

ABSTRACT

DEBNAM-O'DEA, RACHAEL JOYCE. English Language Arts Today: Surveying the Teaching of High School English. (Under the direction of Dr. Carl Young).

This study explores the experiences of high school English language arts (ELA) teachers, focusing on the way they define their profession, their resources, and the benefits and challenges of their work. The participants were high school English language arts teachers from across the United States ($N = 56$). Participants were provided with a survey via Qualtrics that included open- and close-ended questions regarding their experiences in the profession. Eleven open-ended questions were selected for qualitative analysis. Data analysis was conducted using open coding as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), with first cycle and second cycle coding followed by collapsing those codes into broader themes nested under each research question. The findings demonstrate that high school ELA teachers define their work as helping students develop of both discrete skills and broader dispositions; teachers view their resources through lens of peer-, expert-, and technology-centered modes; teachers understand the challenges of teaching as related to social, instructional, and personal issues; and teachers view the benefits of their work as fulfilling intellectual, social-emotional, and civic needs. Though many of these findings align with previous research on the teaching profession, there are implications for teacher education, education policy, and future research.

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English Language Arts Today: Surveying the Teaching of High School English

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Rachael Debnam-O’Dea grew up in Morganton, North Carolina where she graduated from Freedom High School. She then attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she received a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Master in Arts of Teaching in Secondary English Education. After graduating, she spent time living abroad in South Africa, Ireland, and Norway, where she worked with secondary and university students. Upon returning to the United States, worked as a high school English teacher at Broughton High School in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Rachael’s experiences as the child of a public school employee as well as her own work in the classroom in the United States and abroad left her curious about the structure of schooling and the nature of the teaching profession. The content of what is taught, how teaching occurs, and the professional culture around educators varied significantly across contexts in her experience. This led Rachael to pursue her Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction at North Carolina State University with the goal of learning more about the foundations of these issues. Her hope is to be a force for continued improvement English language arts education and a resource for both teachers and learners as the nature of English language arts shifts to reflect the diversity of readers and writers that should be honored in our classrooms as well as the changing nature of reading and writing in the 21st century.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The nature of teaching English language arts (ELA) in the United States has changed dramatically over the last 60 years. In 1957, the launch of Sputnik instilled a societal anxiety about the state of science and math education in the United States, causing an emphasis on STEM skills in schools that still persists today and leaving a gap between the cultural cachet attached to English language arts and the sciences (Jolly, 2009). Furthermore, the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education) pushed American public school policies toward prioritizing standardized testing to allow for tracking of student progress (Borek, 2008). The push for mass assessment of standardized knowledge has undermined and under-measured elements of English language arts that are not easily confined to multiple choice answers like developing writing, critical thinking, and social-emotional skills (Jeffery, 2009; Pendergrast & Swain, 2013; Polleck & Jeffery, 2017; Sundeen, 2015).

With the advent of Common Core State Standards, the subject of English language arts became an official home not just of reading and writing, traditional core elements of the subject, but also for speaking and listening skills as named elements of the curriculum (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). Additionally, the internet and portable technology like smartphones, tablets, and wearable technology have shifted how our society goes about reading and writing, incorporating more multimodal elements and options in communication (Doering, Beach, & O'Brien, 2007). As a result, ELA as a content area has been enlisted to wrestle with large curricular changes while simultaneously navigating seismic changes in the very nature of the content it covers.

Finally, negative trends in public education like poor teacher retention and teacher pay have also impacted teachers of English language arts. In the 2017-2018 academic year, the

United States was in need of 110,000 additional teachers nationwide, a trend that continues today (García & Wiess, 2019). Much of that shortage can be attributed to poor teacher retention and inability to recruit new teachers due to low teacher pay and poor professional support (Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). Though areas of math, science, and special education have been particularly hard hit by recent teacher shortages nationwide, there are shortages of ELA educators in the western and southern regions of the United States, and with trends in teacher recruitment, these shortages are likely to increase and expand over time (American Association for Employment in Education, 2017; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016).

Given the shifting sands of modern schooling and the changing nature of English language arts, understanding the experience of educators in the classroom is of utmost importance. The lived experience of ELA teachers can provide a window into the state of the profession and the impact of larger policies on individuals. This study seeks to bring voices of practitioners to the fore and form a new foundational understanding of the state of teaching ELA today.

Defining the Current Approaches to English Language Arts

The definition of English language arts as a content area is complex. Perhaps the most broadly understood definition of the field is found in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which delineate reading, writing, speaking, and listening as the roots of the discipline (National Governors Association, 2010). Reading, for secondary grades, is broken down into understanding key ideas and details in texts, interpreting craft and structure, integrating knowledge and ideas, and developing reading comprehension over a range of text complexities (National Governors Association, 2010). Their elaboration of the reading standards largely

adopts a New Criticism approach in which reading focuses on close reading and comprehension that arrives at a “correct” and objective interpretation rather than individual and situationally-informed response (Sulzer, 2014). Their definition of the role of writing in ELA focuses on producing texts for different purposes, editing and publishing, positive research practices, and developing writing stamina through regular, varied practice. Speaking and listening are grouped together and described in terms of comprehension and collaboration, with a focus on conversation, integrating and evaluating information across modalities, and evaluating rhetoric; additionally, Common Core emphasizes the presentation of ideas, emphasizing organization, strategic use of different modes of communication, and adaptive communication across audiences (National Governors Association, 2010).

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) offers a definition of ELA that moves beyond the practical aspects of communication and aesthetic appreciation in the CCSS (National Council of Teachers of English, 2017). NCTE offers a definition of English language arts focused not only on literacy but also self-awareness, empathy, and efficacy. In the NCTE position statement on English language arts teacher education, they assert that “ELA should develop in students... interest in and facility with the literacy and language skills necessary to comprehend, create, respond to, and engage with diverse texts while fostering an understanding of self and others that supports engaging with and effecting change in the world around them” (2017, p. 1). The definition of the literacy skills described here couples a social justice focus with a transactional approach to literature, which deemphasizes the discovering of an objective truth in literature and instead focuses on the reader’s experience of and response to text (Rosenblatt, 1994). Furthermore, the past president of NCTE, Ernest Morrell, describes ELA as “a discipline that helps prepare engaged citizens who use language and literacy to speak truth to power”

(Morrell & Scherff, 2015, p. x). Similarly, NCTE articulates the socially-situated and inclusive nature of ELA by “emphasiz[ing] literacy as meaning-making that fosters language competence in a variety of authentic texts, genres, contexts, and situations continuously mediated by a plurality of social, cultural, and ideological factors” (2017, p. 1). These statements point to the fact that the national organization for teachers of English endorses an approach to teaching ELA that moves beyond the basic skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening to endorse both personal connection and civic engagement as key elements of the content area.

Both the CCSS and NCTE definitions of ELA focus on the idea that the subject is grounded in reading, writing, and communication. However, the two broad definitions of the subject area described above diverge in their understanding of the purpose of the work of ELA teachers and acknowledgement of the context of the learner. These different definitions point to a division in the understanding of students as active contributors to the curriculum, with CCSS positioning learners as receivers of information and enactors of skills, while the NCTE definition positions learners as part of the content of the learning taking place in ELA classrooms as well as the lens through and environment in which that learning occurs.

Teaching Today

While there is limited research on the day-to-day experience of English language arts teachers, there is a body of work addressing motivations behind teacher attrition as well as literature about why teachers persist in the profession (National Education Association Research, 2010; Warner-Griffin, Cunningham, & Noel, 2018; Williams, 2003). Neither of these areas of research provide a full portrait of the experience of teaching. The research on teacher attrition provides a biased portrait of the nature of teaching, as educators who have chosen to leave the profession may have vastly different perceptions of their work than those who choose to stay

(Williams, 2003). Similarly, the research addressing motivation behind teacher persistence frames the peak experiences of teaching as the dominant narrative of the profession. Though an imperfect portrayal of the experiences of teaching, taken together, this body of research forms a partial picture of the experience of being a classroom teacher. These experiences largely fall into three categories: benefits, challenges, and community.

Benefits of teaching. The benefits of teaching described in the literature are manifold. In her work with 12 veteran teachers in North Carolina, Williams (2003) found that teachers chose to remain in the classroom because it offered intellectual and creative outlets unavailable in other fields. The change inherent in teaching through variety in curriculum, a yearly change in students, and different needs demonstrated by students offer endless opportunities to try new things in the classroom. Tied to intellectual freedom, a feeling of autonomy played a large role in teacher satisfaction. Although rapidly changing policies and unsupportive coworkers and administration were viewed negatively by many teachers, the fact that there is significant freedom in classroom teaching was seen as a professional perk (Williams, 2003). Furthermore, a study by Warner-Griffin, Cunningham, and Noel (2018) found that environments where higher autonomy is experienced by teachers correlated to higher teacher retention, pointing to the positive impact choice and control can provide in the teaching profession.

Interactions with students in which learning takes place are frequently cited as a positive aspect of teaching. Individual interactions with students can be very motivational for teachers. In fact, a National Education Association Research (2010) survey indicated that the desire to work with young people was the most frequently given motivation for joining the teaching profession. Williams (2003) found that the process of watching students grow and learn was routinely referenced by educators as a primary benefit of their work. For some teachers she interviewed,

this experience was so profound, it was described in spiritual terms or as a calling. Similarly, in their case study of a single English teacher across seven years at one urban high school, He, Cooper, and Tangredi (2015) provide their subject's description of a particularly notable interaction with two students in his class: "They came to me not even knowing how to write a paragraph... Working with me all year, they kept doing what they needed to do. They were motivated. They, too, were able to pass" (p. 56). Their participant took particular pride in this interaction with students and cited it as an important aspect of his academic year. Similarly, in Nieto's (2003) close study of eight experienced teachers, she found that their belief in the mission of educating and respect for their students played an important role in their motivation to stay in the profession.

When considered on a larger scale, these experiences with students contributed to a sense of mission inherent in the teaching profession, which Freedman and Appleman (2009) found to be a key in many educators' motivation to stay in their positions even in challenging contexts. He, Cooper, and Tangredi (2015) also noted of their participant that he "held the belief that being a teacher is more than just teaching content... [he] developed the perception of his teacher's role as an advocate, facilitator, and role model" (p. 56). The teacher they interviewed hoped his students would gain the ability to respect people from all backgrounds and be ready for the world outside the classroom, deriving satisfaction not just from teaching his content but also in communicating and modeling values.

Challenges of teaching. The challenges associated with teaching are well documented. On the most basic level, challenges faced by teachers are related to lack of access to resources. Making do with poor building facilities and lack of basic classroom necessities is a common experience for teachers (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005; Tapper, 1995). Teachers regularly

lack access to the required number of textbooks for all their students and often deal with broken technology, and many teachers resort to spending their own money to purchase classroom supplies, with a 2006 national survey showing that 97% of teachers tap into private funds to provide students with the required resources for learning (National Education Association Research, 2010; Tapper, 1995). This is further exacerbated by the fact that teachers often report low salaries as well as low culturally-ascribed status as negative aspects of teaching (Ingersoll, 2003; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007; Tye & O'Brien, 2002).

Beyond the physical environment, teachers find the cultural environment of work deeply important to their work experience. Teachers indicated finding joy in creativity and flexibility (Williams, 2003), but when they are robbed of autonomy through national policy, focus on standardized curriculum and testing, or through local school administration, finding job satisfaction can be difficult for teachers (He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Warner-Griffin, Cunningham, & Noel, 2018). In a national survey, lack of autonomy and lack of teacher influence over curricular and instructional choices was reported as a reason for dissatisfaction in the profession by 17% of teachers who left their jobs (Ingersoll, 2003). Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistics (2013) schools and staffing survey reported that 21% indicated that dissatisfaction with the administration prompted their departure, 14% indicated that lack of autonomy played a role in their choice to leave the classroom, and 13% of teachers indicated that their lack of influence of school policies influenced their choice to leave the profession.

Finally, difficulties in balancing professional obligations with a personal life are also commonly described as a negative aspect of teaching. In a review of survey data, Ingersoll (2003) found that 44% of teachers leaving the profession cited family or personal issues as the

root cause of their departure, the leading cause of attrition. A 2013 study (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013) also found personal issues to be a leading cause of teacher departure from the profession, with 37% of surveyed teachers reporting it as a factor in their decision. These findings, where a desire for more time away from work duties led to teacher hardship or attrition, are echoed through local and small scale qualitative studies as well (He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015; Kersaint et al., 2007). Relatedly, large workloads are problematic for teacher job satisfaction. Responsibilities for administrative paperwork, grading, correspondence, and lesson planning often contribute to a work environment in which the demands of the profession cannot be met during work hours (Kersaint et al., 2007; Tye & O'Brien, 2002).

Community surrounding educators. Teachers experience their work in the context of community (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). Professional community can have profound benefits for teachers, with mentoring for beginning teachers reducing turnover rate (Ingersoll, 2003; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Simos, 2013) and being able to seek resources and support from colleagues can improve the experience of teaching for even veteran educators (He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Nieto, 2003). Conversely, when support is not received, particularly from administration, the outcomes for teachers can be negative. A lack of administrative support is important in teachers' feelings of professional dissatisfaction and decisions to leave the classroom (Kersaint et al., 2007; Ladd, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Though most teaching in America is a solitary pursuit, with a single teacher addressing a classroom of students, it is clear that the relationships formed in schools and in broader educational communities impact teachers' experiences in the classroom.

Beyond the school building, relationships with parents and guardians impact teachers' work experiences. Teachers see family as key resources for supporting the mission of education and student educational achievement (He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015), but parents can also serve as a professional difficulty to navigate as teachers often feel parents see their relationship as adversarial rather than collaborative (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Despite the sometimes fraught nature of parent interactions, teachers generally desire more parental involvement in schools (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005). Regardless of the nature of the relationship, teachers experience their work in the context of the broader community they serve.

Teachers' relationships with students also play an important role in their experience as educators. As previously noted, sparking student learning is seen as a benefit of teaching, but general interactions with students outside of formal teaching influence the experiences of educators. Mentoring relationships between students and teachers can profoundly positively influence teachers' experience, but negative behavior from students or perceived lack of motivation can leave teachers in situations where they regularly experience interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Ingersoll, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Williams, 2003). Similarly, many teachers find the unmet basic needs of students profoundly impact their work day-to-day (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Ultimately, because teaching is a social act, relationships with students are at the core of the teacher experience.

Framing the Motivation for the Study

Cultivating an understanding of the experiences of high school English language arts teachers is pressing. Of schools reporting job openings last year, 57.2% of high schools reported openings for English teachers, pointing to high turnover in the profession, and over 5% of

schools found it very difficult or impossible to recruit qualified candidates to fill the position (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a; 2012b). Though many believe the reported shortage of teachers is due to retirement, increasing student populations, and lack of new teachers enrolling in teacher education programs, there is evidence to suggest that a significant portion of the problem is due to lack of teacher retention of early- and mid-career teachers (Ingersoll, 2003; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). A review of nationally representative survey data showed that “school staffing problems are not solely or even primarily due to teacher shortfalls resulting from either increases in student enrollment or increases in teacher retirement. In contrast, the data suggest that school staffing problems are to a large extent a result of a “revolving door”—where large numbers of teachers depart teaching for reasons other than retirement” (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 17). Additional research is needed to understand the experiences of teachers to understand how to prevent teacher turnover and to better prepare preservice teachers for the realities of their careers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the belief that meaning is created through social connection. Ultimately, teaching is a social act and teachers play an important role in society in communicating knowledge and facilitating learning that has been deemed socially valuable. By inviting their voices into conversation with the existing research, this study seeks to both understand the meaning teachers have created in the social context of school and also to invite communication that will build an understanding of the experience of teaching English language arts. Rather than seeking generalizability, I believe in

constructing knowledge by seeking to understand the voices of our ELA teacher participants to help represent their contextual and specific experiences that define their teaching lives.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of being a high school English language arts (ELA) teacher. To that end, this study focused on three primary research questions:

1. How do ELA teachers define their content area?
2. How do ELA teachers describe their resources?
3. What challenges do ELA teachers experience as a result of their career?
4. What benefits or rewards do ELA teachers experience as a result of their career?

Research Design

The data examined in this analysis was collected as part of a broader single-phase online survey, ELA Today, directed at English educators and K-12 ELA teachers. A survey approach was selected for this study as the goal was to discern the state of the field based on the experiences of individual teachers. Groves et al. (2009) indicates that survey is an appropriate way to understand more about the beliefs, problems, and opinions of survey respondents. This survey analysis of themes emerging from open-ended portions of the larger survey is stage one of a larger research project. Open-ended questions were selected for analysis in this initial analysis of the data as this type of survey question allows respondents to provide a narrative that is less shaped by researcher expectations than close-ended questions (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). As the focus of this work is to understand the experience of educators, allowing their voices to be the primary guide in analysis seemed appropriate. These survey findings will inform the selection and study of individual teachers for more in-depth case studies which will provide further, more nuanced information about teacher experiences. For the purpose of this analysis, information was drawn from close-ended questions concerning demographics and

working conditions as well as from eleven open-ended survey questions related to the experience of teaching English language arts.

Procedure

Survey Development. The survey questions were initially developed based on prior research and the perceived gaps in existing knowledge about the experience of teaching ELA. After the drafting of questions, the survey was distributed to experts in the field for feedback on question content and structure. Following edits based on feedback from experts, I also conducted cognitive interviews with three participants who fit the survey participant criteria. These interviews followed a think-aloud model, which was accompanied by probing questions by the interviewer (Beatty & Willis, 2007; DeMaio & Landreth, 2004). The survey was edited after each interview based on the feedback received, resulting in several iterations of the survey tool. After the final cognitive interview, the survey was reviewed once more by researchers and the content received a final edit based on feedback received. The survey was uploaded to Qualtrics, and survey responses were collected between September 2017 and March 2018. However, in October, 2017, after an initial review of the incoming data, an additional question was added to the survey asking participants to specify the state in which they taught. For participants who responded prior to October, 2017, IP address information collected as part of the metadata of the survey was used to determine the location where the survey was completed. This information was used to determine the state in which participants taught.

Participant Recruitment. Participants were recruited by outreach through national organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and state professional educator organizations such as the North Carolina English Teachers' Association. Personal contacts were also leveraged through the use of social media and direct outreach to English

teachers known to the researchers. In all cases, a general URL was provided to potential participants linking to the survey. For the purpose of this study, only completed surveys were considered in the analysis of the data collected.

Participants

The ELA Today survey targeted English educators from the elementary to the university level. The respondent data was broken out into four broad categories of elementary, middle, and high school teachers and university educators. This paper focuses on the responses of high school English teachers. Of the 216 total survey responses, 56 completed surveys were submitted by high school English teachers. Of the 56 respondents, the majority taught in North Carolina (24) and Michigan (12). Other participants taught in Wisconsin (3), Missouri (2), California (2), New Jersey (2), and New York (2), Georgia (1), Hawaii (1), Iowa (1), Montana (1), New Hampshire (1), Pennsylvania (1), Rhode Island (1), Tennessee (1), and Virginia (1). Forty-seven respondents were female and nine were male. Most respondents (50) identified as White, while three identified as multiracial, two as Black, and one as Latino. Of the 55 respondents who reported age, the average age was 41.15, with ages ranging from 23 to 67. On average, teachers reported 15.19 years of high school teaching experience, with experience ranging from 1 year to 33 years. Eight teachers held bachelor's degrees, 44 held master's degrees, and four held doctoral degrees.

Analysis

In this section, the approach taken to narrowing the data set from the overall survey responses collected is discussed. Additionally, coding strategies for analyzing the survey responses are also described.

Survey Data. As a first step to analyzing this data, the lead researcher, who had experience as a high school English teacher, defined the case criteria to include only high school English teachers who completed the ELA Today Survey from the larger survey dataset.

Data from the larger ELA Today Survey addresses three large overarching themes related to the field of teaching ELA in the modern era: the experience of being an ELA teacher, the integration of technology into the ELA classroom, and the future of the profession. This research focuses on the first theme, experience of being an ELA teacher, as it is foundational to establishing the context for the other two larger inquiries. The data to be analyzed was narrowed to the responses to questions that directly related to the experience of being an ELA teacher, which were 11 open-ended questions embedded across the survey. The questions are as follows:

1. How do you define English language arts?
2. How would you describe your role as an English language arts educator?
3. What resources do you have access to and use to help support your teaching of English language arts or preparation of English language arts teachers? (Example: books, colleagues, professional organizations, specific websites, professional learning teams, social media connections, etc.)
4. On a personal level (as it relates to your personal and/or family life), what do you see as the major challenges of being an English language arts educator?
5. How do you navigate or deal with the personal challenges you face as an English language arts teacher?
6. On a professional level (as it relates to you on the job), what do you see as the major challenges of being an English language arts educator?

7. How do you navigate or deal with the professional challenges you face as an English language arts teacher?
8. If you could solve or "fix" any of the problems or challenges facing you professionally and/or personally as an English language arts teacher, how would you do so?
9. What do you see as the positive aspects (e.g. benefits, intrinsic and/or extrinsic rewards, etc.) of teaching English language arts or preparing English language arts teachers?
10. What benefits, resources, and/or rewards do you wish you had as an English language arts educator that you currently do not?
11. Are you fulfilled by your career in English language arts education? Explain your answer.

All answers to each individual question were compiled into individual documents and uploaded to NVivo for analysis.

Coding. The data was analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saladaña's (2014) strategy of first and second round coding. During both rounds of coding, I engaged in memo-taking related to emerging ideas, significant statements, and possible patterns in the process of being revealed in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Miles et al., 2014). The first cycle of coding was undertaken by reading teacher statements and identifying key ideas that emerged from their writing. These key ideas were assigned descriptive labels of a single word or a short phrase (Table 2.1). After an initial review of the data, I reviewed the assigned codes and reassigned similar codes under a new single code. The second round of coding involved reviewing the refined code list and grouping codes under a thematic label that captured a larger idea being communicated through teacher responses.

Table 2.1*Example of Descriptive First Rounding Coding*

Survey Question	Teacher Statement	Code	Definition of Code
What resources do you have access to and use to help support your teaching of English language arts or preparation of English language arts teachers?	I go to my friends who can help me understand how to work technology and hopefully can help provide solutions to problems!	Peer Relationships	Teacher experience defined by engagement with other teachers. (Does not include administrator/district level interactions)
How do you navigate or deal with the professional challenges you face as an English language arts teacher?	Most of the time I attempted to stagger my larger/longer assignment due dates among the classes as much as possible so I could spend more time grading and responding to student's work in a way to help them improve their work in the future.	Instructional Choices	Articulated classroom strategies that are used to achieve a goal.
How do you navigate or deal with the personal challenges you face as an English language arts teacher?	Most week days, I take time to exercise, relax, and cook a good dinner. I get a good night's sleep.	Self-Care	Actions taken to improve personal wellbeing.

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

The aim of examining the responses of secondary ELA teachers was to understand the experience of teaching ELA today. The findings drawn from participant responses are outlined according to the research questions that guided this study as these guiding questions sought to define the foundational conditions of teaching in the field (i.e., the definition of the content area and the resources available to teachers) as well as the perceived personal experiences of teaching ELA (i.e., the challenges and benefits of engaging in the work). Together, these help form a picture of the ideological and social context of the field as well as the impact of the work of teaching on individuals.

Using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) first and second cycle coding, the data were collapsed into themes: discrete skills, dispositions, social issues, instructional issues, personal issues, people-center resources, expert-centered resources, technology-centered resources, intellectual benefits, social-emotional benefits, and social justice. These themes were aligned to correspond to major categories defined by the research question: defining the ELA content area, challenges of teaching ELA, describing resources, and benefits of teaching ELA (see Figure 3.1). In this section, themes will be presented under headings corresponding to these categories. The themes will be described and evidence that exemplifies the articulated theme will be drawn from teacher statements.

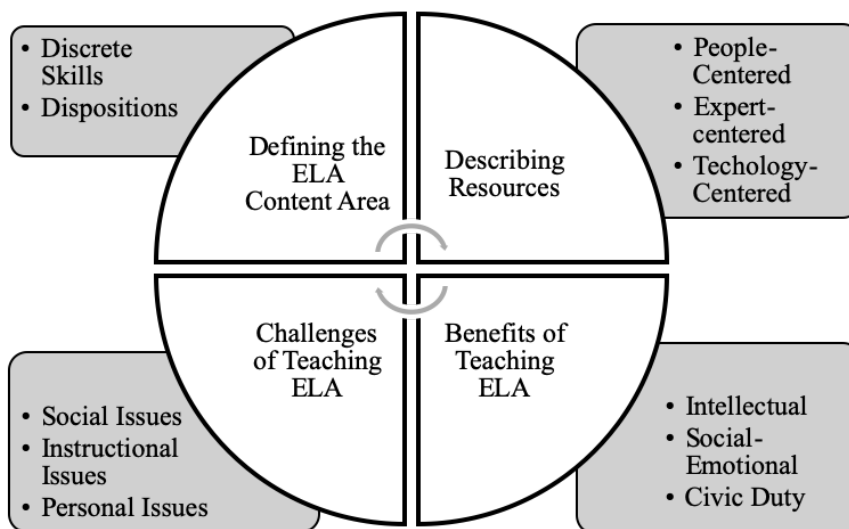


Figure 3.1. Overall thematic findings oriented to corresponding categories.

Defining English Language Arts

As discussed in the review of the literature, ELA is a complex subject that touches on a variety of skills for a variety of purposes. That multifaceted nature of ELA was reflected in teacher definitions of the content area. One teacher described this confluence of discrete skills and broader dispositions well, stating that ELA is the study of :

... the use of the English language for communication and understanding via reading, writing, speaking, and combining the above with visual and digital literacy so that students can communicate their ideas clearly and logically as well as understand and respond in depth to the ideas of others. It's also the study of how to use language for fun and beauty, and the study of language as critical thinking. A lot going on.

Though teachers tended to diverge in their opinions on the core aspects of the content area, with some focusing on discrete literacy skills and others focused more on broader dispositions and ways of thinking (see Table 3.1), nearly half of the sample, 24 teachers (42.8%), indicated that

they viewed their content area as deeply connected to the world beyond the classroom. They understood the ELA classroom as a site where students developed important skills for life.

Discrete Skills. Teachers defined ELA as the process of communicating and learning discrete and action-oriented skills. Frequently, in describing these skills, educators used the language of the Common Core State Standards in defining the scope of their content area: Reading, writing, speaking and listening were regularly listed as skills students should be learning in ELA classrooms. Twenty-one of the participants (37.5%) were relatively straightforward in defining ELA, articulating that “English skills including writing (including grammar), reading, speaking, and listening” and or defining the study of ELA as “the art of understanding literature, writing well, speaking fluently and with confidence, and improving on vocabulary and grammar skills.”

In addition to that familiar refrain, new literacy skills also emerged as an important aspect of ELA. Discussion of the necessity of bringing reading, writing, speaking, and listening to bear effectively in the context of new mediums surfaced in 13 of the responses (23.2%). One participant described this succinctly, “At the high school level, I believe [ELA] encompasses the four common core strands: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. But, I also think in this day and age, English Language Arts changes, as technology changes, mediums change, etc.” Another articulated the idea that ELA is the study of “all aspects of communication including written and spoken language as well as visual rhetoric and digital literacy.”

Dispositions. Beyond the discrete skills of ELA, teachers communicated that their content area was also important in building general dispositions toward knowledge and life. Primarily, this was evidenced through communication of ideas about critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and enjoyment.

The idea of ELA as the space where educators help “... create the next generation of critical readers, writers, and thinkers” was common throughout teacher responses, surfacing in over a third of responses (37.5%). This disposition was described by participants as the ability to evaluate meaning beyond the face-value of information presented. Problem-solving, discerning author intention, and asking questions were key features of how teachers felt critical thinking was practiced in the ELA classroom. For example, one teacher articulates this, “At the end of the day, I’m less concerned that students understand the implications and importance of the Oxford comma, for example, and more concerned that they question whether the rule is necessary in the first place.”

Enjoyment of life and general fulfillment was an important factor in nine educators’ (16.0%) understanding of their content area. Teachers felt that the purpose of ELA was linked to aesthetic engagement with the world and creating opportunities for students to find and pursue passion around reading and writing. One teacher described the ELA classroom as the location for “igniting a love of reading and writing in students and developing their confidence and enthusiasm for both.” Another teacher indicated, “ELA is a subject that helps students delve into their inner beings and find their purpose and self.”

Creativity and opportunities to create in ELA were emphasized by six of the participants (10.7%). Teachers characterized students not as passive recipients of knowledge in the ELA space, but instead indicated that ELA is a space for students to engage imagination and exercise their own abilities with words or multimodal tools for communication. One teacher phrased this as a goal “to help students understand the moves writers make so they can understand when they read and use those moves in their own writing. My purpose is to give students ever-challenging materials and guide them to build independence as readers and writers.”

Finally, empathy was a focus of five (8.9%) of teacher responses. This was demonstrated in teachers' focus on students' ability to anticipate the impact of their writing on a possible audience. One teacher described this as "want[ing] them to be able to write well and understand how their words can create meaning and impact others." However, other teacher focused on empathy beyond the purposes of communicating a point. They sought to build understanding through stories and collaboration by encouraging students to develop an emotional self-awareness and connection to others through study in ELA text. One teacher described this by articulating her desire that "... students must also immerse themselves into different worlds and viewpoints through literary exploration and writing."

Table 3.1

Frequency of Discrete Skill and Dispositional Definitions of ELA Reported by Teachers

Theme	Code	Total Number of Participants Reporting	Percentage of Total Participants Reporting
Discrete Skills	CCSS Definition	21	37.5%
	New Literacy	13	23.2%
Dispositions	Critical Thinking	21	37.5%
	Enjoyment	9	16.0%
	Creativity	6	10.7%
	Empathy	5	8.9%

Describing Resources

ELA teachers defined their resources broadly (see Table 3.2). Resources discussed by teachers included peers from whom support can be drawn, expert resources that provide

guidance and formal learning opportunities, and technology tools that support teaching and learning.

People-Centered. Peer support played a large role in teachers' description of their experience as educators, which points to the deeply social nature of teaching. References to peer supports surfaced in 35 of the participants' responses (62.5%). These peer interactions were sometimes described in formal outlets like professional learning communities or teams. However, casual, unstructured support was more regularly expressed as a source of support. One teacher indicated, "Colleagues are the best resource. They know me, know my kids, know my context, and are genuinely invested in my success." Additionally, peer connections established through social media were highlighted by five educators (8.9%) as primary sites of support. Twitter and Facebook groups were described by participants as locations where they could engage with other educators and be inspired. The support described here both in-person and online related both to social-emotional health and to seeking professional tools.

Expert-Centered. Educators also defined their resources in relationship to experts or materials perceived to be created by experts. Access to organizations devoted to learning or skills related to ELA like local chapters of the National Writing Project or membership in the National Council of Teachers of English were viewed as helpful by 20 teachers (35.7%). Additionally, 12 teachers (21.4%) made use of pedagogical texts and broader texts on social issues that teachers feel inform their understanding of students and schools by authors like Kylene Beers and Ruby Payne. Professional development was also cited as a resource by nine educators (16%), particularly when focused on specific teacher needs. Supportive administrators, district officials, and specialists (like literacy coaches and media center professionals) were viewed as helpful by seven teachers (12.5%) in establishing positive school culture and managing the aspects of

school that stretch beyond standard classroom teaching like discipline, remediation, and technology assistance. Additionally, three teachers (5.3%) expressed positive perceptions of curriculum guides.

Technology-Centered. Technological hardware was referenced by seven teachers (12.5%) as an important resource in the classroom. Teachers discussed access to resources like laptops and desktop computers as positives in their schools, but often these tools were shared between multiple teachers or classrooms, limiting teaching access. Other teachers discussed their schools' one-to-one initiatives as a positive development that allowed students to research or produce work. However, more frequently than hardware, access to particular technology tools or sites were viewed as an important resource by teachers, with 35 educators (62.5%) making reference to using specific websites in their preparation for or teaching of class. Platforms like Moodle or Google Sites that allowed teachers to store materials for and communicate with students asynchronously, specific websites or databases that aggregate content that would be useful in an ELA classroom (like Facts on File, TurnItIn, YouTube, The Online Writing Lab at Purdue, NewsELA), and crowdsourced websites like Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers all provided teachers with resources that allowed them to find inspiration for and execute classroom plans.

Table 3.2*Frequency of Types of Resources Reported by Teachers*

Theme	Code	Total Number of Participants Reporting	Percentage of Total Participants Reporting
People-Centered	Peers	35	62.5%
	Professional Organizations	20	35.7%
	Books	12	21.4%
Expert-Centered	Professional Development	9	16.0%
	Administrators & Support Staff	7	12.5%
	Official Curriculum Material	3	5.3%
Technology-Centered	Software or Websites	35	62.5%
	Hardware	7	12.5%

Challenges

ELA educators experienced profound challenges due to their work. These challenges broadly fell under three larger themes: instructional issues, personal issues, and social issues (see Table 3.3).

Instructional Issues. Teachers also reported instructional issues as a key challenge in being able to effectively perform their jobs. First, there are issues related to resources, which were overwhelmingly reported by respondents. Fifty teachers (89.2%) mentioned lacking necessary textbooks, literary works, technology, and even classroom space that would allow them to effectively work with students. One teacher describes the state of their resources, saying,

“[they are the] same books being taught since I attended school there, [and there are] not enough books for students to hold and read.”

Technology played a complicated role in teachers’ reported challenges. While 18 teachers (32%) reported a lack of technology as an issue, six teachers (10.7%) reported feeling pressed to be “technology facilitators” rather than educators or otherwise pressured to use technology in the classroom that they felt untrained to use or felt were superfluous to the work of their classroom. Additionally, teachers reported frustration with students’ unsanctioned use of technology. Beyond the distraction of devices in the classroom, there was concern among four participants (7.1%) that technology has negatively impacted students' ability to learn. One participant described the negative impact technology has had on students thusly:

New technologies often hinder the teaching of language arts in that students are so reliant on them that they lose their own intrinsic abilities to spell, use correct grammar, etc. Also, students have lost their ability to focus and concentrate for long periods of time necessary to read complex texts.

Finally, 11 teachers (19.6%) reference the changing expectations surrounding curriculum as a challenge. For some, this was a result of lack of control over the curriculum due to scripted curriculums from the district, but others mentioned new curriculum demands being passed down from the state or district without input from educators or appropriate time or resources to make the changes in a meaningful way. Others share that expectations around the amount of feedback they’re expected to give coupled with increasing class sizes results in a poor or late response to student work.

Personal Issues. Challenges faced by teachers do not end at the school building doors. Teachers report carrying the stress of teaching into their home lives. This manifests in teachers’

inability to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance, a challenge reported by 40 participants (71.4%). According to participants, the amount of work teachers are expected to do in terms of planning and grading greatly exceeds the amount of non-teaching time provided in the school building. This results in teachers feeling as though they are neglecting their families, friends, and personal interests in favor of work. One teacher describes this experience, poignantly saying, “I spend most of my free time grading papers. My niece is two and she already knows that if I am at the table with papers and a pen that I can't play with her. And no matter how much I try to grade at work I am always grading at home.” Several teachers cite increasing class sizes as exacerbating this issue. While more students in each class may not significantly impact time devoted to planning, more students do equate to more time spent grading.

Risks to mental health were also reported by ten educators (17.8%). The lack of time away from work in combination with social demands of working in such a people-facing field creates hardships for teachers. One teacher described her experience of teaching as follows: “The emotional toll of having to balance and manage the emotions of 150 students every day creates emotional and physical fatigue and it makes me an impatient parent with my own children.” Another describes her experience: “I spend 10-12 hours a day working. I always bring things home with me (student problems for example). I am emotionally and mentally exhausted.” Teachers describe suffering anxiety, guilt, and burnout while simultaneously feeling they have no time to address these problems.

Additionally, participants reported an aspect of teaching that negatively impacts their personal lives is the poor compensation teachers receive. Low pay was reported as a personal challenge by 17 teachers (30.3%). Both the actual amount they are paid resulting in financial

stress and feelings of not being compensated appropriately for quality and amount of work they perform were reported by teachers. One teacher described the situation:

... the monetary compensation for a job that demands so much time out of your life is nowhere near equitable. The amount of time that I put in relative to the amount of money I make is downright aggravating. I have to live paycheck to paycheck (with zero dependents, living alone) while I simultaneously put in more work than many other (better paid) professionals.

Social Issues. Another challenge teachers faced professionally was demonstrated in large-scale social issues. These social issues appeared to manifest for teachers in two ways. First, teachers were impacted by policies and cultural norms that impacted students, the consequences of which were felt in the classroom. Second, teachers experienced challenging conditions due to social issues that directly related to the school system. Of the 56 respondents, 35 teachers (62.5%) indicated that large-scale social issues of either kind were challenging aspects of their professional lives.

Some of these large-scale social issues were problems related directly to students. Sixteen teachers (28.5%) of teachers reported challenging student-facing social issues. Of those teachers, poverty and political policies that were seen as detrimental to the resources available to students surfaced in six participants' (10.7%) responses. Six participants (10.7%) cited shifts in expectations about the role of parents in relation to schools, both in terms of lack of engagement and in terms of parental censorship of teachers' instructional choices, as a larger social issue that impacts their professional experience. Additionally, safety concerns related to student mental health and school shootings were referenced by four respondents (7%).

Beyond social issues which teachers experienced through their relationship with students, teachers experienced challenging social issues related to larger policies and cultural norms that impact education. The majority of the large-scale social issues relayed by teachers in their responses related to the challenges of the structure of schooling and the way school policies are made at a governmental level, with 27 teachers (48.2%) reporting this factor as a source of frustration. Of those 27 teachers, specific testing accountability measures were cited by four participants (7%) and a cultural bias toward the value of STEM fields over ELA was cited by three participants (5%). One educator decried the shift toward STEM fields, citing the difficulty it can cause in motivating students:

The focus on STEM education has caused a noticeable lack of interest among students in taking English class seriously. ELA is more important than ever in this time of fake news since critical thinking and effective communication is necessary if we want to cultivate a well-educated citizenry. Convincing teenagers that ELA is going to help them no matter what field they choose to pursue is not easy.

Furthermore, perceived constant shifts in education policy, often without support or resources for teachers, and lack of respect for the profession from policy makers were seen as sources of stress for eight educators (14.2%). One educator outlined frustration over policy issues, saying:

More and more requirements for basic, meaningless, "testable" targets like subordinate clauses and parts of speech, a push towards education reform that would like to take public monies and turn schools into private, for profit entities (vomit), and government mandates that make zero sense, created by officials who have never taught a day in their lives, don't read, and never write anything besides laws...

These shifts in societal conditions and cultural norms make teaching difficult as students extracurricular needs outstrip educators' ability to meet them and as the cultural and political forces impact the way ELA content is understood by the public.

Table 3.3

Frequency of Types of Challenges Reported by Teachers

Theme	Code	Total Number of Participants Reporting	Percentage of Total Participants Reporting
Social Issues	School-Related	27	48.2%
	Student-Related	16	28.5%
Instructional Issues	Resources	50	89.2%
	Shifting Curriculum & Teaching Expectations	11	19.6%
	Technology	10	17.8%
Personal Issues	Work-Life Balance	40	71.4%
	Low Pay	17	30.3%
	Mental Health	10	17.8%

Benefits

Though the challenges of teaching ELA today are manifold, educators also discussed the benefits they experience as classroom teachers. These benefits are related to social-emotional satisfaction, the ability to engage in their perceived civic duty, and intellectual freedom provided by the profession (see Table 3.4).

Social-Emotional Satisfaction. Many teachers report a major benefit of their work is the ability to work with and connect to students. Fourteen teachers (25%) highlighted this as a positive aspect of their profession. One teacher describes the satisfaction of positive relationships with students this way:

I love reading students writing when they are passionate about their topic. I also love when a student shares with me a recommendation for a book they found on their own and loved. I love when they come back from taking their first college English class and tell me that I helped them a great deal and they were ready and had no issues with the class. I love when a student tells me that they can't wait all day to get to my class.

Other educators reported feeling deep satisfaction in the social act of teaching. Nine teachers (16%) feel great personal satisfaction when they are able to see the act of teaching-and-learning spark discovery or when they feel they have created a productive environment for student engagement with new knowledge. They may be at the center of this social exchange or they may have created the environment for students to learn from each other, but regardless, they reap a socially-based benefit from the interactions at play in the classroom. An educator describes this occurring in her classroom, saying, “I love the communication that goes on. Seeing students interact with literature, deconstruct arguments of others, compose their own arguments and discuss the nature of art is so exciting.”

Civic Duty. Teachers also experience the benefit of engaging in behavior they believe to be pro-social or their civic duty. This is manifested in two ways. First, 13 teachers (23.2%) felt satisfaction in passing along useful life skills to students that will enable them to succeed in the world. There is a belief that communication, critical thinking, and reading and writing skills will enable their students to reach their goals. One teacher succinctly describes the idea that, “Writing

well helps get [students] into college and be successful in college. Reading well helps all other subjects to come easier to the student in his or her education."

Beyond the delivery of useful skills to all students, nine teachers (16%) communicated a desire to use the classroom as a site of ending some of the root causes of social injustice. There is a strong sense of the ELA classroom as a site of creating good citizens. One teacher offers this idea clearly, stating, "The positive aspects [of teaching ELA] are knowing that we are doing our part to create engaged, informed citizens who will stand up for justice, have the data to form informed opinions, and hopefully vote in every single election." Others perceive the ability to bring diverse stories into the classroom as an opportunity to inspire a desire to change the status quo and see the skills taught in ELA classrooms as important tools in disrupting the status quo. Teachers see being part of this perpetuation of social justice aims as a primary benefit of their work.

Intellectual Stimulation. An additional benefit of teaching described by ELA teachers is the ability to experience intellectual freedom and stimulation. Sixteen teachers (28.6%) described a primary benefit of their work as situated in the variety of teaching. One veteran educator stated, "In my 26 years I have never gotten bored in this job because students have new perspectives on the material every year...and the world changes in ways that make our study relevant." Another expressed, "This is the best job in the world. It is different every single day, and it is funny every single day." This was perhaps most enthusiastically described by a teacher who claims, "The best part is EVERY year, EVERY day it is new. Each group brings new experiences and understandings to these works! What an exciting career! I can think of nothing better to do!" The perception that the job of teaching English language arts is one of constant variety is an intellectually appealing aspect of the work to many teachers.

English teachers also reported an appealing aspect of their work was the ability to read regularly and engage with literature. Using new and favorite literature as part of their professional practice was articulated as a benefit by eight teachers (14.2%). One teacher expressed this, saying, “I get to teach through stories. Stories motivate people, uplift, shock, impress, educate, and hypothesize choices in life so students see cause and effect,” and another simply stated, “We read beautiful things.” The opportunity to personally engage with and to professionally make use of literature is understood as a benefit of the job for English teachers.

Additionally, three teachers (5.3%) expressed an appreciation of the way teaching ELA allows them to constantly learn about and reflect on new and big ideas. Because ELA encompasses literature, storytelling, and the foundational elements of the human experience that inspire art, educators feel excited about reflecting on the topics they teach. One teacher writes:

This is where we talk about life, ideas, thoughts, passions, magic... It's all about words.

Words have the power to change society. Words have the power to define who we are or transport us to another reality. Words speak truths to us from the past, present, and

future... Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

Another teacher even isolates the joys of teaching English as compared to other content areas, expressing their opinion that, “ELA provides for a new way of thinking. While many disciplines are fact-intensive, and focus on rote memorization, there is an opportunity to develop different cognitive practices with ELA.”

Table 3.4*Frequency of Types of Benefits Reported by Teachers*

Theme	Code	Total Number of Participants Reporting	Percentage of Total Participants Reporting
Social-Emotional	Connection to Students	14	25.0%
	Act of Teaching	9	16.0%
Civic Duty	Life Skills	13	23.2%
	Social Justice	9	16.0%
Intellectual Stimulation	Variety	16	28.6%
	Literature	8	5.3%
	Big Ideas	3	14.2%

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

In this section, I will situate the findings of this study in the larger body of research describing the experience of ELA teachers. I will also provide a reflection on the perceived limitations of the study and implications for future research.

RQ 1: How do ELA teachers define their content area?

ELA teachers' definition of their content area largely conforms to the definitions of ELA outlined by the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010) and National Council of Teachers of English (2017). This makes sense as teachers in most states were charged with implementing the CCSS and, therefore, likely internalized some of the language used to describe the goals of the standards, which accounts for much of the focus on skills seen in their responses. Additionally, most teachers received degrees related to pedagogy and as NCTE is a large and influential organization in the field, these dispositions were likely communicated through their coursework, and they may remain active members of NCTE as practitioners, reinforcing these ideas further. Interestingly, teachers negotiate between these two definitions of the field, fully subscribing to neither. Instead, they focus on skills and comprehension as well as individual and emotional connections that can be formed through the ELA courses. These approaches in conversation appear to comprise a working definition of the ELA content area.

Beyond the evidence of the influence of these two major forces in ELA education in teachers' definition of the content area, it is clear that many teachers are thinking about the ways in which the skills and dispositions described are exercised in the real world. For many, this includes bringing more visual elements and discussion of digital media into the ELA classroom. As communications evolve, teachers see a need for the ELA content area to address more and

more aspects of language beyond traditionally written and read texts. This may reflect positions taken by NCTE (2018) about the importance of integrating technology and multi-literacies into the classroom. Additionally, it could be credited to the goal stated in CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010) for students to be 21st-century ready. However, teachers rarely cite these sources in their responses and seem to emphasize the need for content in ELA to have real-world relevance. Many ELA teachers see their content area as naturally extending beyond historically valued texts and including new media and literacies.

RQ 2: How do ELA teachers describe their resources?

The topic of resources for teachers largely reflected in the existing research through the lens of what is missing (Ingersoll, 2003; Tapper, 1995). In other words, they appear to focus on the following questions: what resources do educators wish they had that they don't or what resources would encourage teachers to stay? This research focuses on poor building conditions, lack of up-to-date technology or generally lacking access to necessary resources (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005; Ingersoll, 2003; Tapper, 1995). This aspect of teaching arises in this study primarily in terms of technology. Teachers describe a lack of access to any technology or, when available, it is often very limited in numbers, meaning computers and other tools are being shared among large numbers of students. This particular resource deficit is striking when considered in context of teachers' understanding of ELA as including new media and literacies, many of which are situated in technological contexts.

This study, in addition to working to capture deficits, also sought to capture assets teachers describe in their work environment. In the open-ended responses examined for this study, it is clear that human resources are important to educators' experience. Support from peers and mentorship from experienced education professionals through interpersonal interactions or

through the examination of texts they have produced is seen as a foundational resource for educators. This is situated in existing literature which has shown that strong mentorship and supportive professional environments can have positive impacts on teachers' perceptions of their work (He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015; Louis & Marks, 1998; Nieto, 2003).

RQ 3: What challenges do ELA teachers experience as a result of their career?

The challenges described by ELA teachers in this study align somewhat closely to the current research on reasons motivating teacher attrition. Lack of work-life balance is highlighted as problematic for teachers (Kersaint et al., 2007; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). They discuss the impossibility of meeting the demands of their workload during normal working hours and describe a lack of time with family and for leisure as a consequence of their profession. Limited resources, both in terms of materials available at schools and in terms of teacher pay, are clearly viewed as a difficulty of the profession across the body of research and feature in participants' experiences in this study (Ingersoll, 2003; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Tye & O'Brien, 2002).

An extension of the existing research is in teachers' experience of larger social issues as a significant challenge in their experience of the profession. Issues affecting students over which educators can exert limited control like poverty and school violence in turn impact educators is a clear challenge in the field. Facing the consequence of difficult to solve cultural issues demonstrated in their students' dispositions or living conditions emerged throughout teacher responses as a painful aspect of the profession. In a related fashion, ELA teachers indicate feeling at the whim of shifting cultural values that tend to undermine the rigorousness or value of the ELA content area. Though this has certainly been the case for decades as evidenced by curricular changes due to the Cold War and the Nation at Risk Report (Jolly, 2009; National

Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), teachers in this study indicate feeling professionally devalued by the cultural belief in the preeminence of STEM. This impacts educators' feelings of social worth and therefore their experience of their work.

RQ 4: What benefits or rewards do ELA teachers experience as a result of their career?

The benefits ELA teachers experience as described through this study align well with the existing literature in some ways. Teachers indicated that intellectual variety, student connections, and a sense of mission are important positive aspects of their work, which is evident in previous research (Freedman and Appleman, 2009; He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015; Kersaint et al., 2007; National Education Association Research, 2010; Neito, 2003; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Williams, 2003). While the nature of the connection to students and a sense of mission in the profession revealed in this study are largely resonant with previous research, there is emerging nuance in the way English teachers perceive intellectual engagement in the teaching profession. Prior research indicates that an appeal of the teaching profession is in the fact that the work is variable and dynamic. Many teachers perceive a high level of intellectual challenge and engagement in teaching, particularly in environments where they experience high autonomy in their classrooms (Warner-Griffin, Cunningham, and Noel, 2018; Williams, 2003). This study indicates this is important to teachers surveyed as well, but found that, in addition to the appeals of intellectual freedom, teachers specifically discussed the benefit of having time to think about "big ideas" like the nature of life, human relationships, time. This may be due to the fact that prior research highlighted has largely focused on the teaching profession as a whole rather than on ELA teachers, and the nature of the content area may invite more contemplation of larger ideas represented in literature than teachers of other content areas.

Limitations

While this study has offered new insights into the nature of teaching ELA, there are limitations to this study. Some of the limitations are related to the nature of data collection. While the survey format has benefits, like allowing for a large number of participant voices to be included in the findings and limiting the influence of the researcher on the participants' response due to anonymity (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009), this study was impacted by limitations specific to employing a survey. Specifically, due to the high load of open-ended questions, there was a high incomplete rate in surveys, and due to inclusion criteria, those responses were not analyzed in this study. Also, as is common with open-ended questions, participants sometimes responded with brief or incomplete answers (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). Due to the nature of the survey method, there was an inability to ask follow-up questions, which meant that the data was sometimes limited in terms of desired nuance or the researcher had to limit inclusion of potentially informative data due to lack of clarity in the written response. Additionally, though the goal of the survey was to understand the experience of teaching English in the United States, the majority of our survey respondents came from two states. That, in combination with the fact that survey respondents are self-selected, limits the portrait of the experience of teaching English that this survey attempts to draw.

Implications for Future Research & Practice

In terms of future research, it would be beneficial to engage in observation and interview-focused case studies of specific teachers to provide more detail and nuanced understanding of the experience of teaching ELA. Questions related to the limitations articulated previously could be answered through these different research methods. Additionally, there are some findings that might have been anticipated based on prior research that did not surface here. For example,

despite the NCTE (2017) definition of English language arts which is student-focused, no teachers surveyed mentioned students themselves as an important resource in the classroom. Observational data from classrooms could help determine if this result is simply a lack of self-reporting of behavior, an issue with the question phrasing in the survey, or reflects the reality of teaching. Without this additional observational data, these findings may point to a need to better model and frame the concept of students-as-assets in both in-service and preservice teacher education.

Based on the findings of this study, it also seems that there is a complicated relationship teachers have with technology. Technology surfaced as both a support (through online communities and curricular material) and desired resource for classroom practice (in mentions of poor WiFi, low access to computers for students), however, other educators felt the presence of technology was being pushed unnecessarily or thoughtlessly into their classrooms. Others felt unprepared to make use of the technology they were provided with or expected to use. This tension shows that the relationship between technology and ELA instruction is complex.

Finally, the high prevalence of teachers (62.7%) reporting concerns about the impact of broader social issues in the classroom points to the necessity of future research in education to consider the field beyond the strict confines of the classroom. Teachers experience their profession not just as an isolated practice of teaching and learning but see their work as deeply impacted by political policies, poverty, divergent cultural norms, and worries about the physical and mental health of students and the broader community. While research on targeted instructional practices is valuable, this study points to the fact that teachers do not see the work of educating as divorced from broader social context and it follows that researchers should not aim to approach their work as though learning happens in a vacuum. Furthermore, teacher

educators must approach their work by providing future and current teachers with tools to address the non-instructional demands of the work of teaching.

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