A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL PROMOTION POLICIES IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

Kelley L. Duffy

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2023

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL PROMOTION POLICIES IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

by Kelley L. Duffy

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

APPROVED BY:

Rebecca C. Bowman, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Judy P. Shoemaker, Ed. D., Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe middle school teachers' experiences of implementing social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States. The study advanced understanding about teachers' perceptions implementing social promotion policies and how those perceptions impacted their professional behaviors and identity. Weick's sensemaking theory guided this study as it explains how individuals define and give meaning to their reality when ambiguities and uncertainties exist. The study was designed to explore the central research question, what are middle school teachers' shared experiences with social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States? Thirteen veteran teachers participated in the study and were chosen through purposive sampling techniques. The data were collected through the use of interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. Data were analyzed in accordance with phenomenological methods outlined by Moustakas. Textural and structural themes were synthesized to describe the essences of the shared lived experiences of the teachers implementing social promotion policies. The findings from this study supported understanding of how teachers make sense of social promotion policies and identified how the social promotion policies impacted the teachers and influenced instructional and assessment practices in the classroom. This study expanded knowledge of the efficacy and impacts of social promotion policies within a district specifically from the educators' perspectives. This research may influence future policies related to improving the educational profession and opportunities of low achieving students.

Keywords: sensemaking, social promotion, grade inflation, educational policy

Dedication

To all my students that I learned from and to those that learned from me, an apology for not giving you more, and a thank you for being a part of my journey.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my instructors and faculty of Liberty University. My research would not have been completed without the steadfast knowledge, guidance and support of Dr. Rebecca Bowman, and commitment and expertise of Dr. Judy Shoemaker. I would also like to thank my participants who generously offered their honest insights and experiences that made this study possible.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA)

English language arts (ELA)

English speakers of other languages (ESOL)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12)

National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Professional Development (PD)

Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)

Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Special Education (SPED)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One introduces the research that focused on middle school teachers' experiences of implementing social promotion policies in a public school district. This chapter provides context for this research and explains why this research is needed to further understand the impacts social promotion policies may have on educators' morale and instructional choices. Background information related to the issue is presented in this chapter. The problem and purpose statements further focus on the nature of this study and identify current literature that supported the intent of the research. The significant contributions this research may have in the educational field will then be discussed. Following the significance of this study, the research questions are presented and supported with justification. The chapter concludes with a list of relevant definitions and a summary.

Background

The institution of public education has evolved over time depending on the significance given to it by the educational theorists, politicians, and citizens at that specific time in history (Gutek, 2011). In 1848, during the infancy of public education, Horace Mann explained that education was the great equalizer amongst citizens as it provided the individual with knowledge for economic prosperity and provided the populace with common values and morals to support a peaceful and positive citizenry (Gutek, 2011; Office of Education, 1965). While the nation continued to welcome immigrants, the country's population and cultural diversity continued to grow, and public education was increasingly viewed as a means to assimilate new citizens while reinforcing democratic, social, and cultural norms that would ensure the long-term success of the country (Iacob & Groza, 2019; Marshall, 2012). To address the local and state interests within a

growing country, public school systems worked together to develop coalitions to grow awareness and support for academic and social needs; these coalitions evolved into state and eventually national school board associations (Uphoff, 2010) and other bureaucratic entities (Gutek, 2011). Where school districts were once independent entities meeting the needs of the local communities across the country, public school districts were later refashioned into institutionalized organizations of central offices and neighborhood schools directed by elected school boards and policy mandates that eventually represented one educational system (Peurach et al., 2019). Each state government is responsible to provide public education to its citizens; however, the federal government requires equal access to public education as guaranteed under the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment (Essex, 2016). To bridge the gap between constitutional rights and state responsibilities, federal policies were established in the public school system to provide equal, accessible, and high-quality education.

Historical Context

Federal policy initiatives have been implemented to allow education to be more accessible, equal, and high quality for the students of the United States. Currently, schools are required to operate under the umbrella of several federal policies. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was introduced in an effort to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged communities, increase the quality of instruction, and provide additional supports for economically disadvantaged or neglected students (Congress of the U.S., 1965). The tenets of ESEA were closely aligned with issues associated with the Civil Rights Movement and sought to allocate resources to educational and cultural institutions that served economically disadvantaged youth (Young, 2018).

The legislation outlined in ESEA set the standard for K-12 education for approximately the next twenty years. During this time, the implementation of ESEA was challenged with political opposition and evidence of effectiveness was challenging to assess (Young, 2018). Then, in the early 1980s, a renewed interest in educational reform was initiated at the federal level to address, as the serving Secretary of Education described, "the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 5). An 18-month study was conducted and confirmed that the quality of public education had declined since the inception of ESEA. Declines were observed in four areas: student expectations, time devoted to student learning, content standards, and quality of teaching (Gardner et al., 1983). The federal government presented the findings of the study and subsequently responded with further guidance and initiatives in the report titled, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Gardner et al., 1983). Recommendations included, but were not limited to, establishing high school graduation standards, higher academic and behavioral expectations, and rigorous assessments were proposed (Gardner et al., 1983).

Approximately 40 years later a renewed effort to address decline in student achievement was initiated. Concerned with the quality and access to high educational standards, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted in 2002. NCLB sought to further improve public education by advancing teacher and school accountability measures, improving teacher quality, and evidence-based learning strategies with the goal of further closing the achievement that targeted specific areas for each locale (US Congress, 2002). Efforts to improve the effectiveness of the public education system did not bear ample results and the achievement gap continued to persist. Due to a lack of improvement, public school systems were again readjusted to increase effectiveness under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA returned to the foundations of ESEA with

several changes that applied greater focus on equity, while affording all students with high academic standards and increased school and teacher accountability, especially in low-performing schools (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

As these federal policies shaped the landscape of the United States' public education system, school districts were simultaneously mandated to adhere to other federal mandates. These include, but were not limited to, the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (1974). In addition, state and local governments required educators to perform in accordance with policies related to student bullying, student discipline, responsible reporting of child abuse, and English speakers of other languages (ESOL) initiatives. District and school-based directives also outlined disciplinary guidelines, grading norms, instructional standards, and teacher accountability. National assessment data suggested that the gradual evolution of policies to improve achievement and ensure equity in the educational system produced minimal to no impact on student achievement. Based on National Assessment of Educational Progress data, Hussar et al. (2020) stated that in 2019, 33% of eighth grade students scored proficient or higher in reading and 34% were proficient or higher in mathematics. In other words, the majority of American students were considered below proficient in reading and math. These data were consistent with statistics from 1996 when the Department of Education (1999) described social promotion as a silent but widespread problem that subjects students to an ultimate consequence where "they fall further and further behind, and leave school ill equipped for college and lacking the skills needed for employment" (p. 1). Over the last several decades, the persistent push to improve student achievement while closing the achievement gap has resulted in a wide array of mandates and

forms of accountability for district leaders and educators to adhere to even though the results show minimal progress (Hung et al., 2020; Yeh, 2020).

Social Context

Based on the continual efforts by the federal government to improve student achievement, equity, and access to high quality education, the policies related to social promotion may not be supportive of improving student outcomes. This is evidenced by recent assessment data that suggested a large percentage of students are below basic levels of proficiency in reading and math (Hussar et al., 2020). Social promotion, a policy that advances students to the next grade level who do not exhibit current grade level proficiency, has historically been a controversial practice for the academic and developmental growth of adolescents (Department of Education, 1999). Districts across the country have openly committed to leniency in efforts to promote students to the next grade level who do not demonstrate grade level proficiency or achieved expectations, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Arundel, 2020; Bowie, 2021; Vahle, 2023). By minimizing the value of student grades by transitioning the current system to a pass or fail mentality, Parades (2017) suggested that high achieving students will perform less while low achieving students will perform just enough to get by.

The implementation of social promotion policies may minimize the importance of academic success and rigor even though the intent of the practice is to support student success. Not only do social promotion policies impact the individual student, but the effects may have far reaching consequences. The practice of providing students with passing grades or unwarranted promotion to the next grade level, even though it was not earned, may encourage students to expect passing grades in the future with minimal effort (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2020), and not

seriously invest time and effort into academic and career pursuits (Brown et al., 2019; McMahon, 2018). It may provide students with a false sense of accomplishment that will set up students, as future adult citizens, for failure after graduation (Mawhinney et al., 2016; McMahon, 2018). Teachers and parents that falsely promise student failure are undermined when students are socially promoted which degrades the credibility and trust between student and adults (McMahon, 2018). As social promotion policies most often impact low income and minority students (Hughes et al., 2017; Mungal, 2020; Young et al., 2019), the achievement gap continues to persist. Whereas public education may consider the wellbeing of the student as paramount, social promotion practices have not minimized the achievement gap and could have damaging consequences for the student, educational system, and society.

Theoretical Context

The demand for equitable access to high quality education and rigorous expectations has been a concern for decades (Congress of the U.S., 1965). To address students who perform at academically low standards, two options were available: retention or social promotion. Social promotion has been and continues to be implemented in the public schools (Department of Education, 1999; Mawhinney et al., 2016; McMahon, 2018; Mungal, 2020). As explained by McAfee (1981), the challenge to effectively measure the effectiveness of student retention is the inability to perform experimental design with a control and test group. Despite the controversial and inconsistent effectiveness of both options, social promotion policies are accepted as the better alternative to retention (Anastasiou & Papachristou, 2017; Eren et al., 2017; Hwange & Capella, 2018; Kretschmann et al., 2019; Young et al., 2019). More than 30 years ago, student retention was cast as a burdensome financial cost to the public school system and ineffective at supporting academic growth (Thomas et al., 1990). Social promotion as a tool for promoting

school achievement continues to be deemed ineffective (Brown et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2017; Mawhinney et al., 2016; McMahon, 2018). Historical and recent research on social promotion policies generally focus on the student. This current research could expand understanding of social promotion policies from the perspective of teachers' experiences in schools where social promotion policies are enacted. This is important because teachers are integral to student learning and the impact of implementing social promotion policies is unknown.

This research utilized the sensemaking theory as the theoretical framework. Traditionally, the sensemaking theory was used in organizational studies (Weick, 1995), but was introduced in the educational setting to improve instructional strategies (Morine-Dershimer, 1987). More recently, sensemaking theory has been a framework for research related to student learning (Odden & Russ, 2019), teachers' perceptions of administrative leadership while implementing COVID-19 protocols (Grooms & Childs, 2021), and teachers' experiences implementing ambiguous and conflicting policies related to social and emotional learning (SEL) (Muniz, 2020), and equity-based (Hodge, 2021) mandates. The generous use of the sensemaking theory in organizations, including the educational arena, made it an applicable theoretical framework for this study. This research expands the breadth of knowledge and understanding of the teachers' experiences and perceptions of working in an organization that enacts the policy of social promotion and expands the use of sensemaking theory.

Problem Statement

The problem is that social promotion policies do not provide an accurate account of students' academic abilities and learning outcomes (Attig, 2021; Brown et al., 2019; Gershenson, 2018; Guskey & Link, 2019; Kunnath, 2017; McMahon, 2018; Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). Public education policies have changed over the last several decades in an effort to minimize the

achievement gap and promote high quality and rigorous instruction (Congress of the U.S., 1965; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Gardner et al., 1983; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; US Congress, 2002). As a result, the mandated roles and expectations of teachers are not clearly identified (Peurach et al., 2019) in the effort to achieve equality and ensure high academic standards. As such, the potential for conflict exists between government policies, district mandates, administrative directives, and teacher implementation in the classroom. This struggle has been documented in policies related to ESOL students (Harklau & Yang, 2020), underschooled immigrant students (Drake, 2017), incorporation of socio-emotional skills curriculum (Munez, 2020), teacher accountability (Garver, 2020), and equity-based Common Core State Standards (Hodge, 2021). When teachers feel conflicted, overwhelmed, or unable to adequately perform their professional duties, they may experience decreased job dissatisfaction (Kasalak & Dagyar, 2020) which is common to many teachers who leave the profession (Garcia et al., 2022; Sutcher et al., 2019). For those teachers who remain in the field, some teachers have been likened to informal policy makers as they adjust, negotiate, and prioritize policies based on resources, student needs, and personal beliefs (Drake, 2017; Harklau & Yang, 2020). Researching how various policies impact the teacher may provide insight to job satisfaction (Sutcher et al., 2019), tenure, and instructional choices (Hodge, 2021).

One policy that has been minimally researched through the lens of the teacher is social promotion. This research fills a gap in literature and is worthwhile because teachers who work with low achieving students may exhibit low self-efficacy (Aytaç, 2021; Morris et al., 2017), experience external pressures from stakeholders (Walton, 2018), and teachers may be conditioned to believe social promotion is the acceptable policy (Akin-Sabuncu, 2022; Young

et.al, 2019). Based on the need to understand teacher experiences of social promotion, this study fills a gap in the literature as the policy of social promotion from the perspective of the middle school teacher has not been researched.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe middle school teachers' experiences with working in schools that enact social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States. Social promotion is generally defined as promoting to the next grade level students who do not exhibit grade level academic proficiencies (Department of Education, 1999; Crepeau-Hobson, 2016; King et al., 2016; Mawhinney et al., 2016; McMahon, 2018; Zhang & Huang, 2022) and supported through the practice of grade inflation. This study was guided by the sensemaking theory as it explains how individuals define and give meaning to their realities in the midst of ambiguities and uncertainties related to past events in effort to make sense of policies and actions that legitimize future behaviors (Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1995).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it may contribute to existing research regarding teachers' experiences and perceptions of their roles and expectation as related to policy implementation. The sensemaking theory serves as the theoretical framework explaining how teachers make sense of, give meaning to, and operate in public schools that enact social promotion policies. Teachers' experiences navigating through implementation of other policy initiatives has been conducted and this research provides additional insight into the policy of social promotion.

Theoretical Significance

This research utilized the sensemaking theory as its theoretical framework (Weick, 1995). This theory explains how individuals, in a social context, give meaning to reality in an organization or situation where ambiguity or uncertainty exists. The sensemaking theory was originally implemented in the field of organizational studies but has been recently used to research educational policies related to such areas as school failure (Walls, 2017), implementing socio-emotional skills into standard curricula (Munez, 2020), and teaching underschooled immigrant students (Drake, 2017). Applying the theory of sensemaking to better understand the impacts social promotion policies have on teachers advanced the theory in the educational field, applied principles related to organizational studies to the institution of public education, and provided insight into how social promotion policies may impact the teachers within the organization.

Empirical Significance

This study filled a gap in the literature as it provided insight into social promotion policies based on teacher experiences and perspectives. Conflicting research exists regarding the effectiveness of social promotion policies. Whereas some studies suggest that grade level retention negatively impacts student motivation (Kretschmann et al., 2019), delays social competency (Anastasiou & Papachristou, 2017) and literacy (Hwange & Capella, 2018), and increases the chance of dropping out (Eren et al., 2017), other studies suggest that social promotion does not prepare students for the demands of higher grade levels (Brown et al., 2019; McMahon, 2018) and can negatively impact options into adulthood (Mawhinney et al., 2016; Eren et al., 2017). This research expanded knowledge of social promotion policies as

experienced by the teacher and provided additional insight into the inconsistent consequences resulting from the implementation of social promotion policies.

Practical Significance

Public school systems continue to strive for academic achievement and equitable access to high quality education for all students which may cause a state of flux that impacts teacher roles and expectations in the classroom (Peurach et al., 2019) while not narrowing the achievement gap. As undefined or conflicting roles and expectations placed upon the teacher impact teacher morale (Richards et al., 2016), teachers who work in schools with high populations of low achieving students coupled with high levels of teacher accountability, are more apt to exhibit low morale (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). This study offers more understanding on the impact of social promotion on the teacher. This is important because many teachers who leave the field cite high levels of accountability as a factor (Carver-Thompson et al., 2017). The results of this study are valuable in understanding how implementation of social promotion policies impacted teachers' identities and perceptions of their work environment and instructional practices. This information is useful to school leadership, district administrators, and policy makers to improve student achievement, assessment methods, and valuation of teachers as professionals.

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenological study researched the shared experiences of middle school teachers that have worked in schools that enact social promotion policies. There was one central research question and three sub research questions that guided the study. These questions collectively explored teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies. The research questions focused on the individual participant as the most basic data source

(Moustakas, 1994) and were aligned with the sensemaking theory. Specifically, the sub questions were uniquely designed to address the seven properties of the sensemaking theory. Emphasis was given to the sensemaking properties of individual identity, retrospection, social interactions, and future behaviors (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The meaning that the teachers gave to their iterative and ongoing relationship with their experiences in relation to the phenomenon provided insight into their reality, perception of role within the organization, and how they meet expectations in a potentially uncertain and ambiguous environment (Weick, 1995).

Central Research Question

What are middle school teachers' shared experiences with social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States?

Sub Question One

How do middle school teachers perceive their role as a professional when implementing social promotion policies?

Sub Question Two

How do middle school teachers describe the process of implementing social promotion policies?

Sub Question Three

How do middle school teachers' past experiences with social promotion policies impact future pedagogical and instructional strategies?

Definitions

1. *Achievement gap* – a phenomenon that occurs when one student group exhibits statistically high rates of academic achievement and outperforms another student group on grade point average and/or standardized assessments; differences in academic achievement between two

groups may be influenced by race, economic status, household education levels, student-teacher ratio, and other variables (Hung et al., 2020).

2. *Accountability* – a general policy term related to incentivizing student achievement on standardized tests in effort to improve student learning or minimize achievement gaps among diverse student populations (Wronowski & Urick, 2021).
3. *At-risk student* – a student that may possibly not achieve passing grades at the end of the grading period (Lu et al., 2021) or will not perform to maximum potential (Papageorge et al., 2020); at-risk students have historically been associated with social and cultural characteristics such, as but not limited to, minority status, family income, age of mother at child's birth, and single-parent households (Berends et al., 1995).
4. *Core content class* – a course subject generally accepted as ELA, math, science, or social studies.
5. *Grade inflation* – the overvaluation of student achievement and abilities by educators and districts by awarding higher grades than what the student deserved in relation to course or grade-level standards (Chowdhury, 2018; Dannenberg; 2018; Denning et al., 2022; Gershenson, 2020; Goldman, 1985; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Lin, 2019; Sanchez & Moore; 2022; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tyner & Gershenson, 2020).
6. *Formative assessment* – a process used by educators and students to monitor progress over time to gain understanding of student comprehension and potential need for instructional modifications, improvements, or supports; traditionally intended for informational purposes and not intended to determine student mastery or to develop grades (American Educational Research Association, 2014; Black & William, 2009; Dixson & Worrell, 2016; Guskey & Link, 2019).

7. *Retention* – a policy that requires a student to repeat a grade level due to not demonstrating appropriate academic growth (Rodriguez-Segura, 2020; Warren et al., 2014; Zhang & Huang, 2022); retention implies the student repeat all academic courses associated with the academic year rather than specific subject areas (Carstens, 1985).
8. *Self-efficacy* - the belief in oneself that the internal ability exists and is effective to enact student learning and engagement (Aytaç, 2021).
9. *Social promotion* - a policy that advances students to the next grade level who do not exhibit current grade level proficiency; has historically been a controversial practice for the academic and developmental growth of adolescents in elementary and middle school (Department of Education, 1999; Crepeau-Hobson, 2016; King et al., 2016; Mawhinney et al., 2016; McMahon, 2018) and more recently may be referenced with automatic promotion or retention reform language (Zhang & Huang, 2022).
10. *Summative assessment* – formal evaluation at the end of an instructional unit used to determine whether student acquired understanding of content material and at what level of mastery; traditionally intended to determine student grades, academic placement in appropriate leveled class, and determinant for academic promotion (American Educational Research Association, 2014; Dixson & Worrell, 2016).
11. *Underschooled* – term used to describe students who had limited access to education due to lack of enrollment or informal setting; often refers to immigrant students with limited English proficiency (Drake, 2017).

Summary

Chapter One discussed the historical, social, and theoretical background of social promotion policies. The problem statement was presented, followed by the purpose statement,

and a discussion of the significance of the study. Chapter One concluded with the presentation of one research question and three sub questions aligned with the remainder of the study. The implementation of social promotion policies is a controversial method to address the needs of low achieving students. Over the last several decades, the acceptance of social promotion policies has increased as the better alternative to student retention. Although most studies focus on the impact of social promotion policies on students' academic and emotional well-being, more research is needed to better understand the consequences of such policies. The purpose of this study was to understand middle school teachers' experiences with implementation of social promotion policies in a public school setting. This transcendental phenomenological study explored teachers' perceptions and understandings of social promotion policies. The findings of this research added to the existing knowledge and provided information to improve student learning, teacher performance and policy changes.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this research study was to explore teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies. To understand this topic, a systematic review of literature was performed to understand what social promotion is in the educational context. This chapter provides an overview of the literature pertaining to this topic. This chapter begins with an overview of the sensemaking theory and identifies the value it holds as the framework for this study. A historical summary of the sensemaking theory follows in addition to how the theory was traditionally used in organizational studies and then introduced to the educational field. The chapter proceeds with a focus on social promotion policies starting with a historical overview of the policy and following with assessment methods that allow for grade inflation practices that support social promotion initiatives. The advantages and disadvantages of social promotion are discussed along with the impacts the policy has on students and teachers. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary that discusses the validity of the sensemaking theory as a theoretical framework and a foundation to explore teachers experiences, perceptions, and meanings of social promotion policies.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework serves as a guide for the foundation of research strategies including the design of the research questions and interpretation of findings (CohenMiller & Pate, 2019). Further, the theoretical framework is the base that ties the research problem, purpose statement, significance, methodology, and interpretation together. (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). In other words, the research problem is viewed through the lens of the theoretical framework and provides insight into how the policy continues to be implemented in public education. The

theoretical framework that lies at the foundation of this research is Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory.

History of Sensemaking Theory

The history of the sensemaking theory has roots in the decision-making theory (Boland, 2008), cognitive dissonance theory, and ethnomethodology (Weick, 1995) and is used as an alternative to the decision-making theory traditionally utilized in organizational studies (Wieck, 1993). Decision-making theory is a structured, linear thought process that explains how individuals solve future problems (Boland, 2008). As a forward-thinking process, mechanized processes are used to make decisions rather than experiences (Simon & Newell, 1964). Whereas decision-making theory prioritizes future outcomes when deciding, sensemaking theory prioritizes experiences to determine future actions (Boland, 2008). Weick (1995) explained the sensemaking theory contains elements of cognitive dissonance theory and ethnomethodology in that it recognizes the individual's internal conflict yet partakes in self-justification of behaviors in a social setting.

Sensemaking Theory

Weick (2011) admitted that the concept of sensemaking can be defined in many ways and can be an ongoing or intermittent process as well as individualistic and collaborative. However, it is widely accepted as an iterative process where individuals, often referred to as actors, use past experience and knowledge to collaboratively give meaning to ambiguities and uncertainties to identify current reality (Ancona, 2011; Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1993; Weick et al, 2005). Sensemaking is an interplay of "action and cognition" (Weick, 2009, p. 130) that gives meaning to an inconsistent setting so actors can continue with performing in their roles (Ancona, 2011). In the process, the derived reality does not have to be true but must appear believable to the actors

that created it; this ensures stability and maintenance of ongoing processes and patterns (Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1995; Weick, 2009). As such, sensemaking theory implies that the workers may define and give meaning to the organization rather than the organization or its leaders define and give meaning to the workers (Boland, 2008; Weick, 1993; Weick, 1995).

Guiding Principles of Sensemaking Theory

Weick (1995) identified seven guiding principles that characterize the sensemaking theory. The process of sensemaking is: "(1) grounded in identity construction; (2) retrospective; (3) enactive of sensible environments; (4) social; (5) ongoing; (6) focused on and by extracted cues; and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (Weick, 1995, p. 17). Not presented in any specific order, the guidelines represent an iterative series of steps that, over time, allow the individual and group to rationalize actions and behaviors (Weick, 2020). In essence, individuals, while interacting with others, use past experiences to make sense of the current reality; this reality will give meaning to situations that are ambiguous or uncertain and guides future choices and behaviors that will then become part of the collection of past experiences to make further sense of (Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1995; Weick, 2009; Weick et al, 2005). In a workplace, the process of making sense of the unknowns may define the organization and may promote change, cause stagnation, or stifle growth (Weick, 2009).

Sensemaking Theory in Organizational Studies

The theory of sensemaking is a lens through which to study organizations and how it may identify how employees give meaning to and negotiate through challenging and unknown circumstances (Brown et al., 2015; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Examples of circumstances and settings that the sensemaking theory was used to garner deeper understanding of individuals' experiences within an organization included: a military friendly fire incident (Snook, 2001;

Weick et al., 2005), supply chain analyses (Rit, 2019), risk management (Taarup, 2019), and family relationships (Crawford et al., 2019). The applicability of the sensemaking theory to other fields is appropriate because it is phenomenological by nature and it integrates elements from organizational studies, psychology, sociology, and constructivist perspectives (Brown et al., 2015).

Sensemaking Theory in Education Research

The use of the sensemaking theory in educational research dates back to the late 1980s when it was used to investigate how teachers gave meaning to practical work experiences in an effort to improve instructional strategies (Morine-Dershimer, 1987). Since then, the sensemaking theory continues to be used as the framework for educational research in different capacities. To improve instructional strategies and to understand how students learn and comprehend concepts, the sensemaking theory was previously used as the framework for research related to the instruction of science (Odden & Russ, 2019) and mathematics (Moleko, 2022), and afterschool STEM mentoring programs (Rangel et al., 2022). The sensemaking theory also was used to guide research that provided insight into how educators responded to and made sense of a variety of policy initiatives. Examples of this type of research utilizing the sensemaking theory included the implementation of restorative disciplinary practices (Dhaliwal et al., 2023) and teacher perceptions of integrating SEL (Muniz, 2020) and equity (Hodge, 2021) policies into the classroom while maintaining the expectation of rigor and accountability. On a larger scale, the sensemaking theory was used to explore how teachers and administrators gave meaning to unfamiliar policies and requirements related to COVID-19 (Grooms & Childs, 2021), and how educational and community leaders perceived high rates of absences among Latino populations (Grooms & Galvez, 2022). The diverse use of the sensemaking theory in organizations, including

the public education system, suggests that it is an applicable theoretical framework in the field of education.

Related Literature

The concern for effective schools, high academic achievement and evidence of student learning has been a concern throughout the history of public and private education. For decades, the federal government has legislated state and local entities to modify and enhance educational policies to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap (Congress of the U.S., 1965; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Gardner et al., 1983; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; US Congress, 2002). Historically, for those students that do not meet grade level expectation, two options to address low academic achievement are commonly available, namely social promotion and grade level retention (Carstens, 1985). Both policies have been the focus of much research and debate in the public school setting but unlike retention, social promotion evolved into a widely accepted, yet latent policy, common in all grade levels across the country (Department of Education, 1999). The following literature review provides historical and current insight into the understanding of social promotion policies, the evolution of its presence, and the impact on today's K-12 public school student, teacher, and greater community.

Evidence of Social Promotion in K-12 Schools

Social promotion is defined as advancing to the next grade level students who do not exhibit grade level academic proficiencies to ensure continuance of their academic journey with their peers (Department of Education, 1999; Crepeau-Hobson, 2016; King et al., 2016; Mawhinney et al., 2016; McMahon, 2018; Zhang & Huang, 2022). More recently, social

promotion policies may be described through alternate variations of verbiage such as automatic promotion or reformed retention policies (Zhang & Huang, 2022).

The concept of social promotion can be applied to all grade levels; however, it is most researched in the elementary and middle school years where students are required to repeat entire class grades rather than individual subjects in which a student may demonstrate deficiency. At the high school level, academic classes generally use the Carnegie Unit, a representation of one course taken over the course of an academic year (Silva et al., 2015). The practice of using Carnegie Units allows students who did not fulfill class requirements to repeat, if necessary, individual class units rather than an entire academic year. Elementary and middle schools generally do not employ Carnegie Units and students who do not achieve grade level standards may be passed along to avoid repeating the entire academic year for the sake of one or two content areas.

Legal Precedent in Support of Social Promotion in Public Education

Historically, lawmakers and the general public realized public education needed reform. This was evidenced by a series of federal mandates enacted in effort to achieve higher student standards, close the achievement gaps between student groups, increase teacher and school accountability, and ensure a high-quality education was provided equitably to all students (Congress of the U.S., 1965; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Gardner et al., 1983; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; US Congress, 2002). The concept of students attending and graduating from the public school system without proper preparation for the workforce or college was a historically common and accepted practice for many decades.

Two court cases highlighted the consequences of social promotion policies in public schools and provide precedent for the responsibility of the school to the student in regard to student learning and achievement. In *Peter v. San Francisco Unified School District* (1976) and *Donohue v. Copiague Union Free School District* (1979), both families sued the respective districts because of the students' successful graduation from high school with demonstrably low academic levels that limited employability. In both cases, the parents felt the schools and teachers were at fault for the students' lack of academic success. In both cases, the courts decided in favor of the school districts and stated that the students' rights to an education were not violated, that student learning is influenced by many variables other than solely the school and teacher, and the teacher holds the responsibility to teach while the student maintains the responsibility to learn (Essex, 2016). These cases absolved the public school system from the responsibility to guarantee a certain level of student outcomes and achievement for each student. Simultaneously, federal and state policies were developed to mandate schools and teachers assume more accountability for student achievement and to implement reforms to address inequities observed in the public school system (Congress of the U.S., 1965).

Historical Concerns with Social Promotion

Approximately twenty-five years later these legal precedents and the controversy of social promotion policies still existed. In 2003, it was predicted that social promotion policies would continue to exist as a long-term issue and any successful remedies would have to be considered though the lens of equity (Alexander et al., 2003). Social promotion was considered an equity issue since many low achieving students were minorities or characterized by low socioeconomic backgrounds (Alexander et al., 2003; Hughes et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). As such, merit-based assessment measures traditionally used for grade promotion inherently

disfavored minority and disadvantaged students; however, it was acknowledged that lowering standards to enhance the appearance of academic success among minorities also was not acceptable (Alexander et al., 2003).

When a low achieving student is not promoted to the next grade level, the alternative is for the student to be retained. Retention occurs when a student who has not demonstrated appropriate academic growth is required to repeat all courses within the same grade level to ensure grade-level achievement (Carstens, 1985; King et al., 2016; Rodriguez-Segura, 2020; Warren et al., 2014). Both social promotion and grade retention have historically impacted minority and disadvantaged students more than other groups (Alexander et al., 2003; Department of Education, 1999; Hughes et al., 2017; Young et al., 2019). Thus, current research supports the notion that social promotion and retention policies may be linked to equity issues and are more impactful to students of color and lower socioeconomic status. Students more likely to be impacted by social promotion and retention policies include African American students, Hispanic students, and students living in low socioeconomic households (Brown et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2019). When students lack academic skills and are being considered for retention, other characteristics may impact the decision; low achieving students are more likely to be socially promoted if they are not a behavior concern in the classroom, demonstrate effort, and have supportive and involved parents that advocate for their success (Yang et al., 2018).

Societal Values and Social Promotion

Based on National Assessment of Educational Progress data, Hussar et al. (2020) presented data from 2015 that indicated 35% of eighth grade students scored proficient or higher in reading and 33% scored proficient or higher in mathematics. However, in 2016, it was

reported that 1.6% of the nation's eighth grade students were retained (de Brey et al., 2019). Based on these data, it is evident that a large difference exists between the percentage of students not performing at grade level and the percentage of students that are retained. This would suggest that most students who do not achieve grade level expectations are promoted to the next grade level, and that most students not performing at grade level are being socially promoted.

The acceptance of social promotion policies may be influenced by national policies, public perspectives (Goos et al., 2013), philosophical paradigms in the educational system (Goldman, 1985), and cultural values (Ikeda & Garcia; 2014). Since retention rates are small in comparison to the number of students not achieving grade level proficiency, this data suggests that many students are moving to the next grade level rather than repeating the same grade. National policies and perspectives may support how teachers are prepared and taught to view social promotion. For example, the belief that education is a tool to prepare certain students for essential roles in society is much different than ensuring that all students demonstrate the same learning outcomes; these philosophical differences would deliver different instructional methods (Goldman, 1985). Teacher preparation programs may condition future teachers to recognize that social promotion of low achieving students is an accepted practice and a positive alternative for student success (Young et al., 2019). As such, the need to scrutinize policies that have been widely accepted and regarded as commonplace is needed to determine their effectiveness to meet student needs and improve the performance of the public education system (Walton, 2018). Due to the demonstratable lack of student achievement improvements, social promotion practices and assessment strategies are one area to scrutinize.

History of Grading Systems in Public Schools

The concept of grading students is an inherent practice and fundamental component of education at all academic levels. Originating as a communication tool and student motivator (Goldman, 1985; Schneider & Hutt, 2014), the historical challenge of grading policies has been to develop the fine balance between the student's extrinsic drive for academic excellence and the intrinsic and aesthetic appreciation for acquisition of knowledge (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). The most widely used and accepted grading system based on numerical percentages identifying levels of merit was introduced by Harvard University in the late 1800's (Durm, 1993). Over time, that grading system evolved and morphed into other merit-based divisions such as the 4-point system and A-F grading scheme that are commonly utilized as the cornerstone of assessment at most institutions and at all levels of education (Durm, 1993; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Historically, the use of a widely accepted and merit-based grading structure was deemed as the communication tool for the educator to document the progress and achievement of the student with the students themselves, parents, school system, universities, and employers (Hutt & Schneider, 2014). Likewise, grades offered a larger function as they were used to monitor educational effectiveness on a national scale, thus providing a systemic connection with societal needs and large-scale initiatives of the educational system (Goldman, 1985; Guskey, 2000; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Sanchez & Moore, 2022).

While valuable and necessary, grading processes and systems have long been controversial and sometimes scrutinized as unstandardized and unreliable measures of student abilities and future success (Durm, 1993; Schneider & Hutt, 2013). Inconsistent and subjective grading policies may also impact effective implementation of education reform initiatives because an accurate account of student abilities is not identified (Griffin & Townsley, 2021;

Guskey, 2000; Guskey & Link, 2019; Sanchez & Moore, 2022). Without having a standardized grading policy that is enforced consistently, local educational leaders and classroom teachers may intentionally and/or unintentionally set students and society up for unforeseen consequences in the future (Goldman; 1985). As a result, the evolution of grading systems, in an effort to support students, may have developed negative and inadvertent consequences.

Grading Practices that Support Social Promotion

The concept of social promotion has historically been a latent practice that has been present in the public education system in the past and continues to pervade the present system (Department of Education, 1999). To enact social promotion practices, subjective grading practices and policies have evolved that may have manipulated the concept of grades in ways that may not reflect the true abilities of the student (Gershenson, 2020; Goldman, 1985; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Guskey, 2000; Kunnath, 2017; Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). The process of grading student work and achievement is a complex and subjective process that is difficult to standardize and monitor on a local, regional, and national level (Guskey, 2000; Kunnath, 2017; Sanchez & Moore, 2022). Likewise, the purpose of student grades and assessments may have multiple meanings and values depending on the assessor (Kunnath, 2017; Rubie-Davis et al., 2020). A fine balance exists between fostering student academic growth through demonstratable rigor and achievement and advancing students through the K-12 system based on non-meritorious considerations (King et al, 2016; Kunnath, 2017). As a result, grading policies may vary in an effort to accommodate and support success of all students regardless of academic and cognitive abilities.

Subjective grading policies that delegitimize the value of cognitive, standards-based achievement while prioritizing non-cognitive and social-emotional abilities may limit the full-

potential of the student (Guskey & Link, 2017; Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). Grading policies grounded on lenient strategies that do not focus on high standards and expectations may minimize the identification of at-risk students (Lu et al., 2021) and prohibit supports that may promote student success. The following section will identify several formal and informal institutional policies and individual teacher practices that may support and advance the social promotion of low achieving students, specifically identifying strategies used to increase grade point averages through grade inflation.

Grade Inflation

Grade inflation is the tendency of educators and districts to overvalue student achievement and abilities by awarding higher grades than what the student deserved in relation to course or grade-level standards (Chowdhury, 2018; Dannenberg; 2018; Denning et al., 2022; Gershenson, 2020; Goldman, 1985; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Lin, 2019; Sanchez & Moore; 2022; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). The origins of grade inflation were first linked to university and college campuses during the Vietnam era in efforts to minimize student failure, thus keeping students in college and ultimately avoiding the military draft (Goldman, 1985; Lin, 2019; Schneider & Hutt; 2014). Post-war, the trend to inflate grades continued and after several decades the average grade point average for college students increased without demonstratable improvements to student achievement (Lin, 2019). Possible explanations to this long-term trend of grade-inflation include: (1) lowering of standards to meet the increased enrollment of minority students on college campuses; (2) introduction of field- and methods-based courses that utilized non-traditional grading strategies and prioritized student experiences rather than knowledge; and (3) pressures placed on instructors to secure job security by introduction of accountability measures through student evaluations (Goldman, 1985; Lin,

2019; Schneider & Hutt; 2014). Further, it is suggested that students who receive good grades are more likely to graduate and display satisfaction with the institution (Dannenberg, 2018). Collegial grade inflation practices have also been linked to increasing graduation rates (Denning et al., 2022).

At the university level, the long-term practice of grade inflation implied that low student effort and minimal academic growth was recognized as the current and more contemporary indicator of high achievement and proficiency (Lin, 2019). Often referred as grade compression, this manufactured confluence of grades near the top of the academic scales creates confusion in delineating high achieving students from low achieving students, and may demotivate students, adversely impact long-term financial and career success of the student, and threaten the reputation of the institution (Ehlers & Schwager, 2016; Chowdhruy, 2018). At the collegiate and secondary school levels, the introduction and systemic use of grade inflation practices altered the notion of consistent and effective grading systems that not only stunted the potential of the student body as a whole, but also jeopardized the reputations of academic institutions and misguided future employers and public stakeholders (Ehlers & Schwager, 2016; Chowdhury, 2018). Whereas grading systems at one time served as a reliable communication method to share student aptitudes and merits, those same systems evolved into subjective procedural practices that may have deterred competition and eroded intrinsic motivation for knowledge acquisition on the college campus.

Grade Inflation in K-12 School Systems. The practice of grade inflation is not unique to the collegiate level and has been documented in K-12 school systems (Buckley et al., 2017; Ehlers & Schwager, 2016; Gershenson, 2018; Gershenson, 2020; Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Sanchez & Moore, 2022; Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). The infiltration of grade inflation

practices into the K-12 system allows and supports social promotion policies that permit students to move to the next grade level or course even though academic skills and achievement do not represent grade-level abilities. In other words, the use of grade inflation practices supports the practice of low achieving students to be socially promoted. A notable difference between social promotion and grade inflation is important to identify. Whereas social promotion generally refers to moving students forward an entire grade level regardless of academic success or failure in each content area, grade inflation generally refers to the grade associated with one content area. Whereas elementary grade level educators are more apt to enact social promotion, high school educators would be more apt to practice grade inflation.

Within the K-12 school system, grade inflation practices are presented in a variety of different ways that have unique impacts on the student, school, and system overall (Buckley et al., 2017; Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). As discussed by Tyner and Gershenson (2020), grade inflation practices may be described using three categories: static inflation occurs when student grades are positively exaggerated at a given moment in time; dynamic inflation occurs when student grades gradually increase over time while the expectations to achieve those grades diminish; and differential inflation occurs when students and/or schools are held to different standards to achieve same letter grade.

Evidence of these types of grade inflation have been documented in current research. Over the last twenty years, high school grade point averages have appeared to increase while corresponding SAT scores have demonstrated a decline over time (Buckley et al., 2017). A similar trend was more recently observed when comparing high school grade point averages and ACT scores (Sanchez & Moore, 2022). This type of dynamic inflation also has been documented with state level standardized tests. When comparing state-derived end of course examinations,

data indicated that many students who received high course grades did not achieve proficiency on the end of course exam (Gershenson, 2018; Griffin & Townsley, 2021). In these studies, students given high course grades by the teachers did not necessarily achieve comparable results on standardized assessments (Buckley et al., 2017; Gershenson, 2018; Griffin & Townsley, 2021). Likewise, the studies identified instances of differential inflation. Schools with high populations of low income or minority students demonstrated less variance between course grades and achievement on the standardized tests; further, more grade inflation was documented at wealthier schools (Buckley et al., 2017; Gershenson, 2018; Sanchez & Moore, 2022). A gradual upward shift in course grades and inconsistent degree of variance to standardized testing among schools suggest that grade inflation is present.

In efforts to inflate student grades, teachers and school districts employ a variety of assessment strategies that support student promotion and progression in the K-12 system. One method is to combine formative and summative assessments in grade development (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Link, 2017; Guskey & Link, 2019; Link, 2018). In doing so, students' grades reflect not only content standards, but also are based on the progress made during the learning process which may not be reflective of grade level standards (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Link, 2017). An additional method to enhance students' grades is to incorporate student activities that are not based on cognitive, content-based material into the assessment program. Examples of non-cognitive student attributes that may be awarded in grades include punctuality, good behavior, effort, and participation (Guskey & Link, 2017; Guskey & Link, 2019; Link, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Griffin and Townsley (2022) referred to a variety non-standards-based assessment tools as employability scores. Using assessment categories, teachers may assign different weights to different categories. This process may allow teachers to

take liberties to adjust grades to account for differences between students and inflate grades by weighting non-cognitive, non-content related abilities (Kunnath, 2017). Additional strategies that schools or teachers may use to bolster student grades include eliminating zeros for work not turned in, allowing students multiple attempts to retake tests, or modifying assessments to reflect student abilities (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). These types of assessment practices detract focus from comprehension and mastery of content standards and allows student grades to be a function of a myriad of subjective and non-academic variables. It is important to note that the use of non-content based assessment strategies used to inflate students' grades is often effective; there may also be instances that students' grades are decreased by the same non-content based assessments (Griffin & Townsley, 2021).

Grade Inflation Impacts to Students and Stakeholders. Grading strategies devised by teachers and schools provide students and stakeholders with an understanding of academic progress and achievement and may impact student success. Providing an unclear or false representation of academic abilities in one or more subjects may deny students the opportunity for additional supports or remediation, therefore increasing the risk of achievement gaps in the future (Lu et al., 2021). Further, suggesting students are more equipped than they really are may not adequately prepare students for standardized tests nor motivate them to adequately prepare to address deficiencies (Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, 2018). In addition, the practice of grade inflation was shown to be more prevalent in schools with predominately white, Asian, and economically privileged students; as this will enhance the opportunity for this demographic to compete for college admissions and minimize the competitiveness of students from minority and low-income backgrounds (Buckley et al., 2018)

Beyond K-12 school systems, grade inflation may have unintended impacts on colleges and universities. Providing high grades to students who do not appropriately deserve them can burden admissions offices to make fair evaluations of students for acceptance while accounting for inconsistencies in grading policies between schools (Buckley et al., 2018; Gershenson, 2018; Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). Current trends on some college campuses are to minimize the value of standardized college entrance exams thus placing more credence on high school grade point averages (Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). As a result, the inflation of grades can stunt student growth, deter policy initiatives to support low achieving students, complicate college entrance evaluations, and give false impression of student abilities. Grade inflation practices are used at all levels of K-12 education to ensure students' progress through the system in a timely manner and serve as a tool to support social promotion policies.

Impacts of Social Promotion Policies

The policy of social promotion, although not directly addressed nor mandated in federal policy initiatives, may be perceived as a beneficial alternative when compared to student retention. A compelling benefit to social promotion is the cost savings related to financing an additional year of school for retained students that often include extra services and increased enrollment (Alexander et al., 2003). In 2017, the national average per student expenditure in the public school system was $12,794 and it was estimated that 2% of the 50.7 million (e.g., approximately one million) students were retained (de Brey et al., 2019; Hussar et al., 2020). As such, the estimated cost of retaining students in the same grade level for one year would exceed $12 billion dollars. This example indicates that an economic advantage may serve as the explanation to accept and support social promotion policies over student retention (Hwange & Capella, 2018).

In addition to impacting a potential financial strain to the school district and local taxpayer, social promotion policies may impact individual families. Most families and adults recognize the importance and need for education, and most support the use of tests as determinants to promote students to the next grade level or to fulfill graduation requirements (Starr, 2020). Whereas most parents believe their child is performing at- or above-grade level, the reality is most students are demonstrating academic abilities below grade level (Learning Heroes, 2021). This inconsistency may be more apparent in classrooms and schools where there are more low-achieving students as non-academic factors more heavily influence student grades (Kunnath, 2017). This discrepancy implies that the way schools and teachers communicate student achievement to parents may not be an accurate reflection of reality. When families are eventually informed of the reality of their children's abilities, they may feel embarrassment and powerlessness, yet, may be hopeful to better support student progress (Owens, 2019). While most families want and value an honest understanding from teachers and schools regarding students' progress and abilities, a disconnect still pervades between school and family which may deter trust and constructive relationships (Learning Heroes, 2021). Whereas modifying grades to support student promotion may appear benign and supportive, the impact of the practice may have more far-reaching consequences.

Advantages of Social Promotion Policies on Students. Most current research related to the advantages of social promotion focused on the consequences of student retention rather than the benefits of social promotion. As such, the benefits of social promotion will be discussed through the lens of the negative impacts related to student retention; these often include academic, social, and emotional consequences. At the elementary school level, evidence suggests that retained students may not be academically impacted in the short term, but long-term impacts

are observed in the higher grade levels (Hughes et al, 2017; Rodriguez-Segura, 2020). Specifically, retained students have a greater propensity to perform below grade level in reading (Hwange & Cappella, 2018), exhibit low social confidence (Anastasiou et al., 2017), demonstrate low motivation (Kretschmann et al., 2019), and may leave school before graduation, especially if retained in eighth grade (Eren et al., 2017). Giano et al. (2021) supported the increased risk of student drop out when low achieving students were retained in the middle school grades.

In addition, forcing students to repeat the same grade level removes the students from their normal social and academic cohort; a practice that can cause social isolation and further hinder student growth (Eren et al., 2017). The existing empirical evidence suggests that student retention policies may create harmful short- and long-term consequences to the student. Because student retention may harm the student academically, emotionally, and socially, the practice of socially promoting low achieving students is sometimes considered the more appropriate pathway for student success. Social promotion policies also provide an economic advantage to the public school system.

Disadvantages of Social Promotion Policies on Students. The potential for long term academic, social, and emotional consequences related to student retention was discussed in the previous section as a case for social promotion. However, a review of current literature also reveals disadvantages related to social promotion policies. Similar to student retention, social promotion has been shown to have long term consequences to student growth. Specifically, research suggests that socially promoted students in the elementary and middle school years are not equipped to handle the responsibilities in the high school setting (Brown et al., 2019; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McMahon, 2018; Zhang & Huang, 2022). When students were not prepared

with the proper grade level skills and expectations, especially during the middle to high school transition, students struggled with the increased demands related to rigor, workload and the increased levels of responsibilities and independence (Brown et al., 2019; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). This can be especially pronounced for disadvantaged and minority students who may not have the supports from families or other resources to bridge the gap from middle to high school (Brown et al., 2019; McMahon, 2018). In addition, students who experience a pattern of being passed along without the proper skills may suffer low academic confidence and feel discouraged in classroom settings that are beyond their abilities (Yeh, 2020). As a result, social promotion may cause low achieving students to devalue the work involved to achieve academic expectations.

Equally important is the precedent that is set when social promotion policies reward students for not achieving expectations and undermines the educational system (Goldman, 1985). For example, pass/fail grading systems, a variation of social promotion policies, will benefit low achieving students while merit-based grading systems will benefit high achieving students (Paredes, 2017). This is also true for grade inflation policies that gradually give students' academic grades higher than what is warranted for work performed (Goldman, 1985; Lin, 2019). Students who are socially promoted may question integrity and credibility of parents and educators who tell them that academic achievement and hard work is required for promotion when in reality it is not true (McMahon, 2018). Evidence suggests that even when students graduate from high school, the consequences of being socially promoted may still have negative impacts into adulthood (Mawhinney et al., 2016). Not only are students not prepared academically for college and career opportunities, the emotional toll of social promotion may limit motivation and confidence. Students who receive benefits without putting forth work and

effort may fall victim to apathy, poor work ethic, and unreasonable expectations for further entitlements in the future (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2020). Whereas social promotion is considered to be a less harmful alternative than retention, the long-term student impacts related to low academic achievement and expectation of entitlements may be the same, if not more, harmful, to a student's future.

Social Promotion Policy Impacts on Teachers. The effectiveness of social promotion policies may be controversial; however, it is suggested that low achieving students require additional interventions and supports to help close the achievement gap. Regardless of the academic level of students in a teacher's classroom, the teacher is expected to enact student growth. As such, teachers are under pressure to meet conflicting directives and stakeholder interests that may cause teachers to experience internal professional and ethical dilemmas (Barrett et al., 2012). The degree to which student interventions are offered to students in support of remediation and the extent of student motivation to take advantage of those resources is not well documented in current literature. What is apparent are the high percentages of low achieving students at all grades levels in public schools (Hussar et al., 2020). Without appropriate interventions to support student growth, students are placed in classrooms without the appropriate skills to succeed.

The classroom teacher is faced with a variety of academic levels and needs to tend to. With the demands for student growth and focus on accountability, the added pressure to the teacher could reduce morale (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020) and positively impact teacher attrition (Carver-Thompson et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2022). A culture of accountability can have a negative impact on work environment as it can decrease instructional quality (Harrison et al., 2023) and take attention away from instructional initiatives while causing division within

teachers and administrators (Garver, 2020). As teachers navigate the needs of the students while striving to achieve test-based accountability mandates, the conflict in teacher expectations and roles can cause confusion, burnout, stress (Jentsch et al., 2023; Richards et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2017), lowered self-efficacy and motivation (Aytaç, 2021; Dunn, 2020; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018), decreased teacher satisfaction (Smith & Halloway, 2020), and negatively impact the choice of instructional practices in the classroom (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017; Harrison et al., 2023). When challenged with diverse student needs, unrealistic expectations, and conflicting priorities from administrators and stakeholders, teachers will develop informal classroom-based policies reflective of their beliefs and abilities to best achieve the demands placed upon them (Drake, 2017; Harklau & Yang, 2020). This confusion may then be reflected onto student assessment strategies. When teachers and/or groups of teachers are inconsistent and unclear about how student work is prioritized and how it will be assessed, students may respond with confusion and not participate in the activities (Burriss & Snead, 2017).

Grading and assessment practices enacted by teachers are an amalgamation of district policies, personal experiences, and cultural and social values (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). As such, a teacher's toolbox of assessment strategies and grading policies will be influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic variables. For example, in effort to avoid confrontation with parents, administrators, and other stakeholders, teachers may modify students' grades (Barrett et al., 2012; Dannenberg, 2018) while acknowledging that doing so may delegitimize the integrity of educational system and teacher (Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, 2018). Likewise, teachers may be required to or voluntarily get creative with what constitutes a grade to bolster the appearance of student achievement; this is performed by grading students on the learning process rather than on student understanding of content standards (Guskey & Link, 2017).

The differentiation between assessment of learning processes and content-related standards-based achievement can be identified by comparing non-cognitive skills to cognitive skills, respectively (Guskey & Link, 2019). To improve student grades, teachers may assess students based on non-cognitive skills such neatness of assignments, punctuality of assignments, participation and behavior in class, and student growth over time (Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Guskey & Link, 2017; Guskey & Link, 2019; Link, 2018). Students also may receive higher grades when teachers like the student or if the student performs tasks for the teachers (Barrett et al., 2012). These qualities may demonstrate good character skills, but do not demonstrate academic abilities and the inclusion of these attributes in a grade may not truly reflect student aptitude. Teachers' use of non-cognitive and cognitive tools (i.e., such as standards-based assessments such as tests, quizzes, portfolios, etc.) to determine student grades has been shown to vary across grade levels and type of school; teachers in elementary schools and all levels of urban settings place more weight on non-cognitive tools while teachers in middle and high schools tend to place more weight on cognitive abilities (Guskey & Link, 2017; Guskey & Link, 2019; Link, 2018). It has also been suggested that teachers in low-achieving schools, such as urban settings, maintain more freedom and judgement in determining student grades (Link, 2018). The myriad of variables that teachers consider and openness to subjectivity during the grading practice implies that teachers are not only influenced during the assessment process but also practice creativity during grade development. Teachers may believe that manipulation of grades to benefit the student is unethical and wrong but may continue to participate in the practice due to pressure from parents, administrators and other stakeholders or they feel personally compelled to help their students (Barret et al., 2012). The unclear boundary between the role of teacher and assessor, and the dichotomy of expectations can further cause teacher

stress, burnout, and low morale (Richards et al., 2016; Jentsch et al., 2023; Wronowski & Urick, 2021).

A work environment that propagates low morale and low self-efficacy, coupled with high expectations, may create a cycle of disempowerment that can erode teacher motivation (Bukhari et al., 2023), creativity and choice of instructional strategies (Dunn, 2020). When teachers are not working at high levels of expectation and are not requiring students to work at high levels of expectation, student achievement may suffer (Rubie Davis et al., 2020). In addition, since teachers have a greater awareness of students on a personal level, teachers may encounter moral or ethical struggles when deciding to retain or socially promote a student (Mungal, 2020). Falsely rewarding students with unwarranted success modifies the role of educators without teacher consent and may challenge teachers with ethical dilemmas (Goldman, 1985). Whereas social promotion policies may be regarded as a simple strategy to minimize emotional and social harm to students, competing research suggests that the impact of social promotion policies may have a much larger reach of impact to the teaching staff. As a result of social promotion policies, classroom teachers are often challenged with a wide range of students represented by diverse academic levels and pressures to meet accountability requirements. These conditions may cause stress, burnout, and potentially cause teachers to leave the profession.

Methods to Minimize Social Promotion

Current literature suggests that social promotion policies are more complex and controversial than simply allowing a student to progress to the next grade level. Although research exists that supports both social promotion and retention, the more accepted policies lean to social promotion strategies. Whereas the child is often at the center of promotion choices, other components of the educational system are impacted. These areas include district and school

policies that relate to student retention and promotion, assessment and grading and potential impacts to the integrity of the teacher. The next section discusses potential ways to minimize social promotion policies.

School and District Level Practices to Minimize Social Promotion

An examination of the current research addresses both the advantages and disadvantages of social promotion policies. In both situations, harmful long-term impacts are possible for low achieving students retained to repeat an academic grade or promoted without the necessary skills. To ensure both practices are more constructive for long-term student success, an additional element may be needed to address the unique struggles low achieving students face academically and emotionally (Carstens, 1985). Academic interventions, such as summer programs, after school tutoring, and progress monitoring that address academic abilities can serve as supports to promote student growth and ensure grade level proficiencies (Hughes et al., 2017; Hwange & Cappella, 2018). Summer programs may be especially important in preparing students for the transition between middle and high school and to minimize the potential for students leaving high school prior to graduation (Eren et al., 2017; Giano et al., 2021). Emotional and social supports may also be needed to build and maintain student motivation (Kretschmann et al., 2019) and provide for students that lack resources, parental supports, and stability (Yang et al., 2018). To minimize the achievement gap that socially promoted students are challenged with, opportunities for enrichment and remediation to achieve grade level proficiencies may be needed since current research suggests that both social promotion and retention policies may equally have negative long-term impacts on the future success of the student.

District and school policies that are specific and enforceable also may impact the reliance on social promotion policies. By incorporating stricter attendance policies, smaller class sizes

and specialized professional development opportunities for teachers geared to improve instruction may promote student success for low achieving students and schools (Lock & Sparks, 2017). District initiatives that establish quotas on student letter grades to minimize a large percentage of A- and B-letter grades while monitoring teacher grading patterns may bring alignment between student grades and academic mastery thereby reducing the chance of grade inflation (Chowdhury, 2018). District enforcement of promotion policies linked specifically to standardized test scores may prove beneficial as a way to link a consequence to low achievement (Perrault et al., 2020). The use of test-based promotion policies has been demonstrated to be effective in several states suggesting that the threat of mandatory retention minimizes actual retention while simultaneously improving achievement (Perrault et al., 2020).

The K-12 educational system, as a cumulative whole, is characterized by a variety of different assessment practices and interests that may exist in different school settings and grade levels. Research suggests that the way an elementary teacher assesses students may be different than how a middle and/or high school teacher assesses students; knowledge of the different strategies may be helpful to drive horizontal and vertical alignment policies that attempt to minimize confusion of how students are assessed and graded (Guskey & Link, 2019; Link, 2018). Particularly in the middle school setting, where teacher turnover rates tend to be greater than other grade levels (Marinell & Coca, 2013), district-level and institutional supports may be needed to equip and advocate for teachers as they provide unique emotional, behavioral, and developmental provisions to assist middle school students (Giano et al., 2021) as they transition between the expectations of elementary and secondary school. District and school-wide initiatives offer opportunities to bring more objectivity to promotion and grading policies.

Consistent Student Expectations and Grading Policies

In addition to managing social promotion policies through district and school-wide policies, understanding teacher assessment practices also may be valuable in improving instructional outcomes and grading practices. Teachers' choice of assessment practices is often a very personal endeavor that is developed over time and a reflection of their own personal educational and professional experiences, cultural and social values, and political beliefs (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Beginning with teacher preparation programs at the college level and school environment, formalized and influential programming may be initiated that help form teacher perspectives of student assessment (Coombs et al., 2018; Link, 2018; Looney et al., 2018). For example, elementary school teachers tend to prioritize formative, non-cognitive forms of student work whereas middle and high school teachers prioritize summative and cognitive abilities (Link, 2018). Further, teachers in urban communities and at the high school level may be more likely to use grades to entice students to behave properly and complete work on time than elementary school teachers (Link, 2018). Urban teachers may also utilize more flexible and subjective strategies when assigning grades (Kunnath, 2018; Link, 2019) in efforts to help students progress through graduation (Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan; 2019).

Varying perspectives amongst teachers also exist regarding the purpose of assessment and the function of the educational system (Looney et al., 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Whereas some teachers may view education to equip students to be successful citizens in society, other teachers may view education as opportunity to affect future change (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Further impacting the role of assessment, teachers' assessments practices are dynamic and may evolve over the course of their profession in response to internal and external influences, personal perspectives on fairness, equity, and their perspectives regarding the validity and utility

of the assessment (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Coombs et al., 2017). Kunnath (2017) discussed potential opportunities for teachers to serve as student advocates rather than objective assessors as teachers may choose to modify student grades through non-academic means to accommodate for student differences and to ensure equity in the classroom; thus, minimizing the role of academic rigor in student achievement. It is apparent that teachers' uses and perspectives of assessments are personal, subjective, and dynamic, and are influenced by a myriad of factors that define their professional identity as educators (Looney et al., 2017). These practices are suggestive of an unclear, informal, and inconsistent assessment process that exists in the K-12 educational system.

To promote objective, reliable, and content-based assessment practices in education, professional development opportunities focused on grading and assessment may be needed (Chowdhury, 2018). Identifying consistent grading expectations to the students will minimize confusion and set priorities for the student (Burriss & Snead, 2017). This formalization of assessment could be enacted through a district- or school-wide endeavor that aligns individual teacher expectations and minimizes subjective policies. Professional development activities designed to assist teachers in understanding their own personal assessment identity and how it impacts the district-defined role as student assessor may be effective; this approach may assist teachers to understand their personal knowledge, beliefs, and feelings about student assessment (Looney et al., 2017). Having this understanding of oneself may be a catalyst for self-reflection by the teacher. The minimization of personal biases in student assessment and perceptions of assessment strategies is necessary for objective assessment and may change over time (Coombs et al., 2018) with focused and appropriate professional development. The teachers' ability to confidently promote student achievement and assess student growth may positively impact self-

efficacy and perception of adequacy in their role (Looney et al., 2017) that may impact instruction and motivation.

Professional development opportunities that assist teachers with tools and strategies to set consistent and high expectations for all students may serve valuable. High school teachers that push students to meet consistently high expectations may generate higher student achievement than those teachers that do not (Papageorge et al., 2020). For those students that do demonstrate higher growth, it may not be limited to just that academic year but several years of higher achievement following a teacher that sets high expectations (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018; Papageorge et al., 2020; Rubie-Davies et al., 2020). This student success may be due to high expectations and may also impact how students perceive themselves through the eyes of the teacher and future career candidates by the manner in which the teacher treats them (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018). The importance of teachers understanding their own personal values, beliefs and biases is critical (Looney et al., 2017) since teachers may impose different sets of expectations for different students (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018). Since teachers may place different expectations on different students, it is important for teachers to identify if the differences are based on race (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018), relationship with the student (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019), pressure from parents (LiCalsi et al., 2019), or other non-academic privileges (Fuller et al., 2017). Professional development opportunities where teachers grade assignments and collectively develop a common practice of assessment may minimize individual biases (Jönsson et al., 2021).

Strategies designed at the district and administrative levels may be beneficial to support consistent and objective grading practices. Limiting the pressure that administrators, parents, and stakeholders can exert on teachers to modify grades may be beneficial to maintain morale,

performance, and objectivity (Barrett et al., 2012; Garver, 2020; Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, 2018). Also, top-down directives from the district level to support continuity in assessment strategies and minimize reliance of non-cognitive factors at all grade levels and across all schools within a district may also minimize grade modification (Guskey & Link, 2019). To rebuild the integrity of the assessment process and educational system, efforts should be made to remove bias, pressure, inconsistency, and priority of non-academic factors to grade students.

Promote Family Engagement

The inclusion of family into the student's education may serve as another method to minimize social promotion. Although parents may not have an accurate picture of their student's academic abilities, most parents would like teachers and schools to offer an honest and realistic portrayal (Learning Heroes, 2021). Similarly, high school teachers agree that most parents are not aware of the degree to which student grades may be inflated nor have an understanding as to why or how it occurs (Attig, 2021). Parents may overlook academic achievement, at the detriment of their child, while focusing on grades as an indicator of future student success (LiCalsi et al., 2019). Without a clear grasp of student achievement, parents may not be able to appropriately support student needs.

The need to actively communicate with and involve parents in their student's education is important. Whereas families generally understand the basic and fundamental tenets of education, providing families with specific resources, tools, and knowledge to support student learning is not as easily disseminated especially in adolescent years when communications with parents starts to wane (Hill et al., 2018). Establishing honest and genuine relationships with parents is a long-term endeavor that requires trust, intention, and time; short-lived, impersonal contacts with families may not incur parental involvement (Lasater, 2019). Long-term programs and initiatives

that empowered families with pertinent information, compassion and opportunities for action were demonstrated to be more successful in engaging support for their students (Hill et al., 2018; Lasater, 2019; Perrault & Winters, 2020). Building honest, long-term partnerships with families equipped parents with understanding of the child's academic status, strategies for support, and potential consequences regarding the child's academic and professional success (Hill et al., 2018; Perrault & Winters, 2020). Understanding parent and teacher expectations coupled with active and positive relationships may provide a solid foundation to support student success (Affuso et al., 2023).

Summary

The purpose of this research was to describe teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies in a public middle school. Chapter Two of this study provided a systemic review of the existing literature related to this study area and an overview of the theoretical framework on which the study is based. This chapter began with a discussion of the sensemaking theory and its relevancy to research activities in the field of education and specifically teachers' experiences with social promotion policies. The chapter continued with the history of social promotion policies in the academic setting. Based on existing research over several decades, social promotion policies are controversial, yet considered more favorable than grade level retention for public education students. Of particular concern is the transition between middle and high school for students who are low achieving and have been socially promoted one or more times in the past (Brown et al., 2019). However, limited empirical data exists that focuses on social promotion policies for low achieving students in the middle and high school years (Mawhinney et al, 2016) while student retention during the middle school years is uncommon (Hughes et al., 2017).

Social promotion is possible because students are given inflated grades. The practice of grade inflation to pass along students has been demonstrated at the high school level (Attig, 2021; Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, 2018, Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). As a result of the propensity for grade inflation at the high school level, Attig (2021) and Sorurbakhsh-Castillo (2018) suggested the need for future research to better understand student grading policies and the degree to which grade inflation practices are utilized in the elementary and middle school setting. It was further encouraged for study at all levels of the K-12 system to better understand the causes and consequences of grade inflation (Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). Long held and commonly accepted policies in the educational field may need to be deeply scrutinized and reevaluated to determine the efficacy and validity of such choices and strategies in the quest to support student learning and success (Walton, 2018).

This study explored the social promotion policies at one middle school through the lens of veteran teachers to gain an understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions in implementing social promotion policies. Focusing on the experiences of middle school teachers who have implemented social promotion policies filled a gap in the literature as limited research exists that relates to teachers' perspectives and experiences with practices of social promotion particularly in the middle school setting. Further, the theoretical framework chosen for this study advanced the use of the sensemaking theory in education and offered insight into implementation of social promotion policies through the educators' perspective.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The goal of this chapter is to present a detailed account of the research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures utilized to perform this research study. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe middle school teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States. This chapter commences with discussion of the research design and presentation of the research question and sub questions. A description of the research setting and participants follows. The chapter continues with data collection and analysis processes, then concludes with a discussion of the activities to ensure trustworthiness. Chapter Three concludes with a summary highlighting key components of the chapter.

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used for this study. A qualitative methodology was used because this study explored teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies. Qualitative methodologies utilize individuals as the primary data source to provide descriptions and perceptions of their realities and activities while giving meaning to the studied phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). With a quest to understand the "wholeness of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21), phenomenology searches for meanings and relationships using a holistic approach that links individuals to the outside world (Moustakas, 1994). This study provided an opportunity to build understanding from the most basic source of data which is the individual. At the core of phenomenology is the quest to explore and develop a deep and robust understanding of an individual's experiences, perceptions, observations, and interactions as this provides the "first

method of knowledge" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). Utilizing individual experiences as the data source, shared experiences, and common themes extracted from the data were useful to identify key attributes, processes, or policies that could be used for future studies or affect change in policies or practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological qualitative research method was applicable for this study because the goal of this research was to understand the lived experiences of participants specific to a phenomenon that was shared amongst them. Specifically, this research sought to understand the experiences of teachers that have implemented social promotion policies in a public middle school.

The transcendental approach was applied to this phenomenological research. This phenomenological approach is unique as it requires the researcher to bracket, or set aside, preconceived judgements, knowledge, and experiences as "preparation for deriving new knowledge" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Guided by the research methods outlined by Moustakas (1994), the transcendental approach supported a pure and honest illumination of participant experiences as the participant is the primary source of data. Through a defined set of data analysis processes, the final synthesis of data collected from the participants drawn from this research illustrated the participants' experiences as they perceive them and not through the interpretive eye of the researcher. This information provides others the opportunity to understand the teachers' shared experiences, perspectives, and commonalities and potentially influence policy and administrative decisions.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research of this study:

Central Research Question

What are middle school teachers' shared experiences with social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States?

Sub Question One

How do middle school teachers perceive their role as a professional when implementing social promotion policies?

Sub Question Two

How do middle school teachers describe the process of implementing social promotion policies?

Sub Question Three

How do middle school teachers' past experiences with social promotion policies impact future pedagogical and instructional strategies?

Setting and Participants

The objective of this section is to provide a description of the research setting and participants. The discussion of the setting describes the size of the student and teacher population, provides insight into the academic characteristics of the student population and identifies details related to the communities within the school district. An overview of the study participants follows. This overview provides the rationale for choosing the site and a picture of the qualities and characteristics participants needed to possess to participate in the study.

Setting

The location of this study was identified with the pseudonym Smithtown Middle School located in the American Public School District; the district was in the southern United States. The district included over 21,000 students and approximately 1,700 teachers; more than half of

all students consistently performed below grade level expectations in ELA and math (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021). Even though most students performed at levels considered lower than proficient for academic grade level, less than two percent of these low achieving students were retained for the next school year (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021). This district was selected because the relationship between the high percentage of low achieving students and the low student retention rate suggested that social promotion may be occurring. Smithtown Middle School had an enrollment of approximately 900 students in the sixth, seventh and eighth grade classes.

The district consisted of approximately ten public schools that contain middle grades sixth through eight. These schools were a combination of traditional middle schools, K-8 schools and pre-K-8 schools. Each school exhibited different challenges, racial diversities, and socioeconomic issues. To maintain confidentiality and provide context, documents provided by the district were evaluated to garner a better picture of the students and teachers. Based on these documents, the percentage of ESOL, low income, and minority students enrolled in each neighborhood middle school varied depending on location within the district. The district was also in a period of transition and the surrounding communities have experienced growth and change over the past ten years. A network of teachers working in diverse communities and conditions provided a rich pool of potential participants with various experiences. It is also worthy to note teacher expectations and student needs may have shifted over time as the demographics changed. In addition, the teacher retention rate was approximately 85% and over 40% of teachers were not on a continuing contract (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021). This may indicate that there were frequent changes in the teaching staff. As the country continues to grow, populations migrate, and educational policies evolve, the need for a stable and

qualified teacher workforce is important for student success (Sutcher, et al., 2019).

This district was chosen for two main reasons. First, within this district, there was a high percentage of students that did not meet grade level proficiencies in ELA and math based on state assessments; however, the district-wide student retention rate was very low. The relationship between the large number of low achieving students and low retention rates suggested that students were being socially promoted. Secondly, there were approximately ten public schools that included middle school grades six through eight; these schools were characterized by unique conditions related to demographics, poverty, and community growth. As a result, the district offered a large and diverse pool of potential participants. For these reasons, the American Public School District was chosen as the setting for this study.

One middle school in the district, namely Smithtown Middle School, participated in the research. In addition to site approval by the district, the district required that each principal also approve site access. Smithtown Middle School was the only school that granted access.

Participants

For this research study, the participants were a collection of middle school teachers from one district middle school that houses middle grades six through eight. Each participant had experiences with social promotion policies, were willing to participate in study activities, and possessed five or more years of teaching experience. Five years of teaching experience was demonstrated to be the amount of time newer teachers begin to transition from pre-service perspectives gained from teacher preparation programs to a professional in the field with evolved perspectives (Coombs et al., 2018). Participants were current employees within the same public school and district located in the southern United States. The teachers who participated in study ranged in age from 31 to 64 and included seven females and six males.

Researcher Positionality

My motivation for this study was driven from my own experiences as a teacher who has implemented social promotion policies. Since transitioning from a professional in the private sector to a public school teacher more than 18 years ago, I experienced increasing pressures to meet unsurmountable needs of diverse student bodies while simultaneously trying to improve student academic abilities to grade level standards. The demands for marked student growth often conflicted with administrative and district mandates that prioritized SEL-, ESOL-, and equity-based initiatives. I enjoyed teaching but was torn by the moral and ethical dilemmas the profession presented to me and other educational professionals. This research provided me, and potentially administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders, the ability to better understand what teachers experienced and how teachers experienced the phenomenon of implementing and navigating through social promotion policies.

Interpretive Framework

In research, the interpretive framework referred to the guiding philosophy the researcher held and brought to the study and procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive framework that shaped this research was social constructivism. In social constructivist research, the goal is to understand the meaning participants give to their experiences; these meanings are based on participant perspectives, experiences, and interactions with the outside world (Creswell & Poth 2018). As an educator, life-long learner, and researcher, I believed that the process of learning occurs from a series of individual and social experiences that manifested into lessons that are continually evolving, expanding, and building. For example, based on my experiences with implementing social promotion policies, I constructed my own understanding of my role and place in the public school system. This reality was constructed through personal experiences

and influenced by social and environmental influences. The goal of this research was to understand the reality of the participants and the experiences that shaped that reality.

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are values and beliefs held by the researcher that will influence the choice of methodologies employed in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three philosophical assumptions presented in this research are ontological, epistemological, and axiological. An explanation of how each philosophical assumption was articulated in this research is discussed in subsequent sections.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption was articulated within my research activities. Ontology refers to the belief that each person develops their own reality or multiple realities, and those realities are unique and valid based on the individuals' experiences, values, and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This assumption was supported by certain procedures in this study. Personal interviews and journal prompts served as data collection methods to understand and subsequently report on the realities and perspectives of each participant. This process honored the realities specific to the individual participants and provided insight into their perspective of their world in context to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to understand the collective essence of the phenomenon, comprehension of individual realities and perspectives is important.

Epistemological Assumption

The nature of qualitative research requires extensive time in the field and considerable relationship with the participants; this characteristic supported the epistemological assumption that knowledge is acquired "through the subjective experiences of people" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). Researchers gain knowledge of each participant's realities by interacting closely

with them. The reality the researcher constructs is influenced by the collective of the participants and researcher. In this manner, the creation of reality is an amalgamation of personal experiences and influences and interactions with other people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Epistemological assumptions are evident during the data analysis steps when data from each participant is looked at collectively to determine shared experiences and perspectives. To fully extract the essences from the data and illustrate the experiences of the participants, a collective reality was built from multiple individual realities.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption implies that the researcher possesses previously generated values, beliefs and experiences that will influence all aspects of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To address inherent biases and subjectivities, I positioned myself within the research to identify my relationship with the purpose of the study, the participants, the setting, and personal values that will impact data analysis and conclusions. Following Moustakas (1994) transcendental design framework, my prior experiences, knowledge, and biases were bracketed out to ensure an objective research study.

Researcher's Role

I am a life-long learner and take pride in a strong work ethic. I maintain National Board Certification in earth and space sciences for adolescents and young adults, hold a master of science degree in environmental resource engineering and a master of arts degree in education. Serving as a public school educator is my second career; my initial career was in the private sector within the environmental engineering consulting industry. I view an effective public school system as a vital institution that supports national defense and prosperity. I also believe that the history of public education in America was designed to give all students a chance at a

free and rich life of their choosing.

I am an eighth-grade science teacher and work in the geographic region where the research was conducted. I did not have authority over any of the teacher participants. I had personal experiences and knowledge of practices related to implementing social promotion policies throughout my career in education. I do not agree with social promotion policies and believe the policy degrades the legitimacy of the public education system, negates the role of teachers, and inhibits students from learning both academically and socioemotionally. Through my experiences, I witnessed and interacted with other teachers who have also implemented social promotion policies that both agree and disagree with my perspectives.

Understanding my own experiences, perspectives, feelings, and subsequent actions, this research topic was chosen specifically to understand what and how other teachers experienced the same phenomenon of implementing social promotion policies. While performing all aspects of this research, I acknowledged that I may bring my personal experiences into the research process and in doing so would incur bias and subjectivity. As such, I value the necessity to bracket out my personal experiences, judgements, and opinions. Personal experiences and biases must be bracketed to allow for the shared experiences of the participants to be honestly and objectively portrayed and to bring true understanding (Moustakas, 1994). Since I was the only individual collecting data and interacting with the participants during this research, I served as the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and managed the dual role of "researcher and informant" (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013).

Procedures

In this section, the research methods are presented to support trustworthiness and replication of this research in the future. This section opens with steps taken to demonstrate

appropriate permissions and approvals that were secured prior to conducting research. The section follows with the recruitment process which illustrates how participants were recruited and selected. The types of data collection used in this research are then presented. Data were collected through personal interviews, journal prompts, and focus group sessions. This section continues with data analysis procedures consistent with Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological methods. This section concludes with a discussion of activities to demonstrate trustworthiness and a culminating summary.

Permissions

This study occurred in the American Public School District located in the southern United States. Prior to applying for approval with Liberty University's IRB (Appendix A), the American Public School District's chief instructional services officer was contacted to secure preliminary approval to conduct research within the district (Appendix B); this document later served as the final district and school level site approval. After acquiring site approval, an application was submitted to Liberty University to secure IRB approval (Appendix A). Upon confirmation of IRB approval, the district was notified, and the Director of Secondary Education confirmed site access to Smithtown Middle School and expansion of the participant pool to include all middle school teachers (Appendix B). Expanding participant recruitment to include all middle school teachers occurred during the IRB approval process and email confirmation of that modification is presented in Appendix B.

To recruit participants, the district required that each school principal approve research prior to contacting teachers within that school. One middle school, Smithtown Middle School, participated in the research study. Upon administrative approval, an email invitation (Appendix C) was sent to all teachers at Smithtown Middle School to request voluntary and confidential

participation in this study. An informed consent form (Appendix D) was attached to the email invitation for teachers to read and sign. The email invitation also included, in a separate attachment, a questionnaire (Appendix E) to aid in screening participants for eligibility. The recruitment email was sent to the teachers' district email from the researcher's Liberty University email account.

Depending on preference, teachers were provided the informed consent form to sign electronically or in person. The purpose of the informed consent form was to provide candidates and participants information, such as but not limited to, how they would be treated, what would be expected of them, their right to leave the study at any time without consequence, and how their identity would be protected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure confidentiality, candidate and participant names were replaced with pseudonyms that were kept in a separate location from the data. For study participants, completed consent forms were secured in a third location. In addition, all documents and files related to the research, data collection and analysis were locked and secured. Paper documents and taped recordings were secured in a locked cabinet while electronic files were secured in password-protected digital files. In all cases, access to data and records throughout the research process was protected and controlled to ensure only select Liberty University staff and researcher had access.

Recruitment Plan

The sampling pool for this research included more than 50 teachers in Smithtown Middle School. For this research study, 13 teachers were selected to participate in the study based on purposive random sampling strategies. Participant groups may vary for phenomenological research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested three to ten participants while Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested up to 25 participants were needed to ensure heterogeneity, allow for deep

data collection, and support saturation of themes. A participant group of 12 to 15 was proposed and the final participant number was 13. The final participant number was determined when participant data did not initiate new themes or information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2019).

The benefit of a purposive sampling strategy was to ensure that participants met the specific criteria related to the phenomenon being studied and minimized judgements or biases in the selection process (Patton, 2015). Following appropriate approvals from Liberty University IRB, American Public School District, and Smithtown Middle School, a list of teacher emails was generated from the district directory. Teachers from grades six through eight were included in the recruitment activities to account for teachers that may simultaneously teach different grade levels or transition between grades during different academic years. From this list, an emailed invitation was sent to teachers to participate voluntarily and confidentially in the research study. The email included the informed consent form (Appendix D) and recruitment questionnaire (Appendix E). The questionnaire served as a screening mechanism. Based on the responses from the questionnaires, study participants who met eligibility requirements were selected using purposive sampling. Eighteen teachers responded to the recruitment email.

The questionnaire was created using Google Form software and allowed potential participants to electronically complete the form while complying with IRB requirements regarding informed consent. Potential candidates stated to have had experiences with social promotion policies, were willing to participate in study activities, and had five or more years of teaching experience in a public school district. Five years of teaching experience was demonstrated to be the amount of time when newer teachers begin to transition from perspectives gained from teacher preparation programs to perspectives gained from professional, real-life

experiences (Coombs et al., 2018). After a candidate pool of 18 teachers was determined, the thirteen participants were selected. The sample size and purposive sampling approach helped to focus on those individuals that had the relevant experiences related to the purpose of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The questionnaire (Appendix E) to determine participant eligibility was delivered to all prospective teachers through their district email. To be eligible, teachers met the following criteria: (1) acknowledged they had experiences with social promotion policies; (2) taught in a public school district for 5 or more years; (3) willing and able to share their experiences; and (4) willing to successfully participate and complete participant expectations (i.e., interview, journal prompts, focus group, and member checking session). Study participants received a consent form (Appendix D) prior to initiation of any data collection; each participant was given opportunity to review the form which they signed and returned either in-person or electronically.

Data Collection Plan

Qualitative studies tend to be based on methods that are more holistic and organic which allow for the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding when compared to quantitative studies. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated the importance of generating research that demonstrates extensive time in the field that induces connections between different sources of data. Extensive data collection is important to demonstrate the shared experiences of the participants. The method of triangulation was used to garner an understanding of teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies and was documented utilizing three different qualitative data collection methods. Data collection methods included participant interviews, written responses to journal prompts and focus group sessions. The candidate questionnaire was included in this section as a quantitative tool to better illustrate teacher demographics and

eligibility.

Questionnaire Data Collection Approach

To recruit participants, select middle school teachers within the district were invited to participate in the study. Potential volunteers were emailed an invitation, provided with the informed consent form (Appendix D) and asked to complete a questionnaire to determine eligibility (Appendix E). The questionnaire was written in accordance with IRB standards to ensure teacher confidentiality. The participants were advised that participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and if selected, participation was confidential. The researcher held no authority over potential participants. Prior to sending the email to teachers, the questionnaire was piloted to ensure understandability and functioning. To pilot the questionnaire, it was sent to two colleagues not related to the study and were verbally asked to complete the questionnaire and provide constructive criticism upon completion. The pilot identified no revisions were needed. The questionnaire included six short answer questions, two Likert-style questions and one open ended question.

Questionnaire Questions

The questionnaire questions were:

1. Name:
2. If selected to participate in this study, you will be contacted by email. Please provide a convenient email address for future correspondence:
3. Gender:
4. Age:
5. Highest degree earned:
6. Years teaching in a public school district:

7. Primary grade and subject taught:

Questions one through seven were closed answer questions. These questions were used to provide general demographic information of the participants and provide professional background to indicate eligibility related to content area and years of teaching experience.

Please use the following scale to answer questions 8 and 9:

1 = strongly agree 2 = agree 3 = disagree 4 = strongly disagree

8. Since I have been a teacher, I can recall students being promoted that did not exhibit grade level abilities.
9. I am confident that I can recall, reflect and discuss details of my experiences with social promotion policies.

Questions eight and nine were Likert-style questions. This style of questioning provided a general understanding of whether the teacher had experience implementing social promotion policies and was able to willingly share those experiences. A four-point Likert scale was chosen to support respondents in developing thoughtful and decisive responses (Mangione, 1995).

Please answer question 10 in two or more complete sentences.

10. How do you define your current role as a teacher? Explain how your current role as a teacher aligns/does not align with your purpose for being a teacher.

Question ten was the only open-ended question. The purpose of this question was to garner a preliminary estimate of the participants' ability to be open and forthcoming with sharing their experiences. In addition, the question sought to solicit initial information related to individual identity as a teacher and in the institution of public education, and a potential shift over time of their perception of their professional role. Weick (1995) describes seven properties of sensemaking and question ten intended to address the following three of the properties in the

process of sensemaking; these are: construction of identity, retrospection, and enactment in the organization.

Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan

The data collected from the questionnaires was evaluated, based on participant eligibility, regarding teaching experience, grade level, content area, and preliminary understanding of their willingness and ability to share their experiences with social promotion policies. For those teachers selected to participate in the study, a pseudonym was given to each using a random androgenous name generator (Pelletier et al., 2020), and the demographic data were tabulated. For question ten, teacher responses were reviewed for preliminary themes or consistencies and were not used during the data analysis process.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Participant interviews served as the major source of data in this study. Consistent with phenomenological methodologies, participant interviews are generally the largest source of data and are appropriate as they provide primary source data of the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were conducted with each participant at a time and location specified by the participant and were completed in one session. Interviews followed specific protocols (Appendix F) that defined the structure and format of the interview session to ensure consistency, thoroughness, and collection of data while documenting notable events during the process (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Each personal interview followed a standardized list of interview questions (Appendix G). This format was chosen to reduce bias and improve comparability between participants (Patton, 2015). There were 16 standardized interview questions. The questions started with one grand tour question (Marshall & Rossman, 2012) and then followed with a series of broad questions to obtain “rich, vital, substantive

descriptions" of participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116). The purpose of the grand tour question was to decrease vulnerability and generate rapport to support participants in sharing their experiences with a topic they value in a comfortable manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2012). Probing questions were included, as needed, to delve deeper in the teachers' experience and/or to provide clarification (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Standardized Interview Questions

The standardized, open-ended interview questions were:

Grand tour question:

1. Please describe your educational background and career, including your current position. CRQ

Questions related to individual experiences:

2. What is your understanding of social promotion? SQ1
3. How do you feel as a professional when you know you have students in your class that are not up to grade-level standards and yet you still have to pass them to the next grade level? SQ1
4. Based on your experience and perspective, how do social promotion policies impact student learning? SQ1
5. In your role as an educator, how do feel social promotion policies impact your identity as a teacher? SQ1

Questions related to experiences within a social and organizational environment:

6. What formal and informal policies do you follow when deciding to promote or retain low-achieving students? SQ2

7. How do governmental and district mandates influence you when deciding to promote or retain low-skilled students? SQ2
8. What mechanisms are in place to reward or penalize teachers during or after the process of promoting or retaining low-skilled students? SQ2
9. How do your colleagues, counselors, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders impact the decision-making process when promoting or retaining a student? SQ2
10. Based on your experiences, what is the most influential factor when deciding to promote a low-achieving student? SQ2
11. Based on your experience and perspective, why do think social promotion policies continue to persist? SQ2

Questions related to how past experiences and current perceptions impact future actions:

12. What are the behavioral, academic, and social characteristics of low-achieving students? SQ3
13. How do these characteristics impact your ability to promote student growth and achievement? SQ3
14. How does working with students that are not up to grade-level standards impact your choice of instructional strategies and student expectations? SQ3
15. Based on documents provided by the district, the mission statement states that the district, "through a personalized learning approach, will prepare graduates who compete and succeed in an ever-changing global society and career marketplace," Explain your level of effectiveness in supporting this statement in light of implementing social promotion policies. SQ3

16. Is there anything else not covered that you think I should know about your experiences with social promotion policies in your district? CQR

A grand tour question (Marshall & Rossman, 2012) was chosen for question one to build rapport with the participant. This style of question was very broad but allowed participants to answer in a manner that is unique to them and engage dialogue. This question also addressed the participants' ability to provide a retrospective account of their experiences as teachers. Retrospection is one property of the sensemaking theory.

Questions two through five sought to understand how the teacher perceived their role as an individual person and as a teaching professional. These questions were written to garner experiences and perceptions that relate to different properties of the sensemaking theory. These properties included identity construction, retrospection and enactment in their environment.

Questions six through eleven continued to expand on the properties of the sensemaking theory to dive deeper into understanding teachers' experiences with social promotion policies. These questions focused on the properties related to the social and ongoing processes of sensemaking as well as the impact of external forces that maintain certain processes. Teachers are sometimes expected to meet job expectations without appropriate resources and directions; because of this, teachers will take action and make decisions on their own accord (Drake, 2017; Harklau & Yang, 2020). Weick (1995) explained that employees may experience influential pressures from peers, government mandates, recognitions, and administrative policies when performing job functions. These questions were designed to understand if and how teachers received pressures to implement social promotion policies within the school or district.

Question 12 through 15 were related to the third supporting research question. These questions asked teachers to elaborate how their experiences with social promotion policies

impacted their actions and choices in the classroom. In the sensemaking theory, it is the individual's perception and reality of past experiences that impact future actions (Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1995). Teachers may respond to the academic successes and failures of their students (Dunn, 2020) and this question helped to determine how, if at all, social promotion policies impacted teachers' pedagogical and instructional choices.

Question 16 was a closing question and allowed participants to respond in any manner that they felt appropriate.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis of qualitative data is an iterative and interrelated process of steps that occur both simultaneously and independent of each other that will include a variety of techniques; the process is sometimes referred to as a spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). At the beginning of this spiral was the process of data management which included the use of a detailed organization system using the Google platform and paper-based methods. Electronic files were password protected and a file naming system was incorporated to organize the data materials. The data analysis plan for individual interviews included bracketing, horizonalization, and development of themes (Moustakas, 1994).

Interviews were transcribed using a transcription service and were reviewed for accuracy. The transcription service used was Otter.ai. To review the transcription, the audio file was listened to while reading the transcription text. The text was edited, as needed, to portray an accurate account of the interview and correct transcription errors. In addition, participants were offered an electronic version of the transcribed interview to confirm an accurate account of their experiences was documented. Ten of the participants waived the opportunity to review the transcribed interviews. The three participants who requested copies of the transcribed interviews

did not have any comments or edits. The transcribed interviews were imported into a cloud-based, qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) named Dedoose. The quantitative data collected from the recruitment process was used to describe each participant in the QDAS. The interview transcripts were then linked to each participant.

Prior to reviewing the transcripts, the first step conducted in the "phenomenological reduction" process was bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314, Moustakas, 1994). During the step of bracketing, every effort was made to identify and set aside prior experiences, biases and beliefs from impacting the interpretation of the data and to most objectively understand and express participant experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Identification and acknowledgement of preconceived judgements and personal experiences prior to data analysis supported a more objective perspective when making observations, and processing and analyzing the data. The process of bracketing provided personal awareness and discernment throughout the process to support objectivity and open-mindedness needed to fully capture the shared experiences of the participants.

During the next step of horizonalization, the data and output was reviewed and analyzed to identify and record a list of meaningful phrases and statements, or horizons. Each statement was a text-based description of the lived experiences of the participant that was reduced to useable pieces and phrases and potentially used for further analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Each statement was viewed as an independent piece of data with equal value and weighting. From the statements, a list of descriptions was generated that provided strands of text representative of the teachers' experiences. To fully appreciate the data and participants' experiences and descriptions, both the recordings and transcripts of the interviews were iteratively utilized during data analysis. The QDAS was used to record, manage and store

interview transcripts and lists of meaningful phrases. Interview transcripts from the 13 participants yielded approximately 600 meaningful phrases. The 600 meaningful phrases were divided into 16 delimited horizons or meanings. The process of delimiting the horizons served as a way to further reduce the meaningful phrases into more focused and manageable categories reflected by participant responses and comparable to "winnowing the data" as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 192).

The initial research questions were considered as a guide as the delimited horizons were further analyzed to develop thematic units. As needed, the text was analyzed and further reduced, descriptors that were redundant, repetitive, or not aligned with the research questions were extracted from the data; this process developed broader categories, or themes, delineated by textural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A textural description of the experiences included discussion of the themes with evidence supported by quotes and text extracted from participant interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Five themes related to the textural descriptions of the teachers' experiences were derived from the 13 participant interviews.

The textural themes were used to support the next step in data analysis which was the imaginative variation. As described by Moustakas (1994), imaginative variation seeks to identify the "underlying and precipitating factors that account for what was being experienced" (p. 98). This was performed by looking at the textural themes with imagination through multiple and conflicting perspectives, roles and approaches; as a consequence, structural themes emerged (Moustakas, 1994). This step provided context to the textural themes derived from data collection and illustrated what the participants experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Through the process of imaginative variation, teacher experiences were illustrated with a deeper understanding of the individual, social, and organizational backgrounds and considered relevant

situations that supported the textural descriptions. Through the process of imaginative variation, structural themes were developed to describe how the experiences occurred (Moustakas, 1994).

Journal Prompts Data Collection Approach

The second type of data collection was a modified journaling experience completed by each participant. Participant journaling, supported by question prompts, was the second data type. Journaling is believed to be an effective tool to delve deeper into areas not addressed in the interview; however, researchers are often challenged with poor participation by participants due to feelings of vulnerability and the need for commitment and focus (Hayman et al., 2012). To gain more understanding of teacher experiences, each participant answered five journal prompts to the best of their ability to expand data collection and enrich responses to interview questions. Journal prompts were related to the central and supporting research questions but differed from the standardized research questions.

Within 24-hours of the interview, participants were emailed a link to a Google Form that contained the journal prompts (Appendix H). Teachers were offered the opportunity to verbally answer the questions as a supplement to the previous interview session or as a recording if they felt apprehension with writing. Each participant chose to respond to journal prompts by writing their answers electronically in the Google Form. The teachers were requested to return the journal prompts within seven days of the interview. Of the thirteen participants that participated in the interview, twelve participants returned the journal prompts. Participants were given the option to receive a copy of their responses upon submittal. None of the teachers requested to make changes to journal prompts after their submission.

Journal Prompts

The standardized journal prompts are as follows:

1. I promoted students that were not ready for the next grade because…
2. How have your experiences with social promotion impacted you as a teacher?
3. Think of one student that you socially promoted and later saw as an adult. How did the student fare in their career and in life in general?
4. Based on my experiences, social promotion policies were ineffective when…
5. Based on my experiences, social promotion policies were effective when…

These questions were designed to elaborate upon the standardized research questions to solicit in-depth understanding of how teachers make sense of social promotion policies. Journal prompts one and two focused on individual perceptions of social promotion policies. Journal prompt three considered the teacher as part of a larger network in a student's life and provided insight into how social promotion policies may impact a student's future. The final journal prompts, questions four and five, allowed the teacher to describe their perceptions on the adequacy of social promotion policies based on professional experiences. These questions aligned with sensemaking properties outlined by Weick (1995), specifically related to identity creation, enactment, social construction, and plausibility.

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

The data collected as part of the journal prompts was analyzed using the same process outlined by Moustakas (1994). Teacher responses to the journal prompts were transferred from the Google Forms electronic files and saved in participant-specific password protected Word files. Each file was imported into Dedoose and linked to each participant as a separate file from the interview transcripts. Prior to review and analysis of the journal responses, the researcher reflected on personal experiences and biases to bracket out subjectivity to ensure objectivity during analysis. The journal prompts were analyzed following the process of horizonalization.

Meaningful phrases that resulted from horizonalization were evaluated to develop common textural thematic units. The themes generated from the journal prompts were compared to themes developed during the analysis of the interview process and collectively the thematic units were used in imaginative variation techniques that generated structural themes. The initial data analysis procedures related to the participant journals were similar and separate from the data analysis procedures associated with personal interviews. Data analysis of the journal prompts was consistent with the five themes extracted from the interview data.

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

The third type of data collection was from two focus group sessions. Seven of the study participants engaged in one of two focus group sessions. In addition, one participant was asked the focus group questions individually due to scheduling conflicts. Using Zoom software, the virtual sessions served as an opportunity to gain clarification of the data collected during previous interviews and journal prompts, delve deeper into preliminary findings during early stages of data analysis, and gain deeper insight into emerging themes. The focus group sessions provided the benefit of group interaction between participants which supported more dynamic communication, open sharing of different perspectives, and the opportunity to relate findings to everyday experiences as participants built on each other's contributions (Tausch & Menold, 2016). A standardized list of focus group questions is presented in Appendix I. The development of focus group questions was suggested to be created after preliminary data analysis was performed from the personal interviews and journal prompts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group questions were created after the collection and analysis of interview and journal prompt data from six participants. The chronological order of the focus groups sessions followed interviews and journal prompts; this order allowed for participant feedback on the initial findings

of data analysis.

Focus Group Questions

The standardized focus group questions are as follows:

1. Describe the defined limits of your role as teacher?
2. How do you feel social promotion policies influence stakeholders' perceptions of your school's effectiveness?
3. Considering your own instructional practices, how have social promotion policies impacted your effectiveness as a teacher?
4. One theme among teachers has been frustration with social promotion polices (i.e., teacher helplessness, devaluation, student motivation, etc.) yet teachers have stated to have a myriad of instructional strategies and willingness to try different methods to support student learning. Where does this teacher grit and persistence come from?
5. There were noted inconsistencies associated with social promotion policies (i.e., what administration wants versus what happens in the classroom, academics versus social-emotional learning, disagreement with social promotion but continuing to participate and expect other teachers to do as well, high expectations but willing to manipulate assignments and grades). How do you think these inconsistencies were cultivated and internalized by a variety of teachers?
6. How do those inconsistencies impact your self-efficacy?
7. One participant introduced the concept of gradebook management as a process to inflate grades throughout the school year to ensure student promotion. What are your thoughts on gradebook management as a tool to support social promotion?
8. What are the long-term effects of social promotion policies on middle school teachers?

The questions were designed to address initial themes presented in the data analysis of the interviews and journal prompts. These questions were written to align with three occasions for sensemaking as described by Weick (1995); these occasions are based on instances of time within an organization that when an individual may experience information load, complexity, and turbulence. Information load refers to the expanse of job expectations linked with the quantity of information that needs processing; as information load increases, individuals will manipulate procedures to handle the demand (Weick, 1995). Complexity refers to a high degree of interdependence between a large number of diverse elements; complex work environments may lead to confusion that often causes the individual to develop a modified process to achieve results (Weick, 1995). Turbulence refers to the frequency of change. It is suggested that all three occasions drive uncertainty and ambiguity and as a response, individuals may make sense of the situation in their own terms (Weick, 1995). In addition, questions 2 and 8 were derived from prior research related to the social promotion policies at the high school level (Attig, 2021) and provided further insight into sensemaking processes related to identity construction, external pressures and future enactment (Weick, 1995).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The focus group sessions were conducted after the completion of all participant interviews and participant submittals of journal prompts. Focus group sessions were recorded using Zoom software. An effort to support participants' confidentiality was performed by using pseudonyms for on-screen names and allowing participants cameras to remain off. All focus group audio files were transcribed using Otter.ai transcription services; derived text files were transferred to electronic Word documents and saved in a password protected file. The transcript files of the focus group sessions were imported into the QDAS Dedoose and remained separate

from the interview and journal prompt data. The focus group data were analyzed in a similar manner as the interview and journal prompt data. The data collected from the focus group sessions provided feedback on the preliminary themes developed using the interview and journal prompt data, and the focus group sessions provided further clarification and understanding of teacher experiences. As a result, after analysis of the focus group sessions, the number of thematic units was reduced to four.

Data Synthesis

The final step in the data analysis process was to intuitively integrate the textural and structural themes to describe the essences of the shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Through the imaginative variation process, both textural and structural themes derived from the personal interviews, journal prompts, and focus group sessions were collated for a manual analysis. This analysis compared, integrated, and synthesized the textural and structural themes from the three data sources to develop the essence of teacher experiences. The essences of the experiences were synthesized with the textural and structural themes to develop an explanation of what the participants experienced and how the participants experienced it at a given time and place (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). As the climactic attribute of the research activities, this amalgamation of themes would occur through repetitive evaluation, reflection, and objective intuition that was based on the data collected from teachers on their experiences with social promotion policies.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was enforced through the implementation of several techniques to address the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This section discusses each of those concepts and

provides an explanation of how relevant techniques were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research process.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility and participant honesty, it is important for participants to be aware that their participation is voluntary, they have the freedom to withdraw and/or refuse to answer certain questions without consequence, and the researcher is committed to honor voluntary and non-persuasive participation (Shenton, 2004). To support credibility, each participant was informed that participation was voluntary during the recruitment process, at the beginning of the interview, and at the beginning of the focus group sessions. To further ensure credibility, the processes of member checking, triangulation, and debriefing was used.

Member Checking

Member checking is a means to garner feedback and validation from study participants regarding the analysis of descriptions and themes during the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking occurred during data analysis to ensure participants concurred with preliminary results and the researcher's objective understanding of thematic units. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews shortly after the interview session to confirm their agreement with their responses. Ten of the 13 participants waived this opportunity to review transcripts; the participants that did request transcripts did not have any changes. All participants were given the opportunity to review responses to journal prompts; none of the participants requested modification to journal prompts. The researcher provided to each participant a written description of that participant

through the lens of the research and data for preliminary review. Two of 13 participants requested revisions to their description. One request promoted participant confidentiality and the other request was a modification to professional background.

Following preliminary data analysis of the interview and journal prompt data, preliminary results and thematic units were presented in the focus groups sessions. Participant feedback was evaluated and it was determined that a reanalysis of preliminary results was needed. The revised themes were discussed individually with ten of the 13 participants as member checking opportunities. To ensure confidentiality, member checking occurred during private meetings and through email correspondence with the participants.

Triangulation

Triangulation refers to the use of different methods and sources of data collection to determine if common themes and concepts were present in a variety of data; commonalities between methods and sources support a deep, rich, and extensive breadth of research into the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2014). Triangulation was achieved because data were collected from multiple and diverse methodologies. The different methodologies included personal interviews, journal prompts, and focus group sessions. Data collection occurred over a period of four months. The four months coincided with the traditional period of summer vacation, the beginning of a new school term, and ended at the beginning of the first marking period. Throughout this range of time, data suggested that themes were saturated and consistently presented. Common themes that continued to emerge over time offered another source of triangulation (Patton, 2014).

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing was a continual process throughout the research process. The purpose of peer debriefing was to have dialogue and examination with an objective, detached individual to scrutinize research practices, analyses, and thought processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing was performed with dissertation committee members and occurred on a routine basis. These sessions identified personal biases, blind spots, limitations, and lead to alternative perspectives when studying the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing occurred throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Peer debriefing was given to topics such as, but not limited to, interview protocols and questioning techniques, preliminary data for the use in developing focus group sessions, development of themes in the QDAS, potentials for subjectivity, and determination of data saturation.

Transferability

For a research study to be considered transferable, the outcomes of the study would be applicable to a different setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transferability also implies that the research design and results may be representative of other settings and circumstances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure transferability, Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to the notion of "generating a rich, thick description" (p. 263) of the site and participants of the study. A thick and rich description of these components of the study would allow others to determine and evaluate both the shared and unique characteristics of the setting and participants to gauge applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To promote transferability, the site and participants are presented in such a manner that a reasonable comparison to other contexts will be able to support future researchers to replicate this study.

This study included 13 participants that possessed a combined total of approximately 250 years of teaching experiences. Within the 13 participants, all three traditional middle school grades were comparably represented and all four content areas were equally represented with the inclusion of one elective teacher. The collection of teachers possessed experiences not only from the current middle school but also from approximately 10 different states, multiple counties within the state and multiple schools within the district. The teachers varied in educational attainment as four teachers held a bachelor's degree and the remainder held one or more master's degrees and/or professional certificates in administration. In addition to their current position in the middle school, all of the teachers had previous experiences teaching at other levels including the elementary, high school and/or college level. The vast array of teaching experience and representation may suggest that research outcomes may be transferable.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the capacity to perform the research over again and still produce results and conclusions which are consistent with the original research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using this research as a "prototype model" (Shenton, 2004, p. 71), dependability would infer that this study, including the data collection and data analysis procedures, could be replicated to generate similar findings. Dependability is effectively demonstrated in research by providing a thorough account of data collection and data analysis procedures supported with notes and evaluations of their effectiveness or limitations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the course of this study, dependability was ensured by maintaining a record of notes and memos compiled during the interview process, preliminary data analysis, focus group sessions and committee member meetings. Committee members served as the external reviewers to assure that procedures were detailed, specific and objective.

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). Confirmability was accomplished through an audit trail. The audit trail provides a history of steps and processes that a researcher conducted throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An audit trail was maintained and provided a chronological record of notes, summaries, information regarding iterations of the data analysis process, and reflection memos. In addition, the dissertation chair provided review of the process throughout data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were vital during all aspects of the study to ensure safety, trustworthiness, and validity of the study. Even though qualitative research may appear harmless to the individual, Creswell and Poth (2018) identified several ethical issues that were considered. Privacy and confidentiality of the study participants was respected as the nature of the interview questions requested that teachers respond honestly and candidly about policies that could be detrimental to their position. Study participants remained confidential throughout the process, interviews were conducted at locations and times specified by the participant, and all participant identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms. In addition, participant data were not shared with other individuals, electronic documents were password protected in a database management system, paper documents were stored in a locked cabinet, and computer systems were password protected. The collected data, including but not limited to video and audio recordings, transcripts, and journal entries will be securely maintained for three years after fulfillment of the research and then destroyed. All participants were treated equally and in a similar manner regardless of their experiences, perceptions, or level of participation. They were given ample

time to share without judgement, asked the same questions and not coerced, led, or influenced to answer in a way that was biased or not an honest representation of their experiences. All study participants were invited to complete am informed consent form (Appendix D) that was acceptable to the Liberty University's IRB.

Summary

The goal of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences with social promotion policies of middle school teachers within a public school district. Chapter Three outlined the methodologies used to recruit and select participants. The chapter also identified how a variety of phenomenological methods were utilized to collect three forms of phenomenological data and subsequently perform data analysis. Participant selection and interview design were conducted in accordance with procedures outlined by Patton (2015). Methods associated with data analysis were developed in accordance with phenomenological methods outlined by Moustakas (1994) and included bracketing, horizonalization, development of thematic units, imaginative variation, and synthesis of the essence. Chapter Three concluded with a discussion that focused on activities to support trustworthiness of the research and promote ethical standards.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research was to understand middle school teachers' experiences with social promotion policies in a public school district. Chapter Four presents the data collected and discusses the results of the data analysis process. This chapter begins with a description of participants in tabulated and discussion formats. The chapter proceeds with a summary of themes identified during implementation of the data analysis procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994). Chapter 4 concludes with responses to the central research question and three sub research questions.

Participants

The recruitment process yielded 13 teachers who participated in the study. Each teacher met eligibility requirements and was able and willing to recount and communicate their experiences with social promotion policies. Each participant signed the IRB approved consent form that explained the voluntary participant expectations and researcher's commitment to confidentiality. Table 1 presents a summary of participant information including demographic participation, professional background, and responses to select questions collected during participant recruitment. Teacher descriptions were intentionally vague to ensure participant confidentiality and are presented in alphabetical order.

Table 1.

Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Teacher Participants

Participant Characteristics	Number of Teachers
Gender	
Male	6
Female	7
Age	
Below 30	0
31 to 45	4
46 to 60	5
Greater than 60	4
Years Teaching	
5 to 10 years	4
11 to 20 years	3
Greater than 20	6
Most Recent Grade Level Taught	
6th Grade	3
7th Grade	3
8th Grade	4
Mixed-grade classes	3
Content Area	
Math	3
ELA	3
Science	3
Social Studies	3
Other	1
Highest Degree Earned	
Bachelors	4
Masters	4
Masters +30 credit hours	5
Doctorate	0
Can recall promoting students that did not exhibit grade level abilities.	
Strongly agree	11
Agree	2
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	0
Confident to recall, reflect and discuss details of experiences with social promotion policies.	
Strongly agree	6
Agree	7
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	0

Austin

Austin has been a teacher for approximately 10 years and has taught a core content class that did not have a state mandated assessment. Austin's teaching experience included prior tenure in another state at the high school level. Austin described a strong work ethic when achieving personal goals and indicated that working multiple jobs while in high school and college was integral to developing responsibility and enriching personal and professional experiences. Austin did not support social promotion policies and believed that individuals that support a system that continued to "pass along kids aren't realizing we're crippling them for life or giving them that crutch that's not going to be there once they're out of high school." Relating education back to personal experiences, Austin stated, "I was always expected as a kid that I was going to be challenged." Austin believed that social promotion polices minimized the challenges that students needed to grow academically and emotionally but explained that other systemic problems were present that supported social promotion policies. Austin stated, "I think the biggest problem is almost, it's outside the hands of schools, doing this. I think it comes down to the breakdown of the American family, not having a mom and a dad at home." In the classroom, it was important for Austin to build students' critical thinking skills and sense of success on a daily basis.

Blake

Blake has over 20 years of experience in the educational field and worked in two different states prior to the current position at Smithtown Middle School. Blake possesses two advanced degrees beyond a bachelor's degree and held a variety of positions including teacher, administrator and teacher on special assignment. When serving as a teacher, Blake taught a core content class with a state mandated assessment in the middle and high school settings. Blake

identified familiarity with implementing social promotion policies; this was evidenced when Blake stated, “I’ve never known anything different because I’ve always taught kids who were significantly below grade level.” Blake further explained that “I don’t believe it helps to retain kids…but most of my career, I have believed that it [retention] does more harm than good.” This belief stemmed from what Blake described as a “broken system…where the grades aren’t really true representations of what they [students] know.” Blake acknowledged that students likely struggled in later academic years, however Blake also believed social promotion was the best option within the confines of the traditional grading system.

Cameron

Cameron had a previous career before entering education and has been teaching for approximately 15 years. Cameron possesses a master’s degree, is certified at both the elementary and middle school levels and commonly taught one or more core content classes simultaneously in a single year. Most of Cameron’s career was teaching classes with a state mandated assessment. Prior teaching experience in a different state prepared Cameron with implementing social promotion policies that were relatively consistent with practices at the current site location. Cameron acknowledged that socially promoting students likely posed negative consequences. This was evidenced when Cameron stated, “unless an intervention happens, there’s going to be low achieving students, whether you retain them or whether you pass them on, they [the students] are going to continue to be low achieving and eventually drop out.” In light of the controversial nature of the policy, Cameron also was sympathetic to the socioemotional aspect of retention. Cameron stated, “I truly, honestly believe that they [the students] are better off with their age group…I think age is a better judge of where people should

be as far as maturity goes." Much of Cameron's experiences and perspectives of social promotion policies were centered on the future well-being and success of the student.

Charlie

Charlie has been teaching for over 20 years, possesses two master's degrees and is certified in grades 7 through 12. Charlie began teaching in another state and subsequently moved to the district and since taught a core content subject with a mandated state assessment in the middle school setting. Prior to Charlie's current position, Charlie taught in the high school setting and had limited experience with social promotion policies where students "moved from grade to grade." Based on prior experiences, Charlie explained retention policies were made on an individual basis and the teacher "would recommend that they [the students] repeat even if they did pass or if they didn't meet the prerequisite." Charlie identified a shift in assessment procedures when working in the middle school. Observing that content knowledge was not the primary determinant in grades, Charlie explained how student workload and emotions impacted teaching strategies. Charlie stated:

> I was told that if a student gets behind [on their assignments], then it's nearly impossible for them to get the work in and they get frustrated. So, that was another thing that I had to make an adjustment for…I never had that issue in high school.

This statement suggested that Charlie recognized differences and then accommodated those differences in educational practices with the transition from high school to middle school regarding student grading and expectations.

Elliott

Elliott has been teaching for approximately 20 years and had a previous career prior to entering the public education system. Elliott possesses a master's degree and taught a core

content class with a state mandated assessment in several different middle schools within the district. Elliott has conflicting views of social promotion policies and is aware of own personal conflictions. This was evidenced during the interview. For example, Elliott did not believe in failing students but explained, “I don’t know what the right thing to do is with the failing [students], you know. For me, I always want to give kids a chance.” At a different point, Elliott stated that the socially promoted students can “cause chaos, because they’re still behind. They’re still that struggling learner and now, they’re just that much older in the grade.” These statements suggested that Elliott was aware of the potential risks of retaining a student yet wanted to provide the best opportunity for that student. Elliott made multiple references that trying to fit the current education model to the diverse needs of student populations was problematic and allowed social promotion policies to exist.

Hunter

Hunter has been teaching for less than 10 years and arrived in the educational field after serving in a different professional industry. Hunter possesses two master’s degrees, had experience working with adult learners, and attained teacher certification through an alternative pathway. Hunter has taught in the same school within the district since commencing a career in education and taught a core content class with a state mandated assessment. Due to a previous career field, Hunter was not only experienced with teaching and working with diverse populations, but also was vested in their success. This previous career background influenced Hunter’s understanding of social promotion as:

> having that awareness of…their background…culture a little bit, sometimes it’s just where they’ve lived before. And social promotion is just kind of being aware of that and

> being accepting of it, and kind of also being aware of how our actions can have positive or negative influences or on people based on their backgrounds.

Hunter's understanding of social promotion was inconsistent with the traditional definition used in education; however, it was evident that Hunter was familiar with social promotion policies. When reflecting on a hypothetical student's assessment and promotion, Hunter stated:

> okay, well, you know, we'll get the student through…if he had an end of year test, and that was the deciding factor, then he probably wouldn't be able to pass it, you know, not a real hard [test], just a basic test.

This statement implied that efforts are made by the teacher to support student promotion even though student academic abilities are not reflective of grade level standards.

Jamie

Jamie has over 20 years of experience teaching a core content subject area and maintains certification in grade levels 7 through 12. Jamie's teaching career began out of state at the high school level and subsequently transitioned to the middle school level over 10 years ago after relocating to the area. Jamie does not currently teach a course with a mandated state assessment but was familiar with teaching courses that required state assessments from prior experiences at the high school level. Jamie took pride in maintaining high expectations as a teacher and expected the students to do the same. When discussing the role of teacher in the classroom, Jamie stated:

> "…this is the expectation, you [students] have to meet it." So, it's my job as a teacher to get them to meet it. They have to do their part. I'm not going to give it [passing grades] to them because I can't take tests for them.

Jamie's teaching philosophy and high standards were rooted in personal experiences; this was evident when Jamie stated:

> I know what I had to do when I was a kid, and I'm like, well, they need to be able to do that. I know what they have to do. If they go to college, I know what they have to do if they work in certain jobs, because again, I had experience in other fields outside of education.

Jamie felt it was important for students to understand the relationship between hard work and academic abilities to future success and happiness.

Joey

Joey has been teaching for approximately 20 years and is certified to teach elementary and middle school grades. Joey had previously taught in two other states and in other districts within the current state of residence. When relocating to the area, Joey secured a middle school position and had since taught a core content class with a state mandated assessment. Joey identified as a traditional teacher with straightforward and fair expectations. When discussing leadership style, Joey stated:

> I'm old school, get it done. That's it. There's no excuses. Don't give me anything [excuses], you get it done by this day. But circumstances come up and certain students do have legitimate circumstances and I'm very open to give them second chances to fix something to make it better.

Joey identified positive experiences when having frank discussion with students and families regarding student participation, progress, and achievement. Joey acknowledged that students are not interested in certain content areas and to respond to that lack of interest, has to have a "bag of

tricks and…that bag is open every day and I have to pull from it every day and change everything every day" to maintain student interest.

Kim

Kim is a core content teacher who possesses a master's degree and over 20 years of experience in the elementary and middle school setting. Kim was a teacher in another state prior to tenure at the site location and most recently taught in a core content area with a state mandated assessment. It was common for Kim to teach more than one grade level in a given academic year and to co-teach with a special education teacher in inclusive classrooms. Kim had mixed perspectives of social promotion policies that were influenced and supported by experiences in special education classrooms and with special education teachers and students. Kim, when discussing current relationship with the co-teacher, explained:

> she kind of agrees with me that [grading policies], you know, they [students] have to put forth effort, they have to listen, they have to take notes, they have to try to do their best or they fail…I've been fortunate that I have her. I'm teaching with her this year, too. We have common views on that [social promotion policies].

In addition to student behaviors in the classroom, Kim acknowledged that socially promoting students with disabilities may require different considerations than general education students. This was suggested when Kim stated, "if I'm just thinking of a student that doesn't have a disability or ESOL, I'm just trying to think of a regular kid, and he's having that problem or she is, I think there needs to be something else done [academically]." Kim admitted to not having a strict opinion on social promotion policies but strongly valued student effort and academic growth appropriate to cognitive abilities associated with individual students.

Leslie

Leslie has been teacher for over 20 years, is certified and experienced at all levels of K-12 education and possesses a master's degree with additional 30-plus credit hours at the graduate level. The majority of Leslie's teaching career had been out of state in a core content area. Leslie most recently taught students with special learning needs in grades 6 through 8, and also co-taught a core-content subject with a state-mandated assessment. Leslie supported high expectations and evidence-based student assessments but didn't "necessarily value the standardized assessments" as an accurate portrayal of student growth and ability. When discussing the promotion of students that are not academically prepared, Leslie stated, "I think it's ridiculous. I have to say it's something I encountered like very, very early in my career." Having had personal experiences with social promotion policies, Leslie indicated that the school is, "often times not meeting their [the students] needs by doing this, and then they are being socially promoted and the academic piece of their [educational] career is not being looked at." Leslie viewed social promotion policies in light of what was best for the students' careers and future aspirations.

Parker

Parker has approximately 10 years' work experience in private industry prior to entering the educational field over twenty years ago. Parker possesses two advanced degrees and previously served as a teacher and coordinator at different schools in the district and a building administrator in a different state. Parker most recently taught a core content class with a state mandated assessment and found intrinsic value when students grew academically in the classroom. Parker held high expectations for self and students and was committed to fostering a culture of student learning through the use of diverse instructional methods. Parker expressed

concern for future student success and questioned personal level of effectiveness in the classroom when working with socially promoted students. Parker disagreed with social promotion policies and stated that the policies "widen the gap between the expectation and what the student is capable of, to the point, where the goal that is set year after year becomes completely unattainable for the student." Parker asserted that for those students that were socially promoted, the educational system graduated students that were "ill prepared for virtually any further education or being prepared for the workforce of any kind." Parker valued project- and skills-based learning opportunities in classroom to support student understanding of content standards.

Ryder

Ryder has approximately 10 years teaching experience, possesses a master's degree, and is certified in elementary education. Ryder has taught the same grade level in the same school since becoming an educator. Ryder taught a core content subject with a state-mandated assessment. Ryder took a macro-scale view of the profession and while there was an apparent passion for the profession and care for students' well-being, there was also concern for how social promotion policies impacted the role of the educator and the greater community. This was evidenced when Ryder stated, "as an educator, it's my primary responsibility to educate and I feel that [social promotion] is intrusive to the goal that I am trying to do, it basically takes away from the reason I am there." This statement indicated Ryder is committed to the profession but questions the purpose of the teacher. Ryder elaborated that students are:

> being passed through with a high school education, and they wake up in the real world, and they have no job opportunities, or career opportunities, or even really, capability of

> being employed, then what service have we truly done…the ripple effect of that will be seen generations from now.

Ryder believed that social promotion policies had a negative impact on the role of educator, limited student potentials, and potentially fostered future harm to society.

Taylor

Taylor has been a public school teacher for less than 10 years and taught a core content class that did not have a state mandated assessment. Taylor has previous experiences teaching courses with state-mandated assessments. Taylor possesses a bachelor's degree and attained teacher certification through an alternative pathway. Taylor held prior teaching positions at the university level and in private and home-schooling environments. These settings helped Taylor nurture and develop teaching strategies that supported student-centered, project-based, and experiential learning opportunities. Based on experience, Taylor believed these teaching strategies were advantageous to all students, especially low achieving students. Taylor's primary public school experiences were in a middle school setting. Taylor expressed concerns with social promotion policies but also acknowledged that, for certain socially promoted students, success can happen. Taylor explained, "I have seen many of their [socially promoted students'] efforts rewarded when things started to click…keeping these students with their peer group certainly kept them from feeling defeated and encouraged their perseverance." Taylor structured lessons around content standards but felt the "true value in middle school is delivering those standards while building skill sets, the connections and the ability to transfer knowledge so that they [the students] can have an easier, a more successful pathway in high school." Taylor believed that it was important for the teacher to be able to meet the student at their level and for the student to be

willing to put forth the effort and collectively build academic proficiencies and skills that help the student be successful in the future.

Results

The data analysis procedures were based on "phenomenological reduction" methods outlined by Moustakas (1994). In totality, the data included transcribed interviews from 13 participants, 12 journal entries, three focus group sessions and a series of member checking events with individual participants. In the culminating steps of phenomenological reduction methods, the individual textural descriptions were integrated into one composite and thorough imaginative variation, the composite textural themes were enriched with structural themes to provide a richer description of participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The data analysis process yielded four themes that illustrated the shared experiences of middle school teachers with social promotion policies. It is important to note that most participants agreed that the power to retain a student was not decided by them, but their end of year grades would influence the student being retained, promoted, or enrollment in summer school.

Theme 1 – Teachers Don't Believe in the Educational System

The results of the data analysis process indicated that teachers do not believe in the system they work within. The common perception that the educational system lacked efficacy generated two subthemes that focused on the administrative prioritization of public perception and the institutionalized implementation of social promotion policies that limits all students' learning. Due to the nature of the profession, it was apparent that the participants developed strong knowledge of their students' strengths, weaknesses and, in some cases, personal lives. Participants felt personally invested in their students' success and bared witness to the factors that contributed to student fears and failures. Each participant perceived that the educational

system as a whole was not effective in advancing students' academic growth. Whereas policy decisions are not made at the teacher level, all participants felt they were relegated with all of the accountability for student growth and the responsibility to fix the weaknesses of the system, family, and society. Data analysis showed that five participants used the specific term "broken" to describe the educational system. When explaining how social promotion policies impacted the teacher, Blake stated, "We have a broken system that we're trying to work within. A broken system and it puts absurd pressure on teachers." This perspective was elaborated upon when Austin described how the administrative directives related to social promotion. Austin explained:

> I think a lot of the school system is broken. I think the responsibility is gone from the parents, and it's pushed on, you know, teachers to follow these mandates to do so much paperwork and to follow this, this, this and this. And it's nearly impossible.

An unequal balance of responsibility pervaded participant perceptions and it was apparent that the pressure exerted by the educational system impacted teachers personally and professionally. This was evidenced when Elliott described the feeling experienced when implementing social promotion policies. Elliott stated:

> as a teacher, we really don't have a choice. You know, so it impacts me. It's like, no one comes to me and says, "Well, what's your feeling? Or how do you feel?" It's just like this unwritten rule. We just keep passing kids along, and in the system, this cog. So, I think, for me as a professional, yeah, it makes me sad, because I think we're doing kids a real disservice.

This statement demonstrated Elliott's perception that administrative directives to implement social promotion policies had deleterious impact on both students and teachers and a lack of regard by educational leaders.

Participants demonstrated that enacting social promotion policies had personal, social, and emotional aspects on their lives. However, teachers also described a detached, impersonal and mechanized system that was not indicative of student growth and achievement. In response to why social promotion policies continued to exist, Hunter suggested:

> this education system we all work in is a big machine and so there's this kind of push, you know. The conveyor belt is moving, and the student is on there, and they're going to keep moving along, you know, and [social promotion] lifts them up and pushes them further back [academically] on the conveyor belt.

Hunter viewed the educational system as an assembly line where students travel along and those students that are products of social promotion policies are hindered from achieving full potential. Similar to this analogy, Taylor illustrated a mechanized educational system in the following statement, "I also feel like we're constantly trying to push a square into a round hole. Like it's just, it doesn't fit." Elliott acknowledged, "making all kids into squares, or circles when there are triangles or rectangles or whatever. There's this one size fits all model, it's a real problem." These statements indicated that participants believe they work in the confines of a system that is not adequately designed to meet the needs of the students they teach. The perceived lack of confidence in the educational system resulted from observing low-achieving students being pushed through the system and educational leaders that appeared to prioritize public perception over student learning and expertise of teacher experience.

Public Perception is the Priority

Teachers' lack of belief in the educational system was related to experiences with implementing social promotion policies in a system that was commonly described as broken. A subtheme that emerged through the data analysis process, and supported the teachers' lack of

faith in the educational system, was the educational systems' prioritization of public perception. During the interview sessions, teachers were asked to explain the persistence of social promotion policies. For all participants, social promotion was a commonly enacted practice. Blake indicated, "I've never known anything different because I've always taught kids who were significantly below grade level… and this has been true in every state that I've taught." Similar to Blake, five additional participants felt social promotion policies continued because it was a long-standing problem that educational leaders did not know how to solve but persisted to look good in public. Cameron recalled in the interview that social promotion was a topic of concern since Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush were in office. Cameron stated, "This was before I was even a teacher, the education department comes out and says, 'We do not socially promote.' Well, that was great, except it doesn't work." Austin stated it another way, "it's all about passing kids along, and just getting the good, quote unquote, numbers that look good on paper, but in reality, what's that doing to society?" Both participants implied social promotion policies have been a long-term controversial issue that served as good talking points but without resolution.

Seven teachers perceived that the persistence of social promotion policies helped districts achieve budgetary constraints and resource allocations. Five teachers believed social promotion policies kept the school and district in good standing with families, local stakeholders and state organizations. Joey explained:

> It's about money. It's about looking good in front of the public. I think it happens more and more, because they [educational leaders] can flash numbers around. A lot of people don't know what the numbers are or where they come from. If they say, 'Oh, I got all these students that have all passed. That's great.'

Participants demonstrated awareness of the large number of students that did not meet grade levels standards within the school. Jamie proposed the social promotion policies persisted:

> because you can't hold back 200 kids. You can't... there isn't room there, aren't enough teachers. You'd have to staff a whole extra grade level if you actually held back as many kids as should fail. And they [the district] can't do that.

Having had longevity in the district, Parker reflected:

> Remember when they had, 'if your child's not reading on a third-grade level, by the end of third grade, we're going to hold them all back?' We would end up with entire buildings full of children who were held back. So, we didn't have the infrastructure for it, we didn't have the staff for it. It was a ridiculous threat.

Parker provided an example of a contradictory message from educational leaders that appeared as a positive solution to the public, but implementation was unrealistic and nonsensical to the teacher.

Contradictory messages by educational leaders to appease the public, parents, and other stakeholders degraded the participants' belief in the education system. A recurrent sentiment among participants was a disconnect between parents' understanding and reality. Elliott stated, "I think people are so out of touch with reality and the day-to-day stuff that goes on in schools, and really where kids are at." This topic was discussed in depth during the focus group sessions when participants discussed the contradictions between public perceptions and realities of the classroom. Austin shared:

> I think a lot of parents don't realize what's going on in the classroom. And if they knew, things would change very rapidly…But people don't know what's going on in there. They see all this funding for new technology. Every kid has a tablet, well, that's great.

> But why not fund that and get twice the number of teachers, the classroom sizes are half the size. If parents saw what was going on in the classrooms, they would be horrified. They'd be there every day.

Leslie agreed with the lack of parental awareness and participation in the school, and elaborated by stating:

> I don't think it's full scale where there's a ton of welcoming of parents into the school community. And I think for some, that lets our principal, and our other administrators breathe by not doing that. And I think the amount of scrutiny we would get if that, like if parents were actually in the building, it would get worse before it got better.

These statements demonstrate the dichotomy that teachers perceive between what the public believes happens in the school and what actually happens in the school. Participants suggest that the contradiction arises from messaging at the administrative and district levels to support positive public perception. Social promotion policies were included in the messaging efforts as a way to manipulate the appearance of academic effectiveness.

Social Promotion Policies Limit All Students' Learning

The teacher perception that administrative leaders prioritized positive public perception over student learning was in concert with and exacerbated by teachers' recognition of increasing numbers of students being socially promoted and larger gaps in student abilities. It is important to note that all participants supported instances of social promotion for select students. These select students included those special education students that had IEPs, 504s, language acquisition programs, and/or students that may have experienced an isolated traumatic event during the student year. For example, in a journal entry Kim justified social promotion when:

> students were qualified for special education and had IEPs because of a disability. These

> students completed the assignments (daily work, quizzes, tests, etc.) to the best of their abilities. If they did not, I would not agree to the decision for them to be promoted to the next grade… many of those students would not ever be on grade level.

Ryder also made an argument in support of social promotion "in cases where a student is handicapped in a way that makes it impossible for them to achieve the academic standards but is well behaved and puts forth an effort in class." The concern that all participants had with social promotion policies was the educational system's extensive use of the policy within the general student population and the impact on overall student learning.

Participants acknowledged that many students at the school and the feeding elementary schools have been socially promoted, a practice that was believed to be happening for years and overseen by administrative directives. Leslie reflected that the numbers of socially promoted students had increased over time. Leslie stated, "I think it's been going on for a long time. I do have to say that, I think, it's becoming more of a decision that teachers are being made to ask about a larger proportion of their students." While the numbers appeared to increase, seven participants indicated that the school nor district had effective intervention strategies in place to help lower-achieving students close the academic gaps. Participants indicated that interventions did not happen or groups of students that participated in intervention supports did not show any success. Blake noted, "I'm not seeing a lot of these kids grow…Same kids are getting the interventions starting in second grade, you know, [some students] before then… we don't do a very good job of that [student interventions]." Charlie also discussed the lack of positive academic interventions ingrained in the system and how it impacted the classroom environment. Charlie explained:

> When I teach, I go back to where the student is, but a lot of times, it's frustrating. I'm

> frustrated because those interventions should have been done much earlier. And they weren't done and these kids got moved ahead. And it has made it very difficult.

These statements provided evidence that the educational system did not provide appropriate academic supports for the socially promoted students, and the students continued to be promoted without a plan or consequence.

Through the data analysis process, it was a common perception that the lack of effective academic interventions coupled with expanding social promotion policies was a function of system failure. Cameron explained:

> There's got to be some kind of intervention early on to stop that [social promotion] because, I think, once we have them, I don't know that keeping them in eighth grade or keeping them in seventh grade, I don't think that works. But passing them along doesn't work either.

Because the students experienced advancement to the next grade level without appropriate knowledge, teachers generally believe that students learn to navigate the educational system. Hunter admitted, "they understand how the system works…it pulls away, I think, their motivation to do work or to really apply themselves because they know they're just going to get pushed along." Hunter suggested that students use the lenient social promotion policies to avoid participating in the learning process. The impact that social promotion policies had on all students' motivation was a concern for most of the teachers. This was supported by Jamie's analysis of students' understanding of how educational policies are enacted. Jamie stated:

> They [students] know they're not going to fail, same way as kids with accommodations [don't fail]. They know the system. It's just like kids that know how many days absent in a row they can be before they have to show up or else, they'll get thrown off the roster.

> They know the system…attendance doesn't matter so why are they going to show up for work or think that they're supposed to… it's so unfair how it works, because like I talked about, if it's a kid who is a behavior issue, we don't even care if he's close to passing or whatever but we don't want to have them back on our hall [to retain student].

Jamie expanded teachers' perceived deficiencies in the educational system that are linked to social promotion polices such as issues with student attendance, behavior, and demotivation. The study participants are identified to be professionally accountable for and evaluated on student academic success of their students. However, there was a collective perception that the educational policies are perceived to be antagonistic to the purpose of their role. Joey explained:

> So, what's really happening with the social promotion and all this that we've been talking about is that it's slowing down the educational process of the kids. They're not learning as much as they can, as well as they can [or] as deeply as they can, because of all this other garbage going on, that's been allowed to happen and progressively continues to get worse…they [the students] lose that realization that, you know, that enlightenment from learning, because everything's flattened out when they do. Social promotion, flattens it off, like, "I don't have to do anything, I just move on forward."

As a result, the participants questioned the efficacy of the educational system. Elliott summarized, "the system has set it up so good that no one's really winning, you know, the teacher doesn't win, the students don't win, nobody's winning."

Theme 2 – Teachers Don't Believe Grades Reflect Academic Achievement

A second theme that emerged at the end of the data analysis process was that teachers did not believe that grades accurately portrayed students' grade-level proficiencies and therefore were unrelated to academic achievement. During interviews and focus group sessions,

participants overwhelmingly agreed that an unwritten policy existed that stated all students passed. Ryder explained, “There’s the unspoken rule of the minimum floor that everyone talks about, but it’s never in writing, where no student will get below a 60 [passing grade].” Whereas an accepted and unwritten rule existed to promote all students, all participants stated that a district- or school-based standardized grading or assessment system did not exist. As such, assessment and grading methods were described by most participants to be subjective. The diverse array of assessment and grading methods that existed was explained by Cameron:

> It's subjective with me. It’s subjective with my team. It’s subjective with my AP [assistant principal] …I don’t know that any of them have an objective standard that says, “okay, this an A, B, C, D and F.” Well, we can say, the [teacher made] test, but the [teacher made] test is not the SC-Ready [state-mandated] test, it’s not. There is none. There’s no objective standard.

This statement suggested that teachers were not given formal, objective, and policy-driven directives or standards regarding student assessment or grading.

When discussing school- and district-wide assessment policies, participants commonly identified reasons why a student could not be retained rather than citing evidence of promotion. Most participants explained their understanding of federal and/or state assessment policies related to special student populations. Eight participants identified maximum age restrictions for middle school students; a policy that teachers perceived forced social promotion of previously retained students regardless of academic abilities. Ten participants acknowledged government mandates regarding promotion policies for SPED and ESOL students. Based on interview data, it was apparent that participants held varied understandings of the SPED and ESOL mandates. For example, some participants believed that SPED and ESOL students could not fail and had to be

passed to the next grade level unconditionally; other participants thought a teacher could fail a SPED or ESOL student with documentation and evidence deemed appropriate by administrators. Charlie discussed conflicting directives regarding ESOL students when he explained, "I wasn't aware at first about the ESOL students not being able to fail, no one really said that explicitly to me. So, I had to go back in there [the gradebook] and change those grades to a 60 [passing grade]." Similar to Charlie, it was common for participants to express confusion and/or unclear directives when assessing students. Most teachers stated throughout the data collection process that there was an unwritten rule that stated all students will pass. For participants to achieve the informal and accepted policy that all students pass, two subthemes developed through the data analysis process. One subtheme discusses the pressures placed upon teachers to pass students. The second subtheme discusses the subjective assessment practices used by teachers to inflate student grades.

Teachers Feel Pressured to Pass Students

At several times during data collection, participants clarified that the decision to retain a student was not determined solely by one teacher. However, the end of year grades provided by each teacher determined whether a student was retained, promoted, or enrolled in summer school. When determining final grades for low-achieving students, all participants agreed they experienced situations when other people influenced their decision to pass or fail a student. These other people were identified as administrators by 13 participants, guidance counselors by five participants, parents by two participants, instructional coaches by two participants, colleagues by one participant and/or other district personnel by one participant. Eleven participants stated they felt directly pressured by one or more of the mentioned individuals to

pass failing students, three participants felt bullied, and two participants felt guilted into passing students. Blake affirmed that teachers are pressured to pass students. Blake stated:

> I absolutely agree there's definite pressure to pass kids, to give them enough opportunities to bring their grade up to a passing grade, because that comes from the district. They [teachers] get huge pressure that starts at the top to bring those numbers [of failing students] down. They [administrators] have to report the numbers so there's definitely pressure on teachers to not fail…to give kids opportunities to bring their grades up.

In efforts to minimize student failure rates, there was an overwhelming sense among participants that administrative and district leaders placed blame on them for students' failing grades.

In regard to how the pressure is placed upon the teachers, Austin reflected on recent conversations with an administrator and guidance counselor. Austin shared:

> I constantly get pressure to pass this kid or that kid, just because they are nice or that it [failing] would ruin their summer if they went to summer school, or summer school is too crowded. Or you better pass them because their parents will come down hard on you.

In this situation, Austin felt the administrator and guidance counselor attempted to instill feelings of guilt and fear as a motivator for Austin to change students' grades, regardless of the true academic abilities of the student. These pressure-based tactics suggested to participants that grades that reflect accurate levels of academic achievement was second to passing the student along.

In addition to experiencing pressure to pass students that exhibited low achievement, all participants explained that many students that they felt pressured to pass did little to no work throughout the school year. Yet, participants offered numerous opportunities to help students

improve grades, even against the participants' professional judgement. Describing the messages that teachers often received from administrators and guidance counselors, Ryder explained:

> if you end up with holding kids accountable for the actual grades, you're going to have failure lists that are a mile long and a half a mile wide, and they can't retain all those kids. So, they [administrators and guidance counselors] start bullying you by telling you [the teacher], "what did you do in order to prevent this? What intervention strategies did you do?" If the kid is absent for truancy reasons or if the kid has behavioral problems, or if the kid is so far behind academically, that even if you did all the overwhelming litany of things that they require in order to retain that kid, he still wouldn't be able to pass. Then, they start coming down on you and saying, "you didn't do this, and you didn't do that" in order to pass them [the students] and that is your problem.

In this example, Ryder identified the personal pressures, doubt in professional abilities, and other complex requisites that the participants experienced when students were at risk of failing the school year.

It was a common perception amongst the participants that their effectiveness as a teacher and a professional were questioned when students were posed to fail a class. Several participants discussed student failure lists that are emailed from administrators to teachers near the end of year to motivate teachers to help students' pass the year. This process was explained by Blake:

> definitely they [administrators] are encouraged to run reports of teachers to check their failure rates and look at gradebooks. So, there's definitely expectation for administration…to look at gradebooks to make sure there will be an update [on grades] and to look at failure rates.

The manner in which the lists' impacted the participants was generally one of pressure. Kim stated:

> I do think when you get a list that says these are how many kids are failing in your class, that is like they're [administrators are] looking at it [teacher failure rates] and [asking] 'what are you going to do about it?' So, that does put pressure on you to change their grades or have to come up with a reason why they're [the grades are] like that. I mean, it does have pressure.

The practice of modifying grades for students that were potentially failing was not an uncommon or surprising practice among the participants. In addition to participants being asked to change grades, one participant spoke of an administrator that changed student grades without consent. When discussing the unwritten expectation to pass students regardless of academic ability, Charlie stated, "I don't like being told that I have to pass a class. Nor do I like when an administrator will actually go into my gradebook and change a grade without my permission." Participants all suggested that the pressure tactics employed by the administrators and other professionals in the school and district were effective at reducing the number of students retained. Over the years, Taylor recalled having "seen a lot of kids who are failing more than two classes, who suddenly are only failing two classes, who go to summer school and do nothing in summer school, and somehow they're in the next grade the following year."

The pressure to pass students was a very real experience that all participants shared and struggled with both professionally, emotionally, and morally. To manage the number of students failing, participants identified assessment and grading practices adopted in their classrooms to help low-achieving students pass. Three participants clearly stated they do not fail students. Cameron justified the decision to not fail students with a realization that grades did not matter:

> If they [students] didn't do it [the work] and they failed, it didn't matter. If they did and I graded it, and they achieved, it didn't matter except on an individual basis. And so, my grades, I don't fail anybody ever. I just don't fail them.

There was collective agreement that teachers did not like to fail students and this was documented through the data collection process. Participants identified methods that they used to help students achieve success. These methods were supportive of grade inflation practices.

Grade Inflation Practices

The participants overwhelmingly experienced pressures to implement the unwritten policy to pass students regardless of academic abilities. Coincidentally, the participants did not receive standardized policies to assess and grade students from school or district administrators. This dichotomy elicited a second subtheme that emerged during the data analysis process. The participants agreed that they experienced subjective implementation of assessment and grading practices. The participants also shared the common perception that it was the expectation their grading and assessment practices offered a myriad of opportunities to support the policy that everyone passes. During the data collection process, there were approximately 80 practices identified by participants that demonstrated how they help student achieve passing grades; those references were condensed into 11 grade inflation practices. Table 2 presents a summary of the 11 different grade inflation practices that the participants described during the data collection process and have used to inflate students' grades. It is noted that data collection activities were not related to grade inflation practices nor part of the standardized interview questions or journal prompts. Rather, the participants shared grade inflation practices at various points throughout the data collection process and the presented list may not represent the full range of practices used.

Table 2.

Practices Teachers Used to Inflate Grades of Low-Achieving Students

Practice	Examples of implementation from participants	Frequency, n
Differentiation	"personalized approach," "the bottom tiered ones [students], if they do it, they attempt it, they get full credit, but the higher ones, they have to actually do something that actually has value"	13
Test accommodations	"find other forms of assessment that are less challenging and less rigorous," "test them other ways using visuals or project-based learning," "read it [the test] orally to them"	8
Minimum grade policies	"if you turn something in, we will pass you," "my zeros become 50%"	7
Simplify curriculum	"dumb things down," "slow things down," "lessening rigor and intensity," "spend more time on simpler academic standards"	7
Grade for effort	"made an attempt," "giving forth that effort"	6
Change grades at end of marking period	"lower students, basically, they are going to get a 60," "I might pass or give a student more credit because of their status"	5
Assess for skills not content	"hands on work," "somewhat of a skill set"	4
Offer test retakes	"I know a lot of teachers that…repeatedly give tests over and over and over and over"	4
Grade for growth	"understand at least some of the material"	3
Extended time on assignments	"let them make things up until the very last minute, even do grade changes later"	3
Recovery packets	"…where basically students who have done nothing all year who are completely behind in grade level, get to do non-rigorous busy work to up their grade in order for them to be promoted to the next grade level"	3

The subjective practices used by participants to assess and grade students was implied to be widely accepted as the norm. As such, it appeared that the participants each devised their own procedures to help students pass and support grade inflation practices. This was a concern amongst teachers. One concern focused on the potentially misleading meaning of the grades. For example, Elliott stated, "I think an A for a kid that's reading below grade level is not the same as

an A for a GT [gifted and talented] kid, but they both say A on the report card. So, there's a real imbalance there." This statement suggested that report grades were not perceived as an objective tool to compare and report students' abilities and achievements and it may be implied that report card grades did not offer an accurate representation of student academic levels nor provide a complete story of the student. Another concern related to grade compression. Jamie explained:

> you get two sets of kids, all A's and all F's, and there's no middle ground because that's how we've worked it. That's how teachers have accommodated for the average student. It's pretty easy to pass but then for the ones that it's difficult, they slipped by with an F because everything's been manipulated so that no one fails.…I try to avoid that, like I'm very cognizant of it.

In this statement, Jamie identified the reason for a large number of students achieving high report card grades. It was suggested that because the standard for passing a student was deeply lowered to ensure low-achieving students are promoted, the average student appears to excel.

To explain how the school and district leaders played a role in supporting grade inflation practices, all participants discussed administrative directives that teachers had to meet in order to fail a student. Participants agreed that they had to provide evidence that a variety of grade inflation practices were implemented when failing a student. Cameron explained:

> If you're going to fail someone, you have to prove why. You have to show all the things you did to come to that point of failing that student. What are the things that you did to try to move them forward? What are the things that you did try to help them make up work?'…you're going to have this huge amount of work to prove that this student needs to be retained.…which is one reason I chose not to [fail students].

In this discussion, Cameron identified how student retention appeared to be more about

documenting evidence of student failure rather than evidence of student learning. This documentation often included examples of grade inflation strategies offered to the student and created additional work and stress to the teachers. Most participants supported the perception that administrators pressured teachers for additional work efforts and a variety of grade inflation strategies to reduce the number of retained students. This practice by administrators promoted the participants' perception that student promotion was not a function of student growth and achievement but rather teacher failure to properly document efforts made to implement grade inflation practices to support the appearance of student learning.

Theme 3 – Teachers Feel Devalued as Professionals

A third theme that emerged at the conclusion of the data analysis process was that teachers did not perceive themselves as valued professionals in the education system. The devaluation was based on intrinsic expectations the participants had for themselves in regard to student growth and achievement and based on their perceptions of how administrative leaders and other stakeholders treated and viewed them. Participants generally agreed that there was confusion as to what the primary purpose of the teacher role was, and most participants did not view teaching academic standards as the precedence. For example, during the interview process, the term babysitter was used by three participants to describe their role, one participant used caretaker and referenced the classroom setting as a daycare, and one participant used the term warm body. Taylor journaled:

> I remember the general time that I came to the full realization that regardless of my exhaustive efforts to engage certain students, to get them to complete their work, to communicate with their families, to differentiate with entirely different assignments targeted at facilitating their learning...despite pouring into them and doing everything I

> could, it didn't matter. If they didn't show up in any way, they were still going to move on and pass and often these are the same students that are not only academically exhausting, but behaviorally and make it challenging to pour into the other students. Coming to this realization and knowing that there doesn't presently seem to be another avenue, is extremely discouraging. It makes me question my value as a teacher. It makes me wonder what more I can do (which is only putting more responsibility on me and not on the student); it makes me feel like my role is just to be a warm body in a room and not to actually do my job.

This journal entry exemplified how social promotion policies, and the latent consequences thereof, not only impacted student motivation, behavior and classroom culture, but also the participant's perspective of the profession and role of educator. The impacts of social promotion policies on educators were also discussed by Cameron who explained that the profession was less about educating and more about managing students. In reference to the implementation of social promotion policies, Cameron stated:

> I think it diminishes us because we don't become the expert in the field that we can…I think we lose that and I think we just become caretakers of a classroom…I think it's one of the reasons that we get discouraged because we don't have all those aha moments that we did maybe previously, and it's [the profession is] … less fulfilling because of that.

This statement suggests that Cameron's expectations and role of the educator differed from what was actually implemented in the classroom. Relating the role of teacher to the educational system and purpose, Austin asked, "it's a school policy…everybody claims to have rigor, rigor, rigor. But do you really have rigor? Or are you just looking for people [students] to, you know, just get passed along?" This dichotomy of participants' perceptions of their roles coupled with

the consequences of social promotion exerted a physical and emotional response from all participants.

Teacher Frustration

During the data collection process, participants shared their experiences with implementing social promotion policies. Participants commonly expressed how the policies impacted them by describing a wide range of feelings that did not evoke a sense of job satisfaction. The word frustration, or a variation of, was stated 26 times by eight participants. Other words that participants used to describe experiences with social promotion policies included references to sadness by three participants, helplessness by two participants, disheartening by two participants, exhausting by two participants, disparaging by one participant and powerless by one participant. Table 3 provides a summary of the more common sources of the frustrations with relevant quotes taken from participants' interviews, journals and focus group sessions. As the data suggested, common frustrations discussed by the participants were a result of two factors. The first factor was an excessive workload with high stakes demands that was expected of the participants. The second factor was the participants intrinsic drive to be an effective educator, but often perceived efforts were not enough to garner success.

Table 3

Source of Teacher Frustrations Associated with Social Promotion Policies

Source of frustration	Example quotes
Student behavior	"…and they all fight me…I had to spend a significant portion, especially in the beginning of class, just to get the kids into what we're doing. They refused to do warm up. They won't comply with any of the rules in the class. It was very, very frustrating."
	"…if it's a kid who has put absolutely no effort into any work at all, and hasn't tried, that's frustrating."
Student academic deficiencies	"…it was extremely frustrating because they couldn't read on grade level. They couldn't write on grade level…they were coming to me so ill-prepared just made it that much harder. And then, of course, it's frustrating because their test scores don't matter for them, but they mattered for me and my evaluation."
Question professional effectiveness	"...it's just the frustration that we haven't figured out how to help the kids that don't come to school ready to learn, they usually come to us behind and stay behind."
Lack of parental involvement	"…it is just part of being a parent and caring so it's really frustrating. Like, the future of American society, that parents don't care enough to check their kids grades and they put the blame not on the parents but the teachers."
Ethical/moral Conflicts	"…the expectation that we should move them on is a frustrating demand because I know what I'm setting up other students for and teachers for…we've got seventh graders reading on a first-grade level."
	"…it kind of makes me sick because I know they're just going to go over there and spin their wheels at the high school and that this has been true in every state that I've taught. And so yeah, it's frustrating."
Administrative policies	"…so that's very frustrating because, as a teacher, you know, it kind of undermines you in getting them to where you'd like them to be…their knowledge that, 'hey, I can do nothing, okay. I'll go to summer school. I can do nothing there and I'm still going to pass."
	"These kids are going to learn that 'hey, I don't need to study and I'll just get passed along.' They don't see the end in this, especially when you don't have parent involvement. So, it's really frustrating that we're crippling these kids."

Unrealistic Workload and Expectations

An overwhelming perception among participants was that social promotion policies complicated and extended their roles, not only in the classroom but in the students' lives. Participants generally agreed that they and most teachers want to be positive advocates for their students and help them succeed. The participants' described extensive efforts to help their students learn and achieve and it was apparent that an intrinsic motivation was present within each participant. Hunter explained, "as teachers, we're all focused on doing everything possible we can for these kids, so you just got to keep going and going and try to help them along." During the focus group sessions, some participants expressed how this intrinsic motivation and desire to help students expanded the roles and expectations of teachers. While discussing the topic during a focus group session, Leslie explained:

> I do feel like there's a lot of things that you are implicitly asked to do by nature of being a good human, or there's a lot of pressure on teachers to be these idealistic sort of role models for kids.

Austin agreed and elaborated, "I think it goes back to the high standard of this profession…you are the moral teacher, you are the parent away from home, you are the motivator, the inspirer…and you have to adapt to each and every student as well." These statements suggested that the very qualities that made the participants committed to their students and profession, also led the participants to be tasked with additional duties that resulted in the participants' feeling of being overwhelmed with workload and expectations.

Based on a more thorough data analysis, it appeared that all participants expressed concern and frustration of an overwhelming workload. As Blake described, "we are being asked to do things that we cannot do given our resources, our budget, and our time." Participants

commonly discussed the challenges of working with socially promoted students in diverse classrooms and often addressed the demands of personalized learning and differentiation techniques in a diverse classroom setting. An example of how the workload and expectations impacted one participant was illustrated by Taylor who explained:

> we have kids with radically different needs mentally. Just their whole home life. Language…all those splintered factors become really draining on teachers…there is no time to communicate these things. There's no time to meet, there's no time to try to figure out how to manage all of the different splintered moving parts and so then it becomes chaos in your brain and then you feel spread thin.

This statement suggested that due to enactment of social promotion policies, Taylor felt less prepared to meet the needs of a diverse classroom, lacked time to effectively plan, and lacked support from colleagues; factors that also diminished the ability for participants to achieve their professional expectations. Leslie described a similar sentiment:

> I feel like there's an unrealistic amount of pressure on teachers to both take care the kids in the immediate and solve all of these social [problems]…I'm not even getting to the curriculum because you [administrators] are overloading us with class lists that have ridiculous needs…and at the end of the day, I'm being asked to do something utterly impossible, get [expletive] on for not being able to accomplish it and being told, "well, we're helping you, we're having this PD, or this will be coming up"…principals, coaches, everybody needs to know what's going on in the classroom and I feel like there's a huge disconnect.

This statement provided insight into the participant's perception of an exceptional workload that is unattainable and the participants' perceived consequences when expectations were not met. In

addition to the expectations placed upon teachers in the classroom, the participants suggested that expectations also extended outside of the classroom. The participants further extended the role of educator by expressing the norms of serving non-instructional roles such a mentor, psychiatrist, behaviorist, social worker, computer technician, software specialist and test administrator; roles in concert with the increasing demand for accountability to increase the achievement of a diverse population of students that have been socially promoted. As a result, Joey explained, "…we are losing that teaching time, so we have to figure out how to get more in with less time." The data suggested that participants experienced a workload to be so overwhelming and vast that it impacted their ability to demonstrate or perceive a sufficient level of effectiveness. This was especially true when participants considered the core purpose of their position and how they were evaluated as a professional.

Low Self Efficacy

At the conclusion of data analysis, it was apparent that all participants possessed a sense of low self-efficacy related to meeting the role expectations and advancing student achievement. This was especially true when participants considered the core purpose of their position and how they were evaluated as a professional by administrators and stakeholders. When participants were asked to describe their level of effectiveness, three teachers stated they did not feel any level of effectiveness. Blake responded, "I've never felt effective." Ten teachers expressed conflicted levels of efficacy. Kim responded:

> it [the profession] is hard, it's gotten harder as time progressed. Things are a lot different than when I started teaching and sometimes it is the class in general. Sometimes I feel effective in this class and then in this class, I feel like I'm not effective.

It was common for participants to feel effective with certain elements of the job but not when considering the entirety of expectations. For example, Cameron expressed feeling effective at facilitating relationships with students, Taylor felt effective at facilitating skills-based classroom experiences, and Parker felt 50% effective based on the results of the most recent state assessment. Participants felt most effective and confident in areas where they had some level of control such as differentiating content and establishing relationships. However, participants overwhelmingly experienced frustration and doubt in themselves when they were unsuccessful at achieving the myriad of instructional and non-instructional expectations. Low self-efficacy in the teachers was also attributed to lack of academic gains for students that were previously socially promoted.

Participants often described students that were socially promoted to exhibit characteristic behaviors that interfered with student learning on the individual, classroom, and school level. When describing participant experiences with socially promoted students, all participants stated socially promoted students are more likely to be disruptive, unmotivated, unprepared, lack familial supports, and did not value education. The impact of those student qualities was discussed by Taylor, “they [socially promoted students] have made the educational process more challenging within the classroom.” It was common for participants to personally feel, or made to feel, responsible for the breakdown of the instructional setting often exacerbated by the lack of appropriate supports by administrators and families. Jamie explained:

> We’re held accountable for what didn’t happen before [students came to us], because they’ve been socially promoted… It makes me resentful that I must attend professional development sessions urging me to increase rigor in the classroom when rigorous expectations for the students don't have to be met to be promoted. I feel that I am being

> asked to be hypocritical with my students who do work to meet the rigor in my class. I feel like a pawn.

This statement expressed the range of conflicted interests impacting the participant. There were indices of participant self-blame, lack of control over policy decisions, conflicted leadership expectations, and internal conflicts related to professional integrity.

A common trait among participants was a high degree of self-reflection that often focused on how to better perform all duties of the profession and support student learning. However, participants frequently viewed social promotion policies to have negative impacts on their ability to perform their job with fidelity. Discussing the consequences of social promotion policies on the participant, Parker stated, "…the effect that it [social promotion] has on teachers is a feeling of complete and utter helplessness. Okay. You don't know what to do. What do you do?" Taylor described the feeling with an analogy, "the magnitude of it [social promotion policies] is just like climbing a mountain without the correct materials." These statements were consistent with other participants perceptions that social promotion policies, and consequential magnitude of expectations and workloads, afforded participants few opportunities to experience feelings or recognitions of success.

Theme 4 – Teachers Learned to Maintain Status Quo

A final theme that emerged during the data analysis process was that participants experienced a transition in their choice of instructional methods and perspectives to maintain the status quo of social promotion policies even though participants questioned the efficacy of those policies. A general consensus existed amongst the participants that their instructional methods, assessment strategies, and philosophical perspectives shifted over time to align with leadership

expectations. For example, when describing how social promotion impacts professional identity, Jamie stated:

> I feel like there's something terribly wrong with our education system and then I suppose I've gotten used to it...you can only keep so many kids behind and we get frowned upon if we have a [certain] number or more students failing, as if we're then bad teachers, which is sometimes the case…I've grown as a teacher to learn how not to have as many [failing students] and how to do the things you have to do to bring them along.

In this statement, Jamie identified disagreement with the policies, acknowledged blame for low student achievement and, yet developed a personalized modus operandi that supported the continuation of a system that was believed to not work. Whether it was stated directly or implicitly, participants identified a progression of instructional and philosophical perspectives that shifted over time that assisted them in their work within the system. The personal progression and justification to not fail students was clearly explained by Cameron:

> I learned early on that if you are failing some [students] that now you get this work piled in your lap to try to help them not fail. It was pointless. It's just busy work. It's just, you know, cross the t's and dot the i's, and I'll go ahead and pass you. And to me, it was like, why am I doing all of this when in essence, it's going to be the same thing anyway. So, I fought that battle for two or three years and I thought, this is silly. I'm not going to do this is.

Hunter explained more subtly the consequences of having too many students fail a class. Hunter explained:

> You're probably penalized for, especially if you have a large percentage of students, or maybe it doesn't even have to be a large, you know, I don't know how to quantify

> that…it's your responsibility that they're failing, they got to keep [passing], so you give them their 10th packet to redo or turn in and then you find it on the floor…so it kind of feels like a penalty as a teacher…I have been pretty good about managing my gradebook where I didn't have a large percentage [of students failing].

Hunter's perception that failing students equated to additional workloads was a common sentiment with all participants. In efforts to minimize the workload, participants generally implied the use of what Hunter introduced as gradebook management or an evolving toolbox of subjective and inflationary assessment strategies that nurtured passing grades throughout the school year to support promotion of low-achieving students. The participants' statements suggested that the development of a proper gradebook management strategy throughout the school year minimized additional workloads and expectations at the end of the year when the number of student failures were more scrutinized. In doing so, participants considered and predicted end of year consequences when assessing students throughout the year. The concept of managing gradebooks with the end of the year in mind was confirmed during focus group sessions.

Participants generally agreed that it was easier to conform to the norms of the system even though they acknowledged failures existed within the system that limited student learning. Participants were asked to discuss the consequences of not implementing inflationary assessment strategies or speaking out against social promotion policies during the data collection process. Joey explained that the reason for teachers not to speak out against the system was out of:

> fear because then it'll make them [teachers] look like possibly they don't know what they are doing. Or maybe they're not as good as anyone else and they're afraid to speak up…maybe they don't want to be branded because I know that when teachers speak up

> about certain things, they're pushed aside, they're put on the blacklist. I know, it's happened to me.

Leslie presented an alternative justification to maintain policy norms. Leslie reasoned:

> I think there's a propensity for us [teachers] to go along, to do what is good for the group in general…though, I really feel like some of the pressure to go along with because you want to advance in your own career, too.

Joey's and Leslie's statements were largely supported by participant data. In general, there were four experiences that participants cited that led them to accept and implement of social promotion policies. Seven participants enacted social promotion polices to minimize the social stigma of failing too many students, four participants were concerned with having to justify professional integrity and effectiveness, four participants wanted to avoid the additional workload, and two participants identified the risk of limiting professional advancement. Blake summarized the stance of most participants, "I just sort of play along and we just, we smile and tell each other we're going to do what we think is best for kids."

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research was to understand middle school teachers' experiences with social promotion policies in a public school district. The central research question was supported by three sub research questions. This section provides answers to each of those research questions by holistically and objectively evaluating and integrating the four themes that were developed throughout the data analysis process.

Central Research Question

What are middle school teachers' shared experiences with social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States? Participants' experiences with social

promotion policies indicated a learned process of working and navigating within an organization built upon complex, contradictory, and ineffective policies that diminished the role of the professional educator and eroded student potentials. Participants generally believed that social promotion was the better option when compared with student retention, however, participants strongly believed that the system failed to address the needs of low achieving students benefiting from social promotion policies and simultaneously lowered the expectations for all other students. By not addressing the learning gaps, participants described disdain for the educational systems and perceived that the long-term implementation of social promotion policies consequently created derogatory impacts on the effectiveness of the education system, integrity of assessment methods and value of the professional educator. Considering the myriad of expectations and roles that the participants were held responsibility for, Leslie described in a journal entry the complicated and emotional perspective when implementing social promotion policies. Leslie lamented that social promotion policies:

> …were applied without really trying to solve the underlying problems. Whether it is behavioral or academic, social or a mental health issue, social promotion just puts a Band-Aid on it [lack of student achievement]. I am quite sure that underneath that desire to move on with your class is a desire for belonging and a sense of being part of a learning community…we [educators] reward conscious objectors to hard work, school rules, interpersonal communication and learning when we push kids on in school. And sadly, most times it ends up being the one that needed you to hold on the most.

In this statement, Leslie summarized the internal struggles that implementation of social promotion policies had on participants; these struggles were related to working in an ineffective

system, serving as an active and supporting member within the system, and witnessing unsuccessful student outcomes.

During data collection it was visible that participants were professionally and personally vested in their students' success. High levels of participant commitment and hard work was confirmed during data analysis. Hunter spoke honestly:

> we really bust our butt in that building every day to try to do what we can for the students…maybe we need to have more stricter standards in the middle school that holds kids accountable and that we can enforce…it'd be great if we could come together with some sort of a system to help develop that importance of education.

Each participant expressed concern for an education system that was not effective based on expectations and policies that were unachievable in the classroom and did not have positive impact on student learning. As such, participants experienced working in a defunct system that, as Parker described:

> …we continue to fail them [students] with their inability to be able to become a contributing member of society…I feel like I fail at why I got into this profession to begin with…my job is to teach, their job is to learn and if that process is not going on, then I'm failing on my end, as a teacher, as an educator.

Sub Question One

How do middle school teachers perceive their role as a professional when implementing social promotion policies? Participants generally perceived that implementation of social promotion policies demeaned the role of participants as educators and as professionals. Participants generally agreed that social promotion policies devalued academic accountability, rewarded apathy, and eroded professional and academic integrity, ultimately negating the role of

the educator in the classroom. Insight into this perception was explained by Cameron when describing how social promotion policies impacted shifts in personal identity as a teacher. Cameron stated:

> I think it diminishes the profession because if it [academic growth] doesn't matter, then why do we matter? And again, the whole argument of why even have school. And I think, in my personal opinion…we have school because somebody has to have, we have to have daycare as a society…but I think it diminishes, I think it diminishes us.

In this explanation, Cameron implied that social promotion policies not only fostered the perception that teachers and schools existed to raise children, but also impacted student and stakeholder perceptions of teachers as irrelevant and inconsequential. District and school administrators were often identified as perpetrators in debasing the role of participants, especially when addressing the risk of students failing the school year. Taylor described the administrative insinuations of blame and inadequacy:

> I think that it always comes back on the teacher. What are you doing wrong? What are you not doing? What are you not implementing? So, I'm not sure if they [administrators] need it to be that way or if they're trying to offer support to help the teacher do better for students but I think it comes across as a gotcha.

This statement demonstrated that Taylor's professional integrity was questioned; implying the teacher was the cause of low student achievement. There was a consensus that administrators and educational leaders attributed failing students to be the sole fault of the teacher. Participants shared similar experiences that consequentially led to low self-efficacy and questioning the purpose of their role as an educator. The process of personal deprecation was summarized by Leslie in a journal entry:

> It is never positive to realize that your opinion as a professional is neither valued or wanted. Then again, such is teaching. I think I just would say it has left me jaded. I kind of feel powerless as a teacher.

Sub Question Two

How do middle school teachers describe the process of implementing social promotion policies? Participants generally described the process of implementing social promotion policies as a subjective and complex series of activities driven by conflicting and informal administrative policies that constricted student potentials and teacher effectiveness. The process included administrative pressures to project the appearance of academic effectiveness through the use of manipulated assessment practices and grade inflation practices designed to minimize student failure rates and increase public appearance of effectiveness. The systemic exploitation of implementing social promotion policies subsequently created an academic environment where participants experienced an overwhelming set of expectations and workloads to compensate for student deficits and to maintain status quo. Overwhelmingly, participants described the implementation of social promotion policies as frustrating. Ryder provided insight into the thematic consistencies related to participant frustrations. Ryder suggested that frustration existed:

> I think, by the system that the teacher is forced to play [in]. Everybody's experiencing the same thing because it's across the board. The same requirements and the same hypocrisy. Behaviors are a frustration. Grades are a frustration. Academic performance is a frustration, and the workload is a frustration. Expectations, communication, and then not being able to implement those expectations because of various reasons is a frustration.

This statement exemplified the shared perception that the process of implementing social promotion policies created a frustrating system that not only made it difficult for participants to

navigate with integrity and fidelity, but also created a system that participants had to actively participate in to maintain the appearance of effectiveness.

Sub Question Three

How do middle school teachers' past experiences with social promotion policies impact future pedagogical and instructional strategies? Participants' past experiences with social promotion policies impacted the participants' choice in pedagogical and instructional strategies by lowering academic standards, differentiating instruction and utilizing grade inflation practices as means to support passing grades for low achieving students. Hunter explained:

> even before I started teaching in the middle school, every once in a while, you'd read about students getting passed up [to high school] …and I didn't really understand why we did that…I can kind of, you know, understand a little bit of it now that I've been in the system for [a while] and see how that process works.

The messages that Hunter received over time and with experience was to instruct and assess students throughout the year with the end of year in mind. Hunter learned:

> if they [grades] are so low, then they [students] are not going to be able to recover later on. They'll just give up. Why would they even try? So, you do feel a need, as much as you can, to get them to show you something, at least enough to make it so that they are always within reach of passing throughout the year…you get those students where they just got to put in a little bit of effort at the end to get them over to pass.

The mechanisms utilized by the participants to maintain student grades at a level to enact social promotion policies included, as Austin described, "dumbing down the standards," assessing students for non-academic abilities, and utilizing a variety of other strategies to inflate grades.

Summary

The goal of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand middle school teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies within a public school district. This chapter highlighted the results of the data analysis associated with this study. The data analysis process utilized data collected through participant interviews, journal prompts and focus group sessions. These data generated four themes that illustrated the shared experiences of middle school teachers with social promotion policies. The four themes suggested that participants experienced a lack of faith in the educational system, believed that grades were not accurate indicators of student achievement, perceived their profession was devalued due to social promotion policies, and learned over time how to work within the system to maintain status quo. These themes were utilized and supported by individual participant information generated during data collection to answer the central research question and three sub research questions. The results of this study demonstrated that the implementation of social promotion policies was a complex and subjective process that had deleterious impacts on teacher effectiveness, self-efficacy and student learning. The implementation of social promotion policies was also perceived to be a mechanism to suggest to the public an appearance of teacher and school effectiveness.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe middle school teachers' experiences with working in schools that enact social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States. The contents of this chapter incorporate the findings generated through data analysis and an understanding of current literature related to the study focus. This chapter begins with an interpretation of findings followed by a discussion of the study's implications for policy and practice. The chapter then discusses theoretical and methodological implications and identifies the study's limitations and delimitations. Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations for future research and closing statements.

Discussion

The results of the data analysis process generated four themes that illustrated the shared experiences of middle school teachers' experiences enacting social promotion policies. The four themes were then used to answer the central research and three sub research questions. This section provides an interpretation of the collective data, the four generated themes, the theoretical framework and current literature to offer practical implications of social promotion policies. This section consists of five subsections. The subsections discuss the interpretations of the study's findings, provides implications for policy and practice, identifies theoretical and empirical implications, identifies study limitations and delimitations, and makes recommendations for future research studies.

Interpretation of Findings

The data analysis process illustrated common shared experiences amongst the participants. The shared experiences were then presented as four themes. The themes suggested

that teachers: (1) do not believe in the educational system they work within; (2) do not believe student grades reflect academic achievement; (3) feel devalued as professionals; and (4) learned to maintain status quo of the educational system. These four themes were then integrated with the existing literature, theoretical framework and collected data.

The enactment of social promotion policies sparks a vicious cycle to delegitimize the teacher and upend the educational system. Teachers are challenged with meeting unrealistic roles and expectations mandated by administrative leaders and policy makers while battling internal conflicts of doing what is right for the student and maintain the appearance of effectiveness. As a result, teachers maintain internal and external struggles related to instructional strategies, assessment practices, performance of professional duties, and doing what is right for the students. Teachers function autonomously in the confines of a system that they perceive to be broken and ineffective yet are relegated to administrative and social pressures to function in certain ways without the appropriate resources and time to be effective. The combination of teachers' intrinsic nature to do what is best for students and administrative exploitation of teachers' shared sense of good causes teachers to take on additional administrative roles, academic responsibilities, and put in more time and effort to help students succeed.

To avoid the perception of failure, to meet expectations, and to address pressures from administration to not have students retained, teachers modify curriculum and assessment practices to fit the expectations and support the appearance of effectiveness. Teachers recognize that the process degrades the educational experience for the larger student population and the system does not equip low achieving students with adequate academic growth and supports. This process subsequently creates conditions that make the profession feel unbearable for the teacher as they are at war with student apathy, disruptive behaviors, low skilled students, and lack of

supports. Teachers feel frustrated, powerless and ineffective. They learn to accept the process and emotions as the norm or face consequences from administration and other stakeholders. Examples of consequences that teachers face include questioning the teachers' professionalism, choice of instructional strategies, and effectiveness at meeting job expectations, are given additional tasks and workloads, and experience negative social branding. As a result, teachers choose to participate in the system, albeit devaluing and frustrating. This participation results in a vicious cycle that degrades the individual teacher identity, the professional role of teacher, and the educational system.

Summary of Thematic Findings

To give meaning to the totality of the study findings, three significant interpretations are presented in this section. Each interpretation is supported with participant quotes, related to recent research and aligned with tenets of the sensemaking theory.

Interpretation #1: Teachers' roles do not align with their purpose. Sensemaking theory includes identity construction as one of seven properties individuals use to make sense of an environment or situation (Weick, 1995). However, as described by Weick (1995), self-identity is not only a function of how one sees oneself, but also how one perceives others see them and how well one fits within the context of the larger environment. As described by Weick (1995), creation of self-identity is based on the question, "How can I know who I am until I see what they do?" (p. 23). For middle school teachers the "they" in this question refer to the students, administrators, educational leaders, colleagues, and other stakeholders. Results of this study suggested that middle school teachers are conflicted with the role they serve in the classroom as it does not align with the purpose of choosing the profession. Teachers want to have a positive self-identity and be viewed by themselves and by others as effective, valued, and positively

impactful. At different points of the data collection process, Austin explained the value of experiencing an intrinsic feeling of effectiveness:

> …a teacher wants to feel like at the end of the day they've all mastered this or that at the end of the week…you do have the times where kids will get it, you know. They'll have that smile on their face. You feel like they're excelling and that'll motivate you even more…obviously, the money aspect is not the reason why people are teachers. So, definitely [it is] the internal thing of doing what you believe is right and helping out the next generation.

Throughout data collection, it was apparent that the participants had the intrinsic motivation to help students learn and grow. However, participants expressed working with student populations characterized by large numbers of socially promoted students and only occasionally experienced moments of success or feelings of effectiveness. As the results suggested, participants frequently faced students that were apathetic, disruptive, unaccountable, and unprepared. These characteristics were documented to be common among socially promoted students (Brown et al., 2019; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McMahon, 2018; Yeh, 2020). The consequence of working with lower skilled students brings an increased level of teacher accountability for student learning that may have adverse impacts on the teacher's mental and physical ability to perform role expectations (Dunn, 2020; Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Richards et al, 2016; Reeves & Cozzens, 2018; Ryan et al, 2017; Smith & Halloway, 2020). The results of this study suggests that participants perceived a sense of blame for student failures and felt high levels of pressure to pass students along. Feelings of ineffectiveness were compounded with the struggles of managing behaviorally challenged, ill-equipped, and demotivated students. Participants described feelings of "frustration," "ineffectiveness," "powerlessness," and "helplessness." They

commonly equated their role of teacher to “babysitter” and “caretaker.” The internal conflict between the participants’ expected and intended role of teacher to the actual role they played in the classroom was so conflicting that they struggled with their identity, some so much they questioned their presence in the classroom.

The results of this study indicate that an unwritten expectation existed that stated all students must pass. Results also indicate that participants felt pressured to pass students or feared social stigmatization, the burden of additional work or questioned about instructional choices and professionalism. To avoid these pressures and to maintain the appearance of effectiveness to self and others, the results suggest that the participants learned how to work within the system. This learned process lends itself to four other properties of the sensemaking theory as the process was enacted in a sensible environment that is reflective, social and ongoing (Weick, 1995). In an effort to support a positive self-identity and avoid negative administrative consequences, participants learned over time how to manage additional responsibilities while needing to adjust assessment practices, instructional techniques, and curriculum modifications to show evidence of student learning through report card grades. To avoid blame and condemnation for students’ failures, teachers have learned and developed assessment practices and instructional techniques to suggest the appearance of effectiveness and to elevate value and self-identity. As such, the teachers experience little reward for the extent of work and efforts they exert. This internal conflict indicates the role teachers play in the classroom setting does not align with the purpose they entered the profession.

Interpretation #2: Devaluation of teachers is propagated by educational leaders. The enactment of social promotion policies by middle school teachers is derived primarily by educational leaders and policy makers that favor moving students through the system with a false

sense of learning rather than true academic achievement. Middle school teachers perceive the pressure exerted on them to socially promote students as an administrative endeavor to maintain positive appearances in public. This perception was supported by Attig (2022) at the high school level. However, the institutionalized practice of social promotion is demonstrated to devalue middle school teachers in several capacities. Teachers are challenged with incoming student populations with high percentages of low achieving students (Hussar et al., 2020). As a result, socially promoted students arrive to the middle school teachers' classroom already ill-equipped. Within one classroom Taylor described, "You've got so many different expectations, so many different pressures, so many different variations in students…But by the time these kids get to middle school, they are not set up with the tools to be successful." However, as study results suggest, teachers want to feel and be perceived as effective, impactful, and valued. Joey explained:

> We want them all to succeed, but the students come knowing that they're going get pushed along anyway. So, the effort isn't there. So, now we're fighting that battle and I think that's where some teachers will feel defeated. And sometimes you're even told, push them through.

Study results indicate that administrative pressures exist to pass students to the next grade level and teachers often oblige to the pressures to avoid consequence. The delegitimization of grades by administrative pressures on teachers to pass students may erode the integrity of the educational system and teachers (Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, 2018). This is supported as many teachers also suggest that the social promotion policies degrade the classroom by housing disruptive and apathetic students with little support from administrators to manage students' behaviors.

The administrative policies of social promotion not only devalue teachers in the classroom, but also within the school environment. Teacher perception of devaluation occurs when they are not recognized for the efforts teachers made nor the student growth achieved. When talking about teacher accountability, Joey explained that students are:

> coming to you at a much lower levels, you got to somehow get them, at least to where they need to be. So, teachers will shoot for improvement, but it doesn't always show that in the end numbers. In other words, they might have improved, but they're still below where they're supposed to be and then it looks bad on us. Even though we've done a lot and we've got them to improve and that's kind of what we're supposed to do is get them to learn and get them to progress. But it still doesn't [matter] because they are so low.

The conflict between accountability to achieve grade-level standards and demonstratable student growth may cause teachers to experience lower self-efficacy and motivation (Aytaç, 2021; Bukhari et al., 2023; Dunn, 2020; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Richards et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2017) and may cause animosity between teachers and administrators (Garver, 2020). Results of this study imply that teachers feel unsupported and disconnected from administrators and educational leaders that propagate conflicting expectations, teacher blame, and further promotion of social promotion policies.

On a larger scale, public devaluation of the teaching profession is a concern. Ryder explained, "it [social promotion policies] gives teachers a horrible look in the community because our grades…we just keep asking for more money, more money and the results are never there to back up the justification for more money and more money." As implied by Ryder, social promotion policies cause stakeholders to question the effectiveness of teachers without a true understanding of the educational policies; the public perception may be the lack of student

learning is the fault of the teachers. Turning back to the concept of identity in the sensemaking theory, individuals define themselves based on how they perceive themselves and how they believe others perceive them (Weick, 1995). Study results suggest that teachers feel devalued in concert with their administrators, educational leaders and stakeholders.

Interpretation #3: Teachers are de facto policy makers regarding student assessment practices. The enactment of social promotion policies by middle school teachers is achieved by a combination of subjective and socially constructed assessment practices created to uniquely balance administrative expectations, appearance of professional effectiveness, and student academic growth. The expansive roles and responsibilities of the teacher, in cooperation with conflicting expectations, administrative pressures and lack of resources, forces middle school teachers to navigate within a "broken system" the best they can. As such, middle school teachers serve as de facto policy makers where each teacher develops their own personal assessment policies to ensure students do not fail their class. The concept of teachers serving as de facto policy makers was identified in other studies when policy implementation did not align with classroom realities and was often indicative of educational settings where teachers experience being overwhelmed, conflicted, and pressured with competing expectations (Drake, 2017; Harklau & Yang, 2020; Muniz, 2020).

Middle school teachers devise their own assessment policies out of pressure and necessity to inflate student grades, project the appearance of academic effectiveness, and foster social promotion. The practice of manipulating grades, usually through grade inflation, is a common practice that teachers performed to avoid confrontation with administrators, parents and other stakeholders (Barrett et al., 2012; Dannenberg, 2018). Recalling the sensemaking theory, environments that have many dynamic components, conflicting expectations, and overwhelming

workloads are ripe for workers to redefine norms and give meaning to their reality based on their understanding and experiences (Ancona, 2011; Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The conflict between administrative expectations, classroom realities, and personal experiences are supported by Blake:

> I think there's just a misalignment between what school leadership thinks is best for kids, and what grading policies say in writing, and then how we execute the policy…Those [teachers] who really think we should do what we say we're going to do, it's, I think, it's much more difficult for them.

To make sense of the conflicting expectations and challenges of working within a system that teachers do not believe works but must maintain the appearance of effectiveness, middle school teachers create their own system and supporting policies within the classroom that works to meet their needs. As theorized by Weick (1995), procedures and routines may be institutionalized by individuals or groups of individuals that seek stability and predictability in a chaotic and confusing environment. For the teachers in this study, a collective effort essentially created an informal, in situ, de facto assessment policy unique for each individual teacher. The process of de facto policy creation and implementation is fluid as Blake explained that:

> over the years, I've gotten more solid in my own foundation about what I believe and how I can deal. So, a lot of this [expletive], I just let it go. You know what I mean? I do what I have to do, check the boxes that I have to do. I try very hard to weed out the nonsense; focus on what's going to help the kids. And that's sort of my laser focus, is this going to help kids? Or is it not? And as long as I can justify that, in my mind, that's how I play the system.

Blake, and as other middle school teachers suggested, does not believe educational leaders understand the realities of the current classroom or school setting and their policies are archaic and ineffective. As such, middle school teachers are forced to create assessment policies in the classroom setting to maintain the process of promoting students regardless of academic achievement.

Implications for Policy or Practice

This section presents implications related to the implementation of social promotion policies in a middle school setting. A discussion of two types of implications is presented that emphasize potential inferences in light of study results, existing literature, and the theoretical framework.

Implications for Policy

The results of this study indicated that implementation of social promotion policies at the middle school level created an environment where teachers perceived student learning and achievement to be secondary to the public perception of academic effectiveness. In the process, teachers perceived their role as professional educators devalued by administrative policies that were unrealistic to implement in the classroom thus forcing teachers to serve as de facto policy makers in regard to student assessment practices. Three policy implications emerged from the results of this study. First, it was evident that formalized assessment policies were nonexistent at the school, district or state level; this supported inconsistent and inflationary grading practices that negatively impacted the school environment and teachers' professional identities. Local, state and national educational leaders should provide more clarity and direction to teachers on how to consistently and objectively assess students to ensure grading systems are reliable and truly reflective of student achievement. State and local educational leaders should implement

policy that aligns students' scores on state assessments with academic grades. As is the case for the students within the study site, students can score in the lowest percentiles on state assessment, yet still are promoted to the next grade level due to subjective grading policies and instructional choices designed to promote students to the next grade level. Policy makers should strive to establish policies that support a more objective and achievement-based assessment matrix that includes students' scores on state achievement tests.

The second implication is that existing policies often conflict with expectations that make it difficult for teachers to effectively achieve success and perform professional roles. Results of this study suggested that teachers were conflicted with a myriad of roles and expectations that caused feelings of ineffectiveness and devaluation. School-, district- and state-wide educational leaders and policy makers should collaborate closely with teachers to better understand the degree to which policies are implemented in the classroom setting and how policies may negate, conflict or impact other policies. By working closely with teachers in the classroom setting, educational leaders and policy makers may reconsider the tendency to blame teachers for lack of students' academic achievement and realize the struggles that teachers may face is a result of the inconsistent or unrealistic policies that they create and enforce. Establishing a collaborative and collegial relationship between policy makers and classroom teachers may instigate policy reformation that is more amenable and straightforward to support teachers' ability to implement in the classroom setting.

Finally, results of this study suggested that socially promoted students do not approach grade level standards as they progress through the educational system and often exhibit behavioral problems and high levels of absenteeism. Educational leaders and policy makers should consider policy that requires socially promoted students to participate in specific

programs that focus on academic remediation in efforts to rectify the continued implementation of social promotion policies. The policy implications developed based on the results of this study support the establishment of policy to enact objective and consistent assessment practices, clear and complementary policy expectations, and accountability from stakeholders to support classroom teachers.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study offer practical implications for school administrators, educational leaders, and policy makers that support the use of social promotion policies at the middle school setting. Reflecting on the sensemaking theory, Weick (1995) explained that leaders of an organization play an influential role in the identity of an organization and its workers; the crux and success of this influence relies on the actions of the leaders rather than their policies. Considering that teachers feel devalued, are not equipped with clear assessment protocols, and are left to serve as de facto policy makers, it may be concluded that the teachers are confused of their roles and expectations while the educational leaders are not equipped to effectively guide the teachers. To resolve these issues, administrators and educational leaders should participate in leadership classes to reshape the blame-based culture and messaging that is apparent at the middle school.

Administrators and educational leaders should develop formalized, academic-focused assessment policies to promote uniform and objective grading policies among teachers within the school setting. This may reduce the pressures teachers experience to inflate grades or pass students along without evidence of student learning. The teachers in this study described feelings of frustration, helplessness, ineffectiveness and were overwhelmed with responsibilities. Prior research indicated that conflicting teacher expectations and demands for test-based

accountability caused similar feelings such as confusion, burnout and stress (Garcia et al., 2022; Richards et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2017), lowered self-efficacy and motivation (Aytaç, 2021; Dunn, 2020; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018), and decreased teacher satisfaction (Harrison et al., 2023; Smith & Halloway, 2020). The pressure for student achievement and positive teacher accountability may cause division between administrators and teachers (Garver, 2020). This divide was evident as teachers felt administrators and educational leaders did not understand their needs nor the gap between policy creation and classroom implementation. The impact of administrative decisions that foster chaos, conflict and work overload for teachers often serve as the impetus to the leave the profession (Carver-Thompson et al., 2017; Garcia et al, 2022; Wronowski & Urick, 2021), a possibility discussed by several teacher participants.

Administrators and district leaders should design and implement policies related to assessment, promotion, and behavior that support an academic school and classroom environment. The results of this study show that teachers perceive the existing social promotion policies devalues their role of teacher, diminishes their integrity, and encourages students to believe that they will pass regardless of effort or academic growth. Teachers perceive the implementation of social promotion policies rewards apathetic, unmotivated, behaviorally challenged, and ill-equipped students. Administrative supports and initiatives to redefine the classroom and school environment to an academic institution of student learning may modify the culture of achievement and redefine the role of teacher. Considering the population of the school consisted of large numbers of socially promoted students, it is clear that implementation of social promotion policies negatively impacted the teachers, the students, and the academic environment. In the long term, the implementation of existing policies will continue to promote students through the educational system who are unprepared to be successful at the high school

level and beyond (Mawhinney et al., 2016). The over implementation of social promotion policies and consequential impacts to the classroom and school environment may negate the foundational purpose of the educational system which is to educate students. The findings from this study and practical implications identified may also be applicable to other schools with high numbers of low-achieving students.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This section presents theoretical and empirical implications of the study that investigated middle school teachers' experiences implementing social promotion policies in a public middle school.

Theoretical Implications

In this qualitative study, Weick's sensemaking theory (1995) was chosen as the theoretical framework. In an organizational setting, the sensemaking theory focuses on how employees work within and give meaning to, or make sense of, conditions that may be stressful, challenging and unclear (Brown et al., 2015; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The guiding principles of the sensemaking process are: "(1) grounded in identity construction; (2) retrospective; (3) enactive of sensible environments; (4) social; (5) ongoing; (6) focused on and by extracted cues; and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (Weick, 1995, p. 17). Using the sensemaking theory as the theoretical framework provided a lens to explore middle school teachers' shared perceptions and experiences of implementing social promotion policies. Results of this study suggested that teachers perceived implementation of social promotion policies negatively impacted their role as a professional, minimized the efficacy and integrity of the educational system they worked within, pressured them to partake in subjective and inflationary grading policies, and created conflicting administrative policies and expectations

that were unrealistic to achieve. Teachers made sense of their work environment by believing that they were not important, grades were not important, and the system in which they worked in was broken. Weick (1995) explains that individuals and groups of individuals are more apt to make sense of, or define, their work environment during times of chaos, ambiguity, and overwhelming conditions. These types of conditions were described by the teachers in this study. As the sensemaking theory suggests, the leaders of the organization serve the dual role of sense maker and sense giver (Weick, 1995). Emerging from this study and the use of the theoretical framework, it is suggested that the administrators and educational leaders hold responsibility in the teachers' perceptions of their experiences with implementing social promotion policies. This study supports prior research using the sensemaking theory in understanding education policy implementation at the school and classroom level. Prior studies suggested that implementation of policies was more effective when leadership provided clarity in expectation, explanation of intent, and demonstrated understanding of challenges (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hodge, 2021; Muniz, 2020). Barriers to effective implementation of policy may be attributed to insufficient supports by leadership, inconsistencies amongst staff, and lack of time and resources (Dhaliwal et al., 2023). This study expanded the use of sensemaking theory to determine how it impacts teachers who implement social promotion policies; prior research was used to evaluate policies related to COVID-19 (Grooms & Childs, 2021), implementing SEL into existing curriculum (Muniz, 2020), ensuring equity-based instruction (Hodge, 2021), and effecting restorative disciplinary practices (Dhaliwal et al., 2023).

Empirical Implications

This study filled a gap in the literature as it provided insight into teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies with the focus on the teacher population. Limited

research exists in this area as much of the existing research related to social promotion policies focused on the impacts to the students' emotional and academic outcomes. This study suggests that implementation of social promotion policies is controversial in the middle school setting and confirms previous research that suggests social promotion does not prepare students for the demands of increased rigor, responsibility, workload, and independence that are often associated with higher grade levels (Brown et al., 2019; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McMahon, 2018; Rodriguez-Segura, 2020; Zhang & Huang, 2022). Interestingly, results of this study suggested that teachers perceived socially promoted students to be unmotivated and apathetic; these characteristics were also observed in students that were retained during previous studies (Anastasiou et al., 2017; Kretschmann et al., 2019). This research supplements existing research and suggests that teachers' observations of socially promoted students are consistent with research describing both socially promoted and retained students.

This study validated existing research that described the struggles and demands of teachers that work in schools with large populations of students with a variety of academic needs. To meet the needs of students, administrative policies, and test-based accountability, the conflict in teacher expectations and roles may cause confusion, burnout, stress, (Richards et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2017), lowered self-efficacy (Aytaç, 2021; Dunn, 2020; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018), decreased teacher satisfaction (Harrison et al., 2023; Smith & Halloway, 2020; Wronowski & Urick, 2021), and negatively impact the choice of instructional practices in the classroom (Aytaç, 2021; Guerra & Wubbena, 2017; Harrison et al., 2023). Participants in this study identified similar experiences when navigating the conflicting expectations of social promotion policies implemented by administration and the need for accountability on state mandated assessments. Results of this study clearly indicated that teachers subjectively assessed

students to generate report card grades that would imply students are at grade level in response to pressures from administrators and other stakeholders and fear of consequences. This research confirmed prior studies that concluded teachers may modify grades to avoid confrontation (Barrett et al., 2012; Dannenberg, 2018).

This study expanded knowledge of how social promotion policies are implemented in a middle school setting. To generate passing report card grades, teachers experienced pressure from administrators and other stakeholders to utilize grade inflation strategies to generate the appearance of academic learning and attainment of grade level standards. Prior research identified a myriad of methods to inflate grades that included, but not limited to, assessing the process of learning rather than learning of content standards (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Link, 2017), assessing student effort and participation (Guskey & Link, 2017; Guskey & Link, 2019; Link, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Sanchez & Moore, 2022), and accounting for differences in student abilities through differentiation (Kunnath, 2017; Olsen & Buchanan). Participants in this study confirmed the use of these and additional strategies when determining student grades; strategies used to limit the number of students failing and to provide the appearance of effectiveness. The administrative need for the school and teachers to appear effective through the use of grade inflation was identified at the high school level (Attig, 2020) and confirmed through the results of this study. Furthermore, this study shed light on the conflictions teachers face when pressured to inflate grades to support implementation of social promotion policies. Research suggests that teachers may question their own integrity and role they play in delegitimizing the educational system when participating in grade manipulation (Goldman, 1985; Mungal, 2020; Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, 2018). The teachers in this study

validated the internal struggles they encountered when implementing inflationary grading strategies.

Limitations and Delimitations

The purpose of this section is to identify and discuss the limitations and delimitations present in this study. Limitations refer to conditions within the study that are not controlled by the researcher and may be considered weaknesses in the research study. Several limitations are present in this study. First, the study focused on participants located within one school within the district which may impact transferability to other schools, districts, and geographical locations. During method design, the intent was to recruit participants from approximately ten middle schools located in the district. However, procuring site approval from each school administrator proved difficult. One administrator provided site approval and all study participants worked at that school. Secondly, several participants expressed fear of retribution if discovered by administration for participating in the research study. This fear may have impacted participants ability to be honest about their experiences during data collection procedures. Finally, there was no minority representation in the 13 participants; all participants were Caucasian. During the recruitment stages, no minority teachers responded to recruitment emails. The lack of racial diversity in the study participants may be attributed to the low number of minority teaching staff represented in the school and in the core content subjects. There is also the possibility that minority teachers did not have experiences with implementing social promotion policies which was an eligibility requirement stated in the recruitment letter. The lack of racial diversity may impact the transferability of the study results to other geographical areas or schools with a higher percentage of minority teachers.

Delimitations are intentional choices made during the research design process to provide limits and bounds to the study. Several delimitations existed in this study. The purposive sampling strategy limited the scope of this research to teachers possessing five or more years of experience. Five years was estimated to be the amount of time when teachers begin to develop their own perspectives of the profession rather than what was learned in preparatory teaching programs (Coombs et al., 2018). During the recruitment phase, participant eligibility was based on the teachers' abilities to recall social promotion experiences. Although the study did not include teachers that had no recollection implementing social promotion policies, the choice to exclude them from the study was to focus on the impacts of social promotion policies on only those teachers with experience implementing those policies. The small number of participants gathered from the same middle school was also a delimitation. During phenomenological reduction, theme saturation was developed. However, the transferability to other middle schools in the district or regionally may be compromised. A final delimitation was the decision to not address COVID-related assessment policies in this study. The controversial impacts of social promotion policies have been a long-term concern for educational leaders and policy makers for decades. This study focused on middle school teachers' experiences implementing of social promotion policies rather than the impacts of the temporary COVID pandemic may have on assessment practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research related to teachers' experiences implementing social promotion policies at the middle school level is relatively limited. Therefore, several recommendations are presented in this section for future research. As a continuation of this research, a grounded theory study may prove valuable in better understanding the process by which implementing social promotion

policies impacts the teachers. Whereas phenomenological studies seek to uncover common experiences shared by participants based on participant descriptions, grounded theory studies seek to uncover the process by which the participants' experiences are developed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By understanding the processes, educational leaders and policy makers may better understand the controversial nature between social promotion policies, classroom implementation, and impacts on the role of teachers.

Similar phenomenological studies could also be implemented at different locations. This research was limited to one school in the southern United States. Most participants had previous teaching experience in other geographical areas and suggested that social promotion policies were similar. Expanding the research to other middle schools located in other districts and states may provide feedback on the generalizability of the research and provide information to determine if teachers' experiences in this study site are a localized or a large-scale phenomenon. Referring to other locations could also suggest expanding the research to elementary and high school settings. The learned experiences of teachers at those levels implementing social promotion policies may be helpful to understanding the continuity of assessment strategies, promotion policies, and extent of grade inflation at different academic levels in the K-12 system.

It is recommended that this research be expanded to other educational professionals and stakeholders. One possibility for future research includes administrators' and guidance counselors' experiences with implementing social promotion policies. Results of this study indicated that teachers received most pressure from administrators and guidance counselors to pass low achieving students. Researching their experiences and perceptions may provide a larger understanding of how social promotion policies are implemented through the administrative chain of command. Other stakeholders that were referenced through the course of this study

include parents and community members. As such, additional research could focus on the experiences of parents, local employers, and colleges to determine how social promotion policies impact entities outside of the K-12 school setting.

Final recommendations for future studies relate to special student groups. This study did not differentiate student groups. Several of the participants discussed distinct social promotion policies for special education students, ESOL students, and previously retained students that will age out of middle school. Expanding the research to focus on teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies for special education students and/or ESOL students may provide additional insight into the degree of impact on the teachers. It may prove beneficial, when considering students that have been socially promoted, to understand the percentage of those students that possess differentiated learning plans for special education or language accommodations, and whether those students provide the most challenges to the classroom teacher. Further, additional research related to teachers' experiences working with previously retained students may shed light onto how their presence in the classroom may impact the classroom environment and student learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe middle school teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States. This study filled a gap in the literature and may contribute to improving student assessment policies and improving the working conditions for teachers. The results of this study indicated that implementation of social promotion policies had derogatory impacts to the teaching profession, student achievement, and integrity of the educational system. In this study, teachers who implemented social promotion policies perceived a devaluation of themselves, students'

learning experiences, and the system in which they worked. A commonly shared phenomenon among teachers was the perception of blame, frustration, and ineffectiveness resulting from conflicting and expansive policies, expectations, and roles that teachers were responsible for, and consequently, forced them to serve as de facto policy makers in the classroom setting.

The results of this study provide several implications for administrators, educational leaders, and policy makers. First, collaboration is needed between all levels of the educational system to ensure policy creation aligns with policy implementation. Secondly, implementation of social promotion policies may conflict with other existing policies such as state accountability policies, district grading policies, state content standards, and parental expectations. It is important for leadership to clarify expectations to minimize confusion, ambiguity, and conflicts. Finally, standardized assessment policies are needed to reinvigorate integrity into the educational system and to establish more objective and clear standards for the teachers to abide by. Today's educational atmospheres are characterized by a myriad of student needs, political interests, teacher subjectivities, public opinions, equity-based initiatives, and methods of teaching. Redefining public education to develop continuity, consistency, and norms based on content knowledge rather than appearance of effectiveness is necessary to reinvigorate academic integrity.

References

Affuso, G., Zannone, A., Esposito, C., Pannone, M., Miranda, M. C., De Angelis, G., Aquilar, S., Dragone, M., & Bacchini, D. (2023). The effects of teacher support, parental monitoring, motivation and self-efficacy on academic performance over time. *European Journal of Psychology of Education - EJPE (Springer Science & Business Media B.V.)*, *38*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-021-00594-6

Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Dauber, S. L. (2003). *On the success of failure: A reassessment of the effects of retention in the primary grades* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Akin-Sabuncu, S. (2022). Towards a re-conceptualization of the role of teacher educators in a changing world: A critical pedagogy perspective. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, *18*(1), 362–378.

American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (2014). *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, 2014 Edition*. American Educational Research Association

Anastasiou, A. I., Papachristou, E. M., & Diakidoy, I.-A. N. (2017). Parents' and teachers' views on the psychosocial adjustment of students with and without a history of early grade retention. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 33*(3), 294–307. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2017.1306490

Ancona, D. G. (2011). Sensemaking: Framing and acting in the unknown. In S. Snook, N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *The Handbook for teaching leadership: Knowing, doing, and being* (pp 3-20). Sage.

Arundel, K. (2020, December 8). How educators are tweaking grading approaches in response to the pandemic. *K-12 Dive*. https://www.k12dive.com/news/how-educators-are-tweakinggrading-approaches-in-response-to-the-pandemic/591729/

Attig, J. A. (2021). *A phenomenological study of secondary teachers' perceptions regarding grade inflation in Atlantic State* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Liberty University.

Aytaç, A. (2021). A Study of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, motivation to teach, and curriculum fidelity: A path analysis model. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, *8*(4), 130–143.

Barrett, D. E., Casey, J. E., Visser, R. D., & Headley, K. N. (2012). How do teachers make judgments about ethical and unethical behaviors? Toward the development of a code of conduct for teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 28*(6), 890-898.

Berends, M., Koretz, D., & Harris, E. (1995). *Identifying Students at Risk of Low Achievement in NAEP and NELS*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED404372.pdf

Black, P., & William, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation & Accountability, 21*(1), 5–31. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9068-5

Boland R. (2008). Decision Making and Sensemaking. In: *Handbook on Decision Support Systems 1.* (pp. 55-63). International Handbooks Information System. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-48713-5_3

Bowie, L. (2021, May 25). Baltimore school system will not make students struggling during the pandemic repeat a grade in the fall. *Baltimore Sun.* https://www.baltimoresun.com/education/bs-ed-grade-adjustments-city-schools-20210525-4zmofx6uvrcjhcax7bv4bp2q3y-story.html

Brookhart, S. M., Guskey, T. R., Bowers, A. J., McMillan, J. H., Smith, J. K., Smith, L. F., Stevens, M. T., & Welsh, M. E. (2016). A century of grading research: Meaning and value in the most common educational measure. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(4), 803–848.

Brown, A. D., Colville, I., & Pye, A. (2015). Making sense of sensemaking in organization studies. *Organization Studies*, *36*(2), 265-277. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840614559259

Brown, T. M., Cook, A. L. J., & Santos, J. (2019). Reconceptualizing risk and high school noncompletion: The case of Latina/o ninth-grade leavers in an urban school. *Teachers College Record, 121*(7). http://www.tcrecord.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/Content.asp?ContentId=22687

Buckley, J., Letukas, L., & Wildavsky, B. (2017). *Measuring Success: Testing, Grades, and the Future of College Admissions.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bukhari, S. G. A. S., Jamali, S. G., Larik, A. R., & Chang, M. S. (2023). Fostering intrinsic motivation among teachers: Importance of work environment and individual differences. *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology*, *11*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/21683603.2021.1925182

Burriss, K. G., & Snead, D. (2017). Middle School Students' Perceptions Regarding the Motivation and Effectiveness of Homework. *School Community Journal, 27*(2), 193–210.

Carstens, A. A. (1985). Retention and social promotion for the exceptional child. *School Psychology Review*, *14*(1), 48–63.

Carver-Thomas, D., Darling-Hammond, L., & Learning Policy Institute. (2017). Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it. *Learning Policy Institute.*

Chowdhury, F. (2018). Grade inflation: Causes, consequences and cure. *Journal of Education and Learning, 7*(6), 86–92.

Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub.L. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241 (1964).

Cohen, J. S., & Smerdon, B. A. (2009). Tightening the dropout torniquet: Easing the transition from middle to high school. *Preventing School Failure, 53*(3), 177–184. https://doi.org/10.3200/PSFL.53.3.177-184

CohenMiller, A. S., & Pate, P. E. (2019). A model for developing interdisciplinary research theoretical frameworks. *Qualitative Report, 24*(6), 1211–1226.

Coombs, A., DeLuca, C., LaPointe-McEwan, D., & Chalas, A. (2018). Changing approaches to classroom assessment: An empirical study across teacher career stages. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, *71*, 134–144. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.12.010

Congress of the U.S. (1965). *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Background Material with Related Presidential Recommendations*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED018492

Crawford, W. S., Thompson, M. J., & Ashforth, B. E. (2019). Work-life events theory: Making sense of shock events in dual-earner couples. *Academy of Management Review, 44*(1), 194–212. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2016.0432

Crepeau-Hobson, F. (2016). Grade retention and social promotion. *Communique*, *44*(7), 14–16.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2018) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage.

Dannenberg, M. (2018). The Main Thing Is to Keep the Main Thing, the Main Thing. *Organization & Management Quarterly, 44*(4), 35–82. https://doi.org/10.29119/1899-6116.2018.44.4

de Brey, C., Musu, L., McFarland, J., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Diliberti, M., Zhang, A., Branstetter, C., & Wang, X. (2019). Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups 2018 [NCES 2019-038]. *National Center for Education Statistics*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED592833

Denning, J. T., Eide, E. R., Patterson, R. W., Mumford, K. J., & Warnick, M. (2022). Lower bars, higher college GPAs: How grade inflation is boosting college graduation rates. *Education Next*, *22*(1), 56–62.

Department of Education. (1999). *Taking responsibility for ending social promotion: A guide for educators and state and local leaders*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED430319.pdf

Dhaliwal, T. K., Daramola, E. J., Alonso, J. D., & Marsh, J. A. (2023). Educators' beliefs and perceptions of implementing restorative practices. *Education & Urban Society*, *55*(1), 88–118. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245211048439

Dixson, D. D., & Worrell, F. C. (2016). Formative and summative assessment in the classroom. *Theory Into Practice, 55*(2), 153–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1148989

Donohue v. Copiague United Free School Dist., 47 N.Y. 2d 440 (N. Y. Ct. App. 1979). https://www.leagle.com/decision/197948747ny2d4401440

Drake, K. (2017). Competing purposes of education: The case of underschooled immigrant students. *Journal of Educational Change, 18*(3), 337–363. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9302-3

Dunn, A. H. (2020). “A vicious cycle of disempowerment”: The relationship between neoliberal policies and teachers’ reports of morale and pedagogy in an urban high school. *Teachers College Record*, *122*(1), 1–40.

Durm, M. W. (1993). An A is not an A is not an A: a history of grading. *Educational Forum*, *57*, 294–297. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131729309335429

Ehlers, T., & Schwager, R. (2016). Honest grading, grade inflation, and reputation. *CESifo Economic Studies, 62*(3), 506-521.

Eren, O., Depew, B., & Barnes, S. (2017). Test-based promotion policies, dropping out, and juvenile crime. *Journal of Public Economics*, *153*, 9–31.

Erichsen, K., & Reynolds, J. (2020). Public school accountability, workplace culture, and teacher morale. *Social Science Research*, *85,* 102347. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2019.102347

Essex, N. L. (2016). *School law and the public schools: A practical guide for educational leaders* (6th ed.). Pearson.

Every School Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1232g (1974).

Fuller, R. D., Lawrence, S. M., Harrison, C. K., Eyanson, J., & Osika, L. (2017). Perks for players: High school teachers’ perceptions of athletic privilege. *American Secondary Education, 45*(2), 39–55.

García, E., Han, E., & Weiss, E. (2022). Determinants of teacher attrition: Evidence from district-teacher matched data. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *30*(25).

Gardner, D., Larsen, Y, Baker, W., & Campbell, A. (1983). *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. An Open Letter to the American People. A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education*.

Garver, R. (2020). Evaluative Relationships: Teacher Accountability and Professional Culture. *Journal of Education Policy, 35*(5), 623–647.

Gershenson, S. (2018). *Grade inflation in high schools (2005-2016).* Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Gershenson, S. (2020). End the "Easy A": Tougher grading standards set more students up for success. *Education Next, 20*(2), 18–24.

Gershenson, S., & Papageorge, N. (2018). The Power of teacher expectations: How racial bias hinders student attainment. *Education Next, 18*(1), 65–70.

Giano, Z., Williams, A. L., & Becnel, J. N. (2021). Grade retention and school dropout: Comparing specific grade levels across childhood and early adolescence. *Journal of Early Adolescence.* https://doi.org/10.1177/02724316211010332

Goldman, L. (1985). The betrayal of the gatekeepers: Grade inflation. *The Journal of General Education, 37*(2), 97-121.

Goos, M., Schreier, B. M., Knipprath, H. M. E., De Fraine, B., Van Damme, J., & Trautwein, U. (2013). How can cross-country differences in the practice of grade retention be explained? A closer look at national educational policy factors. *Comparative Education Review, 57*(1), 54–84. https://doi.org/10.1086/667655

Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your "house." *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research, 4*(2), 12–26.

Griffin, R., & Townsley, M. (2021). Points, points, and more points: High school grade inflation and deflation when homework and employability scores are included. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, *6*(1), 1–11.

Grooms, A. A., & Bohorquez, D. G. (2022). What's your excuse? Sensemaking about chronic absenteeism in a rural, Latinx high school. *Journal of School Leadership*, *32*(4), 384–405.

Grooms, A. A., & Childs, J. (2021). "We need to do better by kids": Changing routines in U.S. schools in response to COVID-19 school closures. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 26*(2), 135–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2021.1906251

Guerra, P. L., & Wubbena, Z. C. (2017). Teacher beliefs and classroom practices: Cognitive dissonance in high stakes test-influenced environments. *Issues in Teacher Education*, *26*(1), 35–51.

Guskey, T. R., & Link, L. J. (2017). Grades Represent Achievement and "Something Else": Analysis of the Nonachievement Factors Teachers Consider in Determining Students' Grades. *AERA Online Paper Repository*.

Guskey, T. R., & Link, L. J. (2019). Exploring the factors teachers consider in determining students' grades. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 26*(3), 303–320. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2018.1555515

Guskey, T. R., (2000). Grading Policies that Work Against Standards…and How to Fix Them. *NASSP Bulletin*, *84(*620), 20.

Gutek, G. (2011). *Historical and philosophical foundations of education: A biographical Introduction* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Harklau, L., & Yang, A. H. (2020). Educators' construction of mainstreaming policy for English learners: a decision-making theory perspective. *Language Policy*, *19*(1), 87–110. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-019-09511-6

Harrison, M. G., King, R. B., & Wang, H. (2023). Satisfied teachers are good teachers: The association between teacher job satisfaction and instructional quality. *British Educational Research Journal*, *1*. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3851

Hayman, B., Wilkes, L., & Jackson, D. (2012). Journaling: identification of challenges and reflection on strategies. *Nurse Researcher, 19*(3), 27–31.

Hill, N. E., Witherspoon, D. P., & Bartz, D. (2018). Parental involvement in education during middle school: Perspectives of ethnically diverse parents, teachers, and students. *Journal of Educational Research, 111*(1), 12–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2016.1190910

Hodge, E. (2021). Conceptions of equity in Common Core policy messages in a metropolitan district. *Educational Forum*, *85*(1), 89-106.

Hung, M., Smith, W. A., Voss, M. W., Franklin, J. D., Gu, Y., & Bounsanga, J. (2020). Exploring student achievement gaps in school districts across the United States. *Education and Urban Society, 52*(2), 175–193.

Hughes, J. N., Cao, Q., West, S. G., Allee Smith, P., & Cerda, C. (2017). Effect of retention in elementary grades on dropping out of school early. *Journal of school psychology*, (65), 11–27. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2017.06.003

Hussar, B., Zhang, J., Hein, S., Wang, K., Roberts, A., Cui, J., Smith, M., Bullock Mann, F., Barmer, A., and Dilig, R. (2020). *The condition of education 2020* (NCES 2020-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2020144.

Hwang, S. H. J., & Cappella, E. (2018). Rethinking early elementary grade retention: Examining long-term academic and psychosocial outcomes. *Grantee Submission, 11*(4), 559–587. https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1080/19345747.2018.1496500

Iacob, O. C., & Groza, E. (2019). The history of American education system and its evolution in the new economy. *Hyperion International Journal of Econophysics & New Economy, 12*(2), 159–176.

Ikeda, M., & Garcia, E. (2013). Grade repetition: A comparative study of academic and non-academic consequences. *OECD Journal: Economic Studies*, *2013*(1), 269–315. https://doi.org/10.1787/eco_studies-2013-5k3w65mx3hnx

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

Jentsch, A., Hoferichter, F., Blömeke, S., König, J., & Kaiser, G. (2023). Investigating teachers' job satisfaction, stress and working environment: The roles of self-efficacy and school leadership. *Psychology in the Schools*, *60*(3), 679–690. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22788

Jönsson, A., Balan, A., & Hartell, E. (2021). Analytic or holistic? A study about how to increase the agreement in teachers' grading. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594x.2021.1884041

Kasalak, G., & Dagyar, M. (2020). The Relationship between teacher self-efficacy and teacher job satisfaction: A meta-analysis of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice, 20*(3), 16–33.

King, E. M., Orazem, P. F., & Paterno, E. M. (2016). Promotion with and without learning: Effects on student enrollment and dropout behavior. *World Bank Economic Review, 30*(3), 580–602. https://doi.org/https://academic.oup.com/wber/issue

Kramer, K. (2017). Sensemaking. In C. R. Scott & L. K. Lewis (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of organizational communication*. John and Wiley Sons, Inc. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc185

Kretschmann, J., Vock, M., Lüdtke, O., Jansen, M., & Gronostaj, A. (2019). Effects of grade retention on students' motivation: A longitudinal study over 3 years of secondary school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 111*(8), 1432–1446.

Kunnath, J. P. (2017). Teacher grading decisions: Influences, rationale, and practices. *American Secondary Education, 45*(3), 68-88.

Lasater, K. (2019). Developing authentic family-school partnerships in a rural high school: Results of a longitudinal action research study. *School Community Journal, 29*(2), 157–182.

Learning Heroes. (2021). *Parents 2021: Going Beyond the Headlines*. https://bealearninghero.org/research

LiCalsi, C., Ozek, U., & Figlio, D. (2019). The uneven implementation of universal school policies: Maternal education and Florida's mandatory grade retention policy. *Education Finance and Policy, 14*(3), 383–413.

Lin, Y. P. (2019). Rising grades: A review. *Journal of Applied Economics & Business Research, 9*(4), 177–185.

Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Sage.

Link, L. (2018). Teachers' Perceptions of Grading Practices: How Pre-Service Training Makes a Difference. *Journal of Research in Education, 28*(1), 62–91.

Locke, V. N., & Sparks, P. J. (2019). Who gets held back? An analysis of grade retention using stratified frailty models. *Population Research and Policy Review, 38*(5), 695–731.

Looney, A., Cumming, J., van Der Kleij, F., & Harris, K. (2018). Reconceptualising the role of teachers as assessors: Teacher assessment identity. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 25*(5), 442–467.

Lu, O. H. T., Huang, A. Y. Q., & Yang, S. J. H. (2021). Impact of teachers' grading policy on the identification of at-risk students in learning analytics. *Computers & Education*, 163, N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104109

Mangione, T. W. (1995). *Mail surveys.* SAGE Publications, Inc. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412984881

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2015). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage.

Marshall, J. M. (2012). Common Schools Movement. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education* (Vol. 1, pp. 415-417). SAGE Reference. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX4195500132/GVRL?u=vic_liberty&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=1ead43bd

Marinell, W. H., & Coca, V. M. (2013). "*Who stays and who leaves?" Findings from a three-part study of teacher turnover in NYC middle school.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED540818.pdf

Mawhinney, L., Irby, D. J., & Roberts, E. S. (2016). Passed along: Black women reflect on the long-term effects of social promotion and retention in schools. *International Journal of Educational Reform, 25*(2), 154–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/105678791602500203

McAfee, J. K. (1981). *Towards a Theory of Promotion: Does Retaining Students Really Work?*

McMahon, T. (2018). Despite our best intention: Students relate how social promotion hurt them and what changes they believe will help them. *Interchange, 49*(4), 499–519.

Moleko, M. M. (2022). Using universal design for instruction principles to guide flexible, inclusive and accessible teaching of geometry. *Issues in Educational Research*, *32*(2), 613–633.

Morine-Dershimer, G. (1987). Informal theory and instructional practice: Sensemaking makes sense. *Theory into Practice*, *26,* 59-66. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405848709543250.

Morris, D. B., Usher, E. L., & Chen, J. A. (2017). Reconceptualizing the sources of teaching self-efficacy: A critical review of emerging literature. *Educational Psychology Review, 29*(4), 795–833.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage.

Mungal, A. S. (2020). Inequities and ethical dilemmas beyond the classroom: Joseph's story. *Educational Forum, 84*(1), 29–47. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1080/00131725.2019.1656316

Muñiz, R. (2020). Muddy sensemaking: Making sense of socio-emotional skills amidst a vague policy context. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 28*(114). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.28.5235

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards*. Washington, DC: Authors.

Odden, T. O. B. & Russ, R. S. (2019). Defining sensemaking: Bringing clarity to a fragmented theoretical construct. *Science Education, 103*(1), 187-205. https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21452

Office of Education. (1965). Background Readings in American Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED053027.pdf

Olsen, B., & Buchanan, R. (2019). An investigation of teachers encouraged to reform grading practices in secondary schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 56*(5), 2004-2039.

Owens, E. H. (2019). *A Qualitative Study of Parents' Experience with their Children's Mandated Retention: Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee in Action.* (Order No. 27534716). [Doctoral dissertation, Miami University]. ProQuest Education Database.

Papageorge, N. W., Gershenson, S., & Kang, K. M. (2020). Teacher expectations matter. *Review of Economics and Statistics, 102*(2), 234–251. https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_00838

Paredes, V. (2017). Grading system and student effort. *Education Finance and Policy*, *12*(1), 107–128. https://doi.org/10.1162/EDFP_a_00195

Patton, M. (2014). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage.

Pelletier, C. A., Pousette, A., Ward, K., & Fox, G. (2020). Exploring the perspectives of community members as research partners in rural and remote areas. *Research Involvement and Engagement*, *6,* 3. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-020-0179-6

Peredaryenko, M. S., & Krauss, S. E. (2013). Calibrating the human instrument: Understanding the interviewing experience of novice qualitative researchers. *Qualitative Report, 18*(43), 1–17.

Perrault, P., Winters, M., & Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. (2020). Test-Based Promotion and Student Performance in Florida and Arizona. Issue Brief. In *Manhattan Institute for Policy Research*. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

Peter, W. v. San Francisco Unified School Dist., 60 Cal. 3d 826 (Cal. Ct. App. 1976). https://law.justia.com/cases/california/court-of-appeal/3d/60/814.html

Peurach, D. J., Yurkofsky, M. M., & Sutherland, D. H. (2019). Organizing and managing for excellence and equity: The work and dilemmas of instructionally focused education systems. *Educational Policy, 33*(6), 812–845.

Rangel, V. S., Henderson, J. A., Doan, V., Greer, R., & Manuel, M. (2022). Mentoring roles in an afterschool STEM mentoring program: An investigation of why mentors enact different roles. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, *11*(4), 364–380.

Reaves, S. J., & Cozzens, J. A. (2018). Teacher perceptions of climate, motivation, and self-efficacy: Is there really a connection. *Journal of Education and Training Studies, 6*(12), 48–67.

Richards, K., Levesque-Bristol, C., Templin, T., & Graber, K. (2016). The impact of resilience on role stressors and burnout in elementary and secondary teachers. *Social Psychology of Education*, *19*(3), 511–536. https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1007/ s11218-016-9346-x

Rit, M. (2019). Making sense of blockchain technology: How will it transform supply chains? *International Journal of Production Economics*, *211,* 221–236. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2019.02.00

Rodriguez-Segura, D. (2020). Strengthening early literacy skills through social promotion policies? Intended and unintended consequences in Costa Rica. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *77*, N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102243

Rubie-Davies, C., Meissel, K., Alansari, M., Watson, P., Flint, A., & McDonald, L. (2020). Achievement and Beliefs Outcomes of Students with High and Low Expectation Teachers. *Social Psychology of Education: An International Journal, 23*(5), 1173–1201.

Ryan, S. V., Pendergast, L. L., Schwing, S., von der Embse, N. P., Saeki, E., & Segool, N. (2017). Leaving the teaching profession: The role of teacher stress and educational accountability policies on turnover intent. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, *66*, 1–11. https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1016/j.tate.2017.03.016

Sanchez, E. I., & Moore, R. (2022). Grade Inflation Continues to Grow in the Past Decade. Research Report. *ACT, Inc*.

Schneider, J., & Hutt, E. (2014). Making the grade: a history of the A-F marking scheme. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 46*(2), 201–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.790480

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, *22*(2), 63–75. https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201

Silva, E., White, T., & Toch, T. (2015). The Carnegie Unit: A Century-Old Standard in a Changing Education Landscape. *Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*.

Simon, H. A. & Newell, A. (1964). Information Processing in computer and man. *American Scientist*, 52, 281–300.

Smith, W. C., & Holloway, J. (2020). School testing culture and teacher satisfaction. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 32*(4), 461–479.

Snook, S. (2001). *Friendly Fire*. Princeton University.

Sorurbakhsh-Castillo, M. (2018). *A case study: How freshman teachers perceive grade inflation at a Southeast High School* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_commons_grad_edd/208.

South Carolina Department of Education. (2021). *Report cards data for researchers 2020-2021: Report Card 2020-–1 - Additional Information (Not Ratings)* [Data set]. https://screportcards.ed.sc.gov/files/2021//data-files/

Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2019). Understanding teacher shortages: An analysis of teacher supply and demand in the United States. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(35).

Starr, J. P. (2020). Public school priorities in a political year: The [5]2nd annual PDK poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. *The Phi Delta Kappan, 102*(1), K1–K16. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26977152

Taarup, E. J. (2019). Making sense of risk - A Sociological perspective on the management of risk. *Risk Analysis: An International Journal, 39*(4), 749–760.

Tausch, A. P., & Menold, N. (2016). Methodological aspects of focus groups in health research: Results of qualitative interviews with focus group moderators. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, *3*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393616630466

Thomas, A., Grimes, J., & National Association of School Psychologists, S. S., MD. (1990). *Best Practices in School Psychology-II*.

Tyner, A., & Gershenson, S. (2020). Conceptualizing grade inflation. *Economics of Education Review, 78,* N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2020.102037

Uphoff, J. K. (2010). National School Boards Association. In T. C. Hunt, J. C. Carper, T. J. Lasley, II, & C. D. Raisch (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent* (Vol. 2, pp. 641-642). SAGE Reference. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX1958800309/GVRL?u=vic_liberty&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=4cf3f4cc

US Congress. (2002). No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-110). Author. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556108.pdf

Vahle, C., de Araujo, Z., Han, J., & Otten, S. (2023). Teachers' instructional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, *124*, N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104040

Von Bergen, C. W., & Bressler, M. S. (2020). Be careful when helping others: The long-term effects on recipients of sustained aid and assistance. *Journal of Organizational Psychology, 20*(5), 10–29.

Walls, J. H. (2017). Sensemaking and school failure: lessons from two cases. *Journal of Organizational Theory in Education, 2*(1), 1-26.

Walton, E. (2018). Teacher beliefs about grade repetition: An exploratory South African study. *Citizenship Teaching & Learning, 13*(1), 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1386/ctl.13.1.45_1

Warren, J. R., Hoffman, E., & Andrew, M. (2014). Patterns and trends in grade retention rates in the United States, 1995-2010. *Educational Researcher, 43*(9), 433–443. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.3102/0013189X14563599

Weick, K. E. (1993). The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *38*(4), 628–652. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393339

Weick, K, E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage.

Weick, K. E. (2009). *Making sense of the organization, volume 2: The impermanent organization*. ProQuest Ebook Central https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu

Weick, K. E. (2020). Sensemaking, organizing, and surpassing: A handoff. *Journal of Management Studies*, *55*(7), 1420-1431. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12617

Weick, K. E. (2011). Organized Sensemaking: A commentary on processes of interpretive work. *Human Relations*, *65*(1), 141–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711424235

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, *16*(4), 409-421.

Wronowski, M., & Urick, A. (2021). Teacher and school predictors of teacher deprofessionalization and demoralization in the United States. *Educational Policy*, *35*(5), 679–720.

Young, S., Trujillo, N. P., Bruce, M. A., Pollard, T., Jones, J., & Range, B. (2019). Preservice teachers' views about grade retention as an intervention for struggling students. *Preventing School Failure, 63*(2), 113–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2018.1523124

Yang, M.-Y., Chen, Z., Rhodes, J. L. F., & Orooji, M. (2018). A longitudinal study on risk factors of grade retention among elementary school students using a multilevel analysis: Focusing on material hardship and lack of school engagement. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 88, 25–32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.043

Yeh, S. S. (2020). Educational accountability, value-added modeling, and the origin of the achievement gap. *Education and Urban Society, 52*(8), 1181–1203. https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0013124519896823

Young, V. M. (2018). Assessing the Cornerstone of U.S. Education Reform. *Educational Foundations*, *31*(3/4), 74–99.

Zhang, S., & Huang, A. (2022). The Long-Term Effects of Automatic Grade Promotion on Child Development. *China Economic Review*, 74.

Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 10, 2022

Kelley Duffy
Rebecca Bowman

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-922 A Phenomenological Study of Middle School Teachers' Experiences of Implementing Social Promotion Policies in a Public School District

Dear Kelley Duffy, Rebecca Bowman,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [redacted]

Sincerely,
[redacted]
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Site Approval Form

[redacted]

Application Request for Research Project

NAME: **Kelley Duffy**	DATE OF PROPOSAL: **March 14, 2022**
School/Location: [redacted]	Principal/Supervisor [redacted]
Email address: [redacted]	University Professor: **Dr. Rebecca Bowman** **Liberty University**

SCHOOL(S), CLASSROOM or LOCATION IN WHICH PROJECT IS BEING CONDUCTED:
Potentially nine schools that house middle grades sixth through eighth within the [redacted]
The screening phase will determine which teachers in respective schools will participate in the study.

APPROVAL RECEIVED FROM PRINCIPAL OR IMMEDIATE (YES) NO

RESEARCH START DATE: **4/15/22 (estimated)**

ESTIMATED COMPLETION DATE: **9/1/22 (estimated)**

Research Project Description

1. Title of Research Project:
A PHENOMOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL PROMOTION POLICIES IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

2. Describe the primary purpose of the research as well as the measurable objectives of the project.
Examples: "The aim of this study is to _____ (Determine/Measure/Gather information on/ Investigate the consequences/Test the theory/Analyze the impact/Develop deeper understanding of _____.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe middle school teachers' experiences with working in schools that enact social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States. At this stage in the research, social promotion will be generally defined as promoting to the next grade level students who do not exhibit grade level academic proficiencies (Department of Education, 1999; King et al., 2016) and supported through the practice of grade inflation. This study will be guided by the sensemaking theory as it explains how individuals define and give meaning to their realities in the midst of ambiguities and uncertainties related to past events in effort to make sense of policies and actions that legitimize future behaviors (Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1995).

Department of Education. (1999). Taking responsibility for ending social promotion: A guide for educators and state and local leaders. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED430319.pdf

King, E. M., Orazem, P. F., & Paterno, E. M. (2016). Promotion with and without learning: Effects on student enrollment and dropout behavior. World Bank Economic Review, 30(3), 580–602. https://doi.org/https://academic.oup.com/wber/issue

Kramer, K. (2017). Sensemaking. In C. R. Scott & L. K. Lewis (Ed.), The international encyclopedia of organizational communication. John and Wiley Sons, Inc. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc185

Weick, K, E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage.

Rev 12/2014

3. Provide a brief description of the research and how it will address improvement of educational policy, programs or practices:

This study is significant as it contributes to existing research regarding teachers' experiences and perceptions of their roles and expectations as related to policy implementation. The sensemaking theory will serve as the theoretical framework explaining how teachers make sense of, give meaning to, and operate in a public school that enacts social promotion policies. An understanding of teachers experiences with social promotion policies may provide insight into leadership initiatives, assessment practices, impacts to teacher morale and self-efficacy, and internal and external pressures teachers manage when assessing students.

4. How does the Research Project align with the strategic mission and vision of the [redacted] a specific school or classroom? If a section is not applicable to your Research Project, indicate N/A.

- ☐ District/School strategic plan and educational goals to improve student achievement:
  The outcomes of this research study may provide insight into teachers' experiences and perceptions of individual, school and district level assessment practices, including personal levels of self-efficacy, motivation and professional identity. This information may be useful to district leaders to develop professional development opportunities related to assessment and/or modify policy to support teacher empowerment and professional standards.
- ☐ Research-based strategies related to improving districts, schools, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and improving learning for all students:
  Based on review of current research, assessment practices amongst teachers and schools may be inconsistent, subjective and unrelated to student understanding of content standards and not reflective of cognitive abilities. This research study may give insight into what student data and assessment tools teachers use to determine year-end grades and personal experiences derived when developing grades. The district may be able to utilize this information to establish a more formal and structured assessment policy that can be a source for consistent and objective assessment of student achievement.
- ☐ Improvement of learning for all students in the targeted student population(s): Realizing an achievement gap exists between different student groups, garnering a greater understanding of assessment practices and **In [redacted], an achievement gap exists between student populations. Minority groups generally perform at lower achievement levels and are more likely to be socially promoted. This research may help minority populations as it may result in higher standards-based expectations for all students due to more objective and content-based assessment strategies.**
- ☐ Standards-based instruction and assessment, ([redacted] State Standards, College-Career Ready etc.)
  This research may provide insight into how teachers assess students and what data is used to determine grades. Understanding this, district or school level leaders may use the information to promote more standards-based assessment strategies and prioritization standards-based instruction.
- ☐ Professional development and support for instructional or support staff: Research outcomes may provide a platform to investigate teachers' perspectives on assessment strategies and may be useful for future professional development activities to improve and/or align assessment practices throughout the district.
  The outcomes of this research may provide a platform for professional development to improve, standardize and align assessment strategies. This research may provide areas of improvement to student assessment strategies based on teachers' experiences and perceptions. This research may also assist with improving teacher self-efficacy and motivation.
- ☐ Supervision and evaluation of instructional staff (and non-instructional staff, if applicable):
  In the event the outcomes of the research are fruitful to the district, a more formalized, objective and structured assessment strategy may be implemented as a tool to standardize instruction. This tool may support evaluation and monitoring of teacher practices.
- ☐ Diverse learning needs of students:
  Not applicable.
- ☐ Use of technologies designed to enhance teaching and learning
  Not applicable.

- ☐ Creating a safe, nurturing and orderly school environment that is conducive to learning for all students
  Establishing structured and consistent assessment policies may prove helpful for student learners. Rather than students trying to navigate a variety of assessment policies by several different teachers and grade levels, a unified assessment strategy may provide more structure, discipline and understanding of how their grade is determined and what their grade represents.
- ☐ Engaging Parents, Community or Business partners
  Parents may be more equipped to support students and teachers if there is a mutual and structured assessment plan that spans grade levels and subject area.

Data Requests: Please describe in detail any data or information that you are requesting from the District. This would include requests to administer surveys, conduct observations etc. Please be as specific as possible.

The following information will be requested from [redacted]

- **Email addresses for ELA and math teachers working in the nine schools that house middle school grades (i.e., grades 6-8);**
- **Teachers will be sent a recruitment email with an attached screening questionnaire and informed consent form. The questionnaire will be used to determine teacher eligibility to participate in the study. The informed consent form is a voluntary document that is provided to ensure anonymity and confidentiality to the participants. The email will be sent through Liberty University system.**
- **Teachers will be asked to participate in one interview, one journaling activity, and one focus group session. A member checking event will be the culminating activity. To the extent possible, all activities and discussions will occur outside of the school building.**

Other Relevant Comments:

I have received approval to defend my proposal from the Department of Education at Liberty University. The attached email provides documentation of that proposal.

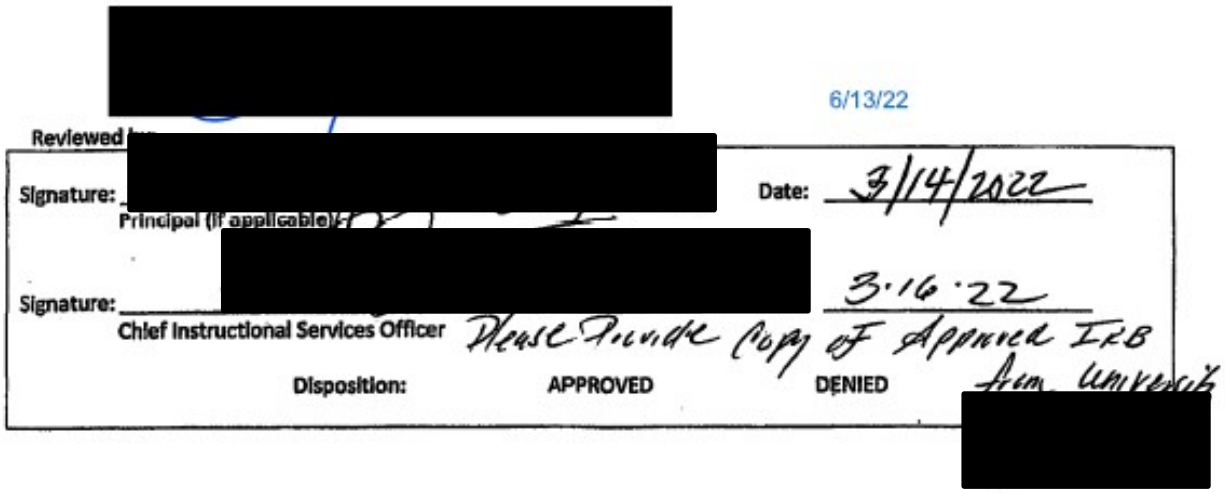
My signature below certifies that:

- I have received a copy of the *Guidelines and Procedures for Conducting Research Affiliated with* [redacted] and that I will comply fully with the policies and procedures outlined as part of my research
- I have reviewed all relevant policies and procedures as outlined in that document related to responsible conduct in research including those related to ethical conduct and confidentiality.
- I understand that while working as a researcher under the supervision of a [redacted] employee, I may have access to records and files that contain confidential information and that it is the employer's obligation to protect the rights of these files and/or individuals and that
- I will follow the operating practices and procedures required while handling these records and will not inappropriately access or disclose this information.
- I acknowledge that if I misrepresent or omit any information as requested on this application I have jeopardized my continued association with [redacted] and is cause for forfeiture of consideration

Researcher Name: __Kelley Duffy_____
Print or Type name

Researcher Signature [redacted] Date ___3/14/22_____

Rev 12/2014


[redacted]

6/13/22

Reviewed [redacted]

Signature: [redacted] Date: 3/14/2022

Principal (if applicable)

Signature: [redacted] 3.16.22

Chief Instructional Services Officer Please Provide Copy of Approved IRB

Disposition: APPROVED DENIED Liberty University

[redacted]

[External] FW: Application Request Form for: KELLEY DUFFY, DOCTORAL CANDIDATE

From: [redacted]
Sent: Monday, June 13, 2022 7:13 PM
To: Duffy, Kelley L <[redacted]
Cc: [redacted]
Subject: Re: Application Request Form for: KELLEY DUFFY, DOCTORAL CANDIDATE

Yes ma'am

Get Outlook for iOS

From: Duffy, Kelley L [redacted]
Sent: Monday, June 13, 2022 4:45 PM
To: [redacted]
Cc: [redacted]
Subject: RE: Application Request Form for: KELLEY DUFFY, DOCTORAL CANDIDATE

[redacted]

Thank you so much! Especially so late in the day. It may have been lost in the flux but the request states math and ELA teacher participants but through IRB process, the sampling pool was modified to all content teachers as potential participants. Are you alright with that change?

Thank you!
Kelley Duffy

Appendix C: Email Invitation to Potential Participants

Dear [Participant]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to understand teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

You were selected as a possible participant because you are a middle school teacher and have at least five years teaching experience in a public school district, have the ability to recall enacting social promotion policies, and be willing to share those experiences. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in one personal interview (45 minutes-one hour), one journaling exercise (45 minutes-one hour), and one focus group session (45 minutes-one hour). In addition, you will be asked to review the transcripts and data collected in order to provide feedback on their accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To be considered for participation, please copy and paste the following link into your browser to complete the attached questionnaire electronically by July 15, 2022:
https://docs.google.com/forms[redacted]

A consent document is attached to this email and will be given to you at the interview, if requested. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Kelley Duffy
Doctoral Student, Liberty University
[redacted]

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of Middle School Teachers' Experiences of Implementing Social Promotion Policies in a Public School District
Principal Investigator: Kelley Duffy, Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a middle school teacher, have at least five years teaching experience in a public school district, have the ability to recall enacting social promotion policies, and be willing to share those experiences. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of middle school teachers who implement social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an interview that will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interview will occur at a mutually agreed upon time and location. Based on your preference, the interview may take place online, using Zoom technology, or be conducted face-to-face. Zoom meetings will be video- and audio-recorded. Face-to-face meetings will be audio-recorded using a cassette-tape recorder and iPad.
2. Complete a journaling exercise that will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The journaling activity will occur after the interview. Your journaling exercise may be completed electronically, in a Google Form, or on paper. The journaling activity will consist of answering five journal prompts that will be provided to you after the interview. Based on your preference, you will be provided the journal prompts on paper in a self-addressed, stamped envelope or emailed to you in a link to a Google Form. You will be expected to return your responses to the journal prompts within 7 days after the interview.
3. Participate in one of two focus group sessions that will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The focus group will be a Zoom meeting with other participants and will be video- and audio-recorded.
4. Review the transcripts, data collected, results, and conclusions in order to provide feedback on the accuracy of the data provided.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include bringing insight into social promotion policies, assessment practices, teacher experiences, and student performance. Outcomes of this study may increase public awareness of teacher work experiences, assessment practices, and how policy implementation impacts teachers and students.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. There is a slight risk that participants may be identifiable to a colleague, administrator, or other district personnel. This risk will be minimized by maintaining confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and maintaining strict storage practices associated with data collection and analysis procedures.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you, the participant. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and faculty sponsor will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted at a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Electronic data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a password-protected database. Paper documents will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all physical records will be shredded.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Electronic recordings will be stored on a password-locked database for three years and then erased. Cassette-tape recordings will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for three years and then destroyed. Only the researcher will have access to tape-cassette recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- The questionnaire responses will be used in the data analysis of this study.
- Participants, under a pseudonym, may be quoted in published reports.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as a teacher in the district but does not have authority over any participant. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on decision to participate or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Kelley Duffy. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Rebecca Bowman, at [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, [redacted]

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix E: Eligibility Questionnaire

The purpose of this study is to explore middle school teachers' experiences with implementing social promotion policies in a public school district in the southern United States. This questionnaire is to confirm you meet the participant requirements, to determine your ability to discuss your experiences, and to learn your overall perception of social promotion policies.

1. Name:
2. If selected to participate in this study, you will be contacted by email. Please provide a convenient email address for future correspondence:
3. Gender:
4. Age:
5. Highest degree earned:
6. Years teaching in a public school district:
7. Primary grade and subject taught:

Please use the following scale to answer questions 8 and 9:

1 = strongly agree 2 = agree 3 = disagree 4 = strongly disagree

8. Since I have been a teacher, I can recall students being promoted that did not exhibit grade level abilities.
9. I am confident that I can recall, reflect and discuss details of my experiences with social promotion policies.

Please answer question 10 in two or more complete sentences.

10. How do you define your current role as a teacher? Explain how your current role as a teacher aligns/does not align with your purpose for being a teacher.

Appendix F: Interview Protocol

Study Title: A Phenomenological Study of Middle School Teachers' Experiences of Implementing Social Promotion Policies in a Public School District	
Date of interview:	
Time:	
Location:	
Interviewer:	
Interviewee:	
Notes to Interviewee:	
Thank you for participating in this research project and taking the time for this interview. The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of middle school teachers who implement social promotion policies at a public school district in the southern United States. Your participation will assist in better understanding the impact social promotion practices may have on teachers.	
As a reminder, your participation in this study and your responses provided are voluntary and confidential. You are free to quit the process at any time. You were given an informed consent form to read and sign. If you elected to sign the informed consent form provided, I will take that now.	
This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes and includes 16 questions. *For face-to-face interview:* During the interview, I will be writing notes while it is being recorded with a tape-cassette recorder and iPad. *For Zoom interview*: This interview will be video- and audio-recorded. During the interview I may be writing notes while it is being recorded.	
Do you have any questions before we begin?	
Perform interview using questions presented in Appendix G	
Closing of interview:	
Thank you for participating in this interview. As a reminder, there are additional tasks after this interview. These include completing a journaling activity, participating in a focus group session, and reviewing the transcripts and data collected in order to provide feedback on their accuracy.	

Appendix G: Standardized Interview Questions

Central Research Question

What are the shared experiences of middle school teachers who have engaged in social promotion policies?

Grand tour question:

1. Please describe your educational background and career, including your current position.

Questions related to individual experiences:

2. What is your understanding of social promotion?
3. How do you feel as a professional when you know you have students in your class that are not up to grade-level standards and yet you still have to pass them to the next grade level?
4. Based on your experience and perspective, how do social promotion policies impact student learning?
5. In your role as an educator, how do feel social promotion policies impact your identity as a teacher?

Questions related to experiences within a social and organizational environment:

6. What formal and informal policies do you follow when deciding to promote or retain low-achieving students?
7. How do governmental and district mandates influence you when deciding to promote or retain low-skilled students?
8. What mechanisms are in place to reward or penalize teachers during or after the process of promoting or retaining low-skilled students?

9. How do your colleagues, counselors, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders impact the decision-making process when promoting or retaining a student?
10. Based on your experiences, what is the most influential factor when deciding to promote a low-achieving student?
11. Based on your experience and perspective, why do think social promotion policies continue to persist?

Questions related to how past experiences and current perceptions impact future actions:

12. What are the behavioral, academic, and social characteristics of low-achieving students?
13. How do these characteristics impact your ability to promote student growth and achievement?
14. How does working with students that are not up to grade-level standards impact your choice of instructional strategies and student expectations?
15. Based on documents provided by the district, the mission statement states that the district, "through a personalized learning approach, will prepare graduates who compete and succeed in an ever-changing global society and career marketplace". Explain your level of effectiveness in supporting this statement in light of implementing social promotion policies.
16. Is there anything else not covered that you think I should know about your experiences with social promotion policies in your district?

Appendix H: Standardized Journal Prompts

To collect further data regarding your experiences with social promotion policies, five journal prompt are presented below. As you reflect on the questions, please be honest and thorough in your responses. For each prompt, please reply with 300 to 500 words. Your responses are due within 7 days from the date of the interview.

The standardized journal prompts are as follows:

1. I promoted students that were not ready for the next grade because…
2. How have your experiences with social promotion impacted you as a teacher?
3. Think of one student that you socially promoted and later saw as an adult. How did the student fare in their career and in life in general?
4. Based on my experiences, social promotion policies were ineffective when…
5. Based on my experiences, social promotion policies were effective when…

Thank you for participating in the journaling exercise and continuing to share your experiences.

Appendix I: Standardized Focus Group Questions

1. Describe the defined limits of your role as teacher?
2. How do you feel social promotion policies influence stakeholders' perceptions of your school's effectiveness?
3. Considering your own instructional practices, how have social promotion policies impacted your effectiveness as a teacher?
4. One theme among teachers has been frustration with social promotion polices (i.e., teacher helplessness, devaluation, student motivation, etc.) yet teachers have stated to have a myriad of instructional strategies and willingness to try different methods to support student learning. Where does this teacher grit and persistence come from?
5. There were noted inconsistencies associated with social promotion policies (i.e., what administration wants versus what happens in the classroom, academics versus social-emotional learning, disagreement with social promotion but continuing to participate and expect other teachers to do as well, high expectations but willing to manipulate assignments and grades). How do you think these inconsistencies were cultivated and internalized by a variety of teachers?
6. How do those inconsistencies impact your self-efficacy?
7. One participant introduced the concept of gradebook management as a process to inflate grades throughout the school year to ensure student promotion. What are your thoughts on gradebook management as a tool to support social promotion?
8. What are the long-term effects of social promotion policies on middle school teachers?