks, acknowledging that students’ grades were up to a 50% at the midpoint of the semester; therefore, the only reflection of the teacher efficacy for the semester is the final grade on the transcript. If the final grade on the transcript suggested a student has mastered the content, while the student may actually fail the class with a grade of 0%, then the teacher's perceived efficacy will also appear as inadvertently increasing for every student who received the adjustment.

The lack of accurate representation of teacher efficacy within the classroom may be held in check by the end-of-course exam, but as the exam counts only 20% of the final grade, a student often passes the class with a grade of 60% regardless of the final exam grade. Promoting students who failed to achieve the required 60% grade, acknowledging that the student has mastered sufficient content for promotion to the next level of the course, can create a false sense of ability for the student and a false sense of success in the ability of the teacher as the students’ actual content mastery may be in the 20-30% range for the class. Misreporting of success hinders the possibility that either the student or the teacher may need additional support and guidance from the school or district. Students or teachers who struggle to achieve desired results may not garner additional resources needed to correct the inadequacies. Misreporting of success hinders the possibility that the students and teachers may need additional support and guidance from the school or district. If allowed to go unnoticed or unreported, the outcomes create years and years of falsified successes.

Concerns arise as illegitimate reporting of inaccurate success at the secondary school level goes unnoticed or unaddressed, creating a culture that lacks accountability as the needs of the students are invisible to the district considering modification of the grade posted to the student’s transcript. Students who could benefit from teacher or counselor intervention to
provide accommodation for unrecognized learning impairments are overlooked as the students may not fit the criteria necessary for investigating or examining the student for a possible learning disorder due to the adjusted grade reported on the nine-week report card. Theoretical implications allow for identifying issues, such as lack of student support, and are clearly identifiable as an underlying concern surrounding secondary teachers’ experiences with grade inflation.

**Empirical Implications**

Several empirical implications are visible regarding perceptions and experiences of secondary teachers and grade inflation. First, this study’s results provided evidence that teachers, regardless of educational background, ethnicity, or years of teaching experience, have similar beliefs surrounding the mandating of grade adjustment at the high school level. The evidence provided in the study lends meaning to the small body of existing research surrounding grade inflation.

Second, the underlying beliefs of secondary educators concerning the district-level rationale for implementing the policy are not in concert with the administrators’ original intent. The study's empirical implications demonstrate incongruence in beliefs about grade inflation between teachers and administrators at the local and state level, demonstrating a divide in the cohesiveness of the system. Teachers in this study acknowledged that the policy's original intent is to increase intrinsic motivation, but none of the participants felt it adequate for motivating students. Moreover, they did not view improving motivation as the underlying, or driving factor for implementing the policy. Throughout the findings, the educators made it known that there is a division between the school, district, and state perspectives on the grade inflation policy. The
policy was merely a crutch for the district and was tied more to financial incentives and perceived community perception than actual student growth or achievement.

This study was focused on the teacher experiences with grade inflation; however, interpreting the study’s results in context for other stakeholders, such as parents, policymakers, and the State Board of Education, allows for additional empirical implications. The policy's wording demonstrates the policy's intention to undertake reform in the best interest of the student, district, and state; however, my study iterates that secondary teachers are witnesses to the policy's downfall. According to the research, secondary teachers feel that parents are ill-advised of the policy and have no real connection to the reasoning behind the policy. Secondary teachers also define the rationale for the policy being to enhance stakeholder support for secondary school success and thus increase community esteem and success. Empirical implications allow for the dissection of the policy from the sum of its parts, where perceived success at the high school level with concern for student promotion and graduation is the most apparent reasoning in the foundation of the policy as written; however, my research provides evidence the true underlying meaning is not in the best interest of the student. In contrast, the ripple effect of the intolerances of the policy will eventually become apparent and have a devastating effect on the education system and the community. The facades of the district's intentions are apparent at the secondary teacher level, and teacher perceptions of the policy address concern about student achievement.

Another aspect of empirical implications is a false sense of secondary school success within the community, as reported by state-issued report cards. To accurately reflect secondary school success, untainted student performance and achievement results are essential. Secondary schools appearing to have successes with student achievement and cohort graduation rates under
the shroud of mandated grade inflation could be misrepresented; hence schools needing State Board reform, intervention, or overhaul may not gain the necessary services needed to counter the manifestation that embodies the underlying, overlooked issues linked with poor student achievement and graduation rates. Secondary school students in need may not be granted the support necessary from the institution, with students merely being passed along or promoted without addressing the secondary school's underlying faults. The misrepresentation of secondary school success via grade inflation according to district policy mandates creates an opportunity for a deleterious domino effect for the educational system of the community, district, and state.

Furthermore, empirical implications address the district's financial incentives and motives to implement a grade inflation policy. Higher grades, such as an A or a B, on a state-issued report card are more impressive for the school, district, and community than those with lower levels of reported student achievement. Some less obvious benefits include higher revenue from property taxes and significant real-estate investment in areas with schools reporting relatively higher report card scores. School administrators achieve tangible monetary gains associated with higher school performance. According to DPI (2019), a principal who exceeds the projected growth rate associated with performance on the state-issued report card and rallies the school from a previous year score of a C or D to an A is entitled to a monetary bonus of $1,000 to $15,000 for that year. School report card grades are based on various factors, with graduation rates and teacher performance assessment scores some of the primary factors influencing secondary schools' grades (DPI, 2019). Consequently, a link exists between graduation rates and teacher efficacy reported on secondary school state report cards, which provides concrete evidence of monetary incentives for possibly inflating students' grades to increase graduation rates and perceived teacher efficacy.
Practical Implications

The study’s practical significance documented the Atlantic State’s secondary education teachers’ perspectives and experiences; therefore, findings from this study could justify a change in grade inflation policies to more accurately reflect student mastery of content and secondary school efficacy. Practical implications within the educational system could include changing grading policies to reflect student content mastery more accurately than standardized testing. Moreover, redefining the criteria for secondary school success as reported on state report cards by identifying areas of opportunity for students and possibly revamping the system is a viable option. Therefore, secondary school report cards and student transcripts either accurately reflect the earned result or disallow the districts to utilize grade inflation to alter the recognition of the data.

According to Woodruff and Ziomek (2004), student grade inflation is not significantly correlated with higher student content mastery over the past several decades. Providing evidence to support the research, Babcock (2010) concluded that standardized test scores have remained stagnant, even though student GPA and percentage of passing grades have increased over the same period. The discrepancy between increased GPA and negligible standardized test score increases suggests no substantive change in student content mastery. Moreover, these circumstances reflect that grade inflation is likely a primary contributing factor to unfounded student achievement. Therefore, practical implications support a transformation of the grade inflation policy at the state and local levels. The end goal of the educational system, in particular for secondary schools, is to produce well-rounded individuals who can demonstrate content mastery in core subjects and be successful after their high school career, whether in the workforce or post-secondary education. To be deemed successful, an educational system must
utilize a definitive tool for assessing student achievement and content mastery, not a misnomer policy that inflates or exaggerates a students’ success. Students’ grades should accurately reflect the student’s effort and progress. If a student lacks proficiency in an area, then the grade earned should be an accurate representation of their content mastery. If mastery is accurately measured, but students lack proficiency, teachers can adjust teaching methods or practices to fulfill student deficiencies during the semester.

Students who fail to achieve the required grade for passing the course, which is 60%, are more easily identifiable as at-risk students than those who benefited from grade inflation and are passed through the course, promoted to the next grade level, or graduated without sufficient knowledge of the subject. Practical implications are that the grade earned should be an accurate representation of the student’s ability, thus allowing quicker identification of students needing learning accommodations. Students who struggle with content mastery or achieving a passing grade may struggle in other core areas due to an undiagnosed learning condition. The results can come about because the grade earned does not suggest a cause for concern due to grade inflation. Perhaps student grade inflation policy should be adjusted by state and local policymakers for use on a case-by-case basis for academically struggling students, students impacted by outside influence, such as attendance issues, or other varying reasons. Applying the policy to all students who fail to achieve the midsemester passing grade creates a disservice to students who could genuinely benefit from a grade adjustment. Recognizing and addressing why students are failing is fundamental to diagnosing underlying student learning issues and revamping policies, curriculum, and instruction.

As demonstrated on state-issued report cards, secondary school effectiveness relies heavily on teacher efficacy and student graduation rates. However, if student grade inflation at
the high school level increases perceived teacher efficacy and unjustly creates an increase in graduation rates, then practical significance implications demonstrate a need to curtail the practice of grade inflation. The study demonstrated that teacher perceptions of grade inflation regarding teacher efficacy and perceived secondary school success might suggest transitioning away from the grade inflation policy. The State Board of Education should reconfigure the metrics for formulating the grade for secondary school success to disallow any factors immediately impacted by grade inflation. Removal of the variables that can be altered through grade inflation, such as graduation rates and teacher efficacy, allows for the translation of accurate, raw data to the school report card.

District and local level administrators are also directly affected by school report cards that show high graduation rates and teacher efficacy. School administrators can benefit from financial incentives when their school has increased in cohort graduation rates and student performance through content mastery assessments, ultimately creating a representation of teacher efficacy. Removal of financial bonuses for schools that exercise mandatory grade inflation to bolster graduation rates should be of immediate consideration for policymakers at the state level. Practical implications suggest that policymakers, school board members, and the community may find it necessary to disavow any district or school level administrator who knowingly requires grade inflation at the secondary level for financial gains. Alternatively, the state could halt any use of the policy to prevent districts from unwillingly taking advantage of such a situation to increase perceived success at the high school level. If the mandatory grade inflation policy was enacted in all districts, statewide or even nationwide, then the representation of secondary school success and teacher efficacy would be more closely comparable between districts.
However, because the policy is enacted only by certain districts, without acknowledging the act of grade inflation on official student documents such as transcripts, post-secondary institutions are not aware of altered grades on students’ transcripts. The discrepancies between districts that utilize the mandated grade inflation policy create unfairness and an imbalance of comparison when dealing with secondary school report card grades, teacher efficacy, and ultimately student content mastery. The discrepancy plays an integral role in student achievement and teacher perception of the policy in locations where the policy is utilized or even mandated.

Students may feel that enrolling in a district that does not acknowledge a grade inflation policy is not a viable option. Community perceptions surrounding secondary school success may transform if the community was made aware of the issue. According to the study, teacher perceptions surrounding the policy invoke ideals that the community and parents are mainly unaware of the use of a grade inflation policy at the high school level. Stakeholders are more likely to be made aware of the mandate if the school is forced to acknowledge the school report card grade is based on illegitimate data and acknowledge the utilization of the policy as it influences graduation rates and teacher efficacy on the state-issued report card. Practical implications derived from the study suggest several options: the policy be removed or revoked by state lawmakers, all schools are forced to utilize the policy, or all legal documentation for secondary school success and student content mastery intentionally acknowledge the policy on the record.

According to the study, teacher concerns with grade inflation included the lack of formal recognition of the grade inflation policy on official student transcripts or official state-issued report cards for secondary schools. Practical implications are that official student documents
containing student grades should accurately reflect the students’ grades before and after grade inflation, allowing a truly accurate representation of student content mastery on a transcript. Similarly, official state-issued report cards acknowledging the success of secondary schools based on cohort graduation rates and perceived teacher efficacy might also require alterations to demonstrate accurate results. It may be necessary to address or modify the secondary school report card grades to acknowledge the utilization of grade inflation to boost student GPA or graduation rates. State-issued report card grades for secondary’s schools should accurately reflect the school’s success without considering enhanced techniques of measurement involving grade inflation. Student transcripts and state-issued report cards of secondary school success are official documents that report vital information concerning student achievement, content mastery, graduation rates, and teacher efficacy. Altering official documents to improve perceptions of success for individual students or holistically for a secondary school masks true success.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations of the study included purposeful decisions defining the boundaries of the study. Delimitations of the study were selecting participants with at least three years of teaching experience, currently teaching at the high school level, and working within the selected district. Participants of the study were chosen by a set criterion for the number of years of teaching and employment at the secondary level for two main reasons, grade inflation occurs at the high school level, and teachers with less than three years of teaching experiences are considered beginning teachers. Administrators often guide the beginning teachers through the grading process at the midpoint of a semester. Therefore, teachers new to the profession with less than three years’ experience were not considered for the study to exclude participants whose beliefs
might be tainted by administrator oversight or guidance. Delimitations also included addressing the educational backgrounds and teaching licensure of the participants in the study, as all the teachers who work for the district have, at a minimum, a bachelor’s degree and a state teaching license. Several participants’ employment experiences included working in other districts, and several of the participants’ children also attend or had attended secondary schools, both inside and outside of the district, but these factors were not determinants of participant eligibility.

An additional delimitation of the study was the use of a phenomenological research method. A phenomenological study approach to collect the data was chosen over other research designs. The phenomenological approach allowed for the formation of understanding based on experiences and perceptions, with the fundamental approach relying on arriving at the descriptive nature of the phenomena. An ethnographic approach to the study was considered during the initial planning stages of the study, but an ethnographic approach focuses primarily on the collective experiences of a community as opposed to the experiences of an individual; therefore, in attempts to better understand multiple forms of interpretations of the same experiences from an individual’s viewpoint, the study utilized a phenomenological approach.

Beyond the scope of controllable research, limitations of the study included participant gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, geographical location, and work experience outside of teaching. Other limitations or potential weaknesses of the study are researcher bias, sample size, and self-reported journal entry collection technique. Researcher bias was accounted for and addressed in the study, and the sample size met the requirements of saturation. Self-reported data of the journal entries were verified through participant reaffirmation of content to support the credibility of the findings. Limitations not discussed are possible, and future research should address limitations in the study’s planning stages.
Recommendations for Future Research

The field lacks a comprehensive theoretical framework or model to describe the development of teacher experiences related to mandatory grade inflation. A need exists for a cohesive, comprehensive model describing predictors, outcomes, and contextual factors relevant to teachers’ experiences with grade inflation year after year concerning mandating of the policy. Considering the limitations and delimitations of the current study, I recommend a replication of this study to address a more diverse population of educators using a larger sample size. Perhaps a study that encompasses all teachers within the district or even within the state, broken down by individual districts. Furthermore, studies could be conducted that analyze teacher experiences with grade inflation based on teacher tenure in education or teacher tenure within a district. Although grade inflation occurs primarily at secondary schools, investigating teachers who teach at the elementary or middle school level would be viable to gain better insight into grade inflation practices or grade promotion practices during kindergarten through eighth grade.

In the future, researchers could investigate post-secondary school experiences with grade inflation as it pertains to colleges and university systems. It seems logical that research concerning college admission and scholarship opportunities for students would be a topic of great interest for the community and secondary school administrators. Along with post-secondary applications for research, researchers could inquire into teacher experiences with grade inflation at private schools to better understand the norms surrounding grade inflation issues in differing contexts. A quantitative approach could allow researchers to test whether graduation rates and school report cards are driven by district funding and bonus allocations of prior years. Prior year monetary compensation awarded to districts for graduation rates and perceived student achievement could be compared between schools and districts that did not
implement grade inflation and those using mandated grade inflation. Thus, the relationship between monetary compensation and grade inflation could be tested.

**Summary**

The results of the study illustrated that teacher experiences with mandatory grade inflation convey adverse and inauspicious implications for the reasoning behind the mandate. Secondary school teachers of BMSD in Atlantic State imparted the beliefs surrounding mandatory grade inflation was not for the betterment of the student but the perceived reputation of the secondary school and the district. High school teachers in the study validated the faults of grade inflation concerning student content mastery and success; relating that the policy’s original intent was cast aside for the true, underlying intent of the district, perceived secondary school success as measure through cohort graduation rates, and teacher efficacy on state-issued school report cards.

The false sense of success created through the district mandate of grade inflation tarnishes the district and teachers' reputation and creates an unequal imbalance when comparing secondary school success across the district, state, or nation. The monetary influences of grade inflation at the secondary school level create a conflict of interest when dealing with the best interest of the students. Students who may need supplemental support or diagnosis of learning deficiencies may slip through the cracks as district administrators are more interested in promoting students to graduate than ensuring student success through content mastery.

The once admiral concept of grade inflation, increasing a student’s grade in hopes of allowing the student the opportunity to succeed at passing the class by demonstrating mastery throughout the second half of the semester, failed to achieve the desired results of the policy. Instead, the policy created a quagmire of issues and complications, resulting in disbelief and
contempt of the policy by secondary school teachers. The policy, as written, is a crutch to support struggling students. The policy, in reality, is a failure, a crutch used not for the sake of the student, but a tool utilized for potential monetary gains of administrators and the creation of a falsified perception of secondary school success. Those on the frontlines of education, the secondary school teachers of the district, emphasized that the policy is a failure and that mandating grade adjustment and inflation is a losing cause. The entire study may be summed up in a quote from Mark, “I’ve just decided to answer that last question you asked. I mean, just a quick summary, I would say long-term grade inflation has done more harm than good. We’ve hurt more students overall than we’ve helped.”
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Other Data Collection Procedures

- In-depth, controlled interviews will take place one week before participants start the journaling process.
- Journaling one week post in-depth interviews will aid in data collection.
- Data collection procedures will also include observation. The researcher will record in the researcher’s field notes recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks while collecting and reflecting on the process.
- Observation collection will occur before and after the interview process, with a focus on essential descriptive notes and reflective notes. Attainment of observational collection will occur before every third question during the interview process.
- Supplemental data collection using memoing will occur through the interview process.
- The researcher will create a chart detailing observation questions and record location details during the observation stage of the interview process.
APPENDIX B: Participant Consent Form

Consent Form

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “A Phenomenological Study of Secondary Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding Mandatory Grade Inflation in Atlantic State.” I will describe this study to you and answer any of your questions. Jason Attig, a graduate student at Liberty University, is leading the study. The faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Vacchi, Education Department at Liberty University.

What the study is about:
The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe secondary teachers’ experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in Atlantic State. For this study, at this stage of the research, the definition of teacher perception is conceived ideals influenced by factors that impact teacher attitudes concerning the mandatory inflation of students’ grades.

What we will ask you to do:
I will ask you to (1) describe your experiences with end-of-course mandatory grade inflation in Atlantic State or describe contributing factors associated with student grade inflation? (2) Complete a writing prompt to improve data collection by enhancing and improving knowledge collectively upon experience, and (3) Partake in a focus group, concentrating on small-group discussion guided the researcher, which will possibly guide future actions.

Risks and discomforts:
In simple, non-scientific language, describe any foreseeable risks or discomforts:
- Legal risks - the possibility of discovering activities, such as grade inflation that may require reporting to authorities.
- Physical risks – none.
- Social or economic risks - loss of confidentiality.
- Emotional risks – a feeling of anxiety or pressure.
- I do not anticipate any other risks from participating in this research.

Benefits:
Information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future by examining the perceptions of grade inflation. Grade patterns change so that most students in a class, college, or university receive higher grades for the same quantity and quality of work done by students in the past. A corollary to this definition is the same GPA obtained by students with a more inferior academic skill (as measured by the SAT or ACT exams). Another less well-known version of grade inflation is ‘content deflation,’ where students receive the same grades as students in the past but with less work required and less learning.

Compensation for participation:
Participants may receive professional development hours as compensation for this study.

Audio/Video recording:
The use of audio recording devices will aid the researcher in the transcription of the interviews. The researcher will appropriately cite exact verbiage and language during the research study, although names will be altered or omitted. The researcher will retain audio files for five years after the conclusion of the research and then officially destroy the transcripts and recordings after that period.

Please sign below if you are willing to have this interview recorded (audio). You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

☐ I do not want to have this interview recorded.
☐ I am willing to have this interview recorded:

Signed: ________________________________
Date: ________________________________

If audio, video, or other recordings that you want to use for activities beyond research analysis (publications, presentations, other promotional purposes):

- The researcher may utilize and include an audio recording in which the person’s name, likeness, image, and/or voice is apparent
- Participant does not have rights to inspect or approve the finished product or printed/published matter that uses the images/recordings or versions of the images/recordings; and
- The participant will not receive any financial compensation for commercial and/or non-commercial (as appropriate) uses of the images/recordings.

Signed: ________________________________
Date: ________________________________

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data security:

Protection of participants from harm, as it relates to identity, will be of the utmost concern during the study.

- The researcher will alter the names of participants to avoid inclusion of identifiable information in the analysis files.
- The researcher will utilize pseudonyms to protect participants.
- Siding with participants and only sharing the positive results.
- Presenting multiple perspectives reflective of a complex picture.
- Conducting sessions in an area that will be comfortable for the subjects to interact and discuss the research topics.
- As information discussed by the subjects is considered sensitive and personal, the researcher will utilize a secure and privileged location.
- Focus group sessions will not be in open or high traffic areas, which could discourage subjects from talking but also cause potential harm to subjects.

Sharing de-identified data collected in this research:

Sharing of the de-identified data from this study with the research community at large to advance science and health may occur. We will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific
standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee the anonymity of your data.

**Future use of identifiable data collected in this research:**
Future research may be conducted using identifiable information without obtaining your consent.

**Taking part is voluntary:**
Participant’s involvement is voluntary; the participant may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions/procedures that may make him/her feel uncomfortable, with no penalty to him/her, and no effect on the compensation earned before withdrawing, or their academic standing, record, or relationship with the university or other organization or service that may be involved with the research.

**Follow up studies:**
We may contact you again to request your participation in a follow-up study. As always, your participation will be voluntary, and we will ask for your explicit consent to participate in any of the follow-up studies.

May we contact you again to request your participation in a follow-up study? Yes/No

**If you have questions:**
The principal researcher conducting this study is Jason Attig, a graduate student at Liberty University. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Jason Attig. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at 607-255-5138 or access their website at [http://www.irb.liberty.edu](http://www.irb.liberty.edu). You may also report your concerns or complaints anonymously through.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature______________________________ Date______________

Your Name (printed)______________________________________________

Signature of person obtaining consent_________________________ Date______________

Printed name of person obtaining consent__________________________

The researcher will keep the consent form for five years beyond the end of the study.
APPENDIX C: Interview Questions/Guide

• Please tell me about your educational and professional background.

• What made you choose the profession of teaching?

• How long have you been teaching?

• How does the manual grade inflation mandate in semester-long classes work, in your opinion?

• Describe the relationship between student grade inflation and overall student grade point average (GPA) and standardized testing results at NCHS.

• How has grade inflation helped your students with college admissions or scholarship applications?

• What are your administrators’ rationales for implementing grade inflation policies?

• Describe your perceptions concerning the rationale or need for mandatory grade inflation.

• Describe situations you have experienced that you feel may necessitate grade inflation.

• How have your experiences with grade inflation influenced your ideals of the possible legal or moral ramifications of implementing the policy?

• How might your past experiences with grade inflation influence your attitude in the future surrounding the use of grade inflation?

• We have covered facets concerning grade inflation and experiences in our conversation, and I so appreciate the time you have given to this. What else do you think would be essential for me to know about your experiences with grade inflation?
APPENDIX D: Journaling Prompts

- How does mandated grade inflation make you feel about your role as a teacher at NCHS?
- How does mandated grade inflation make you feel about the responsibilities of school and district administrators with regard to student achievement?
- How does mandated grade inflation make you feel about state administrators and policymakers?
- Describe your experiences concerning grade inflation with an above-level course such as honors, advanced placement, or international baccalaureate classes.
- Describe your perceptions of secondary school report card grades, the perceived success of the secondary school, while accounting for student grade inflation.
- Describe your perceptions of grade inflation as it pertains to student mastery of content and student grade-level promotion.
- How has grade inflation influenced your perceptions of student achievement?
- How does grade inflation influence your perceptions of the success of secondary schools, while accounting for student GPA and graduation rates?
APPENDIX E: Focus Group Questions

- Why do you believe there are mandates for student grade inflation at NCHS?
- What effects does mandatory grade inflation have on the educational efforts of your high school?
- Which students benefit the most from grade inflation?
- How do you feel about grade inflation in higher-level courses?
- How does grade inflation influence learning at the high school level?
- How does mandatory grade inflation influence your beliefs surrounding student achievement and content mastery?
- How do you feel that grade inflation influences the community perception of secondary school student achievement?
- How do you feel grade inflation impacts community views of secondary school evaluations and graduation rates as reported by the state?
- What are the long-term effects of student grade inflation at the high school level?
- What is your overall perception surrounding mandatory grade inflation at the secondary school level?