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College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Abstract

There exists a lack of communication among teachers about grade inflation. The problem is teachers do not understand the consequences of grade inflation. This instrumental case study is important because without meaningful grading, students are less prepared to function in today's society and teachers are subject to high levels of scrutiny and criticism from all stakeholders involved. The purpose of this instrumental case study is to explore how freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation within a southeast high school. The three main research questions involve how freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation, why freshmen teachers should discuss grade inflation, and what shared experiences do freshmen teachers have about grade inflation. The data triangulation in this instrumental case study involves a qualitative Qualtrics survey administered to all 12 teacher participants, a one-on-one interview with seven out of 12 teacher participants, and a focus group session with the remaining 5 out of 12 teacher participants. Based on the Qualtrics survey, 11 out of 12 teachers in this instrumental case study inflate their grades. The majority of teachers in this instrumental case study express pressure from both administration and coaches to inflate grades when students are not meeting the requirements of passing a class on their own merits. After analyzing the Qualtrics survey data, how students perform in their classes is not an indicator of how they will perform on their state standardized exams. In an ever-changing, global community, we cannot ignore teacher perceptions of grade inflation. These teacher perceptions are critical to our system of educating students.

Keywords: grade inflation, peer pressure, consequences, teacher perceptions

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation in loving memory of my caring and thoughtful uncle, Amoo Nader. May he rest in eternal peace and may the light of his spirit shine brightly upon us always. He once told me that if I didn't make anything of myself by age 40, it wouldn't happen. Amoo, I am 42 years old. I hope I made the cut.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I thank God above for allowing this dissertation to come together to begin with. Next, I must acknowledge my father, my rock, who symbolizes the steadfastness and support that has allowed me to persevere, not only through the entire dissertation process, but all throughout every moment of my entire life. This body of work would not have been possible without the love I have been blessed to receive from my dedicated husband Alex, my magnetic sister Laila, and my talented brother Afsheen. I would also like to thank Dr. Christopher Maddox, my trusted faculty adviser and confidant, who has seen me through a multitude of emotions and who has talked me down from the proverbial ledge of giving up on my dream. He has been there every step along the path. And last, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge my beautiful daughter, Briana, who represents my inspirational muse and embodies the hope of tomorrow.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers have many responsibilities. From educating students to keeping them safe to differentiating instruction, teachers have an obligation to ensure they are addressing the needs of each and every one of their students. One of their many responsibilities includes assessing student work and assigning grades. Grades are given for numerous reasons: (a) to provide reasons for students to learn; (b) to document how well a student performs and determine if a particular program is instructionally good; (c) to let the parents know the academic achievement of their child; (d) to provide students information for their self-evaluation, (e) to group, choose, or identify students for certain programs like advanced placement, and (f) to provide evidence that a student is not taking responsibility for their learning, or has a lack of effort (Guskey, 2011). These student grades should reflect what students learn. In this instrumental case study, I will explore how freshman teachers perceive grade inflation at a Southeast high school. Within Chapter 1, I discuss the background of grade inflation, a conceptual framework of the study, a statement of the problem and purpose of the study, research questions, rationale, relevance, and significance of the study, definitions, and assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study.

Background and Conceptual Framework

Grade inflation is not a new issue; for instance, during the Vietnam War, grade inflation occurred to save male students from the draft (Brookhart, 2015). To avoid the draft, male students enrolled as full-time college students in order to avoid military service; attending full-time college or university was cause for an exemption from military service. Brookhart (2015) stated that during the Vietnam Era, grade inflation was twice as common as it was before 1960.

Rojstaczer (2016) discussed that grades increased during the Vietnam era calling it the *Consumer Era*; he accounted for the variables of the caliber of the school and number of students

enrolled to determine if professors were inflating grades. Higher grades were so insignificant that they did not become evident until reviewed over several years. Average students were getting higher grades, but many teachers believed that grades were not a valid means of evaluation because they created a harmful and authoritarian environment for learning (Rojstaczer, 2016). Instead of viewing students as acolytes in pursuit of knowledge, students were thought of as consumers, whose success rates offered credibility to academic administrators across the college and secondary school campuses they served. The tendency towards inflating grades is still ever-present today and has ceased to recess. Rojstaczer (2016) maintained that grade inflation is a result of the consumer culture that is prevalent throughout higher education. Students, who work hard and excel, are now put in the same category as every other student. Rojstaczer (2016) explained how in an era of consumerism, instructional administrators believe in the need to help students succeed and look good on paper.

According to Maxwell (2005) a conceptual framework is built from a researcher's experiences and knowledge, existing theory and research, exploratory research, and thoughtful experimentation. Maxwell (2005) further asserts that a conceptual framework is the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform research. It is a key component of research design (Maxwell, 2005). This conceptual framework is a research product that will serve as an abstract representation, which is directly connected to the main research question regarding teacher perceptions of grade inflation. Three theorists who form the basis of the conceptual framework are Helson (1964), Kohn (1993), and Page (1967).

Helson (1964), a North American psychologist and professor of psychology, was known for his adaptation-level theory of psychology. His work and research focused on the perception involving the use of color. Helson's theory suggested that in any given student population, the

students' inherent ability levels determined grading standards (Helson, 1939). Furthermore, in a student population where the ability level fell, but the grades awarded by professors have remained the same, one could conclude that grading standards have dropped. The underlying premise of adaptation theory has occurred when a student's ability has declined, but the grades earned remained the same, then grade inflation has occurred.

Kohn (1993) wrote and spoke widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. Kohn (1993) believed the concepts of competition and rewards had influenced parents, managers, and educators in the way that they value grades and test scores. Kohn (1993) clarified that if more educators utilized meaningful, open-ended performance-based exams, then educators could maintain some decent teaching in the classroom. Kohn (1993) stated that test designers believed they were the authority in the classroom due to increased standardized testing.

Ellis Batten Page (1967) is widely regarded as the father of automated essay scoring. Automated essay scoring is a multi-disciplinary field that explores the concept of computer evaluation for the scoring of student essays. Page's (1967) development and pioneering work with Project Essay Grade (PEG) software in the 1960s set the wheels in motion for the practical application of computer essay scoring technology used in today's world. Page's (1967) focus was on grading practices among professors and teachers. He asserted that essays graded by human beings are preferable to machine or computer grading because humans can reason, and to an extent, be subjective. No one teacher has the same perspective, but in comparison, a computer-generated essay grader will remove all subjectivity and focus solely on the components it has been trained to identify. Page's (1967) research involved developing a computer program to simulate or grade student essays in the same way a human would grade.

Statement of the Problem

Without meaningful grading, students may demonstrate less motivation to achieve because they possess little knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, which ultimately can impact their professional outcomes as adults. Teachers inflate grades to please parents and avoid potentially awkward conversations regarding the academic progress of the child. Administrators and athletic coaches place pressure upon teachers to pass student-athletes, who need qualifying grades to be eligible to participate in competitive sports activities. Administrators also place pressure on teachers to keep school accountability ratings high. How freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation is not a typical conversation overheard among teachers. Whether freshmen teachers discuss their experiences regarding grade inflation is unknown, even among educators. Even though there are ethical standards and guidelines to be followed, teachers may not understand school protocols, and may not share their viewpoints and opinions about grade inflation with their colleagues. In part, this is related to the significant pressure placed on teachers to meet high academic standards, while being closely scrutinized. It is likely that teacher perceptions of grade inflation are relatively unknown or rarely discussed because teachers do not understand the consequences of grade inflation. The problem is a lack of communication among teachers about grade inflation.

Purpose of the Study

Grade inflation is defined as the awarding of higher grades than a student deserves or earns. Grade inflation affects all stakeholders within a school environment. The stakeholders include students, parents, community members, teachers, and administrators from high school and higher education institutions. Grade inflation typically occurs when a school desires to maintain a rating or reputation; or because a classroom teacher lowered or diminished student

expectations. The purpose of this instrumental case study is to explore how freshman teachers perceive grade inflation at a Southeast high school.

Research Questions

The research questions for this instrumental case study are:

1. How do freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation?

2. Why should freshmen teachers discuss grade inflation?

3. What shared experiences do freshmen teachers have about grade inflation?

Rationale, Relevance and Significance of the Study

Rationale

Merriam (2009) described a case study as a qualitative approach, where the investigator researches a case utilizing a variety of information sources, such as observations, interviews, audio-visual material, documents, and reports. Yin (2013) defined a case study as an empirical inquiry, which investigates a case, by focusing on the "how" and "why" questions regarding the phenomenon; he explained, every decision a researcher makes in the research process must be logical, and conform to the characteristics of the case.

Merriam (2009) further defined a case study as a well-defined and well-structured research methodology, which is utilized to focus on a bounded situation, event, program, or phenomenon. Yin (2013) delineated five components to the case study: (a) the research questions, (b) the propositions, (c) the units of analyses, (d) the logic behind the connection between the data gathered and propositions, and lastly, (e) the criteria for interpretation of the research findings.

Yin (2013) stressed the importance of multiple data sources as evidence for the researcher. These data sources may include documentation, archival records, interviews, direct

observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. These data sources converge to form the triangulation used to guide analysis. For this research study, the triangulation of data involved a Qualtrics survey, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group session. These three data tools were utilized to guide both the methodology and analysis of this research study.

Stake (2010) classified a case study into three types: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Stake (2010) explained an intrinsic case study as exploratory, where the researcher is guided by his interest in the case. In an instrumental case study, the case is secondary and understanding the underlying phenomenon is primary. According to Stake (2010), the difference between an intrinsic and an instrumental cases study lies in the purpose of the study. A collective case study utilizes multiple instrumental case studies. Stake (2010) further described the instrumental case study as offering a thick description of a site, individual, group, or occupation.

For this research study, understanding teacher perceptions of grade inflation was examined through the lens of an instrumental case study. An instrumental case study attempts to identify patterns and themes; it explores the depth of a phenomenon by offering a comparison to other cases, so the reader can see the transferability of the phenomenon from case to case. In contrast, phenomenology is a methodology and a philosophy, where attention is paid to the lived experiences of people (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Phenomenology views the surrounding world in which it is connected, and provides meaning to the people and objects within (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

A researcher conducting a phenomenological study will focus on the structures of meaning to understand his subjects' worldview or perspective. Whereas, phenomenology is subjective, a case study examines the gathered evidence and utilizes it to inform the research

problem, which in this case, is how teachers perceive grade inflation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). My rationale for utilizing a case study design is two-fold: 1) it is objective and 2) it provides a path to delve deeply into the research problem and tap into rich, descriptive data from the participants. Merriam (2009), Yin (2013), and Stake (2010) are significant to this instrumental case study because they provide a well-developed and structured description of how to conduct an instrumental case study.

Relevance

This research is relevant because it may provide an empirical foundation upon which a continued dialogue on the effects of grade inflation may occur. My case study may illustrate instances of grade inflation and potentially pioneer a discourse platform upon which to build future research in this field. This study will add to the body of knowledge that already exists regarding reform in grading. Furthermore, the results of this study can be used by school administrators, who are interested in grading reforms, by offering them insight to teachers' beliefs. An instrumental case study may inform current research and literature on grade inflation by providing insights into the effects of grade inflation upon students, teachers, parents, administrators, school systems, and institutions.

Significance

The significance for a study is created by a rationale for conducting the study, and through affirmative results, demonstrate its importance. In this instrumental case study, my research may inform current research and literature on grade inflation by providing insight into the effects of grade inflation and its impact upon students, teachers, parents, administrators, school systems, and institutions of higher learning. The proposed research study is significant because it may pave the way for all stakeholders involved to take a closer look at their grading

practices and how the effects of grade inflation impacts students and stakeholders across the country. The research I am conducting is essential as it will shed light on a phenomenon that may not be visible in school systems. This research study will open a dialogue for critical conversations to take place at the local, district, state, and federal levels about the significance of ensuring that every grade a student receives is an indication of the knowledge he or she has acquired. If this is not occurring, a re-envisioning of current grading practices is crucial to maintaining integrity across all levels of learning across the country.

According to Merriam (2009), a case study focuses on a phenomenon, provides a rich description of the underlying phenomenon of the study, and highlights the reader's understanding of the phenomenon behind the study. Merriam (2009) encouraged conducting a literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, identifying a research problem, crafting research questions, and choosing the sample. Merriam (2009) provided extensive guidance for data collection procedures, including conducting effective interviews, being a cautious observer, and mining data from documents. Merriam (2009) focused on asking good questions versus avoidable ones, interactions between interviewee and respondent, and recording and evaluating data through the interview process.

As administrators try to find ways to reform grading, it will be necessary to know the teachers' beliefs and how these influence grading. To gain insight and understanding, freshmen teachers from one ninth grade school will participate in an instrumental case study, designed to analyze their beliefs and experiences about grade inflation. The findings from this research will be used to make recommendations to the school and school district to bring about grading reform that better reflects student academic achievement.

Definition of Terms

The following terms helped guide the study.

Artificial inflation. Assigning two grades to students; one for the registrar and one which a student has not earned that is used in the gradebook (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015).

Automated essay scoring. Multi-disciplinary field that explores the concept of computer evaluation for the scoring of student essays (Page, 1967).

Complex group behavior. Psychological theory of predicting group behavior based on the individual actions of its members (Ashton-James & Neal, 2005).

Grade inflation. The tendency to award progressively higher academic grades for work that would have received lower grades in the past (Kostal, Kunsel, & Sackett, 2016).

Residual stimuli. The performance of students in similar classes in prior years with the same professor in similar situations (Judd, Kenny, & Westfall, 2014)**.**

Assumptions, Delimitations, Limitations

Assumptions

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), assumptions are the thoughts that the researcher has taken for granted or are not considered. Assumptions may also be what the researcher accepts as true without any further investigation. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) further asserted, it is a necessity to explicitly document research assumptions to reduce misunderstandings and potential resistance. One assumption in this study is all teachers inflate grades, regardless of the content they teach. A second assumption is all students expect their teachers to always inflate their grades. A third assumption is that all teachers have thought about their grading practices. A fourth assumption is there is parental involvement in student education.

Delimitations

Delimitations are parameters for establishing boundaries, exceptions, reservations, and qualifications in a research study. Delimitations are designed to narrow the scope of the study including the variables, central phenomenon, specific participants, and research. For this instrumental case study, the delimitations include 12 ninth grade high school teachers, three additional alternate teachers at a high school campus in the state of Southeast; the three content classes taught are English I, Algebra I, and Biology.

Limitations

The limitations of the study are features of methodology that might impact or influence how the results are interpreted. Limitations are any potential weaknesses of the study. These limitations typically occur during data collection and analysis, and are considered uncontrolled variables (Yin, 2013). Yin's (2013) approach to case study viewed the researcher as a quality control agent, who must constantly bring the research back to construct validity through the triangulation of evidence, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. These variables may threaten the internal validity of a study. For example, a limitation may include the scope of the study as it is isolated to one region, the state of Texas, or is limited in the number of participants. A second limitation of this instrumental case study is my lack of experience as a researcher and interviewer. Additionally, during the data collection phase, ensuring that participants provide honest responses is not always possible. It is not guaranteed that the answers participants provide are completely truthful; additionally, the participants may have limited experience with the interview process.

Summary

Student grades should reflect what students learn. Teachers have a responsibility to

accurately assess student work and assign grades. Teachers have the additional responsibility to address the needs of all of their students. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the purpose of this research study. This body of work grapples with how freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation.

Chapter 1 contains a background and conceptual framework about grade inflation. A statement of the problem follows the background and conceptual framework. The purpose of the study is stated and three research questions have been identified. Next, a discussion of the rationale, relevance, and significance of an instrumental case study was included. Pertinent definitions, as they apply to the research, are included. Lastly, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations were explained.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review pertaining to the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, and a discussion on the history and background of grade inflation. In addition, grade inflation, the impact of higher grading standards, and student achievement will be examined. Finally, the last part of the literature review will contain sections on mindset shifts and academic rigor, self-worth, and how teaching has become a consumer culture focused on minimum grading, grading, and grading bias. A section on academic ethics will be discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Grade inflation awards higher grades to students who have not legitimately earned them because of lower expectations set by the teachers or the schools (Bar & Zussman, 2012). Grade inflation is defined as an increase in grade point average without a corresponding increase in student ability. Instead of students focusing on the learning, they are solely focused on the grades they will receive. When this happens, students are not receiving the maximum benefit from their education. Some teachers believe they are required to inflate out of fear of poor student evaluations of them (Bar & Zussman, 2012). Instead, teachers should be setting high expectations for their students, and student grades need to reflect these high expectations. In Chapter 2, I explore authors who researched the topic of grade inflation. Chapter 2 begins with the literature search strategy followed by a conceptual framework that discusses three theorists in the field of grade inflation. The three theorists examined in the conceptual framework are Helson (1939 & 1964), Kohn (1993), and Page (1967). I conclude Chapter 2 with a detailed review of the literature regarding this field of study. The effects of grade inflation are enumerated throughout the entire literature review.

Literature Search Strategy

Machi and McEvoy (2008) noted the purpose of the literature search strategy is to explore relevant research concepts, variables, and attributes. The literature search strategy I employed included the utilization of the Concordia University Library and Google Scholar. I used the educational databases Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), SAGE Education, and ProQuest Central. The key terms utilized in the search were *grade inflation, effects of grade inflation, consequences of grade inflation, causes of grade inflation, professor biases based on tenure and non-tenure, influences of tenure-track on grade inflation, student*

evaluations, *enrollment counts*, and *admissions analyses*. The parameters for this literature review involved researching peer-reviewed journals for all educators at any educational level, all publication types, and all journals and documents.

The literature review search required multiple attempts at gathering referred literature. Through reading the texts, I discovered over 90 relevant authors pertaining to the topic of research. Before I completely disregarded a source, I thoroughly examined it to see if there were pertinent definitions I could utilize to explain my topic and research strategy. Close readings and examination of dissertations pertaining to my topic of the study also aided me in solidifying how I would be structuring the answers to my research questions and helped me as I formulated my bases for analyses.

Conceptual Framework

According to Shields and Rangarajan (2013), a conceptual framework is a tool used to make distinctions and organize ideas. Maxwell (2005) explained that a conceptual framework is constructed, not found. A conceptual framework is built from a researcher's experiences and knowledge, existing theory and research, exploratory research, and thoughtful experimentation. It is the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform research and is a key component of the research design (Maxwell, 2005). A conceptual framework captures a real idea and makes it easier to understand and apply. Sir Isaiah Berlin (2013), a Russian-British sociopolitical theorist and philosopher, utilized a metaphor of a fox and a hedgehog to make conceptual distinctions among philosophers and authors, as it pertains to their worldviews. According to Berlin (2013), a hedgehog takes a single idea or organizing principle and uses it to adopt an overall worldview. By contrast, the fox views the world through multiple lenses that are, at times, in conflict with one another. Hence, I will use a foxlike lens

for the conceptual framework to explore the effects of grade inflation in the way its ideas are organized as they are related to my research purpose. I utilized this conceptual framework to make distinctions among three relevant theorists in the field of grade inflation. Helson (1964), Kohn (1993), and Page (1967) view the concept of grade inflation through multiple lenses that are, at times, in conflict with one another. Helson (1964), Kohn (1993), and Page (1967) explored the single, organizing principle of grade inflation and examined the concept within the context of a greater worldview. This conceptual framework is a research product that serves as an abstract representation that is directly connected to the main research question regarding teacher perceptions of grade inflation.

Helson

Helson (1964), a North American psychologist and professor of psychology, was known for his adaptation-level theory of psychology. His work and research focused on the perception involving the use of color. His first published work was his doctoral dissertation on Gestalt psychology. This dissertation was published in the American Journal of Psychology in 1925 and 1926. To this day, Kansas State University awards one graduate student the Harry Helson Award in recognition of excellence in scholarship and research in cognitive psychology.

Helson's (1964) theory of adaptation originated from detailed studies on vision and the ability of three variables: constancy, contrast, and adaptation to affect visual tolerance. Helson (1964) eventually took his adaptation theory to the realm of psychology and applied it to the observation of complex group behavior. Over time, his theory gained acceptance among psychologists as a way of predicting group behavior based on the individual actions of its members. Helson's (1964) theory may be compared to the positive responses employees feel when they first receive a pay increase, but how after time passes, the euphoric feelings fade

away. Helson (1964) discovered that the emotion might shift, but it is only temporary and eventually returns to its prior state once the period of adjustment passes. Furthermore, any stimuli introduced beyond that do not have an effect whatsoever.

Helson's (1964) theory of adaptation is divided into two phases. The first phase is transient where the individual becomes acquainted with the surrounding environment and learns the appropriate modes of behavior. The second phase involves a slow adjustment with a normalizing period that establishes a new standard and wipes away old norms. During the second phase, all stimuli, focal, background, and residual stimuli interact with an individual. Helson (1964) defined focal stimuli as the performance of individual students. Background stimuli are referred to liken the performance of other students in the same class. Residual stimuli are the performance of students in similar classes in prior years with the same professor in similar situations. These experiences combined to establish a point of neutrality in the faculty member's grading habits.

College grading involves everything from examining the behavior of faculty members, considering the ability levels of students, student enrollment trends, choice of major, and the hiring of faculty. These factors can be linked to the personal characteristics of individual faculty members and are an adaptation level (Helson, 1964). Hence, in any given student population, the students' inherent ability levels then determine the grading standards. In a student population, where the ability level is falling, but the grades awarded by professors have remained the same, one may conclude that grading standards have dropped. The underlying premise of adaptation theory is when a student's ability declines and grades earned remains the same, grade inflation is occurring.

Kohn

Alfie Kohn (1993) wrote and spoke widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. He has written fourteen books in the field of education. Kohn (1993) is an outspoken speaker on the topic of the United States' fixation on grades and test scores. Kohn (1993) theorized that a sense of competition and rewards has had an influence on how parents, managers, and educators value grades and test scores. Kohn (1993) spoke at universities and school faculties as well as professional development seminars and national education conferences. Kohn (1993) strived to make his research in human behavior accessible to a wide variety of audiences.

Kohn (1993) explained how developing caring, thoughtful citizens is a preferable end for character education instead of the submissive, robotic workers who fail to self-reflect that many current programs are cultivating. Kohn (1993) argued a focus on classroom culture rather than a narrow instructional program more effectively facilitate character development. Character education means, in a broad sense, helping children become good people. Kohn (1993) asserted he is disturbed that the powerfully positive connotations of the term have been linked to a narrower meaning and specific style of training underpinned by conservative and parochial religious values.

Religious methods of indoctrination create assumptions about human nature (Kohn, 1993). Furthermore, Kohn (1993) stated they are delivered from a conservative Christian view that maintains all human beings are sinful and wild. Kohn (1993) believed human beings need to be constantly constrained to avoid being tempted by external factors. These assumptions lead to a reliance on extrinsic rewards such as bribes and punishments, the use of rote repetition, structured drills with correct answers, and over-simplified fables on morality. Kohn (1993) referred to the many educators who are unaware of the power dynamic and the nature of school

culture. They do not understand how the decisions they make daily determine this culture and the subsequent effect it has on the behavior and character of students. Kohn (1993) asserted teaching specific strategies for effective classroom management is vital. Teachers should also directly address student attitudes and dispositions to support a respectful and caring environment in the classroom.

The nature of the relationship among the adults who work in a school and how that relationship has more to do with the school's quality and character, and the accomplishment of its pupils more than any other factor (Kohn, 1993). Kohn (1993) reiterated that school communities in which social interchanges reflect positively on their participants have the most success. Kohn (1993) underlined the power of situation or environment on human actions and the need to look beyond the individual classroom to focus on the culture of the surrounding school community at large. Kohn (1993) asked whether common standards are incompatible with the ideals of personalized learning. Kohn (1993) wanted the focus of education to be on how teachers shape instruction to meet the unique needs of-learners. The way some teachers write objectives is incompatible with excellence. The message that their objectives send may come across as individual differences either do not exist or are illegitimate and should be ignored. The objectives are written for a broad and general audience rather than tailored to individual student needs. Kohn (1993) recommended the national standards be kept as simple as possible. He further asserted the narrower and rigid the requirements are; the less responsive educators can be to what distinguishes one circumstance from another, or from one child to another.

A crucial point is the concept of vertical standards (Kohn, 1993). In this model, teaching pedagogy remains the same, but schools administer longer and more difficult exams. Kohn

(1993) maintained when schools turn into fact factories; it prevents children from becoming critical, creative thinkers, or lifelong learners. Kohn (1993) explained the more educators cave into demands for tougher standards, the less schools can reach those ambitious goals. The higher the rise in passing standards on norm-referenced, skills-based, multiple-choice tests, the more they try to fill passive vessels full of facts instead of helping kids engage with ideas.

Kohn (1993) discussed the notion of temporary compliance where employees are motivated by extrinsic rewards such as bonuses, vacations, and banquets, in essence, bribes but no real buy-in. The same behaviorist model can be seen in the toll that standardized testing is taking on the education system. Kohn (1993) asserted rewards and punishment fail to produce lasting changes in attitudes and behavior. Kohn (1993) referred to these bribes as incentives which are extrinsic motivators. These incentives do not impact attitude nor behavior shifts. They only temporarily change the actions a person takes. These ideas apply to standardized testing as well, and the shift in mindset needed to impact change. Long-term commitment to changes in attitudes and behaviors are what Kohn advocated when he described how meaningful testing would impact students in significant ways.

Kohn (1993) clarified that if more educators utilized meaningful, open-ended performance-based exams, then educators can maintain some decent teaching in the classroom. Kohn (1993) stated test designers feel they are the authority in the classroom due to the increase in standardized testing. Test designers think they determine what gets taught in the classroom. Moreover, what that amounts to is nothing more than a basic skill; a fill in the blank type of test with little to no critical learning involved in a high stakes environment that pressures individuals to raise test scores. Kohn (1993) explained how educators need flexibility and freedom to take a teachable moment to accomplish educational goals and learning objectives. However, with a

standardized test, it is virtually impossible to do what needs to be done for children to experience authentic, student-centered learning. Kohn (1993) emphasized the necessity to collect information regarding a student's level of understanding and improvement, but it must be assessed purposefully without undermining a child's desire to learn. Kohn (1993) concluded his essay with a powerful statement on teaching and learning. He expanded on his capacity for teaching and learning based on what he observed and studied from his educational colleagues and from reviewing sound research practices.

Page

Ellis Batten Page (1967) is widely regarded as the father of automated essay scoring. Automated essay scoring is a multi-disciplinary field that explores the concept of computer evaluation for the scoring of student essays. Page's (1967) development and pioneering work with Project Essay Grade (PEG) software in the 1960s set the wheels in motion for the practical application of computer essay scoring technology used in today's world. He was a professor of education and psychology before becoming a professor of educational research and director of the Bureau of Educational Research in 1962.

Project Essay Grade or PEG is a computer technology program that incorporates natural language processing, semantic and syntactic analysis, and classification methods in the essay scoring process (Page, 1967). PEG software trains on human-scored essays and develops a model that is then utilized to score written essays. PEG software uses 500 features designed to capture the intrinsic characteristics of writing including fluency, diction, grammar, and construction. From these features, PEG software builds statistical and linguistic models to predict essay scores accurately. PEG software uses word lists and custom dictionaries to most accurately replicate expert human readers (Page, 1967). It was during Page's (1967) tenure in

1964 that he began developing the PEG software which incorporated aspects of both computational linguistics, artificial intelligence technology, and his experience as a high school English teacher. In 1979, Page (1967) joined the faculty of Duke University as professor of educational psychology and research where he remained until 2002. In 1993, he formed Tru-Judge, Inc. (a web-based program designed to grade essays). In 2002, he sold it to Measurement Inc., an educational assessment company specializing in the development and scoring of large-scale assessments.

Page's (1967) focus was on grading practices among professors and teachers. He asserted essays graded by human beings is preferable to machine or computer grading because humans can reason and are thereby subjective to an extent. No one teacher will have the same perspective as another as compared to a computer-generated essay grader that will remove all subjectivity and focus solely on the components it has been trained to identify. He conducted research that involved developing a computer program to simulate or grade student essays in the same way a human would grade. Factors such as word choice, thesis, and theme were a part of the conducted simulations.

Mechanics are the most reliably graded of these five traits (Page, 1967). Humans have more difficulty with creativity than with mechanics. Page (1967) asserted a computer's difficulty is in the criterion itself and is subject to human limitations. Page (1967) believed a compromise between practical educational utility and intriguing psychological and statistical depth is the foundation upon which this profession is built. Essay samples were judged by independent experts employed to aid in the experiment. The specifics of the simulation included 276 student essays written by students in grades 8-12 at the University of Wisconsin. Four outside judges were brought in to grade them. The outside consultants provided an objective,

neutral opinion of the essays and avoided issues associated with knowing the students from being in class or having an affiliation with the University of Wisconsin. The next step involved formulating hypotheses with variables designed to be highly modular and mnemonic associated with the grading process. Essays were prepared for computer input. Clerical workers were used to process the data (i.e., student essays) by using a standard punch-key method. The essays were punched into cards, and the cards served as input for the next stage. The final step involved passing the student essays through the computer under control of the program (Page, 1967).

After the data was analyzed by the computer program, the scores were then analyzed for their multivariate relationship to the human ratings, weighted appropriately, and used to maximize the prediction of the expert human ratings (Page, 1967). Upon conclusion of the experiment and synthesis of the data collected and analyzed, Page (1967) discovered the computer did a respectable human expert job in grading essays.

Grading is subjective. No matter how many attempts are made to remove incidences of human bias and interpretation using computer programs and modules, nothing can truly replace the human mind (Page, 1967). The ability to read in-depth and analyze a piece of literary work or student product is based on the professor's prior knowledge. Conceptualizing the inner workings of the human mind, judgments, and analysis is virtually impossible with this knowledge. Hence, the phenomenon of grade inflation becomes even more pronounced. A student who received an above average grade for mediocre work is not being graded based on his knowledge or content acquisition. These ethical questions pose a significant need to address the issue of grade inflation.

Conceptual Framework Summary

Helson (1964), Kohn (1998), and Page (1967) explored the various ideas as related to the effects of grade inflation. Helson's (1964) theory of adaptation enumerated how student ability and grades are inseparably connected to grade inflation. Certain factors such as examining the behavior of faculty members, considering the ability levels of students, student enrollment trends, choice of major, and the hiring of faculty can be linked to the personal characteristics of individual faculty members and are an adaptation level. Kohn (1998) focused on the ideas of competition and test scores in a high-stakes testing world. Kohn (1998) emphasized the necessity to collect information regarding a student's level of understanding and improvement, but it must be assessed purposefully without undermining a child's desire to learn. Kohn's (1998) work made a powerful statement on teaching and learning. Page's (1967) research served as the precursor to modern-day internet-based essay grading modules. Page (1967) asserted nothing can truly replace the human mind and focused on the subjectivity of grading. Their research is important as the fundamental backbone on why grade inflation may exist. This practice may have consequences for all stakeholders involved.

Review of the Literature

Grade inflation occurs when teachers give higher grades for student work that is similar in quality to work of prior years (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). Teachers should be setting high expectations for their students, and student grades need to reflect these high expectations. Students have the onus of meeting these expectations to receive the grades they have earned, not been given. Within this literature review, I discuss the causes of grade inflation, grade inflation in higher education, benefits of higher grading standards, student achievement and grades, the distinction between teachers and professors, mindset shift, self-worth and consumer culture,

academic rigor, academic ethics, minimum grading and grading bias, high grading standards and mediocrity all impact on grade inflation.

History and Background

According to Rojstaczer (2012), grade inflation is constantly occurring. The proof of its occurrence lies in the high GPAs students are given at both public and private institutions of higher learning. Rojstaczer (2012) stated some administrators and professors attribute a rise in GPA due to improvements in quality of scholarship. However, the national trend in grade inflation is not supported by this statement and only some institutions across the United States have experienced an actual rise in student quality. Rojstaczer (2012) maintained that grade inflation is a result of the consumer culture that is prevalent throughout higher education. Rojstaczer explained how professors feel compelled to grade easier and water down course content.

Rojstaczer (2012) stated that students who work hard and excel are now put in the same category as every other student and some cases, even lower performing than that. Rojstaczer (2012) emphasized in an era of consumerism such as the one we live in today, educational institutions feel the need to help students look good on paper. Goldman (1985), Mansfield (2001), Nikolakakos, Reeves, and Shuch (2012), and Twenge (2006) described what grade inflation is and enumerates on multiple causes of why it exists. They defined grade inflation as an upward shift in grade-point average (GPA) over an extended period. Goldman stated that when a professor's credit-hour production slips because of withdrawals and declining enrollments, a professor will have the tendency to give inflated grades to attract students who otherwise might be lured elsewhere in search of an easy A.

To keep classroom enrollments up and deter students from withdrawing from his course, a professor would be tempted to give an inflated grade. According to Goldman (1985), grade inflation is also utilized to garner a positive teacher evaluation from a student. Student ratings of faculty diminish the quality of higher education, and they poison faculty/student relationships by encouraging professors to use and take advantage of students rather than educate them. Research has shown that some professors view student evaluations of faculty as a job-security matter and to protect their jobs, they try to ensure students give positive ones by giving them inflated grades. Hence, a teacher can get a good rating simply by assigning a good grade. While it is true that some students have higher abilities, the fact remains that for many other students their abilities have diminished. The only explanation for the inconsistency is grade inflation. If the students had higher cognitive abilities, then their Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) and other standardized assessment grades would reflect that (Goldman, 1985; Mansfield, 2001; Nikolakakos et al., 2012; Twenge, 2006).

Goldman (1985) believed grade inflation is wrong for two distinct reasons. First, the practice subverts the major purpose of education in society and reflects a change in the role of the professor without any discussion on the matter. He maintained grade inflation puts educators in the unethical position of breaking a social contract inherent to the profession. The gravity of the ethical dilemma about grade inflation will be explored. At Harvard, some professors resort to giving students two grades. Nikolakakos et al. (2012) resorted to giving his students two grades: one for the student transcript and one in private which more accurately reflected the student's true academic achievement. Since he perceived Harvard's grading system as flawed, Mansfield attempted to remedy the ethical dilemma for himself by letting his students know

exactly what they are achieving based on a legitimate, realistic grade. Maintaining intellectual rigor and grading standards is essential to the purpose of education in society.

Research showed the student as consumer where they go teacher shopping to avoid hard graders or more difficult classes, and later withdraw from the course to avoid the stigma of a poor grade (Goldman, 1985; Mansfield, 2001; Nikolakakos et al., 2012; Twenge, 2006). If the student thinks may end up with a subpar grade for the course which will lead to a lowering of their overall GPA, then they will withdraw from the class to avoid the negative consequence of an adversely affected GPA. Consequently, faculty and administration experience pressure to satisfy these self-proclaimed consumers by inflating their grades. Grade inflation has led to late course withdrawals if students think they are going to get a low grade. Instead of getting the low grade, they simply withdraw from the course to protect their grades. Grade inflation has also led to more emphasis being placed on standardized test scores rather than GPAs because they are believed to be inflated and therefore, not an accurate indicator of aptitude.

Student self-esteem plays into it as well. Today's students are more narcissistic than in the past and to appease them, professors are careful not to assign poor grades for fear of retaliation from students (Goldman, 1985; Mansfield, 2001; Nikolakakos et al., 2012; Twenge, 2006). They stated that some professors make certain assignments are not too rigorous or so challenging as to damage students' self-esteem. Some students believe that simply by attending classes on a regular basis, they should get higher grades. Nikolakakos et al. (2012) specified even though students acknowledge their work is average and the grade for average work is a C; they expect a grade of B or even an A over 70% of the time. Student report cards cannot be relied on as adequate indicators of student performance.

They are relegated to simply being a device or mechanism used by the teacher to increase students' feelings of self-worth. Students begin to expect grade inflation as early as grade school, and it continues through high school and on to college. The United States Department of Education's categorical rankings of public schools encourage grade inflation at the school, and statewide levels as more schools are designated as being in the top third. Maintaining professor self-esteem is also acknowledged as a cause of grade inflation (Nikolakakos et al., 2012). Twenge (2006) stated insecure professors might seek students' affirmations to raise their personal feelings of self-worth. To gain a sense of approval from students, professors artificially elevate their grades. Goldman (1985), Nikolakakos et al. (2012), Mansfield (2001), and Twenge (2006) further claimed some professors believe that if students demonstrate effort and a positive attitude, then they deserve a good grade, regardless of their actual achievement.

Grade Inflation in Higher Education

Grade inflation is visible in higher education. Untenured faculty members may buy tenure through higher faculty evaluations. These higher faculty evaluations have a direct connection to higher grades. Untenured faculty is reluctant to give grades that more closely resemble student production because giving accurate grades could result in student complaints and failure to be rehired. The authors found a positive correlation between expected grades and teaching evaluations (Addy & Herring, 1996; Dowling, 2003; Germain & Scandura, 2005; Jewell, McPherson, & Tieslau, 2013; Kezim, Periseau, & Quinn, 2005; Vasey & Carroll, 2016).

Extensive use of student evaluations of teaching in the reappointment process could lead to grade inflation. Researchers, Kezim et al. (2005), have shown grade inflation and grade compression depreciates the information content of grades and undermines their usefulness. The observation of grade inflation at the college or university level can be contributed largely in part

to the prevailing belief that untenured faculty tend to grade more leniently to receive higher student evaluations (Addy & Herring, 1996; Dowling, 2003; Germain & Scandura, 2005; Jewell et al., 2013; Kezim et al., 2005; Vasey & Carroll, 2016). This assumption is disproved in Bar, Kadiyali, & Zussman (2009), who asserted the acceleration in the rate of classic grade inflation cannot be attributed to either change in the composition of the faculty or to how the faculty responds to it. Rather, the analysis suggested this acceleration may have been driven by improvement in student quality. This research refuted the theories of grade inflation in favor of higher levels of student productivity.

Furthermore, Bar et al. (2009) discussed the reciprocal relationship between grade inflation and faculty evaluations. Grade inflation can be observed as a form of systematic bias whereby students are rewarded through grades by completing positive faculty evaluations in higher educational institutions. They defined the upward trend in grades at American colleges and universities as the phenomenon known as grade inflation. Kezim et al. (2005) acknowledged faculty tenure and evaluations might also be contributing to upticks in student grades. They summarized the matter by stating instructors have an incentive to inflate grades to improve their scores in the students' evaluations of their teaching (Addy & Herring, 1996; Dowling, 2003; Germain & Scandura, 2005; Jewell et al., 2013; Kezim et al., 2005; Vasey & Carroll, 2016).

Grade inflation occurred at varying rates across different departments in varying departments (Jewell et al., 2013). Disciplines with a more quantitative focus (such as computer science, physics, math, and engineering) tend to inflate grades at a lower rate. Conversely, departments with little or no quantitative focus, such as English, History, and journalism, have inflated grades to a much greater extent. Grade inflation is a problem when it produces artificially high GPAs, which lead to student performance evaluations, which have no meaning

(Addy & Herring, 1996; Dowling, 2003; Germain & Scandura, 2005; Jewell et al., 2013; Kezim et al., 2005; Vasey & Carroll, 2016). Addy and Herring (1996) discussed reasons for the existence of grade inflation. One of which is instructor turnover rates. A new instructor brings different grading criteria with them. Along with new criteria, the structure of the course is also altered. Addy and Herring (1996) stated that contract grading, peer and self-evaluation, extra credit options, class participation and grading per effort and enthusiasm might all supplement the more traditional evaluation methods and lead to grade inflation.

Student evaluations by the faculty have contributed to the rising concerns about grade inflation (Addy & Herring (1996); Dowling (2003); Germain & Scandura (2005); Jewell et al. (2013); Kezim et al. (2005); Vasey & Carroll (2016). Since students can now post comments about their professors anonymously, they are not worried about the comments affecting how their professors grade them. The anonymous aspect of the evaluations tends to allow for harsher, more personally-charged remarks to be made (Vasey & Carroll, 2016). There exists a distinction between tenure and non-tenure track faculty when it comes to issues of grade inflation. Tenure-track faculty is less concerned than non-tenure (Addy & Herring, 1996; Dowling, 2003; Germain and Scandura, 2005; Jewell et al., 2013; Kezim et al., 2005; Vasey & Carroll, 2016). Tenure-track faculty's jobs are not in danger when they receive poor evaluations or a decrease in class enrollment. By contrast, contingent faculty members faced pressure to raise course and program completion rates. The fear of poor student evaluations should not impact grading policies. There is disengagement compact in which faculty tacitly trade lenient workloads and grading for higher evaluations of teaching. If students' evaluations of teachers were more authentic, then they would encourage and protect faculty and students who offer or seek out educational experiences that have not been corrupted by greed, sloth, or cowardice (Addy & Herring, 1996;

Dowling, 2003; Germain & Scandura, 2005; Jewell et al., 2013; Kezim et al., 2005; Vasey & Carroll, 2016).

Kezim et al., (2005) attributed grade inflation to student evaluations of teachers. Student evaluations of teachers or (SETs) and lenient grading practices put university degrees at risk because they end up turning into meaningless paper. Koper et al. described grade inflation as a vector driving both, with sloth, greed, and cowardice living in the shadows. Students seek out easy courses with inflated grades and faculty are fine with limiting the workloads on students because it translates to less grading for the professor and higher student evaluations of teachers (Addy & Herring, 1996; Dowling, 2003; Germain & Scandura, 2005; Jewell et al., 2013; Kezim et al., 2005; Vasey & Carroll, 2016). There is a strong likelihood that lower ranked and untenured faculty give higher grades than senior faculty to garner professional security. Faculty who were newer to the profession taught to the test producing happier students and higher short-term performance. Grade inflation may lead to student performance evaluations of professors that have no meaning because they are not an accurate representation of the course.

Krueger and Tarun (2016) extended the dialogue on student evaluations of faculty even further to include the need for increased rigor in student evaluations of faculty. Krueger and Tarun argued student evaluations of faculty should be accurate representations of their professors based on substance rather than likeability. They believed if the student evaluations of faculty more accurately represented what the teacher or professor was responsible for teaching, then they would be a valid means of evaluation.

Krueger and Tarun (2016) focused on seven factors that should be included in any student evaluation of a professor. The first factor is instructor knowledge of the content. The second factor for a student to consider is testing procedures. For a student to accurately respond

to an evaluation, he or she needed to have participated in the class on a regular basis by attending classes and sitting for assessments and exams. The third factor a student should consider is student-teacher relations. Again, the student had to have encountered the professor on a regular basis to make this determination. Skipping classes, exams, and having acquired very little knowledge from the course would not equip the student with the necessary prerequisites to complete the evaluation with accuracy. The fourth and fifth factors are organizational and communication skills. The sixth factor is subject relevance, and the seventh factor is utility of assignments (Krueger & Tarun, 2016). As is observed by the seven factors above, the student giving the evaluation cannot be a passive student who takes little to no pride in his education. He must be actively involved in his learning and have deep knowledge of the course through his own experiences. It is relatively easy for a student to go through an evaluation of a professor by clicking through several boxes and hitting the submit button. These seven factors, Krueger and Tarun (2016) asserted, hold students much more accountable for the evaluations they submit and require students to bring the requisite knowledge necessary to ensure that the evaluation is a valid representation of the course. It purposefully requires them to be active participants in their learning before they can evaluate a professor.

Higher Grading Standards and Mediocrity

Abbott (2008), Chan, Hao, and Suen, (2007), Figlio and Lucas (2004), and Love and Kotchen (2010) discuss the benefits of higher grading standards. Figlio and Lucas (2004) posed two questions (a) to what degrees do the grades distributed by schools and teachers correspond to their students' performance on state and national exams, and (b) how does tough or easy grading affect students' learning. According to Abbott (2008); Chan et al. (2007); Figlio and Lucas (2004); Love and Kotchen (2010), discrepancies exist regarding teacher grades versus student

performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test or FCAT. Only 9% of students who were awarded A's by their teachers attained a score of 5 on the FCAT (Figlio & Lucas, 2004, p. 60). These results lend credence to the fact that grade inflation is occurring. Figlio and Lucas (2004) concluded students benefit from high grading standards. Changing teachers' grading habits is not easily done due to the mounting pressures placed upon teachers. Students trust that their professor's evaluation of them is valid, accurate, and reliable. When grades are inflated, students get a false sense of security when it comes to how they will perform in post-graduate studies. With grading curves, the accuracy factor is affected. Curving grades are encouraged when it restricts the number of high grades. However, no question is raised when the curve limits the number of low ones (Abbott, 2008). Abbott (2008) pointed out when hardworking students end up with the same grade point average as students who do not work hard; it is an unfair devaluation of the hardworking students.

Most students are not typically unhappy with grade inflation and seldom complain (Abbott, 2008; Chan, et al., 2007; Figlio & Lucas, 2004; Love & Kotchen, 2010). Most students stated they would not complain if they keep their GPAs up without having to sacrifice their personal or relaxation time (Abbott, 2008). The burden, then, is on the university program directors to maintain legitimacy in grading. Abbott (2008) stated that the grade illusion is the public perception that a B is still a good grade while an A represents a superior grade. Some professors have raised concerns over academic freedom. They no longer feel they have grading independence since their grading practices have been severely restricted. The compilation of pressure to inflate grades followed by declining enrollments, course cancellations, merit-pay penalties, and even denial of tenure awaits professors who do not conform sufficiently to the

inflationary trend (Abbott, 2008, Chan et al., 2007, Figlio & Lucas, 2004, Love & Kotchen, 2010).

Love and Kotchen (2010) and Chan et al. (2007) made a distinction between the two different entities– teachers and professors. Professors have the additional demands of research placed upon them so if their grades appear inflated it may be caused by a lack of time due to research constraints. The delivery of the content material was much more thorough and purposeful than that of the classroom teacher who may or may not know the content as well. Love and Kotchen determined careful attention to hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions. Institutions can improve teaching and research productivity without affecting student effort. Some schools assign excessively good grades to students who may or may possess a high level of ability. Subsequently, it becomes difficult to distinguish if these students are performing at a high level or are a result of an overly liberal grading standard.

One specific study conducted by Chan et al. (2007) utilized a signaling model to evaluate grades at a single school. The problem of inflated grades arises more fundamentally from the inability of schools to commit to an honest grading policy in an environment with private information. Chan et al (2007). found that grade inflation helps mediocre students at the expense of good students. Schools with a higher chance of having a large fraction of good students are more likely to inflate the grades. Chan et al. (2007) built on existing research that stipulates how inflated grades allow for mediocrity to be rewarded with the same grades as excellence. They maintain that the inability to commit to an honest grading policy reduces the efficiency of job assignment and hurts a school where employers do not consider student standards when interpreting their grades. Chan, et al. (2007) focus on what they call a signaling theory of inflated grades. This model has two components. The first is to observe what the students are

capable of and the second is how an employer or institution can decipher through grades to find out which students are higher-quality versus those with inflated grades and low skill sets.

Chan et al. (2007) explained how grade inflation harms good students. Hard-working students have little or no incentive to maintain high achievement and competitiveness when mediocre students are rewarded with grade inflation. Grade inflation is contagious, and unless professors and institutions are equipped with strategic complements for combatting the problem, it will continue to spread and adversely affect all stakeholders involved. Grade inflation may encourage some mediocre students to work harder but there is a cost involved in grade inflation, and that cost is a loss of motivation on the part of the hard-working students. Losing motivation from a good student is too pricey a cost to pay for getting mediocre students to work harder. Chan et al. (2007) also discussed the pressure students place on their professors to give them higher grades. Students may even resort to threatening professors, reporting them, and dropping their classes with incompletes to avoid the poor grade. The ramifications of the Chan et al. (2007) study on grade inflation include elevating mediocre students without merit, encouraging high-performing students to work less hard since high grades will be given to students regardless, and increasing levels of pressure placed on professors by students, parents, and administration to inflate grades.

Student Achievement and Grades

Love and Kotchen (2010), Mansfield (2001), Pattison, Grodsky, and Muller (2013), and Ziomek and Syec (2007) stated that critics continue to express concerns about a reduction in the capacity of grades to provide true and useful information about students due to a mismatch between student achievement and the grades students receive. Many critics warn that grades carry signals and when these signals are skewed, the meaning of the grades received is devalued.

Pattison et al. (2013) maintained that serious discussions must continue to take place regarding standards students are held to. They assert that educational institutions should award As less readily and hold students to a higher standard. Grade inflation is defined as an increase in grades without a concomitant increase in achievement (Pattison et al., 2013). There is a connection between grade inflation and GPA especially when GPAs were over a 3.0. However, when they looked at the ACT achievement test, there was no increase in scores to support higher student achievement. Pattison et al. also discovered in their research that teachers rewarded the best students with the highest grades. It is difficult to determine whether grades indeed represent a student's knowledge of course content or, if other factors, such as attendance, effort, and discipline are included by teachers as part of a student's course grade.

Additionally, some university professors are now giving two grades to students. One for the registrar and one which is their actual grade received (Love & Kotchen, 2010; Mansfield 2001; Pattison et al., 2013; Ziomek & Syec, 2007). Mansfield's (2001) two-grade policy produced the desired result of opening the dialogue across university campuses regarding the growing problem of grade inflation. Mansfield (2001) acknowledged that the political climate in existing schools make it difficult to keep grades legitimate and free from artificial inflation. However, Mansfield (2001) still maintained the view that the practice of grade inflation is nauseating; he stated that there is something inappropriate – almost sick – in the spectacle of mature adults showering young people with unbelievable praise. Students need to know when they need to work harder and where they may be deficient (Mansfield, 2001). Excessive praise only makes students more complacent which hurts them in the long run. Grade inflation is inherently wrong because, after a while, it becomes automatic. It became so rampant and

commonplace that people see nothing wrong with it (Love and Kotchen, 2010; Mansfield 2001; Pattison, Grodsky, & Muller, 2013; Ziomek & Syec, 2007).

Mansfield (2001) stated that once evil becomes routine, people can no longer see it. Mansfield (2001) added that grade inflation affects faculty morale as well. When professors stop thinking about what expectations they have for their students and focus only on what students expect from them, this reflects a shift in the natural progression of academic protocol. Professors have less incentive to care about what they are teaching because students know that they hold bargaining power over grades.

Grade inflation is a result of emphasis being placed on self-esteem in American educational institutions (Love and Kotchen, 2010; Mansfield 2001; Pattison et al., 2013; Ziomek & Syec, 2007). The therapeutic idea of making all students feel capable of minimizing their stress levels by giving them inflated grades is not the way to enhance their knowledge and confidence levels. Mansfield (2001) referred to systematic grade inflating practices that began in the 1960s and play into race relations and federal government laws concerning affirmative action. Many of Mansfield's comments have sparked mixed opinions from his colleagues and other members of academia. Many of them have accused Mansfield of not having enough bases in fact to make his claims regarding race relations and affirmative action.

The impact of Mansfield (2001) on grade inflation is significant because he established that grade inflation had become so out of control that there exists a need for two grades. There is a volume of administrative pressure on professors to inflate artificially and how this affects faculty morale, the emphasis on student self-esteem rather than knowledge enhancement, and the political aspect of grade inflation as it pertains to race relations and affirmative action. A democratic theory is included as well whereby professors strive to be democratic in their grading

practices but end up unnecessarily inflating grades by result. There is no real fear of failure for students, and that grade inflation ensures even that those who do not perform up to standard do well, and the best students still do exceptionally well. The competition simultaneously remained intense but without any real risk.

Grades are what teachers use to evaluate their students. However, in today's world, students evaluate their teachers as well (Love & Kotchen, 2010; Mansfield 2001; Pattison et al., 2013; Ziomek & Syec, 2007). Studies investigating the validity and biases of student evaluations of teachers (SETS) abound in the education literature, with most finding a strong, positive correlation between grades and student ratings (Love & Kotchen, 2010). There exists yet another theory that speaks to individual teacher effectiveness. The theory as explained by them is that students learn more from effective teachers and thus receive higher grades. This theory minimized the relationship between grade inflation and student evaluations of teachers. It focused on the effectiveness of a teacher and how that effectiveness directly connects to higher student achievement (Love & Kotchen, 2010; Mansfield 2001; Pattison et al., 2013; Ziomek & Syec, 2007).

Dee, Dobbie, Jacob, and Rockoff (2016) examined the causes and consequences of test score manipulation. Dee et al., (2016) explained how evidence from the New York Regents examinations indicates grading manipulation is systematic across all schools and affects all students. Dee et al. (2016) discovered that when students' exam scores are manipulated, there results in a decreased probability by 50.2% of students meeting the requirements of advanced high school diplomas. Additionally, students who are on the verge of dropping out of high school are assisted by test score manipulation since they are not required to retake the course they may have failed (Dee et al., 2016). However, certain students who are close to meeting the

requirements for the advanced high school diploma are adversely affected by test score manipulation because they are not pushed re-learn introductory material they may have missed or possibly re-take an introductory course in preparation for more advanced coursework (Dee et al., 2016).

Dee et al. (2016) emphasized students who had higher baseline test scores usually had better classroom behavior. Some teachers may use soft information such as what they think a student truly knows about a subject matter or classroom behavior when determining whether to manipulate a student test score. Some teachers also manipulate test scores to permit students to graduate from high school (Dee et al., 2016). Widespread test score manipulation could change the way schools educate students and the way students receive high school diplomas.

Mindset Shift and Academic Rigor

Basinger (1997), Caristi (2014), Hardre and Mortenson (2014), and Iannone (2016) stressed that today's students do not possess any greater capacity than they did in the past. Today's students demonstrate less academic skills than they have in prior years. It is not the case that their motivation is higher either. The goal of students today is to receive high grades while putting in the least amount of time and effort as possible (Basinger, 1997). Because of these reasons, it is easy to conclude that grade inflation is to blame since students place more importance on the grade they receive rather than the knowledge they acquire. Schools feel pressure to please the student consumer by lowering their educational standards. Until students realize that the desire for a degree without the acquired knowledge is an extremely short-sighted viewpoint, the cycle of grade inflation will continue (Basinger, 1997; Caristi, 2014; Hardre & Mortenson, 2014; Iannone, 2016).

Additionally, it is the institution more so than the faculty and students who need the mindset shift the most. The powers that be must begin to think more about educating students rather than enrolling them. Institutions of higher learning must start holding students to the rigorous standards of the past even if that means that some of their student customers will be displeased in the short term. To change a culture of grade inflation, it should be about something more than people pleasing. It must be about the actual learning taking place (Basinger, 1997; Caristi, 2014; Hardre & Mortenson, 2014; Iannone, 2016). Grade inflation is symptomatic of the larger, underlying problem of misplaced and misguided educational standards.

Caristi (2014), Hardre and Mortenson (2014), and Iannone (2016) discussed academic rigor. Academic rigor is yet another component of the equation. Literature exists that suggests elements of the FERPA Act should be revised in the interest of controlling grade inflation. For example, revealing students' grades and making them public to maintain a level of academic rigor is a desirable practice. If students' grades were made public, then professors could compare themselves to one another to make sure they are calibrating, regarding grading. If student grades were open knowledge, then the occurrences of grade inflation would be more exposed. Professors would see that their grades may be significantly higher than that of their colleagues. Also, websites such as Rate My Professors would not be as popular since grading information is publicly provided (Caristi, 2014).

Basinger (1997), Caristi (2014), Hardre and Mortenson (2014), and Iannone (2016) brought up a valid point. Typically, college professors do not involve themselves with what goes on in the elementary and secondary schools (Iannone, 2016). This form of neglect is ultimately hurting higher education. All the ills of the lower schools have infected the higher- bureaucratic rules and paperwork: students incapable and beyond rescue, but promoted yearly; a

curriculum without plan or direction; subject matter dictated by politics or current events (Iannone, 2016). These issues affect higher education and the perceived need for grade inflation. When professors are completely hands-off from what is happening in the lower schools, they are rudely awakened when college students cannot meet the higher education curriculum. Professors and college administrative teams would see for themselves that the teaching to the test occurs because of pressures placed upon school districts to pass standardized assessments (Iannone, 2016). More collaboration between college professors and lower schools could potentially lead to less grade inflation because students would enter college prepared to meet the challenge of the rigorous demands of a college classroom.

Basinger (1997), Caristi (2014), Hardre and Mortenson (2014) and Iannone (2016) explained that grading bias practices affect grade inflation as well. Due to increases in governmental monitor of school accountability, biased grading practices have begun to surface. Whether it is intentional or unintentional grading bias does not matter. If it is occurring, then the question of grade inflation and grade manipulation comes up. One such issue is intentional or unintentional grading bias, which can leave schools open to accusations from grade inflation to more extreme grade manipulation (Basinger, 1997; Caristi, 2014; Hardre & Mortenson, 2014; Iannone, 2016). With grading bias, the term *bias* is referring to giving grades to students that are not based on quality or completion of work. School administrators play a role here as well. By promoting a school culture that encourages faculty to utilize grading practices that are based on student performance, they can limit incidences of grading bias.

Grades provide much information for all stakeholders involved and are modes to communicate with parents and the community-at-large (Basinger, 1997; Caristi, 2014; Hardre & Mortenson, 2014; Iannone, 2016). Whether it is intentional or unintentional, grading bias does

not allow for students to know what their grades are which can create a false sense of security when they are in a job-related field and are expected to know how to do their jobs. Hence, there exists the necessity of finding a systematic way to check bias in grading practices through collaboration with other teachers and providing evidence of that collaboration to administrators who can utilize the data for school accountability purposes (Basinger, 1997; Caristi, 2014; Hardre & Mortenson, 2014; Iannone, 2016).

Self-Worth and Consumer Culture

Caplan and Gilbert (2010), Carter and Lara (2016), Cushman (2003), DiMaria (2013), French (2005), Hassel and Lourey (2005), Hodges (2014), Hubble (2015), Kamber and Biggs (2004), Nash (2015), Popov and Bernhardt (2012), Stanley and Baines (2001), and Voge and Higbee (2004) discussed how grade inflation occurs when an A is awarded to students for what was previously considered by teachers as B-level work. The system loses its capacity to recognize the superiority of what had been A-level work when B-level work is given the same superior rating. While grade inflation may keep students competitive with their peers; it only contributes to the bigger problems about differentiating between varying levels of performance (Kamber & Biggs, 2004). To reflect students' grades more accurately, professors should return to the 1960's grading standards. What is needed is a return to the normal curve grading that prevailed in 1960 or a new system altogether that provides the benefits of normal curve grading (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004).

In a healthy university, it would not be necessary to say what is wrong with grade inflation. Even though educators should instinctively understand why grade inflation is a

problem, one must be explicit about it. It is necessary to frame the discussion on grade inflation exactly as it is. Grade inflation is a rise in grades unwarranted or unsupported by student performance (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). Some professors think that unless they give higher grades, they are at-risk for poor evaluations and lower enrollment levels which can put non-tenured faculty at a disadvantage. When administration steps in to examine grade inflation, this could be a starting point to open the conversation. It can also lead to a higher quality of curriculum and instruction due to a heightened scrutiny (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). Grades need to be a fair representation of student learning. Grades are recognized from the student perspective as well. Many students place their own feelings of self-worth on what grades they make (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). When students fail to reach their achievement goals, then their sense of self is devastated. Moreover, from these feelings of devastation, they go to the core of the essential question of how students view themselves not just as students but as persons (Stanley & Baines, 2001). Some institutions have their administrative teams responsible for limiting the amount of A grades that are awarded. The administrative team also has the added responsibilities of furthering student educational gains through the monitoring quality instruction by faculty and enhanced student engagement

(Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004).

Professors are better equipped to assign grades and make informed decisions about students as opposed to an administration who knows less about them. Administrators are constricted by a consumer culture regarding grades in higher education. Professors are in the best position to fix the problem of grade inflation (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). French (2005) stated that the whole problem could be rectified if all professors would stop inflating grades, go rogue, and break out of the status quo without worrying about the consequences. Cushman (2003) described how it is easier for professors to give higher grades because they are required to provide justifications and paperwork for low grades they give. Cushman (2003) indicated that professors are required to fill out a form that explains to the dean of the college the reasons for any grade of C- or below.

Students tie self-esteem to grades, but the authors emphasized professors deal with this issue as well. They want to be liked by their students, they want favorable student evaluations, and may even bribe students with food on evaluation day. Junior faculty are especially vulnerable to grade inflation because they are usually untenured and in need of positive evaluations (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). Hence, the fight to end grade inflation must be spearheaded by the tenured faculty. Additionally, it is

primarily the students and administration that have the objections to legitimizing grades. Therefore, the professor's voice is so crucial in the process (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley and Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). The tenured professor holds the key to legitimizing the grading process.

Cushman (2003) maintains that the American Association of University Professors should also make stronger statements about grade inflation and say more about how professors who attempt to counter grade inflation are treated by their respective administrators. Cushman (2003) made an analogy to the medical field where a doctor is not told to alter a patient's diagnosis or prognosis in the same manner that a professor is pressured to inflate grades. Cushman (2003) explained that the pressure to inflate student grades when they have not earned them detracts from academic freedom and autonomy. Cushman (2003) stated, at the core of academia, academic freedom and autonomy is the center of the professional vocation. Cushman (2003) put the blame squarely on the shoulders of administrators who foster and tolerate it. The idea of empty praise of students must be changed; the mantra of praise first, examine quality of work later is routinely repeated, as if students existed in perpetual pre-toddler stage (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004).

Such empty and automatic praise has influenced grades to such an extent that the report card has become almost irrelevant (Hodges, 2014). The grade is the cornerstone of communication among parents, students, administrators, and teachers. If the cornerstone is

flawed, the entire structure will eventually collapse. High school is where it starts. Teachers, to avoid pressure from above, inflate student grades. It is a way for them to alleviate workplace conflict. A teacher's life becomes much, much easier when everyone in class has a 99% average (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). Grade inflation causes a plethora of issues on high school campuses. Popov and Bernhardt (2012) expounded that students lose respect for classes where if a student is present, he will get a passing grade. If the teacher is not sufficiently concerned to require real work, then there is no incentive for a student to produce real work. Success without achievement often fosters an attitude of entitlement among students.

The pressure to inflate grades comes from administrative teams who are also feeling the pressure from their school district superintendents to fall in line with federal regulations regarding racial bias towards failing at-risk, minority students. Stanley and Baines (2001) quoted an administrator stating that if they fail those students, then the school will be accused of racial bias. Subsequently, that same administrator changed five of the teacher's grades from failing to passing. Having high-quality teachers is also important to solving the problem of grade inflation. Secondary teachers who are equipped with valuable content knowledge rather than emergency certifications in any content area will be able to successfully implement the curriculum and hold students accountable for it (Stanley & Baines, 2001). They recognized that if such support for academia were offered to secondary teachers, if principals, school boards, and parents decided to call a halt to the sham and encourage teachers to assign the grades that students deserve, perhaps the B-mark could be eventually eliminated. The authors made a

relevant distinction between grade increases and grade inflation. Caplan and Gilbert (2010), Carter and Lara (2016), Cushman (2003), DiMaria (2013), French (2005), Hassel and Lourey (2005), Hodges (2014), Hubble (2015); Kamber and Biggs (2004), Nash (2015), Popov and Bernhardt (2012), Stanley and Baines (2001), and Voge and Higbee (2004) stated that grade increases do not equal grade inflation, instead, grade inflation results from inappropriate standards. They argued that institutions should be establishing standards, setting up instructional goals, and utilizing effective teaching methods that are engaging for learners.

The literature specified that even in the face of moral hazard constraints a university can enhance its profitability by fighting grade inflation (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). DiMaria (2013) understood that the mean-shift grading policy that they have detailed would provide evidence to universities that grade inflation policies are detrimental to their dollar bottom lines. Grade inflation refers to giving higher grades to student work than our expectations for student achievement warrant, and it is a consequence of not having clear learning expectations. Administrative teams and institutions must have criteria to evaluate students that show high levels of thinking and cognition (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). Over time, educators begin to lose a precise gauge as to what type of scaffolding is required when some struggle with learning the material (Carter & Lara, 2016). Experts are no longer aware of the mental steps that are required to produce work of a certain quality and cannot describe the processes or the result to others, either

colleagues or students. Other aspects of teaching and instruction that have made it challenging not to grade inflate include having to explain to parents and students why their child received a poor grade. When there is factual data to pull from, these conversations are easier. However, describing to some flaws in thinking, writing, and speaking is much more of a challenge (Carter & Lara, 2016). Teachers should be encouraged to utilize rubrics for their assessments so that students know beforehand what is expected of them with no surprises. Likewise, Carter and Lara (2016) discussed grade inflation and what the driving force is behind it and conclude that the competition for good jobs and job placement percentages after college had contributed to the problem of grade inflation.

There are causes of dropping student grades such as apathy, absenteeism, and grade inflation as the emerging factors contributing to the lack of student accountability. Now more than ever before students expect that they will be catered to. The lack of student accountability issue begins in high school where rampant grade inflation teaches students that their grades are not necessarily tied to their performance (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004).

By holding students accountable through grades, schools are empowering students to become better, more effective citizens when they enter the worlds of business and industry. Currently, the growing mentality of many students is if they do not do the work, do the work on time, or do the work to the required level, they believe there will always be an extension or an assignment to get their grade back where they think it should be (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter and Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges,

2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). It is this student mentality that must change, and the only way it will change is by holding students accountable (Carter & Lara, 2016). A part of the problem is some administration teams. Hubble (2015) stated that administration also must acknowledge the problem of grade inflation, take responsibility for it, and offer support to faculty who want to address the problem. They need to support this movement by returning instructors to the role of teachers, not small business owners.

DiMaria (2013) iterated that six out of 10 four-year college students are taking remedial or basic skills courses. DiMaria argued that this current generation of students, the millennials, have not been allowed to discover anything on their own. They have been coddled first by their parents then by the school systems that have not allowed them to feel the impact of failure. All this coddling creates problems for students in the long-run. When today's college students enter a workforce in which they will not be coddled by their bosses, it will be a rude awakening for them.

Carter and Lara (2016) believed that students do not study as hard when they know the professor inflates grades. Moreover, students who receive the inflated grades struggle in higher-level classes. In their study, Carter and Lara stated that their findings offer some optimism to those who fear that grade inflation will continue unabated, though the fact that 2/5ths of the universities examined in this study still may inflate grades may quickly quell that optimism. Higher overall GPAs are typically an indication of grade inflation. However, they also explain how solely examining GPA instead of looking at letter grades does not present an accurate picture of student achievement and mastery. Carter and Lara's (2016) research answers two pertinent questions. The first is if grade inflation still exists and the second question is what the

contributing factors are. Carter and Lara (2016) discovered that it does, in fact, still exist, but it may be plateauing. Moreover, letter grades versus GPA determinations impact the way students view their grades. More institutions must recognize how giving a grade of a C is contributing to grade inflation. It is the most common grade given. Several practices are in place to reduce the occurrences of grade inflation such as pass/fail grading systems, better articulating grading expectations, focusing on earned grades versus entitlement, and reporting median grades on student transcripts. However, more needs to be done to curtail the problem (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004).

Subsequently, the phenomenon of growing consumerism has inched into the academic world. Grade inflation puts the administration in a dilemma because while they want to attract new students, they acknowledge that having overall higher GPAs are contributing to the problem of grade inflation (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). Some administrators send a mixed message to faculty members when they tell them to be compliant with student needs, but to not yield on what is perhaps their most important need – good grades.

Grade inflation phenomenon occurs, in part, due to a power shift from professor to student. Student evaluations of professors are utilized in tenure and promotion decisions. Because of this, grade inflation became a way for some professors to ensure positive evaluations from students. Instead of placing so much emphasis on student evaluations, the authors argued

that teaching effectiveness, namely teaching portfolios, in-class peer observations, and self-evaluations are stronger indicators of quality teaching (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov and Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). Hubble (2015) noted that even though all professors are not deterred by student evaluations, it may be present in their subconscious. Moreover, these subconscious thoughts may affect their grading practices. Hubble stated that 43% (of faculty members) either strongly agreed or disagreed with the following statement: student evaluations can seriously jeopardize the career of a professor.

Grade inflation is steadily increasing and students are knowingly choosing classes where the professor gives out easy grades (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). Nash (2015) maintained that the problem is that faculty members are now trying to satisfy both students and administrators while trying somehow to maintain ethical values. The struggle for professors is knowing that students need to be prepared for the future and the jobs that are waiting for them such as lawyer, doctor, or social worker. The pressure they feel from administrators, students, and parents to grade leniently is overwhelming. The reverse side of having higher grades as a professor is that the presumption is that the students are not learning because they get higher grades with less effort. Nash (2015) firmly believed that grade inflation harms students, the school, and higher education in general. It devalues a student's degree and destroys a university's reputation when it comes to student evaluations of professors. Additionally, Nash (2015) stated that student evaluations of professors provide

insight into the student's perspective; however, they are nowhere near an assessment tool for a professional's performance especially the instructor that gave them that grade.

Academic Ethics

Aroian (2015), Barrett, Casey, Headley, and Visser (2012), Barata (2015), Bok (2013), Corlett (2014), Cottle (2014), Klamer (2016), Marx and Meeler (2012), Matos-Diaz and Garcia (2014), Schneider and Hutt (2014), Watjatrakul (2013) and Young (2014) focused their analyses on the concept of academic ethics. Entwined in academic ethics is the grade inflation phenomenon. Students can evaluate their professors making the student evaluations inherently flawed. If the faculty continues to engage in grade inflation and in turn receive mostly positive student reviews because of their grade inflation, the system will continue to perpetuate such dishonesty and continue to devalue higher education in that students fail to receive the grades they deserve (Aroian, 2015; Barrett et al., 2012; Barata, 2015; Bok, 2013; Corlett, 2014; Cottle, 2014; Klamer, 2016; Marx & Meeler, 2012; Matos-Diaz & Garcia, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Watjatrakul, 2013; Young, 2014). If students get caught cheating or plagiarizing, it is common for them not to take responsibility for their actions. Instead, it is easier to blame the professor who clearly has it out for him. If students are caught cheating, they are more likely to criticize the instructor in the company of peers by placing the blame on the professor or some other external factor which is easier than taking responsibility for their own academic misconduct.

Cheating and grade inflation are connected. Addy and Herring (1996), Dowling (2003), Germain and Scandura (2005), Jewell, McPherson, and Tieslau (2013), Kezim et al. (2005), and Vasey and Carroll (2016) noted before grade inflation became so prevalent, students who cheated were viewed with contempt and scorned by their non-cheating peers. Cheating is a form

of dishonesty that misrepresents the playing field by ensuring students get the grade they want rather than the grade they earned. It has the effect of discouraging hard-working students from performing at their best when average-working students are making the same grades (Addy and Herring, 1996; Dowling, 2003; Germain and Scandura, 2005; Jewell et al., 2013; Kezim et al., 2005; Vasey and Carroll, 2016).

When it comes to issues of grade inflation, getting students to take responsibility for their grades so that professors do not feel compelled to inflate grades is even more of a challenge (Barata, 2015; Barrett et al., 2012; Bok, 2013; Cottle, 2014; Klamer, 2016; Marx & Meeler, 2012; Matos-Diaz and Garcia, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Watjatrakul, 2013; Young, 2014). Moreover, Barata (2015) spoke about the concept of teaching to the test and the evaluation of teachers based on their test scores. He questioned the ethics involved in both practices and concluded that it is not about efficiency, curriculum, or discipline when judging what the faculty did with their students. What Barata (2015) described is what concerns these men and women about their students, and what the teachers carry in their hearts about the students that rises to the surface as each teacher develops relationships with them.

Bok's (2013) concerns surrounded improving the quality of education by increasing how much students learn by improving their critical thinking and analytical skills through curriculum reform. Bok (2013) believed that curricula reform would organically occur because the issues of declining hours of study and grade inflation of undergraduate students are a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Also, evaluations cause problems in academic settings. Grading practices and interactions with students become much more artificial. When everything is going smoothly, with no upsetting bad grades or demanding assignments, the odds of conflict decrease which is why grade inflation persists. But, in the spirit of not causing problems, other problems

arise such as a lack of authentic grading practices that ultimately lead to grade inflation (Barata, 2015; Barrett et al., 2012; Bok, 2013; Cottle, 2014; Klamer, 2016; Marx and Meeler, 2012; Matos-Diaz & Garcia, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Watjatrakul, 2013; Young, 2014).

Young (2014) explained a system used in England to assist students in meeting the required standards. In so doing, it reflected a weakening of the rigor expected from the institution. Examples of this weakening included periodic assessments rather than an end of course assessment such as a final exam. Another example is that students have multiple chances to make up their exams in case they do not meet standard the first time. Young (2014) noticed, however, was the decrease in standards led to grade inflation where too many students get As. Watjatrakul (2013) discussed the student-as-customer concept. Watjatrakul (2013) has confidence in that this concept undermines the importance of students' learning. Students become passive to active learners and classroom participants. Watjatrakul (2013) maintained that students would seek the most comfortable courses which are easy to pass. Watjatrakul (2013) iterated that if universities are going to continue to push the 'student-as-consumer' model, then they should not lose focus of the university's service quality, student-centered focus, and course achievement.

Educators should have a code of ethics that is mandated by the state. The code of ethics would bring more accountability for teachers in terms of ethics violations (Barata, 2015; Barrett et al., 2012; Bok, 2013; Cottle, 2014; Klamer, 2016; Marx & Meeler, 2012; Matos-Diaz & Garcia, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Watjatrakul, 2013; Young, 2014). With the steady increase in ethics violations of the past several years, it is even more important to have a mandated code of conduct that lets both new educators to the profession and veteran teachers know what is allowed and not allowed by law (Barrett et al., 2012). Ethics violations include

anywhere from violations on social media to inappropriate sexual relations between teachers and students. However, the ethical violation perimeters also include offenses such as grade inflation. Even though grade inflation is not viewed in the same way and may be encouraged in educational institutions, it is still considered an unethical practice (Barrett et al., 2012). Practices such as returning papers ungraded, subjectivity in grading and instruction, raising grades due to parental pressure, and rewarding or punishing students based on their popularity are all reasons that are unethical. If teachers knew that their evaluations would include ethics violations such as the ones listed above, then they would be less likely to violate them (Barata, 2015; Barrett et al., 2012; Bok, 2013; Cottle, 2014; Klamer, 2016; Marx & Meeler, 2012; Matos-Diaz & Garcia, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Watjatrakul, 2013; Young, 2014).

A Portuguese study conducted by Barata (2015) tried to reduce incidences of grade retention by examining the effects of grade inflation on student achievement. Barata's (2015) study discovered that when teachers made their assessments and determined student grades, the measure of student achievement was not accurate due to grade inflation. Barata noted that more research and study must be devoted to how much grade inflation skews data on what students are achieving. Barata also focused her study on the negative effects of grade retention regarding the socio-emotional toll it takes on students who no longer follow their cohort or appropriate grade levels.

Schneider and Hunt (2014) discussed the desire to please on the part of the teachers towards students. This desire to please ultimately led to grade inflation. The desire to please was also a function of the increasing embeddedness of the school system in the society at large and the pressure this interconnectedness could create. Grade inflation is any attempt to amplify a grade without putting in the necessary effort to make it happen. Thus, every grade a professor

gives becomes a heightened or an unrealistic view of what the student is achieving. Thus, educators have made the B-minus, the new D.

Marx and Meeler (2012) suggested that many academic policies at the university level provide the potential for what we might call institutional grade inflation. Grade inflation and the common reasons for it are discussed in the literature such as reliance on part-time faculty, course evaluations, students pestering professors for grades, and widening student choice (Barata, 2015; Barrett et al., 2012; Bok, 2013; Cottle, 2014; Klamer, 2016; Marx & Meeler, 2012; Matos-Diaz & Garcia, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Watjatrakul, 2013; Young, 2014).

Over half of general grade inflation is the result of university-level factors. These policies affect performance measures in institutions and may also affect different subpopulations of students (Barata, 2015, Barrett et al., 2012, Bok, 2013, Cottle, 2014, Klamer, 2016, Marx & Meeler, 2012, Matos-Diaz & Garcia, 2014, Schneider & Hutt, 2014, Watjatrakul, 2013, Young, 2014). Matos-Diaz and Garcia (2014) utilized data from Puerto Rico to examine equitable issues related to college admissions. Through the exploration of this topic, the problems with grade inflation manifest as well. Issues of privilege and certain students having an advantage over others in the admissions processes have been discussed. Standardized testing was established to make the conditions of college admissions more equitable. The idea is that all students would have a fair shot regardless of whether their GPAs had been inflated or not by professors.

Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson (2015) spoke on the ethics involved in grade inflation as well. They explained how most educators strive to do what is considered the right thing by their grade books while, simultaneously, having to work within the institutional structures that are in place. Many of these instructional structures are considered unethical and seen as contributing to social injustices by the educator (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015). They

discussed how teachers faced ethical dilemmas on a daily basis such as having developed personal relationships with students, serving as liaisons between the student and his family, and not wanting to stand in the way of students, higher education, and employers. Because of these reasons, a teacher may be more inclined to inflate a student's grade because he does not want to see the student fail to achieve his goals.

Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson (2015) acknowledged that there are multiple layers of ethical questions involved when a teacher thinks about how they assign grades. A teacher's ethic of care includes a student's psychology and motivation. Life prospects may lead them to inflate grades. What Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson discovered was that teachers tended to inflate grades more when it seemed that their students were under severe pathological stress and became more lenient when it came to grading them. They also discovered that some teachers even believed that high school was a time of fun and students should not stress about college admissions. The teachers they interviewed wanted to see students prioritize their personal lives and happiness balanced with the stresses of school.

Furthermore, Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson (2015) found that high school teachers rarely wanted to be responsible for a high school senior not graduating from high school because he had missing or insufficient work completed. Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson (2015) described how teachers, as an expression of their concerns for students, felt that it was their obligation to pass students as a cultural commitment to their academic success.

Minimum Grading and Grading Bias

Carey and Carifio (2012), Ashton-James et al. (2013), Franz (2007), Mok and Toh (2014), and Rom and Musgrave (2014) discoursed minimum grading and the effect that has on low-performing students. When professors assign grades that are not justified by demonstrated

levels of academic performance, they are contributing to the overall problems with grade inflation and social promotion. However, academic performance is not always adequately demonstrated when issues of grade inflation and social promotion are at hand. Carey and Carifio (2012) argued that minimum grading may help eliminate the undesired and unintended negative skewing evident in common grading practices, while at the same time reducing the collateral emotional damage that results from the assigning of punishingly low grades. Carey and Carifio (2012) defined minimum grading as artificially giving students up to 50 out of 100 when they may be far below that in quarter one to give them a fighting chance of passing. However, critics of the practice see it as a form of grade inflation and over reporting of student achievement. Carey and Carifio (2012) spoke about blind marking when it comes to grading student work. Carey and Carifio (2012) found that many of the grades students were receiving fell into similar ranges at varying institutions. They conducted an experiment where they had instructors blindly grade students' work to eliminate grading bias (Carey & Carifio, 2012; Ashton-James et al., 2013; Franz 2007; Mok & Toh, 2014; Rom & Musgrave, 2014). When the grading was made anonymous, the distribution of scores changed significantly. Again, finding alternative methods of eliminating the causes and circumstances of grade inflation is crucial to change these practices.

Grading bias and how biased grading practices can infiltrate academia if left unchecked. These biased practices contribute to grade inflation. Rom and Musgrave (2014) suggested that grading bias occurs when illegitimate factors are incorporated into an instructor's assessment of a student's work. An example of this is when educators have read a series of low papers and then read a high one; it tends to get much higher marks than it initially would have because of the low quality of the ones that came before it. Furthermore, political science professors should

be cautious of assigning grades based on students' political ideologies and whether they agree with that of the profession or not. Even judges must constantly question their own biases to ensure that they are not affecting their judgment when determining the outcomes of cases. Teacher emotions play into grade inflation. They introduced the ideas of how elementary and middle school grades affect students' emotional states and their overall well-being (Carey & Carifio, 2012; Ashton-James et al., 2013; Franz 2007; Mok & Toh, 2014; Rom & Musgrave, 2014). It can ultimately lead to higher dropout rates if left unchecked.

Ashton-James et al. (2013) argued there are many factors that influence teacher grading practices such as teacher perceptions of student ability, improvement, effort, rule, adherence, attitude, personality, and classroom participation. The more positive the interaction between teacher and student, the higher the grades tend to be. This study shows a correlation between a teacher's emotions toward the grade of the student. Most teachers are well-trained in emotional awareness so knowing how a poor grade may affect a student affects aspects of grade inflation as well (Ashton-James et al., 2013).

Eyanson, Fuller, Harrison, Lawrence, and Osika (2017) discussed how interscholastic athletic programs also contribute to grading bias and grade inflation. They described how there exists a hierarchy at certain college campuses where athletes receive what is called athletic privilege in that they are not always held to the same academic standards as a non-athlete. When athletics becomes more important than academics at any college campus, the focus of the university must shift. According to Eyanson et al. (2017), it is not okay for student-athletes to receive special perks and privileges. Some of these perks and privileges include scheduling preferences, additional tutoring opportunities, extended deadlines on assignments, automatically excused missed class days, and counseling opportunities. However, when there is a favorable

attitude towards athletic privilege, then it is difficult to combat no matter how unethical it may be. Many educators believe that the athletes are role models and leaders for the general student body population. Since they represent the school, they should be given an exception in terms of maintaining a high level of academic rigor (Eyanson et al., 2017). Depending on the culture of the school towards its student-athletes, the notion of athletic privilege may be more or less prevalent.

Franz (2007) is a prominent theorist in the field of grade inflation. Franz's (2007) study focused on the threat of students' nuisance to explain grade inflation. Franz (2007) defined students' nuisance as students' pestering the professors for better grades. In her analysis, Franz (2007) attributed grade inflation to student behavior which, in turn, induced professors to inflate grades. Franz (2007) believed that students would study less and harass their teachers for higher grades more if the professor is lenient and the studying cost is high. If the reward from pestering is high, then the cost of pestering will continue to remain low.

Carey and Carifio (2012), Ashton-James et al. (2013), Franz (2007), Mok and Toh (2014), and Rom and Musgrave (2014) also discussed students who pester professors for grades sometimes grade inflation is an easy answer to placate the student. Some of these pestering behaviors are sending emails to the professor, trying to persuade the professor during class breaks, dropping by the professor's office, making the same requests, or repeatedly asking for specific details regarding their exam. Grade inflation negatively impacts our society. When students' transcripts reflect inflated grades, graduate schools and employers have difficulty making hiring decisions because they are looking for the most qualified candidate or trust that transcript information is accurate. Grade inflation as well as grade exaggeration is when professors or instructors set low standards and grade over-leniently (Carey & Carifio, 2012;

Ashton-James et al., 2013; Franz 2007; Mok & Toh, 2014; Rom & Musgrave, 2014). There exists the correlation between what is deemed lenient grading where the cost of studying is too high, and professors do not want to deal with annoying students. Also, students collaborate with each other on social media and other sites to rate their professors in terms of their grading practices (Carey & Carifio, 2012; Ashton-James et al., 2013; Franz 2007; Mok & Toh, 2014; Rom & Musgrave, 2014).

For instance, if a teacher is too strict then this is reported and class enrollment for that class declines (Franz, 2007). Franz compared the pestering of students to that of telemarketers who break down their consumers so much that they eventually just buy the product offered. Franz cautioned professors against falling victim to this style of manipulation. The ramifications of these studies are far-reaching. From the harassment of teachers and professors by students, protecting tenure, preserving student self-esteem, managing teacher evaluations, leniency, strictness in grading practices, and the negative impact on society this study addresses not only the problems of grade inflation but the pertinent causes as to why it continues to occur (Carey & Carifio, 2012; Ashton-James et al., 2013; Franz 2007; Mok & Toh, 2014; Rom & Musgrave, 2014).

Summary

The subtopics include a description and the causes of grade inflation, grade inflation in higher education, benefits of higher grading standards, student achievement and grades, the distinction between teachers and professors, mindset shift, self-worth and consumer culture, academic rigor, academic ethics, minimum grading and grading bias, high grading standards and mediocrity all impact on grade inflation. From the beginnings of grade inflation which first became prominent during the Vietnam War era to the modern-day consumer era, the

ramifications of grade inflation are monumental. The effects of it permeate all institutions of education from secondary schools to institutions of higher learning. The pertinent issue in the subsection benefits of higher grading standards is how cheating and grade inflation are oftentimes linked together and how some professors skew student results to impact student evaluations of faculty members. There exists a correlation between lower ranked and untenured faculty assigning less work to students and exhibiting lenient grading practices.

Many students benefit from high grading standards in that the grades they received indicated a higher level of knowledge acquisition and retention on the part of the student. When it comes to the differences between teachers and professors, grades appear more inflated for professors over classroom teachers because a student mastery of content was stronger or the professor may have consciously inflated the grades to dedicate more time to conducting research. Grade inflation has a harmful effect on high-performing students because it encourages them to work less since their grades will remain high regardless. If it is an automatic, foregone conclusion that they will receive high marks, over time, the incentive to work hard is absent. This process of losing the desire and drive to work hard is detrimental to the student first and next to the surrounding community.

Grades carry certain signals, and if these signals are skewed, then the grades received carry no meaning. All sense of authenticity is lost, and there is no way of determining whether the student attained the content or if the professor or teacher needs to reteach and reassess. This section ended with an evaluation of how grade inflation affects overall faculty morale as well when all the attention shifts from what students are doing to earn grades to how students feel about their grades as it related to their self-esteem.

Institutions are the ones in need of the mindset shift the most. The institutions must begin viewing the students as they should be viewed—that is, asstudents. They are not there to please their student consumers, instead, to educate them. In this subsection, it is explained how the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) limits the ability of professors to see each other's' grades, and this may be a contributing factor to increasing grade inflation as well. If grades were made public, then professors could calibrate with one another to remain somewhat aligned in their grading practices. Grading bias is also noted as a significant barrier to normalizing grading practices. Grading bias occurs because there are increasing pressures placed on all educational stakeholders to adhere to governmental regulations and accountability.

Grades must reflect what students know. Moreover, with grade inflation on the rise, it is less and less the case where the grade received is the grade earned. Administrators getting involved in the problem of grade inflation were the starting point to the conversation. Administration can monitor the number of A's given out and play a more active role in limiting the effects of grade inflation by working with the staff. This section also addressed the issue of students about their self-esteem and how empty praise is the norm. Students have difficulty discerning where they need actual improvement because all they are accustomed to hearing is how great of a job they are doing.

When professors are valued solely on how their students perceive them through student evaluations of faculty, then the evaluation tool cannot be a justifiable way of maintaining the integrity of the classroom. Inevitably both teachers and professors will consider inflating their grades to appease their students, and through this, some grades become meaningless and arbitrary. Lastly, the issues of minimum grading and grading bias are discussed. When

professors assigned students grades when they are not measurable or compatible with what students can perform, problems arise.

Miles and Huberman (1994) explain the purpose of a conceptual framework is to identify who will be included in the study, to describe what relationships exist within the research study, and to provide me with an opportunity to transform general knowledge into intellectual receptacles. Miles and Huberman (1994) further assert that the conceptual framework anchors the research study and is referred to during the data interpretation phase of the study. Chapter 2 concluded with a detailed review of the literature regarding this field of study. The review of literature discussed the subtopics including a description and causes of grade inflation, cheating and buying tenure through grade inflation, benefits of higher grading standards, mediocrity disguised as excellence, the mismatch between student achievement and grades received, institutions of higher learning mindset shift and academic rigor, students' feelings of self-worth, consumer culture in academia, academic ethics, minimum grading, and grading bias. The effects of grade inflation are enumerated throughout the entire literature review.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Grade inflation is defined as an increase in grade point average without a corresponding increase in student ability (Bar, 2012). This instrumental case study focused on grade inflation. Grade inflation awards higher grades to students than they have legitimately earned because of lower expectations set by the teachers or the schools (Bar, 2012). Qualitative research is designed to reveal perceptions of individuals with regard to a specific topic or issue. Qualitative research methods are useful because they are intended to attain a deeper level of understanding and knowledge foundation (Palinkas et al., 2013). The primary emphasis in a qualitative research study is saturation where the act of sampling itself provides a comprehensive understanding without needing any supplemental information to inform the research.

Chapter three began with research questions and an explanation of the research design and rationale. Next, I explained my role as a researcher followed by an explanation of my methodology. Then I described my participant selection logic and my procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. Next, I discussed my data analysis plan and the trustworthiness of my instrumental case study. Embedded within the section on trustworthiness I detailed both internal and external validity. Lastly, I elaborated on the dependability of my study and ethical procedures.

Research Questions

The research questions for this instrumental case study were:

1. How do freshman teachers perceive grade inflation?
2. Why should freshmen teachers discuss grade inflation?
3. What shared experiences do freshman teachers have about grade inflation?

Role of the Researcher

According to Patton (2015), the researcher is the instrument or vehicle utilized to conduct the research study. Patton further asserted that the researcher is the only person involved in every stage of the study from defining the concept, designing the concept, interviewing participants, analyzing the data, verifying, and reporting out the findings. Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, and Cheraghi (2014) described the relationship between the qualitative researcher and participants as one that is confidential and of mutual informed consent. There is a level of intimacy that is established among them regarding honesty, openness, and the avoidance of misrepresentation always. Stake (2010) determined a case study is natural, holistic, ethnographic, and biographic. He stated that case study researchers must contribute to a reader's experience. Constructivism or existentialism should serve as the epistemologies utilized to inform the qualitative case study research. Stake (2010) asserted that most case study researchers maintain that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered. He likened the case study researcher to an interpreter and gatherer who reports his constructed reality throughout the investigative process. As a qualitative researcher for this proposal, I anticipated a level of constructed reality that occurred on the reader's side of the report. As I worked with the participants, the ability to suspend preconceived notions and biases were an integral component of the data collection process.

Throughout this instrumental case study, I provided a discourse framework upon which to continue the dialogue regarding grade inflation, by using a multiple choice electronic Qualtrics survey, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group session about the phenomenon of grade inflation. The aim was to gain a complete understanding of the research problem and go beyond the observable, surface factors. Within this proposal, I studied a group of 12 core content

teachers in the fields of English Language Arts, Algebra I, and Biology. My research provided an empirical foundation upon which to continue the dialogue on the effects of grade inflation

According to Arditti, Joest, Lambert-Shute, and Walker (2010), bracketing is a technique used to assist the researcher in removing his personal biases, experiences, or preconceptions from the research study. Therefore, I bracketed out assumptions and pre-understandings regarding the participants and the setting of this phenomenon (Arditti et al., 2010). Through bracketing, I became aware of any personal thoughts, feelings, concerns, and biases that could influence the understanding of a participant's experience (Arditti et al., 2010).

As the primary researcher in this study, I kept a reflective journal where I recorded my personal feelings and biases throughout the instrumental case study. My employment at the study site is one of instructional coach. I do not affect the livelihood, nor influence any teacher's employment status within the district. I am not a supervisor or evaluator; I will simply work with the teachers in an instructional coaching capacity only. My own classroom experiences, working with students, utilizing gradebooks, administering grades, and helping teachers determine grading criteria assisted me in formulating my research topic. I was the sole researcher for this instrumental case study. Any prior knowledge or expectations regarding teacher perceptions about grade inflation were not a part of this case study, and were completely removed from it. This instrumental case study focused exclusively on the participating teachers involved their respective perceptions of grade inflation.

As I began the one-on-one interviews and the focus group session, I referenced my reflection journal each time at the beginning of the session and made a conscious effort to keep them out of the interviews and the focus group session. I referenced my reflection journal after each one-on-one interview and the focus group session, and continued to add personal thoughts,

feelings, biases, and preconceived ideas that I experienced. My reflection journal helped me remain as neutral as possible throughout the research study process.

Research Population and Sampling Method

The volunteer participants in this study taught English I, Algebra I, and Biology, and had at least one year of teaching experience. They were certified teachers who work in a Southeast high school. The teacher participants held a Bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university and teach English I, Algebra I, or Biology. The teachers' genders and ethnicities were not relevant to the criteria used in selecting teacher participants.

Participant Selection Logic

Palinkas, et al. (2013) explained that purposeful sampling in a qualitative research study allowed for compare strategies and for the identification of similarities and differences in the phenomenon of interest. The participants who volunteered must also have been available and have been willing to participate and should have possessed the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in coherent and expressive ways (Palinkas, et al. 2013). Hence, it allowed for me to utilize descriptive analysis rooted in empirical evidence to inform the topic of research. Based in part on the description provided by Palinkas, et al. (2013), I asked for volunteer participants who taught English I, Algebra I, and Biology, and possessed at least one year of teaching experience. They were certified teachers who worked in a Southeast high school. The teacher participants possessed a Bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university and taught English I, Algebra I, or Biology. The teachers' genders and ethnicities were not relevant to the criteria used in selecting teacher participants.

Procedures for Recruitment

To recruit 12 teachers and three alternate teachers from the three core content areas of English I, Algebra I, and Biology, I made an appointment with the head principal of a high school in the Southeast part of the United States. I requested his permission to recruit 12 teachers and three alternate teachers to participate in this instrumental case study. By using the campus website, I gathered the email addresses of department members in the core content areas of English I, Algebra I, and Biology.

After collecting their email addresses, I emailed 25 teachers, asking if they will like to participate. They were asked to respond directly to me via email to express their interest in participating in the instrumental case study. The teacher participants had one week to respond to the email. The first four teachers from each content area who responded to the email were chosen to participate in the instrumental case study; the fifth additional teacher from each content area who responded was selected as an alternative. These teacher participants were sent a Concordia-Approved IRB consent form, and met with me in person to review the consent form in case of any questions or concerns they may have had.

The in-person meetings were scheduled via email. I asked the teachers to provide their room numbers and I asked them to stay after school for 20 minutes so I could visit each of their classrooms to go over confidentiality and logistics of the study. The face-to-face conversations were brief. Since the teachers had time before the face-to-face meeting to review the requirements of the case study, they were prepared to agree to the study. I was able to move quickly from one teacher's room to the next, within a 30-minute timeframe. At these face-to-face meetings, teacher participants were asked again if they are willing to participate. If they

agreed, they signed the consent form in person. The teacher participants had the option of declining to participate in the study, by not signing the consent form.

Instrumentation

The instruments that were used in this case study consisted of a Qualtrics survey (see Appendix A), interview questions (See Appendix B), and focus group questions (see Appendix C). These three self-designed instruments were utilized for the entire data collection process. The interview and focus group protocols were designed with these instruments in mind. The protocols were necessary to ensure that the instruments that are utilized in the research study were universally collectable and could be practically implemented. The Qualtrics survey questions, the interview questions, and focus group questions were based on the theories and philosophies of Goldman (1985), Helson (1964), Kohn (1993), Mansfield (2001), Nikolakakos et al., (2012), Page (1967), Rojstaczer (2012), & Twenge (2006).

Data Collection

All interviews and the focus group session were conducted during after school hours in Southeast Independent School District at Southeast High School. The one-on-one interviews took approximately 45-minutes per teacher, and the focus group session took one and a half hours to complete. Both in the interviews and the focus group session, I centered on the utterances (words) teachers made, as far as their grading practices were concerned. I recorded their responses and included them in my data collection process. For authenticity and relevance of the case study it was imperative that I provided a pseudonym for each participant, along with time and date of creation.

I chose a qualitative approach because it offered the preeminent opportunity to examine grade inflation from a variety of angles. It was bound by time and place, a three week time

period that began the first week of December 2017 and ended during the third week of December 2017. This was ideal in a school setting because it coincided with the academic calendar. The teachers involved collected several grades ranging from major, minor, and other grading categories. Major grades included unit exams, campus common assessments, and benchmarks tests. Minor grades included daily grades, such as warm-up activities, daily journals, and classwork. The other graded categories included homework and class participation.

For this instrumental case study, I focused solely on the teachers' perspectives, attitudes, and views where the phenomenon of grade inflation was concerned. First, all 12 participants took the Qualtrics survey. It was emailed to them to be completed digitally. Next, I conducted a one-on-one interview with seven of the 12 participants in the study. For the one-on-one interviews, I used a digital recorder, with extra batteries, to record the one-on-one interview sessions; this ensured I gathered teacher responses as accurately as possible. Subsequently, at the end of the first nine-weeks marking period, I conducted a focus group session that included the remaining five out 12 participants in the case study. Each of the 12 teachers participated in either one one-on-one interview or one focus group session, but not both. All the interviews and the focus group sessions took place in the skills specialists' office, after contract hours.

The focus group session followed the same protocol for data collection as the one-on-one interviews, and I used a digital recorder to record the conversations and transcribed them accurately. All interviews and the focus group session were conducted after school hours at Southeast High School. The one-on-one interviews were 45-minutes in length per teacher for a total of seven 45-minute one-on-one interviews. There was one focus group session with the remaining five of the 12 teacher participants that was one and a half hours in length. The one-

on-one interviews and the focus group session assisted me in identifying the thinking behind why teachers inflate grades and their perceptions of it.

My focus was based on how these participants perceive grade inflation and whether they thought it may be occurring in their respective classrooms. This instrumental case study pertained to grade inflation because it informed the reader on teacher perceptions of grade inflation. Furthermore, this instrumental case study explored teachers' perceptions, and their abilities to differentiate their contents among their respective students, by paying close attention to how they assign grades, and when they may have experienced pressure to inflate grades.

I utilized a qualitative multiple choice Qualtrics survey, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group session to examine teacher perceptions regarding the phenomenon of grade inflation. First, I administered the Qualtrics survey to all 12 teacher participants. The survey was sent to all 12 teacher participants via email where they will record their responses. The Qualtrics survey consisted of 12 multiple-choice questions (see Appendix A).

Teachers answered yes or no to questions in a survey format. Their answers remained anonymous so that the data analysis of their responses remains neutral, objective, and devoid of bias or influence. Once they completed the survey, I gathered their responses and analyzed the results using Qualtrics data analysis tools. I printed out their answers and added them to the data analysis methods, where they were coded, accordingly.

After the Qualtrics surveys were complete and with the participants' continued consent, seven teachers participated in a one-on-one interview to discuss the one-on-one interview questions designed to inform the research study. The interview questions gauged where teachers align in the study, in terms of their frequency to utilize grade inflation in their grading practices, teacher attitudes towards grade inflation, teacher attitudes towards student performance, teacher

attitudes towards standardized testing, and teacher attitudes towards a possible disconnect that may or may not exist between standardized test scores and student course grades (Appendix B).

I also used a digital recorder with extra batteries to record the one-on-one interview sessions to ensure I gathered teacher responses as accurately as possible. I started the recorder, asked the first interview question, and listened to the teacher participant's response. Time was not limited, so the participants will have as long or as short as needed to answer the questions. I continued this process with each of the interview questions. The teacher participant was free to take a break at any time during the interview, at which point I would turn off the recorder, and restart it when the interview resumed. Once I went through each interview question, and recorded all the teacher participant's responses, I concluded the interview. I thanked the participant for their time. The interviews occurred after school hours in a private, quiet skills specialist's office.

Once the one-on-one interviews were complete, the third phase involved in the data triangulation was setting up one focus group session with five teacher participants. During this focus group session, participants discussed the focus group questions designed to inform the research study (Appendix C).

I arranged a time for five of the 12 teacher participants to come together for a targeted focus group session, in a safe and confidential space, after the school contractual time hours. At that time, we reviewed the focus group questions and discussed the implications that their collective comments had on the grade inflation phenomenon. The focus group session provided insight into the minds of teachers, as far as their perceptions are concerned, and whether these perceptions remained the same or are altered in any way by coming together as a group. By hearing other teachers explain their perceptions and perspectives of the phenomenon of grade inflation, all the teachers in the study had an opportunity to reflect on their individual beliefs,

perceptions, and perspectives regarding grade inflation. The focus group session provided the teachers with an opportunity to voice their feelings and thoughts in a protected, confidential environment, and share ideas with each other regarding their perceptions of grade inflation.

The focus group session followed the same protocol for data collection as the one-on-one interviews, where I used a digital recorder to record the conversations; then I went back and listened to them, stopping the recording periodically to transcribe teacher answers in a word document. During the focus group, norms were established prior to the session, which included: no one would talk over anyone else and all participants had been given the opportunity to share during the allotted time frame. I used a chart to separate the teacher participants' words from one another. All the interviews and the focus group sessions were conducted during after school hours at Southeast Independent School District at Southeast High School. Both in the interviews and the focus group session, I centered on the words teachers used to describe their grading practices.

For both the interviews and the focus group session, confidentiality was a key component. The information I gathered was password locked on the computer and inaccessible to anyone other than me. The tape recorder was locked in a drawer at my home and the transcriptions (teacher words) were destroyed after all the data was transcribed. No specific students were discussed, no accusations were made, and a level of trust was created between me and all participants. It was a safe space in a quiet office at a school. I received permission from the head principal and after school programmers, based on their contractual hours, for participants to openly share their thoughts and concerns, without fear of retaliation or of putting their job security at risk.

Data Analysis Plan

According to Angen (2000), data triangulation is utilizing multiple sources of data to support research findings. In a qualitative study, data triangulation is a valid method for ensuring that the research study is strongly supported by empirical evidence, is comprehensive, and is well-developed. It also ensures that the research study allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The open, axial, and selective coding models allowed me to identify, name, categorize, and describe the participants' responses in one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions. I used open coding charts that aligned with the three primary research questions. They were three column charts labeled with the headings *category*, *subheadings,* and *participants' words.* At each one-on-one interview and focus group session, I used a new open coding chart to keep my data organized. Each chart was labeled with the participant's pseudonym, time, and date of creation. This information assisted me in data analysis so I could code the data effectively and make distinctions between the teacher participants.

I closely examined participants' words and responses, and connected subheadings to overall categories (headings) using different colored highlighters to connect ideas together. The overall categories (headings) I discovered were assigned a different color and any subheadings that related to the overall category were highlighted in the same color. The participants' words were also color-coded to match the appropriate subheading and category (heading).

The open, axial, and selective coding charts were kept in composition notebooks that were stored in a locked cabinet when they were not in use by me. I used sticky notes to update the coding charts, after I shared them with participants, to ensure accuracy and reliability of data. The triangulation of data within this proposal entailed the use of a Qualtrics survey, seven one-

on-one interviews, and one focus group session with five teacher participants. I compared the teachers' responses by analyzing their specific words to discover what specific factors had the most impact on student performance, such as student fatigue, interest levels in subject matter, absenteeism, and truancy.

I utilized open, axial, and selective coding charts to keep my information organized and clear. Teacher participants received a transcript of their respective interview, and focus group responses, for reaffirming and/or clarifying their responses, as necessary. I needed an audit trail to keep a chronological record of all utterances, words, and responses for the duration of the data triangulation process. My audit trail was open, axial, and selective coding charts that were fluid documents, updated frequently, and shared with the participants to ensure they were an accurate representation of participants' views and beliefs.

According to Saldaña (2013), open coding is used to identify, name, categorize and describe a phenomenon within the text of a one-on-one interview or focus group session. It is a line by line, sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph method of coding all the participants' utterances and responses into overall concepts and subheadings. It is the first level of coding to look for specific concepts and categories within the data. This level of coding formulates the basic units of analysis. In open coding, first level concepts, overall headings, second level categories, or subheadings are recorded. Examples of open coding include color coding the same concept or theme throughout the data collection process. By the end of the data collection process, all of the transcriptions will be color-coded based on an overall theme or concept (Saldaña, 2013).

For the Qualtrics survey, I used open coding to identify the overall categories (headings) of (a) grades; (b) grade inflation; (c) consequences of grade inflation; (d) students as customers;

(e) parents and other stakeholders; and (e) pressure from the administration. These overall categories were color-coded using the yellow highlighter tool in Microsoft word. Any subheadings related to these overall categories were highlighted in yellow, using the yellow highlighter tool. The subheadings evolved because of analyzing the surveys during and upon completion of the instrumental case study (see Appendix D).

For the one-on-one interviews, the three overall categories (headings) were background questions, interval questions, and closing questions. These three overall categories (headings) were color coded. The background questions, subheadings, and participants' words related to the background questions were highlighted in green, using the green highlighter tool in Microsoft word. The interval questions, any subheadings, and participants' words related to the interval questions were highlighted in pink, using the pink highlighter tool in Microsoft word. The closing questions, subheadings, and participants' words related to the closing questions were highlighted in blue using the blue highlighter tool in Microsoft word (see Appendix E).

For the focus group questions, I utilized the overall categories (headings) of (a) grade inflation, (b) curriculum mandates, (c) administrative teams, (d) teacher bias, (e) teacher confidence, and (f) standardized testing. These overall categories (headings) were highlighted in orange. Subheadings and participants' words associated with these overall categories (headings) for the focus group session listed above were also highlighted in orange (see Appendix F).

Next, in axial coding, the researcher has identified the key categories and subheadings from the interview and focus group transcripts and taken them one step further by closely examining each concept and combining concepts that related to one another (Saldaña, 2013). Axial coding is the process of relating codes to each other by the phenomenon, a causal condition, or by consequence (Saldaña, 2013). For axial coding, I reviewed the open coding

charts designed in Microsoft word using a table. I created this table to organize the Qualtrics survey data, see where the participants' responses overlap, and where key categories could be combined, such as grades and grade inflation. Then, I closely examined the open coding charts for the one-on-one interviews to find connections between the interviews, areas where participants overlapped in their responses to the questions, and identified any potential new themes that may have emerged. I used a bubble chart using Microsoft word to organize the one-on-one interview data. For the focus group session, I reviewed the open coding charts and looked to combine categories, such as teacher bias and teacher confidence, as teacher responses to these questions may overlap. I also paid close attention to any new themes that may have arisen because teacher participants heard each other's responses during the focus group session. I used a tree chart, using Microsoft word, to organize the focus group session data.

Selective coding chooses one category as the core category and relates all other categories to that core category. The essential idea or core category then serves as the common thread that all other subheadings are connected do (Saldaña, 2013). For selective coding of the Qualtrics survey, the one-on-one interviews, and the focus group session, the core category (heading) were teacher perceptions of grade inflation. The subheadings related to teacher perceptions of grade inflation for the Qualtrics survey were (a) grades, (b) pressure, (c) students as customers, (d) parents and other stakeholders, and (e) the consequences teachers may face because of grade inflation.

For the one-on-one interviews, the three subheadings under teacher perceptions of grade inflation were divided into background questions, interval questions, and closing questions. In looking at the teacher responses to the three categories of questions, I followed the story of how their responses will inform the core category (heading) of teacher perceptions of grade inflation.

The subheadings in the focus group session were (a) teacher bias, (b) teacher confidence, (c) curriculum mandates, (d) administrative teams, (e) grade inflation, and (f) standardized testing. Teacher perceptions of grade inflation formed the basis for informing the underlying phenomenon of grade inflation. It is through the lens of these 12 teacher participants, and their corresponding perceptions, that the phenomenon of grade inflation was thoroughly explained and analyzed.

Member checking is a critical component of an instrumental case study. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) describe member checking where the researcher provides participants with the data interpretation and allows said participants opportunities to discuss and clarify the researcher's interpretations as needed for the duration of the case study. Merriam (2009) provides extensive guidance for data collection procedures including conducting effective interviews, being a cautious observer, and mining data from documents. She focused on asking good questions, questions to avoid, interaction between interviewee and respondent, and recording and evaluating data through the interview process. I followed the member checking process from the first interview, until the conclusion of the case study in December 2017, by keeping an open line of communication between myself and the teacher participants. They were provided with the transcript records of all the interviews and the focus group session to ensure accuracy, and any changes they made will be documented in the transcription documentation. By utilizing the data triangulation method described above, I ensured this research study was strongly supported by empirical evidence, was comprehensive, and was well-developed.

Trustworthiness

Confirmability

As the primary researcher in this study, I kept a reflective journal, where I recorded my personal feelings and biases throughout my instrumental case study; to prevent them from affecting this case study. My employment at the study site was one of instructional coach. I did not affect the livelihood, nor influence any teacher's employment status within the district. I was not a supervisor or evaluator; I simply worked with the teachers in an instructional coaching capacity. My own classroom experiences, working with students, utilizing gradebooks, administering grades, and helping teachers determine grading criteria assisted me in formulating my research topic. I was fully committed to the data collection process. Any prior knowledge or expectations, regarding teacher perceptions about grade inflation, was not a part of this case study, and were completely removed from it. This instrumental case study focused exclusively on the teachers involved and their respective perceptions of grade inflation.

Credibility

Angen (2000) states the triangulation of data involves using a variety of sources of data to support research findings. In a qualitative study, data triangulation is a valid method for ensuring that the research study is strongly supported by empirical evidence, is comprehensive, and is well-developed. It also ensures that the research study allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The data triangulation in this instrumental case study involved a qualitative Qualtrics survey, administered to all 12 teacher participants; a one-on-one interview with seven out of 12 teacher participants; and a focus group session with the remaining five out of 12 teacher participants.

Member checking is a critical component of an instrumental case study. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) describe member checking where the researcher provides participants with the data interpretation and allows said participants opportunities to discuss and clarify the researcher's interpretations as needed for the duration of the case study. I followed the member checking process, from the first interview until the conclusion of the case study in December 2017, by keeping an open line of communication between myself and the teacher participants. They were provided with transcript records of all interviews and the focus group session, to ensure accuracy, and any changes they made were documented into the transcription documentation.

Dependability

As far as dependability is concerned, Campbell and Stanley (1996) stated that single-subject experimental studies typically have high internal validity because the participants are the controlled variables. Single-subject studies gain authenticity through replication and extension of the study through varying settings and participants (Campbell & Stanley, 1996). It is further asserted that the results of group studies are more readily accepted by the scientific community when the study can be replicated and the findings of the study remain constant. My instrumental case study was replicable and could be extended to any student and faculty population because the steps were enumerated clearly. Teacher participants exist everywhere in education, as do student body populations, so standardized testing and grades are the predominant methods of assessment of students, and surveys, one-on-one interviews, and focus group sessions can be regularly conducted in the field of education.

External and Internal Validity

Huitt, Hummel, and Kaeck (2001) defined external validity as the extent to which the results of a study can be applied to other participants in alternative settings. Campbell and Stanley (1966) have identified four factors that may negatively impact the external validity of a study. The first of these four is interaction. Interaction is the bias that may occur when participants are chosen at random. Pretesting subjects could ruin the results because it creates an additional, independent variable. The setting is the third factor that could negatively affect external validity where the reaction of the subjects and participants is a result of the experimental setting rather than the independent variable. An example of this is when a subject knows he is being observed and acts differently than what is expected. The fourth factor Campbell and Stanley (1966) discussed is multiple treatments and interventions which may influence a participant's performance if multiple studies are conducted in subsequent order instead of just one stand-alone study.

The first factor that could have a negative impact on my case study is interaction. Interaction was mitigated because my participants were purposefully selected individuals and not chosen at random. The second factor, pretesting subjects, was also mitigated because none of the participants were pretested. The third factor, setting, was diminished because the data was gathered after school hours when participants were not on their obligatory contractual time. Lastly, since my case study was a stand-alone study, independent of any other study, I alleviated the factor of multiple treatments and interventions influencing participant performance. By following the process for data collection, teacher participants, methodology, location, and observed population, this case study may be replicated.

Internal validity refers to the quality and accuracy of a study (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). It is the recognition of how well experimental research is conducted, how operational definitions are used, how variables were measured, and how confident are the conclusions one can draw from the research study (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). Internal validity is the degree to which the results of the experiment can be connected to the independent variable involved rather than some outside factor or explanation (Prochaska, 2017). According to Campbell and Stanley (1966), there are eight variables that could destroy a research study. The eight variables are (a) history, (b) maturation, (c) testing, (d) instrumentation, (e) statistical regression, (f) selection, (g) experimental mortality, and (h) selective interactions.

If the experimental case study is conducted with subjects for a longer period, it may not be as valid as a shorter period with repeated iterations. As far as my case study is concerned, to address the variable of history, I conducted the entirety of it over a three-week time period, with multiple iterations in the form of a Qualtrics survey, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group session. The second variable is maturation. Maturation refers to changes that occur with the natural passage of time. It may include such problems like participant boredom or a lack of motivation (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). To account for the variable of maturation, I valued a participants' time effectively and efficiently to avoid their potential feelings of boredom or lack of motivation, honoring the pre-established interview protocols, and not going over the allotted time specified. The third variable is testing. Testing is performed to ensure all participants are starting on the same level. If not, then it could cause problems later in the performance factors. To account for the third variable in my case study, testing, I started the research study in December 2017 where all participants had the same students, and were implementing the ninth-grade curriculum by content for the second 9-week grading period.

Instrumentation is the fourth variable that could negatively impact the validity of the study. Any changes in measurement, such as human observers, who may influence their subjects' performance, could damage the study. I chose participants who value their positions and followed the school code of conduct; it is not expected that their teaching positions would change during the duration of the study. Statistical regression is another variable that could alter the data but did not apply to my study. It requires administering a test to participants and seeing how they perform on a retest. Selection is where the subjects and/or participants in a study change from the beginning of it until it is over. The fifth and sixth variable, statistical regression and selection, did not apply to my case study because I did not administer any test that would require a retest; my participants will remain the same for the entirety of the case study. I did not anticipate a change in participants for the duration of the study; however, I reached out to three alternate teachers, in the event a participant change is necessary. The seventh variable, experimental mortality, is where subjects/participants drop out of the study midway or partial way through. I did not antedate a drop in participation by any of the participants for the duration of the study; however, I included three alternate participants in the event a teacher drops out. The last variable is selection interactions, which could potentially threaten the validity of the study. This includes any combination of the above seven factors occurring at the same time or at any point in the study.

Ethical Issues

According to Resnik (2015), ethical decision making in the research process is necessary for interpreting, assessing, and applying the findings of a research study. Resnik (2015) defined ethics as norms of conduct that determine the difference between what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. Resnik (2015) enumerated multiple reasons why it is vital to adhere to ethical

norms in research. The first reason discussed is to promote the aims of research such as knowledge, truth, and avoiding mistakes. Without adherence to these ethical aims, the results of a research study could be fabricated, falsified, or somehow misrepresented. Another reason is that research involves coordination and cooperation from a variety of disciplines and institutions, so maintaining ethical standards regarding trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness are paramount to collaborative work. For this case study, if the participants or I demonstrated any unethical choices, such as fabricating information, falsifying documents, or misrepresenting the data in any way, the research would be invalid and unreliable.

The aim of this research study was to shed light on the phenomenon of grade inflation. At no point during this research study did I, or any participant, engage in unethical means in achieving information. Next, Resnik (2015) outlined the third reason ethical standards are a must. Ethical norms keep researchers accountable to the public. The fourth reason is that ethical norms build public support for research projects and the public is more likely to support the project when they have faith in the quality and integrity of the research. Lastly, Resnik (2015) explained how research norms could impact both moral and social values, including social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with the law, and public health and safety. When a researcher fabricates data or fails to follow regulations and guidelines, he is potentially jeopardizing not only his safety, but the health and safety of the public, including participants of the research study. This research study was available to the public, for future researchers to read the findings, and to find value in the findings of this study. By adhering to ethical research norms, I ensured that no one was adversely affected because of this case study, and it inspired the public to examine social values closely.

My instrumental case study was conducted with transparency regarding all information provided to all participants. From the onset, all teacher participants were aware of the purpose of the study, how the data gathered would be utilized, and how their input and active participation was crucial to the success of the study, by discussing the importance of the research that was conducted. I explained to the teacher participants, as it related to accountability, that without their honest feedback and answers, it would not be possible to conduct the case study. At all times, the case study was conducted in good faith. The norms of mutual respect and fairness, with no potential to harm any participants or the public at large, were strictly followed, without exception. The participants, including me, signed an oath, signifying the confidentiality of all participants involved, as it pertained to the triangulation of data.

Summary

In the proposed study, I have enumerated research questions that will be addressed and answered. I have described my research design and the reason why I chose a case study over phenomenology. I have explained what the role of the researcher is, as defined by authors in the field, and how my specific role was conducted. I have described my methodology as a case study and what a case study is. Also, I have provided a logical explanation affirming why I chose the participants I did. I have explained my procedures for data triangulation and my data analysis plan. Further, I have discussed the trustworthiness of my research study regarding both internal and external validity. I have addressed the issues of dependability, ethical procedures, and instrumentation. Finally, I have included my references and appendices, which contain the Qualtrics survey questions, case study interview questions, and focus group questions. Throughout chapter three, I have discovered the importance of reliable, ethical, and dependable

data collection in a case study and how my role as sole researcher was integral in pulling all the necessary components together.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Grade inflation affects all stakeholders within a school environment. It has occurred occurs when a school desired to maintain a rating or reputation, or when a classroom teacher lowered or diminished their expectations of students. How freshman teachers perceive grade inflation is an integral component when examining grade inflation.

This instrumental case study explored the opinions and beliefs of 12 teachers and how they perceived grade inflation across three different content areas at a Southeast High School. The study site, data sample, and the data analysis process were presented, along with the qualitative data collected, through the triangulation of teacher responses in a Qualtrics survey, one-on-one interviews, and focus group sessions. The participants taught one of three disciplines, English I, Algebra I and Biology, which were necessary to see where similarities and differences existed; especially in identifying the way teachers who taught these subjects perceived grade inflation. Results were analyzed according to the study's primary research questions. Common themes and summaries from the triangulation of data are described herein.

Description of the Sample

The participants within this study taught English I, Algebra I, or Biology, and possessed at least one year of teaching experience. They are certified teachers who work in a high school in the southeast part of the state. The teacher participants all hold a Bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university. The teachers' genders and ethnicities were not relevant to the criteria used in selecting teacher participants. The only prior knowledge I had of the participants was where they worked and what content area they taught.

The study site has approximately 900 students and 60 classroom teachers. According to the Southeast Ninth Grade School campus website student demographic information, 84% of the

students served by these participants were classified economically disadvantaged; the student body demographic makeup was comprised as follows: 42.8% Black, 49% Hispanic, 3.9% White, 1.9% Asian-American, .8% Pacific Islander, and 1% are two or more races. The participant demographics included four White males, three White females, two Black males, two Black females, and one Hispanic female. The overall goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the topic of research, data collection, and fieldwork from credible and reliable participants. This study allowed for comparison strategies, as well as the identification of similarities and differences.

Methodology and Analysis

To recruit 12 teachers and three alternate teachers from the three core content areas of English I, Algebra I, and Biology, I scheduled an appointment with the head principal of a high school in the Southeast part of the United States. I asked the principal permission for 12 teachers and three alternate teachers to participate in this instrumental case study. By using the campus website, I collected email addresses of department members in English I, Algebra I, and Biology. After I gathered their email addresses, I emailed 25 teachers to ask if they would like to participate. They were instructed to reply within a week via email if they were interested in participating in the instrumental case study. The teacher participants had one week to respond to the email. The first four teachers from each content area, who responded to the email, were chosen to participate in the instrumental case study, and the fifth additional teacher from each content area who responded, was selected as an alternative. These teacher participants were sent a Concordia-Approved IRB consent form and met with me in person to review the consent form in case of any questions or concerns they may have had.

The in-person meetings were scheduled via email. I asked the teachers to provide their room numbers and requested they stay after school for 20 minutes so I could visit each of their classrooms to go over confidentiality and logistics of the study. The face-to-face conversations were brief. Since the teachers had time before the face-to-face meeting to review the requirements of the case study, they were prepared to agree to the study. I moved quickly from one teacher's room to the next within a 30-minute timeframe. At these face-to-face meetings, teacher participants were asked again if they were willing to participate. If they agreed, they signed the consent form in-person. The teacher participants had the option of declining to participate in the study, by not signing the consent form.

The initial, introductory face-to-face conversations were brief. Since the teachers had had time before the face-to-face meeting to review the requirements of the case study, they were prepared to agree to the study. I was able to move quickly from one teacher's room to the next within a 30-minute timeframe. At these face-to-face meetings, they were asked again if they were willing to participate. If they agreed, they signed the consent form in-person. No teacher participant refused to sign the consent form.

I used a qualitative multiple choice Qualtrics survey to examine teacher perceptions regarding the phenomenon of grade inflation. The Qualtrics survey was administered to all 12 teacher participants. The survey was sent to all 12 teacher participants via email where they recorded their responses. The Qualtrics survey was a twelve-question survey that consisted of multiple-choice questions. A Qualtrics survey is an online platform tool that allows for the creation of an intuitive survey that utilizes embedded data, randomization, and is compatible with both mobile devices and desktop computers. Teachers were sent a secure link to their email. Teachers answered yes/no type questions in a survey format, where their answers

remained anonymous; the data analysis of their responses remained neutral, objective, and devoid of bias or influence. After they completed the survey, their responses were analyzed using Qualtrics data analysis tools. Their answers were printed and added to the data analysis methods and were coded, accordingly.

After the Qualtrics surveys were completed, a one-on-one interview was conducted with seven of the 12 teachers. The one-on-one interview questions were designed to inform the research study. A digital recorder was used with extra batteries to record the one-on-one interview sessions to ensure teacher responses were recorded as accurately as possible. I asked the first interview question and listened as the teacher participant responded. Time was not limited so the participants took as long or as short as they needed to answer the question. This process continued through all the interview questions. The teacher participants were free to take a break at any time during the interview. After all interview questions were recorded the interview was concluded, and I thanked the participants for their time. The interviews lasted approximately 30-minutes each. The interviews occurred after school hours in a private, quiet office of a Skills Specialist at their school.

After the one-on-one interviews were completed, data triangulation occurred by setting up one focus group session with the remaining five out of 12 teachers. I arranged a time for five of the 12 teacher participants to meet for a targeted focus group session on Tuesday, December 19, 2017 from 3 pm until 4:30 pm Central Standard Time, in a safe and confidential space in the Skills Specialist's office at their school, after the school contractual time hours. The research questions were reviewed. The focus group discussed their collective remarks and thoughts about grade inflation.

The focus group session was designed to gather perceptions from the teachers that concerned them and whether these perceptions remained the same or were altered in any way by meeting as a group. By hearing other teachers explain their perceptions and perspectives of the phenomenon of grade inflation, all of the teachers in the study had an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs, perceptions, and perspectives regarding grade inflation. The focus group session provided teachers with an opportunity to voice their feelings and thoughts in a protected, confidential environment, to share ideas with each other regarding their perceptions of grade inflation. Before commencing the focus group session, the teacher participants were reminded about the confidentiality parameters regarding any comments made during the session. All teacher participants agreed again that all comments that were made during the session were to remain confidential, and not to be shared with anyone outside the group setting.

The focus group session followed the same protocol for data collection as the one-on-one interviews. A digital recorder was used to record the conversations to transcribe them accurately. All interviews and the focus group session were conducted after school hours in a high school in the southeast part of the state. The focus group session took approximately one to one and a half hours to complete. The interviews, focus group session, and teacher utterances (words) were thoroughly documented.

For the interviews and the focus group session, confidentiality was a key element. The information gathered was password locked and inaccessible to anyone other than me. No specific students were discussed, no accusations were made, and a level of trust existed between all participants and the researcher. This level of trust was built over time, through a detailed explanation of the case study process, the consent form, and in-person interactions. The one-on-one interviews and focus group session took place in a safe space in a quiet office at school after

receiving permission from the head principal for the participant to openly share their thoughts and concerns without worries of retaliation. During the focus group, one person spoke at a time. All participants were given the opportunity to speak. Teachers were informed of the expectations for participation via email, at the beginning of each one-on-one interview, and again at the beginning of the focus group session. Each teacher participant was made aware of the confidentiality, privacy agreements, and ethical norms of the case study on three separate occasions, both verbally and in writing.

In a qualitative study, data triangulation is a valid method for ensuring that the research study is strongly supported by empirical evidence, is comprehensive, and well-developed (Angen, 2000). Triangulation also ensures that the research study allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Open, axial, and selective coding charts were utilized to observe the emerging patterns within the data of the interviews and focus group responses. The open, axial, and selective coding charts were password-secure, locked, and stored on a laptop computer in my home. IRB requires the consent forms to be retained for three years, but the credited teacher participant responses were deleted immediately after the data had been collected and recorded. The participant responses currently exist solely in pseudonym form and are accessible in the appendices of this case study.

The open, axial, and selective coding models allowed identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing the participants' responses from one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions. Open coding charts were used that aligned with the three primary research questions; the three column charts were labeled with the headings *Category*, *Subheadings*, and *Participants' Words.* During each one-on-one interview and focus group session, a new open coding chart was kept and data was organized. Each chart had been labeled with the participant's pseudonym, time,

and date of creation. This information assisted in data analysis to code the data effectively and make distinctions between the teacher participants.

I closely examined participants' words and responses, and connected subheadings to overall categories using different colored highlighters to connect ideas together. The overall categories I discovered were each assigned a different color, and any subheadings that related to the overall category were highlighted in the same color. The participants' words were also color-coded to match the appropriate subheading and category.

The open, axial, and selective coding charts were kept in composition notebooks that were stored in a locked cabinet when they were not in use by me. I used sticky notes to update the coding charts after I shared them with participants to ensure accuracy and reliability of data. The triangulation of data within this proposal entailed the use of a Qualtrics survey, seven one-on-one interviews, and one focus group session with five teacher participants. I compared the teachers' responses by analyzing their specific words to discover what specific factors had the most impact on student performance such as student fatigue, interest levels in subject matter, absenteeism, and truancy.

I utilized open, axial, and selective coding charts to keep my information organized and clear. Teacher participants received a transcript of their respective interview and focus group responses for reaffirming and/or clarifying their responses as necessary. I kept an audit trail to have a chronological record of all utterances, words, and responses for the duration of the data triangulation process. My audit trail was open, axial, and selective coding charts, updated frequently and shared with the participants to ensure they were an accurate representation of participants' views and beliefs.

According to Saldaña (2013), open coding is used to identify, name, categorize and describe a phenomenon within the text of a one-on-one interview or focus group session. It is a line by line, sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph method of coding all the participants' utterances and responses into overall concepts and subheadings. It is the first level of coding to look for specific concepts and categories within the data. This level of coding formulates the basic units of analysis. In open coding, first level concepts, overall headings, second level categories, or subheadings are recorded. Examples of open coding would include color coding the same concept or theme throughout the data collection process. By the end of the data collection process, all the transcriptions would be color-coded based on an overall theme or concept (Saldaña, 2013).

For the Qualtrics survey, I used open coding to identify the overall categories (headings) of (a) grades; (b) grade inflation; (c) consequences of grade inflation; (d) students as customers; (e) parents and other stakeholders; and (e) pressure from the administration. These overall categories were color-coded using the yellow highlighter tool in Microsoft word, and any subheadings related to these overall categories were all highlighted in yellow using the yellow highlighter tool. The subheadings evolved because of analyzing the surveys during and upon completion of the instrumental case study (*See Appendix A).*

For the one-on-one interviews, the three overall categories (headings) were background questions, interval questions, and closing questions. These three overall categories (headings) were color coded. The background questions, subheadings, and participants' words related to the background questions were highlighted in green using the green highlighter tool in Microsoft word. The interval questions, and any subheadings, and participants' words related to the interval questions were highlighted in pink using the pink highlighter tool in Microsoft word.

The closing questions, subheadings, and participants' words related to the closing questions were highlighted in blue using the blue highlighter tool in Microsoft word (see Appendix B).

For the focus group questions, I utilized the overall categories (headings) of (a) grade inflation, (b) curriculum mandates, (c) administrative teams, (d) teacher bias, (e) teacher confidence, and (f) standardized testing. These overall categories (headings) were highlighted in orange. Subheadings and participants' words associated with these overall categories (headings) for the focus group session listed above were also highlighted in orange (see Appendix C).

Next, in axial coding, the researcher had identified the key categories and subheadings from the interview and focus group transcripts and takes them one step further by closely examining each concept and combining concepts that relate to one another (Saldaña, 2013). Axial coding is the process of relating codes to each other by the phenomenon, a causal condition, or by consequence (Saldaña, 2013). For axial coding, I reviewed the open coding charts designed in Microsoft word using a table. I created this table to organize the Qualtrics survey data and to see if participants' responses overlapped, and if key categories could be combined such as grades and grade inflation. I closely examined the open coding charts for the one-on-one interviews to see if connections existed between the participants' interviews, any areas where participants may have overlapped in their responses to the questions, and any potential new themes that could have emerged. I created a bubble chart using Microsoft word to organize the one-on-one interview data. For the focus group session, I reviewed the open coding charts and looked to combine categories such as teacher bias and teacher confidence as teacher responses to these questions may have overlapped. I paid close attention to any new themes that may have arisen as a result of teacher participants hearing one another's responses during the

focus group session. I utilized a tree chart created using Microsoft word to organize the focus group session data.

Selective coding requires one category as the core category and relates all other categories to that core category. The essential idea or core category then serves as the common thread that all other subheadings are connected do (Saldaña, 2013). For selective coding of the Qualtrics survey, the one-on-one interviews, and the focus group session, the core category (heading) was teacher perceptions of grade inflation. The subheadings related to teacher perceptions of grade inflation for the Qualtrics survey were (a) grades, (b) pressure, (c) students as customers, (d) parents and other stakeholders, and (e) the consequences teachers may face because of grade inflation.

For the one-on-one interviews, the three subheadings under teacher perceptions of grade inflation were divided into background questions, interval questions, and closing questions. In looking at the teacher responses to the three categories of questions, I followed the story of how their responses inform the core category (heading) of teacher perceptions of grade inflation.

The subheadings in the focus group session were (a) teacher bias, (b) teacher confidence, (c) curriculum mandates, (d) administrative teams, (e) grade inflation, and (f) standardized testing. Teacher perceptions of grade inflation formed the basis for informing the underlying phenomenon of grade inflation. It is through the lens of these 12 teacher participants and their corresponding perceptions that the phenomenon of grade inflation was thoroughly explained and analyzed.

Presentation of the Data and Results

The Qualtrics survey data listed in table 2 below addressed the first research question as to how freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation.

Appendix G: Qualtrics Survey Tables

Table 1

Participant's Pseudonyms and Demographic Data for the Qualtrics Survey

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Professional Identity	Length of Time at This Study Site
A	36	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
B	26	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
C	42	White	English Teacher	2 years
D	25	Hispanic	English Teacher	2 years
E	25	White	English Teacher	1 year
F	41	Black	English Teacher	2 years
G	42	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
H	25	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
I	26	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
J	43	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
K	46	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
L	27	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years

Table 2

Thematic Abstraction, Qualtrics Survey

Qualtrics Survey Questions	Participants A-L
1. Are you a ninth-grade high school teacher?	All participants A – L responded yes
2. Do you teach a content assessed by the state-mandated test	All participants A – L responded yes
3. Do teachers inflate grades?	All participants A – L responded no
4. Do you inflate grades?	A-I responded yes, J-L responded no
5. Are your grades an accurate representation of the knowledge your students have acquired?	A-D responded yes, E-L responded N
6. Do you feel that there are consequences for students when they receive grades they have not necessarily earned?	A-G responded yes, H-L responded no
7. Do you think some teachers view their students as customers?	A-F responded yes, G-L responded no
8. Do you have a desire to reward your students with good grades?	A-H responded yes, I-L responded no
9. Are the parent(s) and/or guardian(s) of your students actively involved in their academics?	A-C responded yes, D-L responded no
10. Do you feel pressure from administration to inflate grades?	All participants responded yes
11. Have you witnessed a disconnection between how your students perform in your class versus how they perform on standardized tests?	All participants responded yes
12. Do you feel pressure from coaches to pass star student athletes?	A-K responded yes, L-N no

The one-on-one interviews primarily addressed the second research question as to why freshmen teachers should discuss grade inflation. For the one-on-one interviews, pseudonyms were assigned to all seven teachers involved ranging from Participant F through L (Table 1). A list of 20 interview questions was further broken down into three overall categories of background questions, interval questions, and closing questions.

Table 1

Participant's Pseudonyms and Demographic Data for the Qualtrics Survey

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Professional Identity	Length of Time at This Study Site
A	36	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
B	26	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
C	42	White	English Teacher	2 years
D	25	Hispanic	English Teacher	2 years
E	25	White	English Teacher	1 year
F	41	Black	English Teacher	2 years
G	42	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
H	25	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
I	26	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
J	43	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
K	46	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
L	27	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years

Understanding Grade Inflation

For the background questions, all seven teachers identified grade inflation as giving students grades higher than what they have earned. Participants G and H gave numerical examples of grade inflation, i.e., a student earned a 67 but the teacher recorded a 70 in the grade book (Table 5). Participant F defined grade inflation as significantly affecting a grade because of a student's classroom behavior such as replacing 0s with 50s when student conduct affected their grades. Participant F stated "To me, grade inflation is giving someone a grade that I think would be based on work that would be significantly different in another school" (Table 4). Participant L defined grade inflation as giving students extra points for things they had not done or attempted to do. Alternatively, students were given to students because the teachers liked the student. Participant L stated "Giving them extra points for doing things they haven't done or attempted to do; giving someone extra points because you like them" (Table 4).

Teacher perceptions of grade inflation. Teacher perceptions varied during the one-on-one interviews with the participants (Table 5). Participant G believed that grade inflation was

beneficial for some students because it took into account a student's hard work. Participant G provided the example of a student, who worked extremely hard in class, but struggled with test-taking. In this instance, an inflated grade was reasonable. Participant G explained that simply inflating a student's grade so they will be promoted to the next grade level was an inappropriate use of inflating grades. Participant I stated "It's not always bad; I believe it's unfair. The grades aren't equally inflated; the curve is one thing. But if you go through and individually add points, then it's more like favoritism" (Table 6).

Participant H thought her failure rates would be too high if she did not inflate her grades. As a result of high failure lists, principals would question her as to why she had so many students failing. Participant I explained that she had to inflate grades, or else all of her special education (SPED) students and English Language Learners (ELLs) would fail.

Participant K did not believe it was equitable to inflate grades for any student because the student would then think he was doing better than he really was. Participant K referenced one example where the parent of one of her students was so angry that her child was failing that instead of dealing with the stress of an upset parent and the subsequent explanations; it was just easier for her to give the student a passing grade. However, she noted that this is ultimately not in the best interest of the child because the passing grade would prevent the student from being eligible for an additional Algebra I class in the spring to help the student prepare for the state standardized exam in April. Without the additional 90-minute block of Algebra I in the spring, Participant K stated she feared the student might not pass the state standardized exam. Participant K found it frustrating when parents did not see the big picture and how they may be doing more harm than good. She wished parents would just trust that the teacher has his or her child's best interest at heart.

Participant L did not perceive grade inflation as fair when the grade no longer reflected a student's abilities. She explained that part of being a good teacher is the human side, where a teacher empathizes with students and gives them an extra push, and students do not get discouraged and think they are always failing. Participant F also viewed grade inflation as a building block to healthier, positive relationships with students. If some students have difficulty passing and they try very hard, a little extra encouragement from the teacher regarding grades are highly beneficial. Participant F further explained how it gives the student a reason to keep trying and lets the student know the teacher is there to nudge them along the way. Participant L perceived grade inflation as a good thing when it is used to encourage kids but it is a bad thing if teachers use it to just pad their grade books. Participant L stated "So, I think that it's not fair, necessarily if you're helping out a student where their grade no longer reflects their abilities; part of being a teacher is being human, and we might feel bad for our students and give them a little extra push so it doesn't seem like they're just failing all the time." (Table 6).

Parental involvement in students' grades. For participants F–L, the explanation of the role of the parents varied. Participant F shared in his experience, parents have no role whatsoever. He stated that when he makes a phone call home and the parent can get the kid to make up his missing work or stop missing class, it is extremely helpful. The ideal situation is to have teachers and parents work together to support the student. Participant G believed parents are underutilized. He asserted, parents are not contacted enough. If parents were contacted more often, they would put pressure on their kids to perform academically, attend tutorials, and study at home.

Participant H shared his frustrations with parents. He stated as good as he as a teacher, there is only so much he can do when a parent refuses to take an active role in their child's

education. Participant H offered an example of a student, who was evicted from their apartment and the mother kept him home to help her move out before all of their belongings were confiscated by the landlord. In this case, the parent is in need and the child is forced to miss classes as a result. Participant H said this type of poor parenting contributes to students' feelings of helplessness. Participant H stated students are constantly doing a cost-benefit analysis and if they do not see the benefit of doing their work at the moment, they find ways to entertain themselves by playing on their cell phones or just sitting there in class bored.

Participant I explained how parents play a major role in a child's education. She stated, there is a huge difference among students, when their parents care and are super involved, versus apathetic parents. When parents are disengaged from their children's' educational lives, students are less likely to care about their schoolwork because they know no one at home expects anything from them. Participant I often thought outside of her classroom, there are no expectations and responsibilities placed on her some of her students. Participant J asserted parents could help by making sure kids turn in their work on time. Participant K believed parents could help students by holding them accountable. Holding students responsible at school is one thing, but if the child has zero accountability at home in the evenings, on the weekends, or during holiday breaks, then teachers have little leverage to motivate students to take more ownership of their education

Participant L explained that parental involvement plays a huge role in a student's grade. Participant L shared she can always tell who the involved parents are and it helps with her classroom management as well. More involved parents tend to have better behaving children who comply with classroom rules and expectations.

Participant L shared a heartbreaking tale of her first-year teaching when she contacted a parent regarding one of her students who had been absent several days in a row and the parent shared she had no idea where her child was. Later, the teacher found out the student had dropped out of school. As a new teacher, Participant L shared how life-changing that experience was for her and how she was not prepared for the emotions that came with learning how some parents treat their children.

Ethical ramifications of grade inflation. Participant F believed there could be some ethical ramifications depending on how it is done, and with which students it is being done. Participant F did not necessarily view grade inflation as unethical. He iterated with grade inflation there is the possibility of dishonesty, or whether consciously or subconsciously, a teacher would choose not to inflate because of a dislike or affection for a particular student. Participant F based his ethics of grade inflation on the result or goal. He stated if the goal is to keep students motivated and not feel overwhelmed, then it is within ethical guidelines. Participant F did not believe grade inflation is inherently harmful to students.

Participant G asserted there are huge ethical ramifications for moving up star athletes. He explained how moving a star athlete up teaches the child sports are more important than academics. Participant G posed the concern if teachers are always inflating grades, then students pay less attention to trying hard or getting an answer right.

Participant H shared his views on the ethics of grade inflation. He explained on a personal level, yes, but on a professional level, no. Participant H further clarified that the personal code of ethical standards that he holds for himself cannot always apply to his professional life because he strives to meet his students where they are. Participant H stated "Personally yes, professionally no. I feel like my job is less important when I have to inflate

grades but I'm not suffering from it professionally. I still get same pay and raises" (Table 18). He believed his job as a teacher is less important when he has to inflate grades but he is not suffering professionally as a result of it. He explained he is still getting annual raises and his salary has not been affected but he feels less important nonetheless.

Participant I believed there are ethical ramifications of grade inflation. She asked the question, "How can a student prove what he knows when everything in the guidebook has been inflated" (Table 18)? Participant I explained how dishonest she feels every time she goes into her grade book and inflates grades. She thought she is being dishonest to the rest of her students who had the same material and made the grade without needing the benefit of grade inflation. She further asserted, teachers are setting students up for failure after high school. Students may think they have done well compared to their peers, but when they get to post-secondary education, they will struggle in the real world and college.

The focus group session questions and answers closely aligned to Research Question 3 which pertained to the shared experiences freshman teachers have about grade inflation. For Participants A–E in the focus group questions, the following overall categories were highlighted.

Grade Inflation

a. Curriculum mandates

b. Administrative teams

c. Teacher bias

d. Teacher

e. Standardized testing with participants

Motivating Factors

Cheating

a. Artificial inflation

b. Special populations

c. State-mandated test preparation

d. Test validity

Student Likeability

a. Fairness

b. Ethics

c. Universal Interscholastic League (UIL)

Administrative Teams and Grade Inflation

a. Curriculum mandates

b. Parental pressure

c. Administrative pressure

d. UIL regulations

Campus Improvement Plan

a. Failure rates

b. Graduation requirements

The third category was administrative teams and grade inflation with the subheadings of pressure from curriculum mandates, parental pressure, administrative pressure, UIL regulations, campus report cards, campus improvement plans, failure rates, and graduation requirements. The fourth category was curriculum mandates and grades inflation with the subheadings of district policy of re-teach/re-test. When one-third of students fail an assessment, there is a district requirement that teachers take a major grade every three weeks using district common assessments and benchmark exams. The fifth category was grade an indicator of student

knowledge acquisition with the subheadings of student preparedness for the next grade level, college readiness, and job skills. The last category was the discrepancy between students' grades and standardized test scores with the subheadings of how state passing standards were not aligned to district passing standards.

Curriculum mandates on teachers. During the focus group session, Participant A discussed by the time a student reaches the ninth grade, he might have already been passed along multiple times. Participant D contributed they may even be illiterate which then makes it necessary to update documents so the student has been passed through the system.

Participants B and C explained how grade inflation is forced upon them and special populations of students, such as SPED, dyslexia or 504 identified students are not required to meet the same requirements as general education students. Participants B and C explained it is an unspoken requirement to inflate grade for these sets of students. Other teachers in the focus group explained how they give students extra points for effort. For example, if a student has a 67 or 68, but works hard, stays after school for tutorials, and shows strong effort, they deserve a couple of points to pass with a 70.

Discrepancy between standardized test scores and student grades. All the Algebra teachers in the focus group complained about district benchmark exams that are overly difficult, and teachers are forced to inflate grades to compensate for an unnecessarily challenging test. They stated they are frustrated with a district curriculum that expects students to be state-mandated test ready from day one of school. Students lose all hope when they start the school year with difficult district tests they end up failing. Additionally, the Algebra teachers explained how district exams are much more difficult than the state-mandated test. Hence, students who

may have been able to pass the state-mandated test in the spring, give up in September because they are failing the overly difficult district benchmark tests.

Similarly, all the English/Language Arts (ELA) teachers expressed concerns over the legitimacy of the state-mandated tests. For example, students are asked to write a 26-line essay. No college or university English class would ask a student to write in this format. College professors expect students to write college-level essays with multiple pages. All the ELA teachers in the focus group session also expressed concerns over questions about the author's purpose for writing something. They assert these questions are completely subjective and cannot be answered with any level of accuracy. "How should a student be expected to predict how an author felt or what he meant by using a particular word or phrase?" All of the ELA teachers cited a recent example, where a poet wrote a letter to a state board of education about her poem, which was used on the English I state-mandated test. One poet informed the state test writers they were wrong about the assumptions they had made about her poem. She challenged that their test questions and multiple-choice answers were invalid and not an accurate representation of her poetry.

Furthermore, teacher Participants C and D in the focus group session questioned the manner in which the state administers the state-mandated exam. For instance, on the day of the state exam, some students may be too tired to perform their best or they may be in a testing room where the testing monitor allows them to fall asleep for the entirety of the exam. Participants A and B explained that some testing rooms might have 33 students in them and it is quite the challenge to monitor every single one. Testing monitors typically do their best to ensure test security as it is state law, but it is not realistic to expect them to monitor every single action each child is taking at all times, especially when there are so many students in a testing room.

Another unrealistic expectation placed on teachers. Knowing the levels of expectations placed on classroom teachers informs the topic of grade inflation because teachers often have unrealistic time restraints placed upon them, where the only option remaining is to inflate grades.

The focus group participants also discussed English as a Second Language (ESL) student. Participant A explained how she would take additional time to fill out additional paperwork for ESL students who are failing her class if it means the student will get the extra help and more time to learn the concepts by taking the class a second time. Many ESL students struggle with the English language, such that acquiring adequate content the first time around is quite a challenge.

Summary

This instrumental case study explored the opinions and beliefs of approximately twelve teachers and three alternate teachers who taught in three different content areas and how they perceived grade inflation. Chapter 4 presented a description of the sample, methodology and analysis, summary of the findings, presentation of the data and results, and a summary. The study site, data sample, and the data analysis process are presented along with the qualitative data collected through the triangulation of teacher responses in a Qualtrics survey, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group session across the three disciplines of English I, Algebra I, and Biology to see where the similarities and differences existed and how various teachers perceived grade inflation. Results were analyzed according to the study's primary research questions. Common themes and summaries from the triangulation of data were described.

The primary topics addressed in the Qualtrics survey, as they pertain to Research Question 1 were: teachers inflating grades, grades as accurate representation of knowledge students acquire, adverse consequences for students when receiving inflated grades, students as

customers, rewarding students with good grades, parent(s)/guardian(s) involvement in academics, pressure from administration to inflate grades, disconnection between in-class performance and standardized tests, and pressure to pass star athletes. The primary topics addressed in the one-on-one interviews as they pertain to Research Question 2 were: definition of grade inflation, teacher perceptions of grade inflation, parental involvement in students' grades, and ethical ramifications of grade inflation. The primary topics addressed in the focus group session were: curriculum mandates on teachers and discrepancy between standardized test scores and student grades.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This instrumental case study addressed the implications of grade inflation and focused on teacher perceptions of grade inflation. There is a need to more closely examine whether grade inflation influences standardized testing scores. The way teachers think about grading was explored and whether grade inflation has an effect on standardized test scores. This study adds to the existing body of knowledge regarding grading inflation. This instrumental case study informed current research and literature on grade inflation by providing insight on how the effects of grade inflation impacted students, teachers, parents, administrators, school systems, and institutions. The study explored the beliefs held by teachers at a ninth-grade school concerning teaching, learning and grading and how these beliefs influenced classroom grading practices. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation?

2. Why should freshmen teachers discuss grade inflation?

3. What shared experiences do freshmen teachers have about grade inflation?

Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings and conclusions, findings related to perceptions of teachers based on a Qualtrics survey, findings related to perceptions of teachers during a one-on-one interview, findings related to perceptions of teachers during a focus group session, findings related to perceptions of teachers based on the conceptual framework, and recommendations for further research.

Discussion of the Results

Based on the Qualtrics survey, it was concluded that the majority of teachers in this case study inflate their grades. Secondly, it was concluded that the majority of teachers feel pressure from both administration and coaches to inflate grades when students are not meeting the

requirements of passing a class on their own merits. A third conclusion, based on how students perform in their classes, is not necessarily an indicator of how they will perform on their state standardized exams. As a consequence of grade inflation, students may very well be passing some or all of their classes and then when it comes time to sit for the state standardized exams in the spring, they may fail to meet the minimum requirements for mastery.

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

Findings of Teachers Perceptions Based on a Qualtrics Survey

For Research Questions 1 and 2 of the Qualtrics survey, all 12 participants indicated they teach ninth grade and teach a content subject assessed through state-mandated testing. For Research Question 3, all twelve participants responded that teachers, in general, inflate grades. For Research Question 4, nine participants responded that they personally inflate grades. Three teachers indicated they did not inflate grades. For Research Question 5 regarding whether their grading was an accurate representation of the knowledge their students attained, four teachers responded affirmatively and eight responded negatively. Eight out of 12 teachers did not feel their grades accurately reflected the knowledge their students acquired in their respective content areas. For Research Question 6, teachers were asked if they believed there were adverse consequences for students who received grades they may not have earned because of grade inflation. Seven teachers responded affirmatively while five responded negatively. For Research Questions 6 and 7, 12 teachers believed there were consequences for students when they received grades they may not have necessarily earned. As far as teachers viewing their students as customers, case study participants were evenly split with six responding affirmatively and six responding negatively. Research Question 8 of the survey asked if teachers have a desire to reward their students with good grades. Eight responded affirmatively while four responded

negatively. Research Question 9 asked teachers if they felt the parent(s) and/or guardian(s) are actively involved in student academics. Three teachers answered yes while nine answered no. Many teachers involved in this study did not feel that parental/guardian support is sufficient. Research Question 10 asked teachers if they felt pressure from the administration to pass students by inflating grades. All 12 teachers answered in the affirmative to this question. Research Question 11 asked teachers if they felt there is a disconnection between how students perform in class versus how they perform on the state standardized exams. All 12 teachers responded affirmatively. Research Question 12 in the Qualtrics survey asked teachers if they felt pressure from the coaches to pass star athletes. Eleven teachers responded affirmatively and one teacher responded negatively. Most teachers in this study felt pressured from coaches to pass athletes, regardless of their academic performance in class.

The literature supports the Qualtrics survey findings. Dee et al., (2016) examined the causes and consequences of test score grade inflation and manipulation. Dee et al. explained, evidence from New York Regents examinations indicated grade inflating and manipulation is systematic across all schools and affects all students. Dee et al. (2016) discovered that when students' exam scores were manipulated, the results decreased, whereby a probability of 50.2% students met the requirements of advanced high school diplomas.

Goldman (1985) believed grade inflation was wrong for two distinct reasons. First, the practice subverted the major purpose of education in society; second, it reflected a change in the role of the professor without any discussion on the matter. At Harvard, some professors resorted to giving students two grades: one for the student transcript and one in private, which more accurately reflected the student's true academic achievement. The Qualtrics survey data also confirmed what Goldman (1985), Mansfield (2001), Nikolakakos et al. (2012), and Twenge

(2006) asserted about students going teacher shopping. If the student thinks he may end up with a subpar grade for the course, which will lead to a lowering of their overall GPA, then they will withdraw from the class to avoid the negative consequence of an adversely affected GPA.

Consequently, faculty and administration experienced pressure to satisfy these self-proclaimed consumers by inflating their grades. Grade inflation has contributed to late course withdrawals, especially if students think they are going to get a low grade. Instead of receiving the low grade, they simply withdraw from the course to protect their grades. Furthermore, Goldman (1985), Mansfield (2001), Nikolakakos et al. (2012), and Twenge (2006) iterated, grade inflation has led to more emphasis being placed on standardized test scores rather than GPAs because they are believed to be inflated, and therefore, not an accurate indicator of aptitude.

Findings of Teachers Perceptions Based on One-on-One Interviews

The one-on-one interviews primarily addressed research questions as if freshman teachers perceived grade inflation. For the one-on-one interviews, pseudonyms were assigned to all seven teachers involved ranging from Participant F through L. A list of 20 interview questions was further broken down into three overall categories of background questions, interval questions, and closing questions. For the background questions, all seven teachers identified grade inflation as giving students grades higher than what they have earned. Participants G and H gave numerical examples of grade inflation, i.e., a student earned a 67, but the teacher recorded a 70 in the grade book (Table 4). Participant F defined grade inflation as significantly affecting a grade because of a student's classroom behavior, such as replacing 0s with 50s when student conduct affected their grades. Participant L defined grade inflation as giving students extra

points for things they had not done or attempted to do. Alternatively, giving students extra points because the teachers liked the student.

Teacher perceptions of grade inflation varied during the one-on-one interviews with the participants (Table 5). Participant G believed that grade inflation was beneficial for some students because it took into account a student's hard work. Participant G provided the example of a student who worked extremely hard in class, but struggled with test-taking. In this instance, an inflated grade was reasonable. Participant G explained that simply inflating a student's grade so they will be promoted to the next grade level was an inappropriate use of inflating grades.

Participant H felt that her failure rates would be too high if she did not inflate her grades. As a result of high failure lists, principals would question her as to why she had so many students failing. Participant I explained that she had to inflate grades or else all of her special education (SPED) students and English Language Learners (ELLs) would fail.

Participant K did not believe it was equitable to inflate grades for any students because the students would then think they were doing better than they were. Participant K referenced one example, where the parent of one of her students was so angry that her child was failing; instead of dealing with the stress of an upset parent and the subsequent explanations, it was just easier for her to give the student a passing grade. However, she noted, this is ultimately not in the best interest of the child because the passing grade would prevent the student from being eligible for an additional Algebra I class in the spring, which would help the student prepare for the state standardized exam in April. Without the additional 90-minute block of Algebra I in the spring, Participant K stated she feared the student might not pass the state standardized exam. Participant K found it frustrating when parents do not see the big picture and how they may be

doing more harm than good. She wished the parent would just trust that the teacher has his or her child's best interest at heart.

Participant L did not perceive grade inflation as fair when the grade no longer reflected a student's abilities. She explained that part of being a good teacher is the human side where a teacher empathizes with students and gives them an extra push, so students do not get discouraged and think they are always failing. Participant F also viewed grade inflation as a building block to healthier, positive relationships with students. If some students have difficulty passing and they try very hard, a little extra encouragement from the teacher regarding grades are highly beneficial. Participant F further explained how it gives the student a reason to keep trying and lets the student know the teacher is there to nudge them along the way. Participant L perceived grade inflation as a good thing when it is used to encourage kids, but it is a bad thing if teachers use it to enhance their grade books.

For participants F–L, the explanation of the role of the parents varied. Participant F shared, in his experience, parents have no role whatsoever. He stated that when he makes a phone call home, and the parent can get the kid to make up his missing work or stop missing class, it is extremely helpful. The ideal situation is to have teachers and parents work together to support the student. Participant G felt that parents are underutilized. He asserted that parents are not contacted enough. If parents were contacted more often, they would put pressure on their kids to perform academically, attend tutorials and study at home.

Participant H shared his frustration about parents. He stated, as good as he as a teacher, there is only so much he can do when a parent refuses to take an active role in their child's education. Participant H offered an example of a student who was evicted from their apartment, and the mother kept him home to help her move out before all of their belongings were

confiscated by the landlord. In this case, the parent is in need and the child is forced to miss classes as a result. Participant H said this type of poor parenting contributes to students' feelings of helplessness. Participant H stated students are constantly doing a cost-benefit analysis, and if they do not see the benefit of doing their work at the moment, they find ways to entertain themselves by playing on their cell phones or just sitting there in class bored. Participant I explained how teachers play a major role in a child's education. She stated there is a huge difference among students when their parents care and are super involved versus apathetic parents.

When parents are disengaged from their childrens' educational lives, students are less likely to care about their schoolwork because they know no one at home expects anything from them. Participant I often felt that outside of her classroom, there are no expectations and responsibilities placed on her by some of her students. Participant J asserted parents could help by making sure kids turn in their work on time. Participant K believed parents could help students by holding them accountable. Holding students responsible at school is one thing, but if the child has zero accountability at home in the evenings, on the weekends, or during holiday breaks, then teachers have little leverage to motivate students to take more ownership of their education.

Participant L explained that parental involvement plays a huge role in a student's grade. Participant L shared she can always tell who the involved parents are and it helps with her classroom management as well. More involved parents tend to have better behaving children who comply with classroom rules and expectations. Participant L shared a heartbreaking tale of her first-year teaching when she contacted a parent regarding one of her students, who had been absent several days in a row, and the parent shared she had no idea where her child was. Later,

the teacher found out the student had dropped out of school. As a new teacher, Participant L shared how life-changing that experience was for her and how she was not prepared for the emotions that came with learning how some parents treat their children.

As far as the ethical ramifications of grade inflation, Participant F believed there could be some, depending on how it is done and with which students it is being used. Participant F did not necessarily view grade inflation as unethical. He iterated, with grade inflation there is the possibility of dishonesty or whether, consciously or subconsciously, a teacher would choose to not inflate as a result of a dislike or affection for a particular student. Participant F based his ethics of grade inflation on the result or goal. He stated if the goal is to keep students motivated and not feel overwhelmed, then it is within ethical guidelines. Participant F did not believe grade inflation is inherently harmful to students.

Participant G asserted there are huge ethical ramifications for moving up star athletes. He explained, moving a star athlete up teaches the child that sports are more important than academics. Participant G posed the concern, if teachers are always inflating grades, then students pay less attention to trying hard or getting an answer right.

Participant H shared his views on the ethics of grade inflation. He affirmed on a personal level, yes, but on a professional level, no. Participant H further clarified, the personal code of ethical standards that he holds for himself cannot always apply to his professional life because he strives to meet his students where they are. He felt his job as a teacher is less important when he has to inflate grades, but he is not suffering professionally as a result of it. He explained he is still getting annual raises and his salary has not been affected, but he feels less important nonetheless.

Participant I believed there are ethical ramifications of grade inflation. She asked the question, "How can a student prove what he knows when everything in the grade book has been inflated?" Participant I explained how dishonest she felt every time she inflated grades. She felt dishonest toward her students, the ones who had the same material and made the grade without needing the benefit of grade inflation. She further asserted that teachers are setting students up for failure after high school. They think they have done well compared to their peers, but when they get to post-secondary education, they will struggle in the real world and college.

The literature supports the findings during the one-on-one interviews as well. With regard to the issue of teacher perceptions of grade inflation, Goldman (1985), Mansfield (2001), Nikolakakos, et al. (2012), and Twenge (2006) stated that some students believe, simply by attending classes on a regular basis, they should get higher grades. Nikolakakos et al. (2012) specified, even though students acknowledge their work is average, and the grade for average work is a C, they expect a grade of B; or even an A over 70% of the time. Furthermore, student report cards cannot be relied on as adequate indicators of student performance and are relegated to simply a device used by the teacher to increase students' feelings of self-worth.

In addition, as it pertains to administrative teams, Stanley and Baines (2001) quoted an administrator stating, if they fail those students, then the school will be accused of racial bias. Stanley and Baines research also supported the findings during the one-on-one interviews that if principals, school board members, and parents decided to call a halt to the sham of grade inflation and encourage teachers to assign the grades students deserve, all stakeholders would reap the benefits of a more realistic picture of what students know.

Furthermore, Dee et al., (2016) emphasized students who had higher baseline test scores usually had better classroom behavior. Some teachers may use soft information such as what

they think a student truly knows about a subject matter or classroom behavior when determining whether to manipulate a student test score. Some teachers also manipulate test scores to permit students to graduate from high school (Dee et al., 2016). Widespread test score manipulation could change the way schools educate students and the way students receive high school diplomas.

Findings of Perceptions of Teachers Based on a Focus Group Session

The focus group session questions and answers closely aligned to Research Question 3, which was what shared experiences do freshman teachers have about grade inflation. For Participants A–E in the focus group questions, the following overall categories were highlighted.

Grade Inflation

a. Curriculum mandates

b. Administrative teams

c. Teacher bias

d. Teacher

e. Standardized testing with participants

Motivating Factors

Cheating

e. Artificial inflation

f. Special populations

g. State-mandated test preparation

h. Test validity

Student Likeability

d. Fairness,

e. Ethics

f. Universal Interscholastic League (UIL)

Administrative Teams and Grade Inflation

e. Curriculum mandates

f. Parental pressure

g. Administrative pressure

h. UIL regulations

Campus Improvement Plan

c. Failure rates

d. Graduation requirements

The third category, administrative teams and grade inflation, with the subheadings: pressure from curriculum mandates, parental pressure, administrative pressure, UIL regulations, campus report cards, campus improvement plans, failure rates, and graduation requirements. The fourth category, curriculum mandates and grades inflation, with the subheadings: district policy of re-teach/re-test. When one-third of students fail an assessment, there is a district requirement that teachers take a major grade every three weeks using district common assessments and benchmark exams. The fifth category, grade an indicator of student knowledge acquisition with the subheadings: student preparedness for the next grade level, college readiness, and job skills. The last category was discrepancy between students' grades and standardized test scores, with the subheading: how state passing standards were not aligned to district passing standards.

During the focus group session, Participant A discussed by the time a student reaches the ninth grade, he might have already been passed along multiple times. Participant D contributed

they may even be illiterate which then makes it necessary to update documents so the student has been passed through the system. Participants B and C explained, grade inflation is forced upon them and special populations of students, such as SPED, dyslexia or 504 identified students; they are not required to meet the same requirements as general education students. Participants B and C explained, it is an unspoken requirement to inflate grade for these sets of students. Other teachers in the focus group explained how they give students extra points for effort. For example, if a student has a 67 or 68, but works hard, stays after school for tutorials, and shows strong effort, they deserve a couple of points to pass with a 70.

All the Algebra teachers in the focus group complained about district benchmark exams, which are overly difficult, and teachers are forced to inflate grades to compensate for an unnecessarily, challenging test. They stated they are frustrated with a district curriculum that expects students to be state-mandated test ready from day one of school. Students lose all hope when they start the school year with difficult district tests they end up failing. Additionally, the Algebra teachers explained, district exams are much more difficult than the state-mandated test. Hence, students, who may have been able to pass the state-mandated test in the spring, give up in September because they are failing the overly difficult district benchmark tests.

Similarly, all the ELA teachers expressed concerns over the legitimacy of the state-mandated tests. For example, students are asked to write a 26-line essay. No college or university English class would ask a student to write in this format. College professors expect students to write college-level essays with multiple pages. All the ELA teachers in the focus group session also expressed concerns over questions about the author's purpose for writing something. They assert these questions are completely subjective and cannot be answered with any level of accuracy. "How should a student be expected to predict how an author felt or what

he meant by using a particular word or phrase?" All the ELA teachers cited a recent example, where a poet wrote a letter to a state board of education about her poem, which was used on the English I state-mandated test. One student informed the state test writers that they were wrong about the assumptions they made about her poem, and their test questions and multiple-choice answers were an invalid and inaccurate representation of her poetry.

Furthermore, teacher Participants C and D in the focus group session questioned the way the state administers the state-mandated exam. For instance, on the day of the state exam, some students may be too tired to perform their best or they may be in a testing room where the testing monitor allows them to fall asleep for the entirety of the exam. Participants A and B explained that some testing rooms might have 33 students in them and it is quite the challenge to monitor every single one. Testing monitors typically do their best to ensure test security as it is state law, but it is not realistic to expect them to monitor every single action each child is taking at all times when there are so many students in a testing room. Knowing the levels of expectations placed on classroom teachers informs the topic of grade inflation because teachers often have unrealistic time restraints placed upon them, and the only option remaining is to inflate grades.

The focus group participants also discussed English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Participant A explained how she would take additional time to fill out additional paperwork for ESL students, who are failing her class, if it means the student will get the extra help and more time to learn the concepts by taking the class a second time. Many ESL students struggle with the English language such that acquiring adequate content the first time around is quite a challenge.

The findings of the focus group session match those of the literature. The lack of student accountability issue begins in high school, where rampant grade inflation teaches students that

their grade are not necessarily tied to their performance (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2013; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004). By holding students accountable through grades, schools are empowering students to become better, more effective citizens when they enter the worlds of business and industry. Currently, the growing mentality of many students is if they do not do the work, do the work on time, or do the work to the required level, they believe there will always be an extension or an assignment to get their grade back where they think it should be (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2012; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004).

Dee et al., (2016) added students who are on the verge of dropping out of high school are assisted by test score manipulation and inflated grades since they are not required to retake the course they may have failed. However, certain students who are close to meeting the requirements for the advanced high school diploma are adversely affected by test score manipulation because they are not pushed re-learn introductory material they may have missed or possibly re-take an introductory course in preparation for more advanced coursework (Dee et al., 2016).

Moreover, Hubble (2015) stated that administration also must acknowledge the problem of grade inflation, take responsibility for it, and offer support to faculty who want to address the problem. They need to support this movement by returning instructors to the role of teachers, not small business owners. DiMaria (2013) iterated that six out of ten four-year college students are taking remedial or basic skills courses. DiMaria argued that this current generation of

students, the millennials, have not been allowed to discover anything on their own. They have been coddled first by their parents, then by the school systems that have not allowed them to feel the impact of failure. All this coddling creates problems for students in the long-run. When today's college students enter a workforce, which they will not be coddled by their bosses, it will be a rude awakening for them. Likewise, some administrators send mixed messages to faculty members when they tell them to be compliant with student needs, but to not yield on what is perhaps their most important need- good grades (Caplan & Gilbert, 2010; Carter & Lara, 2016; Cushman, 2003; DiMaria, 2013; French, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hodges, 2014; Hubble, 2015; Kamber & Biggs, 2004; Nash, 2015; Popov & Bernhardt, 2013; Stanley & Baines, 2001; Voge & Higbee, 2004).

As it pertains to student athletes, the literature supports the findings of the focus group session as well. Eyanson, Fuller, Harrison, Lawrence, and Osika (2017) discussed how interscholastic athletic programs also contribute to grading bias and grade inflation. They described how there exists a hierarchy at certain college campuses, where athletes receive what is called, athletic privilege, in that they are not always held to the same academic standards as a non-athlete. When athletics becomes more important than academics at any college campus, the focus of any institution must shift.

Findings of Perceptions of Teachers Based on the Conceptual Framework

According to Helson (1939), in any given student population, the students' inherent ability levels determined grading standards. Furthermore, in a student population where the ability level fell, but the grades awarded by professors have remained the same, one could conclude that grading standards have dropped. The underlying premise of adaptation theory has

occurred when a student's ability has declined, but the grades earned remained the same, then grade inflation has occurred.

Both Participants G and I confirmed Helson's (1939) adaptation theory. Participant G explained, if teachers are always inflating grades, then students pay less attention to trying hard or getting an answer right. Participant I posed the question, "How can a student prove what he knows when everything in the grade book has been inflated?" Participant I further asserted that teachers are setting students up for failure after high school. When students leave high school, they will find their ability levels are subpar to those of their peers.

According to Kohn (1993), the concepts of competition and rewards had influenced parents, managers, and educators in the way that they value grades and test scores. Kohn clarified that if more educators utilized meaningful, open-ended performance-based exams, then educators could maintain some decent teaching in the classroom. Kohn stated that test designers believed they were the authority in the classroom due to increased standardized testing.

Kohn's (1993) research falls in line with the discoveries that came from the focus group session. The Algebra teachers complained about district benchmark exams, which are overly difficult, and teachers are then forced to inflate grades to compensate for an unnecessarily, challenging test. The Algebra teachers further asserted they are frustrated with a district curriculum that expects students to be state-mandated test ready from day one of school. The Algebra teachers explained, district exams are much more difficult than the state-mandated test. Hence, students, who may have been able to pass the state-mandated test in the spring, give up in September because they are failing the overly difficult district benchmark tests.

Similarly, all the English/Language Arts (ELA) teachers in the focus group session expressed concerns over the legitimacy of the state-mandated tests. The ELA teachers in the

focus group session also expressed concerns over the subjectivity of multiple choice questions that cannot be answered with any level of accuracy. The ELA teachers cited a recent example, where a poet wrote a letter to a state board of education about her poem, which was used on the English I state-mandated test. The poet informed the state test writers they were wrong about the assumptions they made about her poem, and their test questions and multiple-choice answers were an invalid and inaccurate representation of her poetry.

According to Ellis Batten Page (1967), essays graded by human beings are preferable to machine or computer grading because humans can reason, and to an extent, be subjective. No one teacher has the same perspective, but in comparison, a computer-generated essay grader will remove all subjectivity and focus solely on the components it has been trained to identify.

The participants in this study speak to the subjectivity factor in grading as well. For example, students are asked to write a 26-line essay on the state mandated test for English I. No college or university English class would ask a student to write in this format. College professors expect students to write college-level essays with multiple pages. All the English/Language Arts (ELA) teachers in the focus group session also expressed concerns over the state mandated 26-line essay and the subjectivity involved regarding the individuals grading them. Participant F's subjectivity in grading significantly affected a student's grade due to a student's classroom behavior, such as replacing 0s with 50s when student conduct affected their grades. Participant L also used subjectivity in grading by giving students extra points for things they had not done or attempted to do. Alternatively, giving students extra points because the teachers liked the student is yet another example of subjectivity in grading practices.

Participant G utilized subjectivity and believed it is beneficial to students because it considered a student's hard work. Participant G provided the example of a student who worked

extremely hard in class, but struggled with test-taking. In this instance, an inflated grade was reasonable. Participant G explained that simply inflating a student's grade so they will be promoted to the next grade level was an inappropriate use of inflating grades.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are those features of methodology that might impact or influence how the results are interpreted. Limitations are any potential weaknesses of the study. These limitations typically occur during data collection and analysis and are considered uncontrolled variables (Yin, 2013). Yin's (2013) approach to a case study viewed the researcher as a quality control agent, who must constantly bring the research back to construct validity through the triangulation of evidence, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. These variables may threaten the internal validity of a study. A limitation may include the scope of the study as it is isolated to one region in the state of Southeast and is limited in the number of participants. A second limitation of this instrumental case study is my lack of experience as a researcher and interviewer. Additionally, during the data collection phase, ensuring that participants provide honest responses is not always possible. It is not guaranteed that the answers participants provide are completely truthful. The participants may have limited experience with the interview process.

Implications of the Results for Transformation

As this research study confirmed, several conclusions can be made regarding teacher perceptions of grade inflation. Most teachers in this case study inflate grades and feel pressure to inflate grades from both administration and coaches. Additionally, how students perform in their classes is not indicative of how they will perform on state standardized exams. Based in part on the aforementioned conclusions, an implication for transformation necessarily involves a

reformation of the grading process. Grade inflation weakens teacher pedagogy and adversely affects student morale. Students may believe their hard work is not valued thereby lowering their own standards.

Similarly, teachers may also believe their hard work is not valued because of the pressures placed upon them to inflate their grade books. Teachers and students must believe the work they do is meaningful. To prevent quality teachers from leaving the profession due to burnout, as a society we must encourage and value, not only our educational system, but the stewards charged with the jobs of educating tomorrow's youth. The educational stewards, teachers, deserve autonomy, respect, and the ability to determine their own grading practices. Teachers are the experts in their classrooms and we cannot tie their hands when it comes to holding students accountable for their own academics. We do a disservice to all stakeholders involved when teachers are forced to unnecessarily inflate students' grades.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendations for further research could include the effects of grade inflation in sports, the amount of grade inflation in low-income vs high-income schools, the differences in grade inflation between male and female students, principal attitudes on grade inflation, and grade inflation in elementary schools. This research study could be conducted at the middle school level, a private or parochial school, or a charter school to see where any similarities and/or differences may lie. This research study would be beneficial and relevant at institutions of higher education to examine if college students receive grades and degrees not necessarily based on their academic performance. Regarding institutions of higher education, Rojstaczer's (2012) research explains, students who work hard and excel are now put in the same category as every other student, and in some cases, even lower performing than that. Rojstaczer (2012)

emphasized, in an era of consumerism, such as the one we live in today, educational institutions feel the need to help students look good on paper. Furthermore, Goldman (1985) stated that when a professor's credit-hour production slips because of withdrawals and declining enrollments, a professor will have the tendency to give inflated grades to attract students who otherwise might be lured elsewhere in search of an easy A. This research study could also take a closer look at any discrepancies as it pertains to a specific type of athlete/sport.

Conclusion

Teachers have an obligation to ensure they are addressing the needs of all of their students. One of their many responsibilities includes assessing student work and assigning grades. These student grades should reflect what students learn. Without meaningful grading, students may be less prepared to function in today's society, and teachers may be subject to high levels of scrutiny and criticism from all stakeholders involved. The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore how freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation within a southeast high school. The three main research questions involved in this research study were: How freshmen teachers perceive grade inflation? Why freshmen teachers should discuss grade inflation? What shared experiences do freshmen teachers have about grade inflation? The data triangulation in this instrumental case study involved a qualitative Qualtrics survey administered to all 12 teacher participants, a one-on-one interview with 7 out of 12 teacher participants, and a focus group session with the remaining 5 out of 12 teacher participants. In an ever-changing, global community, teacher perceptions of grade inflation cannot be ignored. These teacher perceptions are critical to the educational system.

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Appendix A: Qualtrics Survey Questions

1. Are you a ninth-grade high school teacher?
2. Do you teach a content that is assessed by the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)?
3. Do teachers inflate grades?
4. Do you inflate grades?
5. Are your grades an accurate representation of the knowledge your students have acquired?
6. Do you feel that there are consequences for students when they receive grades they have not necessarily earned?
7. Do you think some teachers view their students as customers?
8. Do you have a desire to reward your students with good grades?
9. Are the parent(s) and/or guardian(s) of your students actively involved in their academics?
10. Do you feel pressure from administration to inflate grades?
11. Have you witnessed a disconnection between how your students perform in your class versus how they perform on standardized tests?
12. Do you feel pressure from coaches to pass star student athletes?

Appendix B: One-on-One Interview Questions

Background Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What is your definition of grade inflation?
3. Give me an example of grade inflation.
4. Tell me about your perception of grade inflation.
5. Tell me about your personal experiences with grade inflation.
6. Do you inflate grades? Why or why not?
7. How does grade inflation impact your effectiveness as a teacher?
8. What criteria do you utilize to differentiate among your students' abilities?

Interval Questions

9. Has student academic performance changed since your first year of teaching? If so, how?
10. What role, if any, do parents play in a student's grade?
11. How can parents assist teachers with a student's grade?
12. What do students have to do in order to stand out in your class?
13. How do you measure a student's academic progress?
14. What are some barriers that you have observed when reflecting on a student's academic progress?
15. How are grading policies evolving in your school?

Closing Questions

16. Are there ethical ramifications of grade inflation?
17. If so, what do you perceive them to be?
18. Do you believe grade inflation harmful to students who have the desire to pursue higher educational goals? If so, please elaborate on this idea.

19. How has a consumer culture towards grading practices affected teachers?

20. What other comments would you like to share regarding grade inflation?

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

1. Do teachers inflate grades on a regular basis?
2. How do administrative teams contribute to grade inflation?
3. How do curriculum mandates on teachers affect grade inflation?
4. Do you ever feel it is necessary to inflate grades? Why or why not?
5. How confident are you that your grades are an accurate indicator of what your students have learned? Why or why not?
6. How would you explain the possibility of discrepancy between standardized test scores and student grades if you discover that one exists?
7. How does teacher bias affect grading practices?

Appendix D: Specific Areas Addressed

Qualtrics Survey: Teacher Perceptions of Grade Inflation

Subheadings	Survey Questions/Teacher Responses
Pressure From Administration	Do you feel pressure from administration to inflate grades? 12 Yes Do you feel pressure from coaches to pass star student athletes? 11 Yes, 1 No
Grades and Grade Inflation	Are you a 9th grade high school teacher? 12 Yes Do you teach a content assessed by the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR)? 12 Yes Do you feel teachers inflate grades? 12 Yes Do you inflate grades? 9 Yes, 3 No
Parents and Other Stakeholders	Are the parent(s) and/or guardian(s) of your students actively involved in their academics? 3 Yes, 9 No
Consequences of Grade Inflation	Are your grades an accurate representation of the knowledge your students have acquired? 4 Yes, 8 No Do you feel there are consequences for students when they receive grades they have not necessarily earned? 7 Yes, 5 No Do you feel there is a disconnection between how your students perform in your class versus how they perform on standardized tests? 12 Yes
Students as Customers	Do you think some teachers view their students as customers? 6 Yes, 6 No Do you have a desire to reward your students with good grades? 8 Yes, 4 No

Appendix E: Colored Categories

One-on-One Interview Questions: Teacher Perceptions of Grade Inflation

Background Questions	Interval Questions	Closing Questions
How long have you been teaching?	Has student academic performance changed since your first year of teaching? If so, how?	Are there ethical ramifications of grade inflation?
What is your definition of grade inflation?	What role, if any, do parents play in a student's grade?	If so what do you perceive them to be?
Give me an example of grade inflation.	How can parents assist teachers with a student's grade?	Do you believe grade inflation harmful to students who have the desire to pursue higher education goals? If so, please elaborate on this idea.
Tell me about your perception of grade inflation.	What do student have to do in order to stand out in your class?	How has a consumer culture towards grading practices affected teachers?
Tell me about your personal experiences with grade inflation.	How do you measure a student's academic progress?	What other comments would you like to share regarding grade inflation?
Do you inflate grades? Why or why not?	What are some barriers that you have observed when reflecting on a student's academic progress?	
How does grade inflation impact your effectiveness as a teacher?	How are grading policies evolving in your school?	
What criteria do you utilize to differentiate among your students' abilities?		

Appendix F: Themes

Focus Group Session: Teacher Perceptions of Grade Inflation

Subheadings
Grade Inflation
Curriculum Mandates
Administrative Teams
Teacher Bias and Teacher Confidence
Standardized Testing

Appendix G: Qualtrics Survey Tables

Table 1

Participant's Pseudonyms and Demographic Data for the Qualtrics Survey

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Professional Identity	Length of Time at This Study Site
A	36	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
B	26	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
C	42	White	English Teacher	2 years
D	25	Hispanic	English Teacher	2 years
E	25	White	English Teacher	1 year
F	41	Black	English Teacher	2 years
G	42	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
H	25	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
I	26	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
J	43	White	Biology Teacher	2 years
K	46	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years
L	27	White	Algebra Teacher	2 years

Table 2

Thematic Abstraction, Qualtrics Survey

Qualtrics Survey Questions	Participants A–L
1. Are you a ninth-grade high school teacher?	All participants A–L responded yes
2. Do you teach a content assessed by the state-mandated test	All participants A–L responded yes
3. Do teachers inflate grades?	All participants A–L responded no
4. Do you inflate grades?	A–I responded yes, J–L responded no
5. Are your grades an accurate representation of the knowledge your students have acquired?	A–D responded yes, E–L responded N
6. Do you feel that there are consequences for students when they receive grades they have not necessarily earned?	A–G responded yes, H–L responded no
7. Do you think some teachers view their students as customers?	A–F responded yes, G–L responded no
8. Do you have a desire to reward your students with good grades?	A–H responded yes, I–L responded no
9. Are the parent(s) and/or guardian(s) of your students actively involved in their academics?	A–C responded yes, D–L responded no
10. Do you feel pressure from administration to inflate grades?	All participants responded yes
11. Have you witnessed a disconnection between how your students perform in your class versus how they perform on standardized tests?	All participants responded yes
12. Do you feel pressure from coaches to pass star student athletes?	A–K responded yes, L–N no

Appendix H: One-on-One Interview Tables

Table 3

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q1: How long have you been teaching?	
Participant F	"I'm in the middle of my second year"
Participant G	"3 years"
Participant H	"16 years"
Participant I	"3 years"
Participant J	"11 years"
Participant K	"4 years"
Participant L	"3 years"

Table 4

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q2: What is your definition of grade inflation?	
Participant F	"To me, grade inflation is giving someone a grade that I think would be based on work that would be significantly different in another school."
Participant G	"Grade inflation is any time a teacher bumps up grades for no reason."
Participant H	"When you give a kid a grade that is higher than they earned."
Participant I	"Giving a grade higher than what was earned; anything beyond what the actual score was"
Participant J	"Adding points that aren't earned"
Participant K	"Putting pressure on not failing too many kids; feeling like you have to give them extra points"
Participant L	"Giving them extra points for doing things they haven't done or attempted to do; giving someone extra points because you like them"

Table 5

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q3: Give me an example of grade inflation.	
Participant F	"An example of grade inflation is giving someone a grade that I think would be based on work that would be significantly different in another school."
Participant G	"Grade inflation would be let's say a student has a 67 in the class and needs to get a 70. Especially around UIL eligibility when the coach comes in."
Participant H	"Well if a kid got a 50 on a test and you pass them with a 70."
Participant I	"Curving grades; giving extra points for other assignments, other work for missing assignment not the same as missing work"
Participant J	"Passing rate is 37 on [the state-mandated test]; low"
Participant K	"The passing rate is so low that the 70 we go by in the gradebook appears inflated"
Participant L	"So…I mean just giving students extra points on assignments when they don't deserve it; for example, a kid you like makes a 65 but you give them extra points on a regular basis."

Table 6

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q4: Tell me about your perception of grade inflation.	
Participant F	"Grade inflation happens; it can be encouraged for different reasons depending on the district; whenever a grade is significantly affected by things other than academic performance."
Participant G	"I think for some students it's beneficial; those who can't take a test, but work extremely hard; struggles with test-taking. Inflating grades just to pass the kid along cuz we don't have to deal with them again. We won't have to see them again next year.
Participant H	"My class is much harder than the STAAR passing rate so I inflate to match the expectations on the STAAR. If a kid is failing my class, it is likely that they will fail the STAAR."
Participant I	"It's not always bad; I believe it's unfair. The grades aren't equally inflated; the curve is one thing. But if you go through and individually add points, then it's more like favoritism."
Participant J	"I haven't heard that term that much; I don't have a degree in grade inflation. It's not fair to give the grade they should be getting because kids think they're doing better than they are. SPED is rampant with it. Mom threw a fit. What's the point in not? I'm getting called in that it's only my class. I don't need the hassle. "
Participant K	"We have categories that we have to manage kids and put them in. so I know kids need extra math but won't get it because mom is adamant that the kid pass. Mom says she doesn't like how her special needs kid is being treated. We give them so much attention but how much help are they actually getting? Sometimes it's a detriment. If you label students in categories they shouldn't be in, now we have to inflate their grades. Student feels like he can behave however he wants because if I write him up, mom will call and complain to admin. Leaps and bounds of extra points and even still they aren't passing."

(continued)

Table 6

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q4: Tell me about your perception of grade inflation.	
Participant L	"So, I think that it's not fair necessarily if you're helping out a student where their grade no longer reflects their abilities. Ummm…but I also think part of being a teacher is being human and we might feel bad for our students and give them a little push so it doesn't seem like they're just failing all the time. Just making up grades is not a good idea. When I think of grade inflation, I don't think of teachers just making up grades. I think of giving them extra points on something. The way I use it isn't as bad as just making grades cuz those would be bad teachers."

Table 7

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q5: Tell me about your personal experiences with grade inflation.	
Participant F	"I've definitely used grade inflation as a means to address behavior and also to ensure the right amount of students passing my class. I don't think it is entirely without merit. Even if it is not based solely on academic performance I still think it is valid. I feel occasionally pressured that a certain number of students pass my class. Did they actually do better or were they given a 20-point curve, 52% is passing. Unfair for a 60 to not be passing since the state passing standard is 58 aligning gradebook grades with state exam. We give students a test and 50% of them fail, we can't change the test, we have to change something else about our grades so as to not affect the students in their futures."
Participant G	"I've definitely inflated grades, always work hard, on time, help out, come to tutorials, bump up test grades. A little different when extra credit comes in not quite grade inflation. Model behavior"
Participant H	"Gives kids a wrong perception of their achievement; pretty good kids think they're awesome, mediocre kids think they're good enough, their parents think the same thing about their kid."
Participant I	"I have to inflate grades with my SPED students. That happens frequently unfortunately. Curving overall, I feel like it's a teacher problem not a student problem because I feel I didn't' teach it well enough for it to be fair."
Participant J	"Once I had a co-teacher who was out ½ the year. I was forced to change grades."
Participant K	"Principal came to me with 15 grade change forms, made me change the grades, and sign it. That experience changed me as a teacher."
Participant L	"Since I use a point system with fake money economy there is grade inflation. It is helpful to get buy-in from my students. Coming to class all the time, makes them grow more successful by adding points to lower grades. In my classroom, there is some grade inflation and that is the purpose of the money economy in my class."

Table 8

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q6: Do you inflate grades? Why or why not?	
Participant F	"Yes. Manage behavior, students' difficulty focusing misbehaving but smart enough to be passing, extra encouragement to manage their own behavior, trying really hard to improve may get a nudge from teacher, less rigorous rules if they are showing effort. Based on more than just how a teacher feels but not solely based on academic performance."
Participant G	"Yes, through hard work, those who earn it. Slight language barrier I inflate it enough so they won't be failing my class. I think it is unfair to the kid that the major part of their grades comes from test. 60% of grade comes from reading, can't speak or understand English very well, demographics plays a crucial role."
Participant H	"My class is much harder than the state-mandated test passing rate so I inflate to match the expectations on the state-mandated test. If a kid is failing my class, it is likely that they will fail the state-mandated test.
Participant I	"Yes. I have to for my sub-pops. A lot of my ELLs need extra help. My SPED students even with accommodations and modifications wouldn't pass without grade inflation. Especially the lower CTM students. This year is very different than previous years with SPED kids. One girl speaks very little."
Participant J	"Yes. Of course. Different reasons. ½ the kids are failing, to try to keep your percentages low so you're not called into the principal's office."
Participant K	"60% of kids would fail if we went strictly by the test scores. So, we are almost forced to inflate. The grade book doesn't match the perception of whether they will pass the test."
Participant L	"Yes. I inflate grades but it's not I don't choose what grades to inflate. Kids use their money to add to their grades. One or two grades are the ones they can change usually major grades. It was a part of the deal at the beginning of the semester. They don't have a clue how important this is. Ninth graders who are constantly failing hurts them emotionally. The kids pick the grades they want to raise. It's not every single thing a few every 9 weeks twice per 9 weeks."

Table 9

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q7: How does grade inflation impact your effectiveness as a teacher?	
Participant F	"I try my best to have a positive influence. By creating healthier relationships with my students regarding their grades. Generally, doesn't have that affect but it can low threshold for frustration. Shutting down and minimal success can be encouraging."
Participant G	"I don't think grade inflation has anything to do with my effectiveness as a teacher; it's about the student and the tests holding them back. Obviously, I would like to reach all but it isn't always possible."
Participant H	"Well- kids are less motivated to do well based on grades. And my personal professionalism is undermined. My sense of doing correct and proper work, my ethics, is undermined by the requirement to inflate grades. It is a requirement; an under-the-table requirement. If I don't do it, then I'll face negative consequences from higher-ups. Personal ethics is forced to change by coercion based on how the system is designed."
Participant I	"I don't think it affects my effectiveness. Only when I have to do it. I don't do it very often. It's positive when I know I have to re-teach re-test."
Participant J	"It makes you disillusioned. Doesn't give you very much satisfaction but it has to be done. It makes the kids think they're doing better than they are. So, they think I'm easy on them."
Participant K	"Students think they can just chill and not take it as seriously as they would. We're discouraged from filling out grade change forms."
Participant L	"I don't think it does. It helps a lot because if a student is in class consistently then they're earning money and they can use it on their grades. They have to check themselves. Why are they gonna yell and scream and act the fool, when they know they will lose money? I think it makes me better the way I'm looking at it. I'm not just entering grades in the gradebook to cover my ass."

Table 10

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q8: What criteria do you utilize to differentiate among your students' abilities?	
Participant F	"Student ability starting out and effort, solid, mediocre paper might get a higher grade than a gifted student who puts minimal effort."
Participant G	"Past test scores, daily quiz grades, plicker questions, thumbs up, thumbs down, small-group, 504, SPED, I utilize stuff I'm aware of. A student doesn't just understand it or I don't get it."
Participant H	"Based on how well they can read and write; mostly"
Participant I	"I use formative assessments; grasp or not grasp. Mastered the content, you're so-so, you completely missed it. Higher middle work with the higher kids and I pull the low kids and work with teacher."
Participant J	"Assess how motivated students are. Assess their motivation level and their skill level. Try not to do stuff to wear them down so they just stop trying."
Participant K	"If it motivates them, I'll try it with them whether they need it or not. Mainly on the test grades, I see. Then I try to do more individual help with those that struggle."
Participant L	"It depends on the class and the kids. Pre-AP level for all students. The scaffolding between classes is very different. ESLs need much more scaffolding than Pre-AP. If I'm teaching 1A or 1B, I need to be more lively. Where 4th period is all hyped up and I find ways to use their energy depends on student and class period."

Table 11

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q9: Has student academic performance changed since your first year of teaching? If so, how?	
Participant F	"No, but it's only been a year and a half; I don't feel that I can answer that question with significant meaning."
Participant G	"Yeah, performance has gone up. Better test grades as my years of experience have increased."
Participant H	"That's hard to say; I've been in a couple of different schools. This school has been shockingly low, depressingly low, concerned about society low."
Participant I	"Yes. Every group is different. I feel like their performance is better because I have more experience and know where to start as a teacher. When I first started, I didn't know where to start."
Participant J	"Yes, it has changed. It's gotten better since I've been here."
Participant K	"In some ways from the first year. For me, that's not what everyone else says. Year one, I had a hard time getting them to work. I had to hover over them for them to work. One or two understood English. I have more initiation out of my students. Students taking the initiative has gotten better."
Participant L	"Yes and no. I think yes because my first year teaching I co-taught seeing those students who were very low-performing that changed and now I teach Pre-AP and GT. No, I've taught regular classes since I've started and I don't see a lot of growth. I still see them struggling with the same things every year. How to open a document, where to put commas, level in which they know things, no. It's the same frustrations year after year."

Table 12

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q10: What role, if any, do parents play in a student's grade?	
Participant F	"Almost none. Other than their role in a student's education. A phone call home to get parent to make kid do the work they're missing."
Participant G	"Parents are the underutilized part of the student's grade. They don't get contacted enough; parents will do it if they know about it. They come up to the school often and will help put pressure on kids to perform academically."
Participant H	"90% I realized as good as I think I am; what's happening with the parents at home. A kid has been missing school. We have to move so she keeps kid out of school to help with moving and an eviction. Poor parental decision making, kids have to compensate by missing school. The kids have a feeling of helplessness; not worth it to do well in school when they're going to have a shitty job anyway. Kids are constantly doing a cost-benefit analysis and don't see the benefit of doing the work in the moment. Entertain themselves, sit there bored, or play on cell phones. This is more worthwhile to them in the moment than getting their work done."
Participant I	"They play a major role. You can tell a huge difference between a parent who cares and is super involved. The kid tries harder and brings that attitude to school. An apathetic student nobody cares about at home, nobody expects anything from them at home. Outside of my classroom no one expects anything from them. They may turn around eventually but it takes more time with them."
Participant J	"Well, if they're involved, they can really help make sure things are getting turned in. They can keep their kids accountable."

(continued)

Table 12

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q10: What role, if any, do parents play in a student's grade?	
Participant K	They can keep their kids accountable. If we're keep them accountable 70% of the time, what happens the rest of the time if their parents aren't?"
Participant L	"They play a huge role in their grades. I know that if their parent cares, just because a parent isn't active in the kid's education, doesn't mean they don't care. May not have parents or single parent working a lot. Being involved helps their kids a lot. Classrooms that have better discipline get more things done. If they did what I asked them to do, they would grow a lot knowing that their parent cares a lot. His parent said I don't know where he goes after school, student ended up dropping out. It was heartbreaking. Pre-AP students' parents email all the time, write me letters, set up some standard for their kids. Kids will then own up to it. Parent too busy no time, then kids mess around more frequently."

Table 13

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q 11: How can parents assist teachers with a student's grade?	
Participant F	"Encourage completion with work is the biggest issue I have with students; parents can help with this."
Participant G	"Make them go to tutorials, study at home, put pressure on them to study more. Know what is going on in class."
Participant H	"Parents can check grades regularly online, by checking my website to make sure the kids have done all my work, making sure kid is present and on time for school. All of that is free; parent doesn't need to make money for any of that."
Participant I	"Parents need to stay involved. If they talk to their students daily, keep up to see where their student is, look in online gradebook. Their student may have a B but the parents expect an A. I really wish all parents would talk to their kids and find out what's going on. Then check in gradebook."
Participant J	"Giving input on things they struggle with. History of their learning."
Participant K	"I think they can help them by assuring they can help them by assuring they do their work, accountability, monitoring their progress. ½ of the students are shocked they have a test. Keep up with the process."
Participant L	"They can't. They can offer support for teacher at home. A parent can't come in and do the work for them. They have to put the responsibility on their kids. Have a school conversation at home. They can push them to stay for tutorials but their student is going to be who they are at school can't do much if kid won't listen to parent. Communicate with teacher would be annoying because kid acts one way at school versus at home. Parents coddle kids and then ask for extra credit why should I when they don't even try on the regular stuff.

Table 14

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q 12: What do students have to do to stand out in your class?	
Participant F	"Academically, show effort and improvement. Personally, I'm a fan of out of the box thinkers but this does not always show in grade book or other ways. Being cooperative good behavior helps them stand out. Again, does not always show in grade book."
Participant G	"Good test takers, always get their work done, silent students-they're loud. Exceptionally quiet, check in on them. Then when I get comfortable I ease up; extremely loud ones stand out."
Participant H	"Kids need to get all their work done. They have to want to do well and make the choices that will help them do well."
Participant I	"They have to try to put forth effort how hard do they push themselves struggling kids try and I know I can help them if they are trying."
Participant J	"Those that are self-motivated. More likely to participate. You're done!"
Participant K	"The quiet ones, working hard, initiation-taking it upon themselves to not wait for you. That can change with your population. This has to do with the type of population of students."
Participant L	"Speak contribute to class and I'll notice. Super quiet and I'll notice that too."

Table 15

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q13: How do you measure a student's academic progress?	
Participant F	" Paper-based; Oral responses in class, multiple choice tests aren't accurate, good day or bad day, form sentences for essays and grammatically correct. Develop more complicated thoughts in words better. These are ways I feel that I see/determine progress I see in my students."
Participant G	"Growth measures between tests; quiz grades, daily progressing getting worse staying the same, improving"
Participant H	"Mostly by their test scores. And their grades on experiments."
Participant I	"Formative and summative assessments; I look at their interactive notebooks, organization, note taking, things become more organized, more colorful. Writing down basic notes to applying the notes. Draw apply progression of thought as weeks pass."
Participant J	"Partly by how long it takes them to answer a question; they're getting quicker at doing it. Their answer is quicker."
Participant K	"Noticing if their test grades are going up, if they're turning in HW, working out problems, showing improvement on quizzes."
Participant L	"Lack of background knowledge and common sense"

Table 16

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q14: What are some barriers that you have observed when reflecting on a student's academic progress?	
Participant F	"So many. Anything from out of school obligations, a huge factor it affects their abilities to stay awake, come to class, attend tutorials, stay engaged, take care of parents, siblings, I have experienced these with my lower performing students. Motivation is a factor as well. The motivation to do the best versus motivation to pass. There is a satisfaction with just being mediocre."
Participant G	"Outside life biggest barrier. Angels in classroom, social media is a barrier, bad in café"
Participant H	"Poor reading and writing, if they can't read, if they have poor language skills, Biology is really hard. Society's influence, society has shaped us to search out entertainment above all else so our students spend most of their time doing that."
Participant I	"Language is a huge barrier. Ways to help with that. Intellectual abilities and/or deficiencies, social issues with autistic students. If they don't trust me as a person, nothing for teacher to do. Basic discipline, lots of kids looking for attention. Negative attention-seeking behaviors as a result of not getting enough at home based on economic status."
Participant J	"Inconsistency, the good ones stagnate and go backwards once they hit a certain point."
Participant K	"Grades going down and they're getting behind; it's hard to catch them up."
Participant L	"Lack of background knowledge and common sense"

Table 17

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q15: How are grading policies evolving in your school?	
Participant F	"Again, based on my limited experiences, yeah they haven't changed since I've been here."
Participant G	"They haven't all have stayed the same- we do it the way we do it because the state makes us take a standardized test, multiple assessment style, live practicals."
Participant H	"They're not. They're not changing the grading policy. There's a set grading policy and teaches just work around it. We use grade inflation to get around the grading policies and then pray that they pass the state-mandated test."
Participant I	"I don't think our grading policy has changed. It's not evolving. A bigger focus on major grades not all being summative assessments. A bigger focus on performance-based assignments. It's only on one thing that can't evaluate poor test takers. Department-wide, our focus is on multiple choice tests. A good day or a bad day on a test versus application in a lab or a project I can tell as a teacher whether the kid got it or not. Homework aspect can be completely taken out. If they didn't understand it in class, then try to do homework and do it wrong or not doing it at all."
Participant J	"I feel like it's just been the same, having to always have a certain number of kids passing."
Participant K	"They haven't evolved a lot, I don't think. I think I'm more looking at the bottom line more than where are we along the way. Thinking about the very end; a lot of it has to do with the state-mandated test."
Participant L	"They aren't; not school wide at least."

Table 18

Thematic Abstraction, One-on-One Interview Questions

Q16: Are there ethical ramifications of grade inflation?	
Participant F	"I think there can be; it depends on how it's done. With which students, I don't think that that is necessarily the case; it is not always unethical. According to the definition I made p."
Participant G	"Of course. Big trouble moving up a star athlete, sports is more important than schooling, license revoked. What are we teaching kids if we always inflate their grades, trying hard, or getting it right."
Participant H	"Personally yes, professionally no. I feel like my job is less important when I have to inflate grades but I'm not suffering from it professionally. I still get same pay and raises."
Participant I	"Yes, I think there are. How can you prove what a kid knows in a gradebook if you've inflated everything the kid has ever done? I feel dishonest every time I go into my grade book and inflate grades. Doesn't feel honest to the rest of the kids who had the same material and made the grade without inflation."
Participant J	"I feel guilty I don't like doing it. Failing but shouldn't be. How can I bring this up? Making her be quiet about it. She needs to really pass."
Participant K	"It's not fair; it's just not fair making special cases to fix your gradebook."
Participant L	"Absolutely."

Appendix I: Focus Group Session Tables

Table 19

Thematic Abstraction, Focus Group Session

Q1: Do teachers inflate grades on a regular basis?	
Participant A	"Yes. Grades are arbitrary. You want effort as a teacher reward effort with good grades. If you can't do this, then kids won't work."
Participant B	"Oh yeah, not even a question. We almost have to; weird situation."
Participant C	"In Algebra, some stuff doesn't lend itself to a 3-week cycle notebook check artificially inflates grades."
Participant D	"Grades as a motivating factor rather than an actual assessment of where the student is performing."
Participant E	District policies tend to be, x number of grades in the gradebook."

Table 20

Thematic Abstraction, Focus Group Session

Q2: How do administrative teams contribute to grade inflation?	
Participant A	"Districtly, re-do when more than 1/3rd of students fail. Contacts and contact logs are required.
Participant B	"When administration says you need a major grade every 3 weeks, some grades lend themselves to major grades but others don't. We've finished the state-mandated test, PBA, artificially inflates to not get yelled at. You're failing too many kids; helplessness; apathy; kids get used to the system. Kids with labels tell teachers you won't fail me too much paperwork for you. Illiterate kids who can't read yet have passed every single year. Illiterate in two languages. Product of southwest school district, barely write your own name how have you been passed through?"
Participant C	"Passing is easier than failing a kid on a teacher. kids with labels tell teachers you won't fail me too much paperwork for you. Illiterate kids who can't read yet have passed every single year. Illiterate in two languages."
Participant D	"Justified to actually fail hidden agenda to pass students so the district doesn't look bad."
Participant E	"Holding kids back, promotion issues to the next grade level."

Table 21

Thematic Abstraction, Focus Group Session

Q3: How do curriculum mandates on teachers affect grade inflation?	
Participant A	"Can't slow down enough to create mastery; stick to the program even when kids aren't getting it. Must keep moving forward; grade by effort rather than ability. Not enough time to get kids to master the things they need. The way it is. Fill gaps they have rather than filling them with so much content and focus only on what they need. What they actually know versus what they don't know grades would be more authentically. We're doing this until all of you master it say that with a low class."
Participant B	"Amount of grade in gradebook. Algebra 1 graphing is unit 3, writing unit 4, put them together. You've only taught half the unit, testing from a district common assessment, too hard, must be curved. We write the DCA, too hard, shuffle choices, no voice, artificially inflate grades, drop grades so dramatically."
Participant C	state-mandated test -ready day one, lose all hope since they fail. Kids are not ready for state-mandated test tests at the beginning of the year. With the hurricane, kids were even further behind. Three years in a row they have lost everything because of floods. Major tests are all multiple choice, guess yourself to a 50, then we curve it and you still know nothing."
Participant D	"They are never forced to show what they actually know. Steps thought process is on exit tickets. Are you a good test taker? That is all that matters."
Participant E	"Teachers are originally from New York forces kids to show work. Multiple choice on the computer and take a month to get results back. You knew what you needed to do, no partial credit given for missing a sign or guessing right just getting the answer gets you one point. No need to show work and get full points for guessing. Aldine to lone star take remedial courses, they know nothing. Magical math courses, too far behind. All calculator in ninth grade. Type in problem from test. They have calculators that give /them the answers when they type in the questions. Balancing act rock and hard place, get credit but don't understand. Don't have prerequisite skills, no foundational skills. AP calculus is hardest class because students have no foundational skills to succeed in higher level math."

Table 22

Thematic Abstraction, Focus Group Session

Q4: Do you ever feel it is necessary to inflate grades? Why or why not?	
Participant A	"Yes, SPED, ELL, special pops, very dangerous to give them the grade they deserve. We are told to consider their level of ability sort of objectively compared to other students. Compare them but don't grade them the same as other students. Just giving them good grades does not help. Performing at65 then giving an 80 does not help a child. They learn they do not have to work in order to get a decent grade. Don't shoot a kid down."
Participant B	"Yes. Hand is forced with some kids- special populations, SPED keep it low and really low to admit there is a problem. Trailer course in second semester they retake the first semester along with second semester. They passed state-mandated test so pass them through regardless. Don't outright say pass the child, they dance around passing state-mandated test and passing class. They throw enough hints around for you to get the message to pass them, too many numbers in summer school."
Participant C	"Identified students with special needs are protected from getting the grades they deserve, document, document, document, or be in trouble for failing a student. Pass a kid for strong effort, staying for tutorials, getting them to work and learn."
Participant D	"Some students need extra push; lowering grade from 63 to 60 to qualify them for extra help they need. 69 will require an explanation to principal."
Participant E	"Negative reinforcement. A treat for barking is opposite of what we want to reinforce. Grade inflation is a reality; you're trying as hard as you can."

Table 23

Thematic Abstraction, Focus Group Session

Q5: How confident are you that your grades are an accurate indicator of what your students have learned? Why or why not?	
Participant A	"Accurate measure of where kids are. Region demographics same grades to where I grew up. Lower kids would be higher, higher kids would be higher still. Nature of the grades would change. 70 reflects they are doing work, complete certain grading goals. Students who are failing are doing very little. 94 doing everything well. Clearly learned all the skills to get to the 94 process pieces. Failing students did not get the skills needed to pass the process piece. Throw hands in the air and expect it to just go away."
Participant B	"Kids that have a 70 take it more seriously they would have a 78 or 82."
Participant C	"Failing students did not get the skills needed to pass the process piece."
Participant D	"2-3% of kids fall in this category."
Participant E	"Apathy, absenteeism, truancy, missing classes causes failing grades, not lack of ability. Behind students likely stay behind."

Table 24

Thematic Abstraction, Focus Group Session

Q6: How would you explain the possibility of discrepancy between standardized test scores and student grades if you discover that one exists?	
Participant A	"State standards for passing the state-mandated test is 58; class passing is 70. Why are the two percentages different? Testing monitors make a difference. Test determines everything we teach. They make it so difficult to pass. Just below level to pass bubble kids in the middle usually fails."
Participant B	"Shocker students overthink it; take it too seriously."
Participant C	"Wake up finish the job so many standards in English gotta cover them all."
Participant D	"Wide strata (range) of student scores in one class. In gradebook"
Participant E	"Class doesn't align with test. Isolated incidences of fatigue, never really know what is going on in a kid's life."

Table 25

Thematic Abstraction, Focus Group Session

Q7: How does teacher bias affect grading practices?	
Participant A	"Try to protect the kid you like. Meanwhile a child that barely works hard gets a good grade."
Participant B	"Special cases to protect those hurting, be fair"
Participant C	"Being helpful is more important than failing."
Participant D	"Ties teachers' hands"
Participant E	"One works hard and gets good grades."

Appendix J: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does "fraudulent" mean?

"Fraudulent" work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one's own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate's final work without full and complete documentation.

What is "unauthorized" assistance?

"Unauthorized assistance" refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another's work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project

Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

- I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University- Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

- Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

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05/15/2018

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