

Transitions, Tensions, and Retention Factors:
The Value of Community and Support for Early Career English Educators

by

Michelle Glerum

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Jessica Early, Chair
Christina Saidy
Doris Warriner

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores the experience of three first-year English language arts educators within a small community of practice designed to provide personal and professional support for beginning teachers. The participants engaged in a 12-week session where weekly meetings, which alternated between workshop and discussion, focused on participant experiences, sustainable teaching practices, and English language arts pedagogy. The study shares the curricular design of the community as well as the issues and ideas that were raised about teaching and the teaching life.

Data were collected over the entire 12 weeks as well as in follow-up interviews conducted within four weeks of the last meeting. Data were drawn from the following sources: (1) pre-and-post-community questionnaires, (2) audio recorded meetings, (3) researcher notes and memos, (4) follow-up interviews. Using Wenger's (1998, 2009) theory of communities of practice as well as sustainable teaching theory (Burns et al., 2018), this study documents the value of early career communities of practice and indicates that early career communities are necessary in light of the emotional dimensions of teaching English language arts, the many aspects of successful teaching that are not covered in teacher preparation programs, and the need for both personal and professional support, camaraderie, and continued learning for beginning teachers.

DEDICATION

To teachers.

Your incredible work makes a difference
and nudges the world in the right direction.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I began my teaching career in an incredibly supportive and inspiring environment. The English Department of Saguaro High School comprised a group of wildly talented individuals whose pedagogical prowess was exceeded only by their massive hearts. The energy was infectious. It was an ideal environment for any teacher and, as a novice, I was welcomed with open arms and supported every step of the way. I still struggled, of course, because the first year of teaching is challenging even in the best of circumstances, but my experience there, and how I *felt* as a beginning teacher—a supported, valued member of the community—made a lasting impression that would later become the cornerstone of this study.

Almost a decade later, I sat in a local coffee shop across from a first-year teacher who had taken my methods course the previous spring; she had reached out asking if I would be open to an informal interview. As I listened to her talk about her experience being emergency certified and spending her student teaching semester in her own classroom, in a department where every other teacher beyond the department chair was also an emergency certified student teacher, I thought about the importance of support for new teachers. I wondered how I could better equip my methods students for the realities of the classroom and the lack of support they might encounter. I also thought about my own experience in comparison: I began my teaching career at Saguaro as an intern, then as a student teacher, and finally as a faculty member. I was supported by the entire department, administration, and community of staff and students. Without that framework, I'm not sure I would have found as much joy (or longevity) in this career.

But the idea for the early career community did not fully materialize until the following year when I became a parent for the first time. I soon realized that I needed significantly more help than I had anticipated. Much like the beginning teachers I worked with, I found myself overwhelmed and under-equipped in my new role. Without my network of new and veteran mothers I would have been lost. Collectively, they had all of the answers I was looking for but did not know where to find. My own experiences reminded me that people need support systems specifically designed to help them navigate transitions as much as they need the friendship of others who are going through similar experiences. Since my students were no longer secondary students, but were now future English teachers, my focus naturally shifted to ways I could support preservice and early career teachers through their transition from student to teacher. When my methods students left my classroom, I wanted them to have the kind of support I experienced at Saguardo, but I recognized that many of them were experiencing quite the opposite.

Throughout my life, I have seen the importance of support play out over and over again. I have seen the effects of mentorship, camaraderie, and community, and I have seen the effects of isolation, overwhelm, and burnout. I have concluded that support leads to sustainability. Teaching without support is simply not sustainable.

From the moment I first encountered the sustainable teaching framework, I have done my best to share it with as many teachers as possible, facilitating sustainable teaching workshops in methods courses and sharing scholarship with my colleagues. Once I started imagining a community for early career educators, I knew support and sustainable teaching practices would be the heart of our work.

In light of my own experiences, both personally and professionally, I became interested in how I could provide support to beginning teachers who found themselves in positions where they required more support than they were offered. I was equally committed to sharing work on sustainable teaching—with all of my colleagues, not just pre-service and early-career teachers—because I believe that sustainable teaching practices are paramount to not only the success of teachers (and thus, their students and communities) but also to teacher contentment and commitment in the profession.

Setting the Stage for My Study

In preparation for my dissertation study, I conducted a pilot study in the fall of 2020, aimed at better understanding the needs and experiences of first-year English teachers in Arizona. I was particularly interested in examining the factors that enable or limit feelings of support, empowerment, and efficacy of new teachers during their first year of teaching. Research indicates that the first year of employment has a critical impact on the learning and retention of beginning teachers and I hoped that my pilot and subsequent studies would provide insight into factors that support the socialization and professional development of English teachers.

My pilot study helped me to understand the experiences of three first-year English teachers and allowed me to come to several conclusions: I was able to determine that participation in this early career community fostered feelings of support and empowerment for the participants. I also discovered the unintentional benefit of providing a place for beginning teachers to share their frustrations without being redirected by school administrators and leadership. While the pilot results were exciting, they were also limiting. My pilot study consisted of three female participants, two of

whom worked in the same district (though not at the same school). In light of my limited sample size, as well as my own limited knowledge in research and data collection, I substantially revised my second study. I doubled the meeting time (from 6 weeks to 12 weeks), revised and added curriculum, and reworked my data collection and methods.

Purpose of the Study

When teachers feel supported, they are better equipped to support their students. The primary focus of my research is to support beginning teachers and to provide a better understanding of the kinds of programs that may be useful in supporting and retaining early career English educators. The significance of this research, however, goes far beyond retention. I also examine how our field can foster contentment with and commitment to the profession while enabling beginning teachers to cultivate sustainable teaching practices to counteract feelings of burnout and overwhelm.

Substantial scholarship explores the pitfalls of beginning teacher transitions, including the disconnect between university courses and classroom teaching, struggles with identity, and feelings of isolation as key elements of stress and overwhelm. Johannssen (2009) connect these early issues with the staggering level of attrition in education. Schlichte et al. (2005) highlight the importance of emotional relationships, community, and connection as protective factors for teachers. Furthermore, research shows that fostering relationships and being part of a caring and compassionate community increases both teacher retention (Waddell, 2010) and satisfaction (Cherkowski, 2011). Yet, despite some promising scholarship in retention and sustainable teaching, little research has been devoted to harnessing the combined power of emotional

support, camaraderie, and mentorship in communities specifically designed for beginning English teachers.

My study, *The Community for Early Career English Educators*, aims to provide a bridge between method courses/student teaching and the first year of teaching to support the transition from student to teacher, all while fostering authentic professional relationships in communities of practice. Building upon the results of my pilot study, I facilitated a community for beginning teachers that offered a place to reflect on first-year experiences and cultivate sustainable teaching practices. The meetings were a mix of writing, discussion on recent scholarship in our field, mentorship, and time to talk and connect with one another. My early career communities are concerned with the potential for social and emotional support of beginning teachers through a collaborative and informal group of peers (fellow first-year English teachers) and facilitated by a mentor teacher. In my pilot study, I was able to examine beginning teachers' feelings of support and empowerment as a result of participating in the community, and I was able to continue this line of inquiry in my study this past fall.

Research Questions

1. How might participation in an early career community of practice extend what beginning English Language Arts teachers have learned from traditional methods courses and their student teaching experiences?
2. How do beginning ELA teachers describe and make sense of the purpose of this community of practice? Do they see a relationship between their participation in this community and their access to sustainable teaching practices?

3. What kinds of issues and ideas are raised about teaching and the teaching life in such a community?
4. In what ways do sustainable teaching practices offer support for beginning English Language Arts teachers?
5. Which curricular approaches facilitated participation and engagement more than others and why?

Theoretical Framework:

In this study, I bring together two specific frameworks, Wenger's (1998, 2009) concept of communities of practice and Burns et al. (2018) sustainable teaching theory. Both frameworks are unified by the understanding that participation in a community shapes identity and knowledge. Furthermore, the merging of these frameworks allows me to examine social practices and sustainability in beginning teacher experiences.

Communities of practice are part of a larger theory of knowledge and learning, known as social learning systems (Wenger, 2000). Social learning systems, or the idea that knowledge accumulates across social, cultural, and historical systems, allow individuals to 'know' various concepts and ideas based on their participation in various communities. Wenger offers the example of knowing that the earth is round as one of the concepts known as a result of collective knowledge and accumulated learning over time. In education, we might think about Dewey's concept of student-centered learning, which has been a driving force behind educational reform and knowledge for decades. By participating in the broad social learning system of education, we are familiar with student-centered learning; thus, these systems accumulate learning and knowledge specific to particular communities and fields.

Wenger (2000) further explains how experience and competence drive learning systems: “We each experience knowing in our own ways. Socially defined competence is always in interplay with our experience. It is in this interplay that learning takes place.” (p. 226) To illustrate this point within educational systems, and beginning teacher transitions in particular, I offer the following example: New teachers look to veteran teachers for advice, mentorship, curriculum, and guidance. Student teachers and early career teachers often align their experiences with the competence they emulate in master teachers by teaching the same assignments, following a similar syllabus, and using the same phrases for classroom management, among other things. Veteran teachers participate in the same learning model, forging new definitions of competence; often these experiences come from conferences, scholarship, and reflective teaching; in this way, we use our experiences to “pull our community’s competence along” (Wenger, 2000, p. 227).

Within the broader umbrella of social learning systems, I draw upon communities of practice, in particular, to situate my study. Wenger (2009) defines communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). Specifically, communities of practice “develop around things that matter to people. As a result, their practices reflect the members’ own understanding of what is important” (Wenger, 1998, p. 1). Communities of practice go beyond professional contexts to include and explore experiences that occur both in and out of the classroom, such as implementing sustainable teaching practices and the effect those practices have on teaching and the teaching life.

All communities of practice operate under key tenets that are determined and defined by the community. This study will draw from the established practices of the National Writing Project. In “The Work of the National Writing Project: Social Practices in a Network Context”, Liebermann and Wood (2002) examine how the successful professional development network connects social practices with network organization. “The social practices we saw operating in the summer institutes produced revitalizing and highly collaborative professional communities. Through them, teachers played the roles of both experts and learners, recognized and built knowledge from practice, and encouraged one another to continually seek better ways for reaching students” (p.4). The practices they reference, which will also be used in this study, include:

- Approaching every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor
- Teachers teaching other teachers
- Creating public forums for sharing, dialogue, and critique
- Situating learning in practice and relationships
- Reflecting on teaching through reflection on learning
- Adopting a stance of inquiry
- Rethinking professional identity and linking it to professional community

The community for early career English educators focuses on the experience of beginning teachers and offers a place to share and examine those experiences, while also sharing and co-creating knowledge and insight. The purpose is for beginning teachers to teach one another through shared experience, discussion, and reflection– and to situate their learning (of both sustainable teaching practices and classroom practices) in practice and relationships.

I merge communities of practice with sustainable teaching (Burns et al., 2018) to serve as the foundation of my theoretical frame because sustainable teaching, at its heart, asks what we can do to support teachers before they burnout; it is about prevention over reaction. The Colorado State University Writing Project website (2020) defines sustainable teaching as “the process of fostering self-compassion and renewal in educators who support the growth and development of students in turn. Sustainable teaching puts educators first with the goal of creating a collaborative community that values an integrated approach to education and enables all participants to thrive.” Sustainable teaching offers educators a framework for renewal, contentment, and happiness within a field so often marred by exhaustion, burnout, and attrition (Burns et al., 2018; Curry and O’Brien, 2012; Jennings, 2015).

Teachers have to take care of themselves in order to care for others but beginning teachers are particularly ill-equipped to carve out time for self-care because of the many demands of teaching as a novice. Daily tasks such as planning a lesson or responding to a parent email, for instance, take significantly longer for novice teachers to complete than master teachers. Sustainable teaching practices aim to interrupt the potentially damaging dynamic of beginning teachers working themselves to the bone, often leading to burnout, and instead offers a framework for resilience. When teachers are given tools to feel renewed and inspired, it directly benefits students, and that positive energy feeds into schools and communities (Brooks, 2017). While sustainable teaching emerged from (and continues to respond to) research around burnout, the movement is rooted in preventative strategies and fostering renewal in educators. Sustainable teaching prioritizes and values

English *educators*, which not only supports retention but also encourages the larger community to follow suit.

Sustainable teaching is vital for all teachers, but it is particularly important to the field of English education because of the emotional dimensions of teaching literacy (Garcia and Dutro, 2018), an element of teaching that many beginning teachers are not prepared to navigate. Whether supporting student testimony of trauma through writing or speaking, facilitating seminars and arguments around divisive political issues, or teaching literature that deals with an array of heavy topics, English teachers are responsible for cultivating healing environments where trauma is often centered (Hanh and Weare, 2017; Dutro, 2019, 2011; Garcia and Dutro, 2018). For early career teachers who are still navigating their own transition into the classroom, the emotional demands of teaching ELA can feel especially heavy given their anxieties about being “new” and inexperienced. Sustainable teaching practices, coupled with membership in a community of practice, support beginning teachers in the emotional and professional work required of them.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction and Purpose

This literature review focuses on the experience of beginning English teachers as they transition from their role as students in teacher training programs to teachers in their own classrooms. Since both attrition and retention have been tied to early career educator experiences, this review also focuses on support factors, such as professional development, sustainable teaching practices, and supportive mentors and administrators, that research has shown to influence teacher's feelings of satisfaction, contentment, and commitment in their careers as English educators.

For the purposes of this review, I define "beginning teachers" as teachers in their first three years in the classroom. In the field of English Education, studies have often shown beginning teachers to struggle with the culture shock surrounding their transitions into the classroom (Corcoran, 1981; Wideen et al., 1998; Ketter and Stoffel, 2008, Smagorinsky et al., 2014) Furthermore, several studies have examined the connection between early educator experiences and longevity, as well as satisfaction, in the classroom (Grudnoff, 2011; Schlichte et al., 2005).

Since there has been substantial research devoted to student to teacher transitions and retention, I put several limitations on my criteria for inclusion, namely by focusing my attention on studies published after Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann's 1983 seminal text, "Pitfalls of Experience in Teacher Preparation" and also by focusing on literature that primarily addresses secondary English educators within the field of English Education. The review is organized in two sections. The first section, "Navigating the

Two Worlds Pitfall”, outlines the major areas of tension experienced by beginning teachers: the theory and practice disconnect, misalignment between expectation and reality, feelings of isolation, and cultivating a professional identity, and concludes by examining how these tensions may limit or encourage retention and attrition rates in the first 3-5 years of teaching. The second section, “Support Factors that Influence Retention, Contentment, and Commitment”, builds off of the first with a detailed look at support factors. This section explores internal and external sources of support that influence retention, contentment, and commitment to the profession, including mentorship, administrators, professional development, authentic relationships and community connections, sustainable teaching practices, mindfulness in the classroom, and teaching from a wellness paradigm.

The scope of this paper does not permit a comprehensive review of the literature on teacher transition or retention factors, rather, the purpose of this review is to contextualize the study in the broader scope of English teacher education and, in particular, in the value of community and sustainable teaching practices for beginning teachers.

Navigating the Two Worlds Pitfall

Many solutions have been offered and enacted in an attempt to navigate and solve what Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1983) refer to as the “two-worlds pitfall”, which finds pre-service and early educators caught between the world of the university and the world of the classroom. Though seminars and practicums help bridge the gap and undoubtedly provide student teachers with vital support and insight (Meyer and Sawyer, 2006; Grudnoff, 2011), they typically end before official classroom teaching begins. And

therein lies a problem. Research shows that beginning teachers often feel a disconnect between the theoretical university courses they took and the practical teaching they need in the classroom (Carrington, 2009; Wideen et al., 1998). Student teaching is designed to ease this transition. As Anderson and Stillman (2013) explain, “Policymakers and practitioners alike increasingly tout clinical experiences as a key component—even “the most important” (p.3) component of—preservice teacher preparation”, but despite widespread agreement that student teaching is an essential aspect of preparing teachers for the classroom, many educators still enter the profession with feelings of inadequacy (McCann and Johannssen, 2009; Lindqvist et al., 2017).

When these feelings are combined with additional tensions, such as professional isolation or lack of mentorship, beginning teachers can become strained beyond their limits; add in weak or missing induction programs and is it any wonder that beginning teachers are leaving the profession? Scholarship points to several factors that cause significant tensions in early career teachers, tensions which often begin with their realization that there is a disconnect between theory and practice.

The Theory-Practice Disconnect

An extensive body of literature documents the immense challenges of first year teachers, often attributed, in part, to the theory-practice disconnect, a tension which Covino (2020) describes as the “push-and-pull between theory and practice” (p.21). The longstanding theory and practice disconnect can stymie beginning teachers as they navigate the real world of the classroom and can manifest in both internal and external ways as beginning teachers struggle to find their footing in their new and emerging roles as educators (Agee, 2016). Some teachers will resort to the expectations or status quo of

their department, or alienated teaching (MacDonald and Shirley, 2009), where “teachers neglect teaching practices that they believe are best suited for their pupils and instead comply with externally imposed mandates out of a sense of deference to authority” (p.15), and some will revert to consciously or unconsciously teaching as they were taught, despite alternative and often more progressive methods explored in their university courses (Ell et al, 2017; Saily, 2015). Others will push back against established teachers or paradigms as they connect theory and practice, carving out their own teaching styles and identity in the process (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Smagorinsky et al, 2014). Still others will leave the profession all together.

Michelle Knotts (2016) describes the experience of Anya, a first year English educator who felt her beliefs and her classroom experiences were at odds with one another. The disconnect led her to label herself as a “hypocrite” because her classroom management methods were in direct opposition to her beliefs, which were based in theory from her coursework. “This comment, her response when I asked her to describe her philosophy of classroom management, illustrates her awareness of the mismatch and hints at the tensions she faces in moving from a critically minded pre-service teacher toward a critical practitioner” (Knotts, 2016, p.130). Anya and the majority of early career educators struggle to implement their preconceived teaching philosophies created during university work into their practice in the classroom. Applying their philosophies across the changing landscapes– from classroom to intern teaching, then to student teaching, and finally to classroom teaching– has proven stressful for teachers.

Spangler and Fink (2013) illustrate this point in their discussion of the need for early educators to revisit theoretical ideas and applications once they are in the

classroom, explaining, “These are usually topics that they have already encountered in their pedagogy courses but on which they need a refresher or deeper study now that they are in the classroom. The concepts and information they already know about the topic are not merely theoretical anymore, and they want to discuss the topic in light of their experiences” (p. 89). Meyer and Sawyer (2006) extend this notion of creating communities and conditions in which “novice teachers can ask questions that arise in particular practice(s)” (p.50), citing Gary Griffin’s (1999) seminal work, which purports:

If we expect teachers to be constantly inquiring into the nature and consequences of their work, we should provide individual and group opportunities to ask serious questions about practice and search for answers in practice as well as in theory. If we expect teacher education graduates to have an influence on the schools they enter as novices, we should work with them in ways that raise penetrating and thought-provoking questions rather than perpetuate acceptance of the norms of the schools and classrooms in which they find themselves.

Cochran-Smith et al. (2003; 2020) also suggest an amalgamation of theory and practice that, instead of privileging one or the other, “depends upon a rich dialectic of the two” (p. 9). The authors explain, “Here the lines between professional practice in teacher education, on the one hand, and research and ongoing inquiry related to teaching and teacher education, on the other hand, would be increasingly blurred” (2020). Though teachers need time and space to wrestle with such lines of inquiry, independently and with their colleagues, they often do not have either.

The literature above suggests that early career educators benefit from additional support, as well as a time and space to revisit curriculum and theory, as they begin their

teaching career. McIntyre and Jones (2014) describe similar experiences in England, where early career English teachers struggled with tensions between policy and practice, and Grudnoff (2007) documents nearly identical tensions in New Zealand; clearly, much of the work for beginning English teachers lies in bridging the gap between theory and practice, and though that gap looms largely, beginning teachers must also navigate other universal chasms as they embark on their teaching journeys.

Misalignment Between Expectation and Experience

In addition to the theory-practice disconnect, first year challenges are also related to the disconnect between the expectation and actual experience of being a classroom teacher. Gold (1996) refers to this disillusionment as one of the greatest obstacles faced by early educators. McCann and Johannessen (2009) note the recurring experience of novice teacher's expectations not matching reality and, through their case study of Clara, they share the "contrast between her initial belief that she knew how to manage the class and the subsequent discovery that she could not" (p. 109), among other challenges, as representative of a rather prevalent issue for novice teachers. Hargreaves and Jacka (1995) came to similar conclusions in their case study of Paula, a teacher who entered the classroom with positive yet preconceived notions of what the experience would entail and found that the "realities of teaching remained a powerful shock for her" reflecting that "without remarkable determination, inner strength, and drive, it is not clear that she would have survived through her first year" (p. 56).

Corcoran (1981) and Wideen et al. (1998) describe the disconnect that Clara, Paula, and so many others experience as "transition shock" or "culture shock", likening the beginning teacher's arrival in the classroom as the disorienting and sometimes

alarming experience of being suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture. Smagorinsky et al. (2014) refer to the experience as “praxis shock”, citing the common experience of beginning teachers’ efforts to develop and implement student-centered teaching “in school settings that suggested or imposed authoritarian conceptions of teaching and learning” (p. 215). The expectation of many beginning teachers is that when they finally have their own classroom, things will run rather smoothly, and when met with the reality that classroom life is full of struggles, teachers can experience transition, culture, and praxis shock.

Without a support system in place, the shock can prove detrimental and the significant tensions between expectation and reality can weigh heavily on novice teachers. McCann and Johanssen (2009) describe the experience of Joshua, who struggled with crippling anxiety as a result of his doubts about his curriculum, delivery, and persona as a teacher, at times making him physically ill. The authors offer the following observation in regard to Joshua’s plight, which they found to be a recurring experience among beginning teachers: “Negative episodes provide evidence to novice teachers that they are not doing what bona fide teachers do, leading to doubts about their qualifications as teachers” (p. 108). The authors add that many novice teachers do not believe their skills will improve enough with time and can consider themselves unfit to teach, not realizing that many of the struggles they are experiencing are actually universal (McCann and Johanssen, 2009).

Feelings of Isolation

Emotionally, the student to teacher transition, while exciting, can also be quite jarring. As they navigate the shift from university student to classroom teacher, many

educators find that feelings of isolation (Spangler, 2013) and tensions around their shifting identities (Premont et al., 2020) surround this momentous transition. Intensifying the already difficult and rather abrupt transition is what Lya Kremer-Hayon (1987) refers to as the physical and psychological isolation of the teaching profession, feelings which Appl (2006) found persist in early educators even when paraprofessionals are in the room with them. The emotional and cognitive demands of being needed by so many students at a time, for so many hours a day, can weigh on beginning (and veteran) educators, who may spend entire days working with and surrounded by students, but without spending any time interacting with colleagues. Without the social, emotional, and cognitive support of colleagues and peers, teaching can become a career marred by involuntary solitude.

Boreen and Niday (2000) highlight need for teachers to have a supportive community of colleagues but cite Lortie's (1975) observation that the "cellular nature of schools" causes teachers to be "compartmentalized, fostering independence and self-reliance rather than collaboration" (Lortie, 1975; cited in Boreen and Niday, 2000, p. 152). Yet, collaboration and collegiality are widely recognized in the literature as vital variables for successful and satisfactory first year (and beyond) experiences, and, according to Schlichte et al. (2013), represent protective factors against feelings of isolation so commonly experienced by early educators. They go on to explain that while "collegial support has been determined to be linked to retention, it is especially first-year teachers' sense of isolation that necessitates support and assistance" (Schlichte et al, 2013, p. 38).

Feelings of alienation and isolation do not end at the school gates, however, and can follow teachers out of their classrooms and into their personal lives. As their peers

embark on careers that situate them in an environment where they work exclusively with other adults, and with different expectations and norms, teachers can feel alienated because the stress and demands of their job are not understood by their friends and family, intensifying feelings of isolation. Furthermore, Jennings (2015) explains that many teachers “are not well prepared for the social and emotional demands of the classroom”, and for beginning teachers who also lack a trusted mentor, caring administration, or other connections with their school community, this predicament can be the final straw in their commitment to their career as an English educator (Schlichte et al. 2013). Establishing authentic relationships and connections within the school community are paramount for buffering feelings of isolation, as well as for supporting identity development as a teacher of English (McCann and Johannssen, 2009; Spangler, 2013).

Cultivating a Professional Identity

Despite the fact that physical, social, and psychological isolation hardly fosters an emotionally supportive environment, it is imperative that beginning teachers explore intersectionality and develop their professional skills through mentorship and community in order to explore their emerging identity. As Premont et al. (2020) argues, “professional teacher identity is important—and we argue necessary- for...” enhancing intellect, “...merging personal and professional identities” (p. 1), and developing content expert identity, such as that of a writing teacher. Covino (2020) takes the argument a step further, exploring the tensions that precede and lead to teacher identity, as beginning teachers form and reform their identities:

No aspect of the two-world pitfall affected the identity of the teacher candidates as deeply as their drive to shed their "student self" and fully evolve into their "teaching self." For the cohort [...] the progression toward becoming a "real" teacher was a finite, one-way transition. And it was a transition that stymied them. (p. 31)

Covino further explains that students who embraced a different identity paradigm—that of teacher as learner— and saw their roles as more fluid, were also more successful at working through their identity transitions and understanding their identity as dynamic, an idea that is echoed by Smagorinsky & Whiting (1995) and Beauchamp and Thomas (2009). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) assert that a “teacher's identity shifts over time under the influence of a range of factors both internal to the individual, such as emotion, and external to the individual, such as job and life experiences in particular contexts.” Their assertion that teacher identity shifts over time is prevalent in the literature, and in offering a definition of the concept, Sachs (2005), provides a succinct and thoughtful start that also touches on the shifting nature of identity:

Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (p. 15)

In fact, various studies and researchers have concluded “teacher identity [is] both [a] product (a result of influences on the teacher) and process (a form of ongoing interaction

within teacher development)” (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). Gee (2001) extends the understanding of identity development and shifts over time, adding that identity has various forms depending on context, and McIntyre and Jones (2014) came to similar conclusions, offering their observation that school contexts impact the evolving identities of beginning English teachers.

Agee (2006) captures how identity construction is a result of many overlapping experiences, factors, and even desires of the type of teacher each person imagines themselves to be:

Prior experiences alone do not explain how new teachers engage with the range of concepts and methods they find in a teacher education course. At this time and even into the first years of teaching, a beginning teacher seeks theory and practice that offer a fit with his or her imagined role, even as this role is under construction. (p. 196)

Saidy (2015) explains the evolution of teacher identity is also tied to content knowledge, noting that “as pre-service teachers get closer to becoming professionals and shift their focus to being experts on content, they draw less from their experiences as writers and more from their ideas of what teaching should be, which often lends to a more prescriptive approach” (p. 110). Cultivating a professional identity is complicated and nuanced. It is not a linear progression nor a permanent state, but rather teacher identity is both a product and an ever-evolving process in which teachers see themselves as learners and work to foster their identity based on who they want to be in the classroom.

Attrition and Retention: Tied to Early Educator Experiences

The disconnect between theory and practice, as well as between expectation and experience, coupled with the emotional toll of this transition, can leave early career educators feeling overwhelmed and alone. McCann and Johannssen (2009) connect these early issues with the staggering level of attrition in education: “Beginning teachers face many challenges and difficulties; as a result, one-third will leave the profession in the first three years and nearly half will be gone within their first five years in the profession” (p. 108). Grudnoff (2011) corroborates their findings, adding, “A number of researchers argue that teachers’ early experiences impact not only on their long-term effectiveness in the classroom and their levels of job satisfaction, but also influence whether, and for how long, a teacher remains in the profession” (p. 224). With effectiveness, satisfaction, and retention on the line, understanding and improving the experiences of beginning teachers is of the utmost importance.

Schlichte et al. (2005) highlight the importance of emotional relationships, community, and connection by sharing two stories, one in which a first-year teacher felt isolated and alone, leading her to resign at the close of her first year, and another in which a teacher flourishes and thrives as a valued member of her school community. The stark differences in their first-year experiences are a direct result of their communities, perceived value to their communities, and level of support they received from those communities. Connection and support are two of the most protective factors for early educators, widely documented in the literature. In discussing the connection between support and retention, Grudnoff (2011), reminds readers that “collegial support to assist novices in overcoming their initial difficulties and becoming more confident teachers is important for new teacher retention” (p. 224).

Furthermore, research shows that fostering relationships and being part of a caring and compassionate community increases both teacher retention (Waddell, 2010) and satisfaction (Cherkowski, 2011). McCann and Johannessen (2009) suggest that programs would “benefit from being sensitive to the reported concerns and frustrations of beginning teachers” (p. 109). Many of the concerns and frustrations cited by teachers focus on a lack of support– be it emotional, professional, or financial; according to Arthur Levine’s (2016) report, attrition is tied to “low salaries, [...]the absence of teacher induction programs, low hiring standards, and poor working conditions” (p. 21), all of which cause high teacher turnover.

Despite the bleak findings of how and why teachers leave the profession, scholarship also points to protective factors that not only keep teachers in their classrooms but also support effectiveness and satisfaction, finding that mentorship, mindfulness, and caring leadership can soften the blow of transition shock, boost retention, and foster sustainable teaching practices. By applying current research, English education and induction programs can work to provide additional and vital support to beginning teachers entering the profession, likely enhancing their connection to their teaching community and aiding in both teacher retention and feelings of job satisfaction.

Factors that Foster Feelings of Satisfaction, Contentment, and Commitment

“Compassion, joy, love—these deep human capacities are essential components of educational leadership that evoke and sustain teacher commitment in learning communities. Leadership that can nourish and sustain passion and commitment is needed as educators are, more and more, challenged to adapt and shift their practices and mindsets in the rapidly changing educational landscape.” -Sabre Cherkowski

The last decade’s focus on mindfulness practices in the classroom (Schreuder and Wilder, 2020) sustainable teaching (Burns et al, 2018), compassionate leadership

(Cherkowski, 2011), and fostering authentic relationships with colleagues (Waddell, 2010) represent a powerful shift towards a wellness paradigm (Curry and O'Brian, 2012) in education. It's about time. Burnout and attrition have long plagued education, leaving teachers to address the "nagging exhaustion" (Burns, et al.) of this profession on their own, often without necessary resources or support. But a growing body of literature (Smagorinsky, 2020; Hahn and Weare, 2017; Jennings, 2015; hooks, 2003), and a relentlessly optimistic group of educators, have shown that it doesn't have to be that way. When teachers feel invested in their teaching communities, they are more likely to stay in the profession (Schlichte et al., 2014; Shen, 1997) because they feel connected to and invested in their careers. Educators benefit from sustainable teaching practices, and, in turn, their students benefit as well. Therefore, prioritizing the social and emotional health of teachers is paramount to the success of schools, as well as the individuals and communities that they serve.

Supportive Mentors and Administrators

The literature shows a clear connection between supportive leadership and beginning teacher retention; Richardson et al. (2007) argue that "support in the induction phase of novice teachers is crucial to teacher retention" and Odell and Ferraro (1992) add, "providing emotional support to beginning teachers may have a powerful impact on subsequent teacher retention." Teachers who feel they are valued and cared for members of their communities are more invested in and connected to their careers, and though this tends to be true for teachers at all points of their careers, it is especially true for early career development (Grudnoff, 2011; Schlichte, 2005).

Mentorship involves providing professional and emotional support while working with novice teachers; McCann and Johanssen (2009), Spangler (2013), and Mulvahill (2019) all attribute mentorship as a key element in teacher induction and retention. Schlichte et al. (2005) describe the ideal mentor as someone who “models exemplary teaching, communicates well, and works on building a trusting relationship that is congenial and helpful” (p. 37), and highlights the crucial importance of emotional support in the mentor-mentee relationship. They note that without this key factor, beginning teachers can feel isolated even if they are assigned a mentor. The authors explain that, “In addition to providing instructional support and helping the novice teacher over the hurdles of paperwork and general school tasks, the mentor has to exude encouragement, empathy, and compassion” (p. 36).

They share the experience of Ann, a special education beginning teacher who, 7 months into her first year, was contemplating leaving the profession. “When asked what kind of support she needed, Ann laughed sadly and said, ‘A mentor, a true mentor who cared about me.’ The fact that her room is less than adequate or that her caseload exceeds 30 students is not as serious as the lack of emotional support she is experiencing” (p. 36). Beginning teachers need emotional and psychological support as they navigate the transition to classroom teacher, though most teachers struggle to receive adequate support after student teaching. The literature suggests that mentoring not only plays a crucial role in the professional development of beginning teachers, but in their psychological and emotional success as well.

Of the five mentoring functions identified by Anderson and Shannon (1998), sponsoring, encouraging, counseling, and befriending all overlap social, emotional, and

psychological needs. Successful teachers need support in various capacities; providing professional development that focuses only on content or pedagogical practices does a disservice to teachers. Mentorship for beginning teachers, in their first and second years, has the potential to affect retention, but even more importantly, has the potential to make educators feel supported and cared for, which in turn allows them to be better sources of support for their students.

There are various models for mentoring early career educators, each with its own benefits and determinants. In one model, the Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS), mentorship is somewhat streamlined. In their piece, “Stopping the Leak: Retaining Beginning Teachers”, Richardson, Glessner, and Tolson (2007), examine the implication of the Texas Beginning Educator Support System, a program which provides systemic mentoring to beginning teachers under the assumption “that beginning teachers who had TxBESS support would attain greater professional expertise more quickly than unsupported teachers, leading in turn to higher academic achievement among students” (p. 3) The model utilized training on interpersonal skills and communication strategies as well as a teaching rubric (TAP) and conferences to support beginning teachers through the crucial early years. TxBESS was associated with higher retention rates for beginning teachers, high school teachers, and minority teachers. Researchers found that 67 percent of respondents “mentioned that their mentors' assistance significantly affected their decision to remain in the teaching profession” (p. 8). The mentors themselves “reported that serving as mentors positively affected their professional growth” (Richardson, Glessner, and Tolson, 2007, p. 3). Richardson et al.’s work shows that ideal mentor-mentee relationships are mutually supportive and beneficial to both parties.

Strong mentors go a long way in supporting beginning teachers, but caring administrators also play a vital role in retention, as well as fostering feelings of contentment and commitment to a school community. Cherkowsky (2014) found that when school leadership is focused on authentic emotional expressions and cultivating an environment where faculty and staff feel supported and trusted, monumental growth ensues. In this case, the principal, Norm, “endeavored to create an atmosphere of trust, care, compassion, and joy in the school through his consistent attention to creating deep connections with his teachers, staff, and students” (p. 61), and was, by any account, wildly successful at transitioning the school culture from that of a hierarchical institution to a true learning community where collective wisdom and shared goals reign. The teachers in the study spoke not only of their commitment to their school, with one teacher reflecting that in a different setting she may have left the profession entirely, but also “credited Norm with the positive changes they were beginning to see in the school organization” (Cherkowsky, 2014, p. 63). The effect of mentorship and administration, and to what degree that effect is positive, are based partly on the degree of social and emotional support offered. The importance of true, authentic relationships and supporting beginning teachers (and all community members) cannot be overstated.

Beginning teachers thrive in communities with supportive mentors and administrators, but that is not always the environment they find themselves in. While all scholarly communities should strive to provide supportive mentors and administrators, the reality is that many beginning teachers will teach in communities that lack support and will need to find it elsewhere. Communities for early career English educators,

facilitated by veteran teachers, can offer a third space to provide, among other things, the vital support and socialization that beginning teachers need.

Authentic Relationships and Community Connections

Schlichte et al. (2005) attribute socialization and collegiality as two of the protective factors for beginning teachers, as well as possible antidotes to loneliness and alienation, writing, “Collegiality is recognized in the professional literature as one of the important variables in the successful first-year experience. Collegial isolation relates to burnout, and Miller et al. emphasized the importance of leadership and collegiality to reduce stress, build confidence, and reduce feelings of isolation” (p. 36). The National Writing project also harnesses the power of collegiality in professional development. Whitney (2008), when writing about the experience of teachers participating in the National Writing Project Summer Institute, writes that, though most of the work is done alone, both writing and teaching are social acts. She explains that teachers often credit the institute, a collaborative community of teacher-writers, as life-changing, and acknowledges that the NWP network foregrounds writing “behind the growth that teachers experience within that network.” In both instances, researchers highlight the value of community and collaboration as both a method of professional development and an antidote to burnout.

Liberman and Friedrich (2007) came to similar conclusions, finding supportive communities are ideal for professional development and growth and that leaning on community was paramount for fostering a stance as both a leader and a learner. The authors wrote, “In their leadership, these professionals drew on the community of the National Writing Project, which renewed their excitement for learning and taught them

that they could continually improve their own practice as well as others” (p. 47). The scholarship points to socialization and collegiality as crucial indicators of professional development, emotional support, and feelings of contentment and commitment to the profession, but relationships with colleagues are only part of the puzzle of community commitment.

Relationships with students, as well as creating a classroom community that fosters support and camaraderie, are also vital to teacher satisfaction and enjoyment. In “Students Learn from the People They Love”, David Brooks (2019) argues for putting relationship quality at the center of education. “The bottom line is this, a defining question for any school or company is: What is the quality of the emotional relationships here?” Brooks follows with a series of questions: “And yet think about your own school or organization. Do you have a metric for measuring relationship quality? Do you have teams reviewing relationship quality? Do you know where relationships are good and where they are bad? How many recent ed reform trends have been about relationship-building?” He offers readers a chance to reflect on their professional relationships and to imagine the possibilities when social and emotional needs are prioritized and valued, further questioning, “When you start thinking this way it opens up the wide possibilities for change. How would you design a school if you wanted to put relationship quality at the core? Come to think of it, how would you design a Congress?” Both students and teachers benefit when emotional relationships are at the forefront of education.

Other institutions, such as the National Board and the National Council of Teachers of English, also offer educators a collaborative space to refine their pedagogical prowess in communities of practice, which Wenger (2009) defines as “groups of people

who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). One of the Five Core Propositions of The National Board Certification for Teachers (2016) is “Teachers are members of learning communities” and highlights the importance of community with colleagues and administrators, students and families, and other stakeholders. In relation to professional development, the National Board explains that, “accomplished educators work with one another to strengthen their teaching practices [...] engage in pedagogical discussions and collaborate to improve their teaching methods and explore new instructional strategies.” Individuals and sites across the NCTE network corroborate the National Board recommendations.

Bryan Ripley Crandell, in his 2019 *Voices From the Middle* piece, “Who We Are Together: Emphasizing Community in the Work We Do”, writes that “Building community, especially a community of writers, should be at the core of teaching practices” (p. 10). Later in the article, Crandell explains how the Connecticut Writing Project emphasized ubuntu, writing, “Ubuntu, the South African ideology for togetherness, humanity, and community engagement, is often translated as “I am me, because of who we are together” At its heart, a community is made better when all individuals feel strong membership within the group” (p. 12). Crandell’s ideas are echoed in another NCTE publication, a blog post from Leigh Ann Eck, who, at the start of the 2020 pandemic, wrote, “Teacher communities come in many different forms, and can be beneficial to our growth not only as teachers but also as humans, especially right now.” What both authors, and many scholars, have addressed is that connection is, always has been, and always will be at the heart of education.

Where teachers find that connection— be it in colleagues, students, administrators, and in local or national communities— depends on how many communities they have access to. In many cases, though not all, early career teachers can feel intimidated speaking up or sharing experiences in groups largely dominated by veteran teachers, which constitutes most of our professional organizations, even PLCs. One of the goals of early educator communities is to provide a judgement-free space where teachers can share their experiences (and perceived failures) among their peers who are going through similar if not identical experiences themselves. Providing a place for beginning teachers to be vulnerable, yet still emboldened to share their true experiences, is the work of this community. Since many beginning teachers are struggling to keep their heads above water, and to stay one day ahead of their students, creating communities designed specifically for early career development can offer these teachers a much-needed place for personal and professional development, collaboration, friendship, collegiality, and support, without the potential for feeling they need to posture or impress senior teachers.

Sustainable Teaching Practices

Mary Rose O'Reilley (2005), at the end of her career, reflects on burnout and breakdown in the teaching profession, writing, “I hope you will not leave teaching forever, but rather retire now and again to get your breath. Retreat, replenishment, nurturance-how quickly we can lose track of the importance of these simple requirements of the stable soul” (p. 61). O'Reilly hints at the dire need for teachers to prioritize themselves in a profession that can pull them so strongly in so many different directions that it can feel as if they are unraveling at the seams. Sustainable teaching, a growing movement, offers a new framework for understanding what it looks like to prioritize

mental and emotional health for teachers. The Colorado State University Writing Project (2020) defines sustainable teaching as: “the process of fostering self-compassion and renewal in educators who support the growth and development of students in turn. Sustainable teaching puts educators first with the goal of creating a collaborative community that values an integrated approach to education and enables all participants to thrive”, an idea that was introduced by Burns et al. (2018), and immediately captivated and intrigued English educators as a part of the potential antidote to burnout and attrition.

According to the The Colorado State University Writing Project (2020) , components of sustainable teaching include:

- cultivating self-compassion and a gracious mindset toward others
- acknowledging and embracing our own vulnerability
- recognizing limits and stressors, then setting boundaries so that we don't exhaust our resources
- developing a repertoire of mindfulness practices and actually using them to build personal resilience and professional longevity
- reserving space for self-care, play, and laughter
- creating and actively participating in a support system for personal and professional growth
- identifying allies who will advocate on our behalf and help us locate and leverage resources to enable our professional longevity
- modeling for all stakeholders, including our students, how to live and work sustainably

The above components to sustainable teaching, unfortunately, do not just happen. Educators must intentionally and mindfully foster sustainable teaching practices, and, to do so, must learn about them in the first place. Since the vast majority of undergraduate and graduate teaching programs in the United States do not offer or require a course on sustainable teaching, doing this work and gaining this knowledge is the responsibility of individual teachers.

Beginning teachers are in a unique position to apply sustainable teaching methods from the onset of their career, disrupting the potentially damaging dynamic that has led to the current attrition rates. Communities of support and practice for early career educators can foster relationships with colleagues, encourage beginning teachers to cultivate sustainable teaching practices, and provide a space to reflect and work through their professional and personal experiences. By providing a time and space for this important work, communities also promote mindfulness, wellness, and intentionality, which are linked to teacher satisfaction.

Mindfulness in the Classroom

Bell hooks reinforces the importance of mindful teaching from a wellness paradigm in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, writing, “It is essential that we build into our teaching vision a place where spirit matters, a place where our spirits can be renewed and our souls restored” (p. 183). Thich Nhat Hanh and Katherine Weare echo this sentiment, reflecting on the idea that teachers, whether intentionally or not, model behaviors that students mirror and are uniquely positioned to help students cultivate behaviors that they themselves have mastered, “An educator who knows how to take care of body and mind, how to cultivate joy and happiness, how to reduce stress and handle

difficult emotions, is someone who displays resilience and compassion, such a teacher would be able to help his or her students do the same” (p. xiiiv). When teachers are unable to renew and restore, stress can build up resulting in issues in and out of the classroom. Alternatively, when teachers are able to take care of themselves, they find more satisfaction in and out of the classroom (Hanh and Weare, 2017).

Patricia Jennings (2015) in her book, *Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom* reflects on her own experience of observing how “emotional reactivity interferes with teaching and learning” (p. 32), writing that she noticed teachers' emotional reactivity was especially detrimental to classroom management. Jennings also noticed that her own work on mindfulness and intentional behavior in the classroom were helpful in managing classroom emotions. In discussing mindfulness as a practice for teachers, Hanh and Weare (2017) explain:

Teachers who study mindfulness tend to experience fewer mental health problems, such as stress, depression, and anxiety. They report greater well-being, including a sense of calmness, life satisfaction, self-confidence, and self-compassion. They show an increase in kindness and compassion for themselves and for others, with greater empathy, tolerance, forgiveness, and patience, and less anger and hostility. Their cognitive performance improves, including their ability to pay attention and focus, make decisions, and respond flexibly to challenges. They make better teachers, showing higher levels of classroom management and organization, with greater ability to prioritize to see the whole picture, and to be more self-motivated and autonomous. They are more attuned to their students needs, and achieve more supportive relationships with them. They

also tend to have better physical health, including lower blood pressure, declines in cortisol (a stress hormone), and fewer reported physical health problems and days off work (p. xi).

Katie Egan Cunningham (2019) offers similar insights and connects mindfulness with happiness in her book *Start with Joy*, explaining that teachers must focus on and cultivate their own happiness in order to support students on the same quest. She shares research that shows classroom tension and stress are contagious and citing the fact that “teachers who had higher levels of burnout had students with higher levels of stress hormones each morning.” She also points out that with “half a million teachers leaving the profession each year” (p. 154), the number of students affected is tremendous. But the effect works both ways. Brooks (2019) showcases the reciprocal nature of mindfulness and intentional behavior, writing “Students have got to have a good relationship with teachers. Suzanne Dikker of New York University has shown that when classes are going well, the student brain activity synchronizes with the teacher’s brain activity. In good times and bad, good teachers and good students co-regulate each other.” In *Happy Teachers Change the World*, Hanh and Weare note that teachers need to cultivate happiness from within, and further explain that happiness is developed through “increasing our sense of connection with others, cultivating altruism and compassion, savoring the present, accepting with equanimity what cannot be changed, and building a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives” (p. xxxvii). As Jane Goodall so succinctly put it: “What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”

Teaching from a Wellness Paradigm

Hettler (1984) recognized the importance of wellness in education, stating, “It seems ludicrous to prepare a student for a lifetime career in their area of interest and not prepare them for the responsibilities of maintaining their life” (p. 17). Curry and O’Brien (2012) argue for teaching from a wellness paradigm, finding “that wellness planning may be one way to assist preservice teachers in developing strategies to combat early career stress, burnout, and attrition” (p. 186). The authors also explain the consequences of not focusing on wellness and sustainable teaching, writing, “The combined experience of instruction fatigue, job stress, and burnout may lead to greater attrition or lower career commitment among teachers because of job dissatisfaction” (p. 179). The call for wellness in education is a multifaceted issue; wellness is the result of many of the above factors, such as sustainable teaching practices and cultivating authentic relationships, but it is also the potential antidote to some of the transition tensions highlighted in section one, “Navigating the Two Worlds Pitfall.” Curry and O’Brien further explain, “Wellness may be considered more than avoiding disease or experiencing an absence of illness; there is an emphasis on prevention and lifestyle choices that promote optimal functioning” (p. 180). If their call to action for preventative measures is to be adopted in education, and for beginning teachers in particular, then schools, districts, and universities must offer teachers the knowledge to achieve wellness and the time and place to apply that knowledge.

Teachers have always been busy, but due to the ongoing pandemic, they are busier than ever before as they navigate entirely new teaching systems, virtual learning environments, and unprecedented strains on mental health (both their own and their students). For beginning teachers especially, negotiating their teaching responsibilities in

light of the pandemic is extremely challenging. Making friends, reaching out to colleagues, and arranging times to meet would be adding to an already full plate; putting that work on teachers is not sustainable and, likely, given their overwhelmingly full schedules, making time for communities of practice would not make the cut. But having a space to share their experiences with friends and colleagues is important. Teachers deserve a place where time is devoted to exploring and discussing the practices which support them in their pursuit of “ongoing professional self-renewal and development” (Conference on English Teacher Education, 2017). To ensure this space does not become another item on educators' never-ending to-do lists, arranging and facilitating early career communities should fall on those that are already in the profession of teaching and supporting teachers, such as university programs, induction programs, and local affiliates of national organizations such as NCTE.

Building Networks of Support

Too often, beginning teachers fall through the cracks of a system that was not designed with their needs in mind. Communities are not enough, on their own, to fully support early career educators; they make up one of the many ropes needed to weave together in creating the safety net that catches beginning teachers *before* they fall through the cracks. Supportive (and well-trained) mentors and administrators, as well as sustainable teaching practices and authentic relationships within the professional community must be woven together for supporting new teachers through the tensions and transitions of their first years in the classroom. When some or many of the protective factors outlined in this review are missing or ineffective, communities for beginning teachers can help to fill the gap. When protective factors are met, they offer another

opportunity for reflective teaching, collegiality, and professional development. In short, providing a space for beginning teachers has no downside but could be a retention strategy when systems fall short (as history suggests they often do).

The tensions surrounding beginning teachers' transitions into the classroom are emotionally, cognitively, and professionally challenging, and without the presence of protective factors, these challenges can cause teachers to leave the profession. The tensions are widespread, they are common, but they are not necessarily normal, and it certainly doesn't have to be this way. Drawing upon Curry and O'Brian's (2012) wellness paradigm, Wenger's (1998, 2009) communities of practice, and grounded in Freire's (1993) explanation of praxis as the synthesis of "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it", communities for early career development offer beginning teachers a place to cultivate collegiality and sustainable teaching practices from the onset of their career.

The NCTE Standards for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts (2012) call for teachers to "interact knowledgeably with [...] colleagues based on social needs and institutional roles, engage in leadership and/or collaborative roles in English Language Arts professional learning communities, and actively develop as professional educators." The field of English education is devoted to supporting beginning teachers in this quest. Part of that support must come from colleagues and networks of support where teachers can reflect on their experiences and consider lines of inquiry in their teaching lives, and where they can find renewal, inspiration, and camaraderie. These crucial elements of sustainable teaching keep teachers teaching. Communities for beginning teachers also offer mental, emotional, personal, and

professional support, which counteract the feelings of isolation and ineffectiveness cited in the literature. They combine communities of practice (Hahn and Weare, 2017), professional learning communities, and affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) to cultivate personal and professional growth.

English education is nothing without English educators; finding ways to keep educators invested and happy should be at the heart of this field. Scholarship supports this assertion; substantial research in the field has been devoted to beginning teacher development. Yet, communities for beginning teachers are rarely written about; instead, much of the focus is on case studies of early career educators or PST seminars. Research indicates that the first year of employment has a critical impact on the learning and retention of beginning teachers; further research on communities for first- and second-year teachers can help to fill the gap in literature as well as the gap in teacher support.

This study aims to present opportunities for English Teacher education and initial teacher induction programs to consider further what it means to prepare and support beginning teachers. As someone who is committed to English teachers, teaching, and teacher education, it is my sincere hope that this research will provide insight into factors that support the socialization and professional development of English teachers as well as provide a better understanding of the kinds of programs that may be useful in supporting early career English educators on a larger scale.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Research Site

The setting for this study was the Phoenix metropolitan area, a large valley in central Arizona. The setting comprised economically, racially, and culturally diverse cities, towns, and suburbs. Teachers from all over the state were invited to participate, though in-person meetings were held in the valley, at Arizona State University's Tempe campus. I originally intended for all meetings to be in person, but due to COVID-19 precautions, we ended up having many meetings online, via zoom. The research site, ASU, has a long history of community outreach for ELA educators as it is also the site of the Central Arizona Writing Project (a local affiliate of the National Writing Project), the annual Día De Los Niños, Día De Los Libros (a celebration of books, authors, and literacy workshops for local students and teachers), and has previously housed the Arizona English Teachers Association, a local affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Participants

I recruited participants by sharing a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) with the Arizona English Teachers Association and Central Arizona Writing Project to distribute among their members and social media, as well as sharing the flyer with my own methods students (current and former). The flyer had a link to the Arizona English Teachers Association website Early Career page (Appendix B), where interested parties could sign up for the community. The community was open to all secondary English Language Arts teachers in the state of Arizona in their first year of teaching. Since

meetings were (meant to be) held in person, a criterion for inclusion also included teachers willing and able to travel to the location (Tempe, Arizona). I placed no other criteria for inclusion beyond that; first year ELA teachers were invited to participate regardless of district affiliation (public, private, charter), background, race, gender, age, ethnicity, grades taught, classes taught, tracks taught (honors, AP, dual enrollment), certification status (emergency or traditional), membership in AETA or CAWP, or any other identifying criteria.

Five teachers initially signed up to participate in the community. Through our opening correspondence, one teacher shared that they had been in the classroom for five years, but they were taking on a new role in ELA. Since this group was specifically designed for early career educators, I suggested the teacher join the Central Arizona Writing Project and the Arizona English Teachers Association and provided links to their offerings. The teacher agreed that CAWP and AETA were a better fit. Another participant emailed me the day before our first meeting to say that she was no longer going to teach in the fall; she had been offered a promotion at her job with the YMCA and the pay was significantly higher than her teaching salary would have been, so she decided to stay. As she was no longer teaching, she did not join us for meetings. That left three first-year teachers:

Meri: Meri has an infectious smile, an easy laugh, and an incredibly warm and kind demeanor. She is thoughtful, creative, and artistic. Connection and empathy are Meri's hallmarks, and she makes everyone around her feel seen.

Danielle: Danielle is a deep thinker. She is kind, focused, and reflective. Danielle is the type of person (and teacher) that others gravitate towards because they

know they can count on her. She is a creative and encouraging educator and person.

Annie: Annie connects to and brings people together by making them feel instantly comfortable and at ease. She tells it like it is. Annie is funny, engaging, convivial, kind, clever, and driven.

Participant	Teaching Certification	Grade Taught	Classification	Age	Ethnicity
Meri	Traditional	9 th grade ELA	First-year	25	White
Danielle	Traditional	7 th grade ELA	First-year	22	Hispanic
Annie	Emergency	10th grade ELA	Student-teaching/ First-year	43	White

I knew all three participants before the community began; each of them had enrolled in my Methods of Teaching Composition course (though not in the same session), through the Arizona State University English department. To honor the unique and specific experiences of my participants, as well as the “contemporary, real-life events” (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl, 2016, p. 20) of the community, I employed a case study methodology and a participant observer stance. I chose this methodological stance to account for the foundational nature of relationships to this study and community and “the fact that the researcher is part of the social world he or she studies and can’t avoid either influencing this or being influenced by it” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 90). The relationships that I built with the participants before, during, and after the community are integral to this study as they contributed to a greater sense of trust, intimacy, and engagement. As Maxwell (2013) explains, “[Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis]

argued that ‘relationships that are complex, fluid, symmetric, and reciprocal [...] reflect a more responsible ethical stance and are likely to yield deeper data and better social science’ (pp.137-138) and they emphasized the continual creation and renegotiation of trust, intimacy, and reciprocity” (p. 92). Fostering relationships was critical for establishing a community among the participants, which was a priority of this study.

Curricular Design

The community meetings took place once a week, on Sunday afternoons, for 12 weeks in the fall of 2021. Meetings began at the end of July, roughly two weeks before the first day of school, and lasted until the first week of October, right before fall break for the participants. I created the curriculum for beginning teachers to have a space to share their experiences, find support and camaraderie among their colleagues, and discuss both sustainable teaching practices and current scholarship in English education. I wanted participants to think about the ways in which their practices in the classroom and in their school communities were contributing to feelings of contentment and commitment to the profession (or not, if their practices were contributing to feelings of stress, overwhelm, and burnout). Through writing and discussing participants’ thoughts and responses, I hoped to shed light on how their experiences contribute to their identity as English educators, as well as their personal feelings of contentment with the profession.

I was also very cognizant of the fact that teachers needed time and space to discuss issues that came up in their classrooms that would not fit into my prompts or planned activities. To account for this need, weekly meetings alternated between workshop and discussion; every other meeting was a discussion-based meeting where participants directed the topic of discussion based what was happening for them in a

given week. This choice was based on my experience from my pilot study, where I followed a similar pattern towards the end of the study and found that giving teachers the autonomy to decide what they needed to discuss was incredibly helpful. In fact, it was through this strategy that we discovered all of the participants were dealing with issues of toxic positivity in their district and department meetings. As first year teachers, two were told that they were “lucky to have a job at all” when they attempted to voice their concerns with online crisis-teaching through the pandemic, and they were shut down in a similar fashion any time they attempted to voice valid concerns. Without adopting an open forum during that meeting, I would not have learned about this shared experience, nor would the participants have had a chance to talk through it with one another, so I was determined to have open discussion time in my dissertation study.

In order to keep the coherence and unity of the meetings, I continued to start each meeting with an opening circle and ended meetings with a brief closing activity, but I encouraged participants to guide the discussion during every other meeting. Even on days where I was leading a workshop, I made sure to keep the focus of the work and discussion on the participants and their experiences. Each session followed a predictable pattern and involved several key components: each meeting began with (1) greetings (and snack for in-person meetings), followed by (2) opening circle (where each participant shared celebrations and tensions of the week), (3) invitation to write and share, (4) workshop or discussion (depending on the rotation; see below), (5) closing announcements and goodbyes.

I created the following timeline and curriculum knowing that I would adapt it as needed, and I did just that: I often moved the order of workshops and topics around to fit

the needs and experiences of participants, and I added readings, topics, and strategies as needed. For example, after the first week of school, all three participants shared specific examples and significant concerns over challenging behaviors from students; the following week, instead of the originally scheduled topic of getting to know English education sources of support, I focused our workshop on building classroom community, harnessing student energy into positive opportunities, and redirecting behaviors before they became larger issues. I shared excerpts from *No More Teaching Without Positive Relationships* (Howard, Milner-McCall, Howard, 2020) and *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* (Christensen, 2017), and shared specific examples and strategies from my own classroom experience. We listened, discussed, and offered support for each participant and their unique experiences with challenging behaviors. In this way, we functioned as a true community of practice where we discussed and worked with topics that mattered to each member of the community (Wenger, 1998), instead of following a predetermined timeline or curriculum.

Similarly, it became clear very quickly that my participants loved to talk through their experiences in detail, so I also adjusted my original timeline and curriculum to address this preference and need. Whereas my pilot study participants seemed to prefer ample writing before shorter discussions, in this study, participants often started writing and within a minute or two, were thinking aloud and prompting discussions to begin. I had originally planned for one-hour meetings, but I found that, often enough, that was simply not enough time. Our first meeting, for instance, was just over two hours, and subsequent meetings fell between 1 and 2 hours (timing was dependent on varying

factors). I adjusted the curriculum to allow for more time to talk, less time to write, and shortened closing activities.

Table 3.1

Week/Date	Curriculum Focus	Activities
Week 1 July 25	Workshop: Setting up for Success	Writing: Expectations Planning for the first week of school Applying sustainable teaching practices
Week 2 August 1	“Setting up” experiences	Participant-led Discussion
Week 3 August 8	Workshop: Identifying Areas of Focus for Sustainable Teaching Practices	Dashboard Activity Wheel of self-care Reflective writing
Week 4 August 15	Sustainable teaching experiences <i>*first week of school</i>	Participant-led Discussion
Week 5 August 22	Balance Workshop: Leaning on Sources of Support	Sources of support map Revisit expectations and toxic stereotypes
Week 6 August 29	Balance and Support experiences	Participant-led Discussion
Week 7 September 5	<i>Pose Wobble Flow</i> Workshop	Evaluating poses and areas you want to wobble with (and guided writing) Conscious and unconscious competence
Week 8 September 12	<i>Pose Wobble Flow</i> experiences	Participant-led Discussion
Week 9 September 19	Identity and Intersectionality Workshop	Identity Maps and poems
Week 10 September 26	Identity and Intersectionality experiences	Participant-led Discussion

Week 11 October 3	Sustainable Teaching: closing workshop	Writing: Finding flow, strategies for wobbles, sustainable practice/mindset
Week 12 October 10	Sustainable Teaching: celebrations and tensions, plan for future	Participant-led Discussion

Data Collection

This study incorporates data from pre-and post-surveys, interviews, and recorded meetings:

- Pre- and post-community survey questionnaire (Appendix A)
- An open-ended interview conducted up to 4 weeks after the last community meeting

(Appendix B)

- Two follow-up letters, written one and two years after the community completion

- My observations as a participant observer in the community
- Recorded files from the meetings (recorded on my computer)

Survey Questionnaire

I decided to begin with a survey questionnaire for several reasons: (1) to gauge where my participants fell in certain categories and (2) to allow for written responses for those that struggle with off-the-cuff responses and interviews, and (3) to allow for brevity and focus within participant answers. Lastly, I used the responses, as well as the conversations from our meetings, to guide interview protocol, using interview time to follow up on ideas and salient themes.

The pre-survey questions center around transitions from student to teacher (with prompts like, “Tell me about your transition from student to teacher”) and experiences in teacher preparation programs. The questionnaire specifically asks participants if they felt anything was missing from their teacher preparation programs and if there was or is anything they felt/feel would be helpful in preparing them for classroom life. It also asks participants to rate their levels of contentment with and commitment to the profession on a Likert scale, (and asked again on the post-survey). The post-survey also asks participants to talk about their experience in the community, any insights they gained from the experience, and if they feel that their experience in the community impacted their experience in the classroom.

Interviews

In an effort to “make interviewing across a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored,” I followed Patton’s (1990) general interview guide, which allows for flexibility within each interview while still adhering to predetermined themes and ideas. The predetermined themes include many of the questions and topics from the surveys, including connections between community participation and classroom experience and teaching, as well as levels of contentment and commitment to teaching English language arts. I also ask about feelings of balance (between work and life) and what led participants to join the community.

Recorded Meetings

I used audio recordings from our meetings to review conversations and ensure accuracy of quotes as well as to refresh my memory when reviewing my analytic memos

and writing about the community. Each recording was saved as a file on my laptop and organized according to date. I chose not to transcribe the meetings in their entirety, rather, I transcribed specific excerpts that I wanted to examine in more detail, based on themes I created from my analytical memos and first and second cycle coding.

Analysis

My data analysis began with the process of data collection through my organization and labeling of materials as the study took place. I also categorized where I had missing data: I planned to collect pre- and post-questionnaires from all participants, though one participant did not complete either of the questionnaires, and another participant never returned the post-questionnaire. I planned to collect these items during our meetings but since we moved online due to COVID precautions and CDC guidelines, I relied on participants to email me their completed questionnaires. I also wanted to give participants time to reflect and write without feeling rushed, so I offered participants the option of emailing me their answers after the meeting had concluded. In retrospect, I should have kept my original plan to have participants complete and submit their surveys during our meeting. Though I did email reminders, one of the participants did not complete the questionnaires, and one of the participants completed the pre-survey only.

I conducted interviews on zoom with all participants within four weeks of our last meeting and used the interview to ask any questions that had not been answered for those that did not submit questionnaires. Following the interviews, I reviewed the zoom transcriptions for accuracy and made necessary revisions. Then, I saved the transcribed interview in the participants folder as well as in my general data folder in the interview section. I also created research memos after each meeting of the teacher group. All of

these materials were then stripped of identifying information and stored in a password protected folder on my laptop. I saved the audio files of each meeting on my laptop, according to date.

After completion of data collection, following Saldaña's (2009) *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, I went through the process of recursive and iterative coding. I began by reading and viewing all of the data for a first level of inference in chronological order as a way to gain an overall sense of the project, key occurrences, and major first-level themes. I chose to take handwritten notes for this part of the process so that I could freely make connections and multimodal maps as I reviewed the data. I used two notebooks for this process: a larger 8x10 for detailed notes on each individual piece of data, which I reviewed chronologically, and a smaller notebook where I focused my notes on themes and larger, reoccurring issues. I looked for categories, topics, and themes that came up various times, in various ways, throughout meetings, interviews, and survey results for all three participants. From this process, I created the following thematic categories:

1. Student Motivation and Challenging Behavior
2. Grading and Feedback
3. Emotional Dimensions of Teaching English Language Arts
4. Methods and Teacher Preparation Gaps
5. The First Weeks of School
6. Teachers Need Teachers
7. The Community (this study)
8. Contentment and Commitment (what helps/hinders?)

9. Compensation and Time
10. Time Management
11. Identity and Isolation
12. Support (site, mentor, district, organizations)
13. Phases of First Year Teaching

Though some of the themes certainly overlap, I waited to collapse the themes until my second cycle of coding.

Next, I reorganized the data based on participants, rather than chronological order of data event, and employed a second cycle of coding by designating a word or short phrase “that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing” (Saldaña, 2009, p.3) attribute for a portion of the data. For each participant, I followed their journey over the first 12 weeks of being classroom teachers and using a mix of their own words and my interpretations of their words and experiences, I created the following analyses by dividing their journey into three segments: Weeks 1-4: I, Weeks 5-8: II, Weeks 9-12: III.

Participant	Themes and Categories
Annie	I: Excited // Confident II: Supported III: Confident, connected
Danielle	I: Excited // Uncomfortable, unsure II: Growing confidence III: Empowered
Meri	I: Excited // Disrespected, challenged II: Inadequacies <i>and</i> triumphs with student connection, motivation, lesson planning III: student-centered pedagogy, skilled teacher

All of the participants noted how excited, yet nervous, they were as they anticipated the first week of school; I chose to divide part I with before and (//) after students joining the classroom. I also chose to focus particularly on their site and classroom experiences, though they did share many ‘teaching life’ experiences during meetings as well, which I looked at separately.

For the teaching life analysis, all three participants followed the same trajectory: (I) the year began with all three teachers spending the vast majority of their time on teaching, preparing to teach, or reflecting on teaching. They had little time for themselves, their friends and families, or time to decompress. (II) During meetings designed to examine balance and sustainable teaching practices, all three participants discussed the need to carve out time to focus on themselves and their lives outside of teaching (as well as how challenging it was and that it felt like a “trade-off”). (III) Listening to later meetings and interviews, as well as reading through Danielle’s post-community questionnaire, I noticed that all three participants commented on the ways in which they had found ways to prioritize themselves and their personal time more, though they often still struggled with the vast demands of teaching.

Following my second cycle coding, I employed a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) by organizing data into broad categories based on my initial coding, followed by collapsing these categories into the following larger themes:

1. The emotional dimensions of teaching English language arts
2. Aspects of successful classroom teaching not covered in teacher preparation programs and/or methods courses

3. The need for both professional *and* personal support, camaraderie, and continued learning
4. The role of early career communities of practice

Using the themes above as headings, I went back through my data and pulled any excerpt or idea that I thought connected to the themes to provide additional context. I then used these themes to develop theories about the data, detailed in my findings section.

I organized the data thematically, based on my coding and analysis, as well as by participant, so that I could view the data according to each individual's chronological journey. I organized and saved the data on my laptop in a folder titled "CECEE 2021." Within that folder, I have a folder for each participant where I save all data associated with that individual (demographic survey, questionnaire, interview recording and transcript). I also have a folder dedicated to data by theme. Within this folder I created subfolders that house all documentation and data associated with the themes I created during coding. This allows me to look at data chronologically based on the order of events (by participant and theme) as well as to examine data in isolation or as a portfolio of work. I created pseudonyms for each participant to ensure anonymity and kept a master list on my google drive under two-factor authentication.

One of the things I learned during my data analysis is that qualitative research is messy. I tried to keep myself organized through charts, notes, headings, and all of the above details, but despite my best efforts, this process often felt unwieldy. I attribute some of this feeling to the amount of data I was working with, but I also realize that, when working with people's stories, it can be challenging to categorize and code experiences and feelings. In some instances, a particular experience or event would

“begin” when a participant first shared it, but I would follow that event through various weeks and data points to get the whole story, which often had many varied (and sometimes contradictory) codes. I had to learn that I would not be able to organize all of the data as neatly as I had originally planned, and though that was a hard pill to swallow at first, ultimately, I think this shift in perspective helped me to see the participant’s experiences for what they really were: messy, real, authentic, and complicated.

Connecting to Research Questions and Larger Themes

After my initial coding cycles, data organization, and theme creation, I aligned my data with my research questions. I categorized all data in relation to the question I think it answers by creating a table for each of my research questions and combing each data set meticulously for the ways in which data addresses or answers (or challenges) the research question at hand. Through this process I made several conclusions about the study and findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from my qualitative case study and explores significant themes that I created as a result of meticulous analysis of the data. My findings are shared using a case study methodology (Creswell, 2014) and through my theoretical lenses of sustainable teaching theory (Burns et al, 2018) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000), and align with my research questions which address (1) how early career communities extend traditional methods courses and student teaching experiences, (2) what kinds of issues about teaching and the teaching life are raised in such a community, (3) how a community of practice for early career teachers influences sustainable teaching practices, (4) in what ways sustainable teaching practices offer support for beginning ELA teachers, and (5) which curricular approaches facilitated participation and engagement more than others and why.

My findings indicate that early career communities are necessary in light of the emotional dimensions of teaching English language arts, the many aspects of successful teaching that are not covered in teacher preparation programs, and the need for both personal and professional support, camaraderie, and continued learning for beginning teachers. Since school districts and sites are unwilling or unable to provide programming for beginning ELA teachers, local affiliates of national organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project, as well as university teacher preparation programs, must work together to provide opportunities for communities specifically designed to support early career English educators, while encouraging districts to prioritize this work in the future.

In this section, I highlight my findings in three areas: (1) the emotional dimensions of teaching ELA and the need for both professional and personal support, camaraderie, and continued learning, (2) aspects of classroom teaching that are not typically covered in teacher preparation programs, and (3) the value of community and support through early career communities of practice for beginning English language arts teachers. There are natural overlaps between these sections, as many of the data showcase all three of these areas at once, though I have provided discussion and evidence to explore these ideas semi-separately below.

**The Emotional Dimensions of Teaching English Language Arts:
The Need for Personal and Professional Support, Camaraderie, and Continued
Learning**

We laughed. A lot. We laughed during retellings of funny classroom moments, jokes we made during our conversations, the way things played out at school when emotions were high, and we even laughed at ourselves. We laughed at all kinds of things. The conversations were fluid and organic, and the company was supportive and warm. Listening to the meetings during my analysis, I was actually a bit surprised at just how much laughter there was. Because the topics were no doubt heavy at times, and the challenges were no doubt significant, but the group continued to be a place of joy and radical acceptance.

The authentic relationships and nature of support allowed us to share and reflect on experiences in a way that also allowed us to, once we were together, see some of these darker experiences in a new light. As we came together on those many sunny Sunday afternoons, the sting of the week's more emotional moments had passed, and we were

able to reflect and collectively offer perspective and empathy. So many times, after sharing their experiences (and sometimes in the midst of sharing), participants would exhale and say things like, “I needed this”, “I really needed to get that off my chest”, “I’ve been waiting all week to share this”, and “I knew you guys would understand this.” The ritual of opening our meetings by sharing our wins and celebrations, followed by our tensions from each week, was often a cathartic experience: participants were able to celebrate and *be* celebrated. When sharing their tensions, they were able to ‘get this off [their] chest’, and when listening, they were able to see that they were not alone in their experiences.

Participants often started sharing the second they walked through the doors or entered the zoom room; they told their stories with a sense of urgency– the words often tumbling out with haste and filled with emotion, as if they had been waiting all week to get out. Participants had been waiting, too–to let go of what had happened so that they could start the week with a clean slate and from a place of rejuvenation. On so many levels, the group functioned as any *true* community does: we listened to each other’s stories. We empathized, understood, and connected over these shared experiences.

In each of our meetings, participants reflected and worked through the emotional dimensions of teaching English language arts. Each week, we began with an opening circle where participants would share their celebrations from the week, followed by going around again and sharing their tensions from the week. In each instance, conversations would erupt during and after each person sharing–connections, commiserations, personal and professional support–the conversations were detailed and deep.

The first two weeks of our 12-week session were filled with feelings of excitement and anticipation. Participants were looking forward to setting up their classrooms, getting to know their future students, colleagues, and school communities, and finalizing professional details. Simultaneously, they felt anxious, under prepared, and uncomfortable with their new roles. Both Meri and Annie ran into documentation issues (through no fault of their own) that meant they legally had to have a substitute teacher in their room with them, which caused some feelings of distress. On the Sunday before the first day of school, nerves were setting in and everyone mentioned their mixed feelings—excitement mingled with anxiety, one moment they felt confident, and in the next, unsure.

Knowing how powerful deep breathing can be for regulating the body, and following the work of Patricia Jennings (2015), I reminded participants that there would be times of significant stress in their classrooms and that they would need strategies for regulating themselves: taking a moment to pause and take a few deep breaths was one of their most accessible and effective options. I did this so that when the inevitable moment came when beginning teachers felt their heartrate climbing, hands shaking, and anxiety taking over, they could, hopefully (with time and practice), pause, breathe, and help themselves.

I also made sure to normalize things “going wrong” and mentioned that sometimes we get overwhelmed and wish we handled a situation differently; in those instances, we learn from the experience and move forward, taking accountability and repairing as necessary. I wanted to normalize making mistakes and having plans go awry

so that my participants were less likely to consider their inevitable challenges as personal flaws or evidence that they were in the “wrong profession.”

When we met on Sunday following the first few days of school, Meri and Annie reflected on specific connections they made with individual students, and how positive that felt for them. Annie also mentioned she had a few students who might have ‘problem behavior’ so we talked about ways to harness student energy so that they could be an asset to the learning community. Annie shared how she felt having a substitute in the room with her, saying it was “strange and uncomfortable, almost undermining” and that she did not tell her students she was a first-year teacher as she thought they might “take her less seriously.” Danielle and Meri agreed, saying they also wanted to appear as if this was not their first-year teaching.

Yet, they were experiencing many of the difficulties of beginning teachers. The first days of school had been an emotional rollercoaster for all of the participants. Danielle felt “uncomfortable” for the first few days, noting that she was stressed and nervous and that she felt shaky, her stomach in knots as she started class. Annie said the emotional bandwidth of trying to figure out the documentation/substitute issues had taken all of her energy. “My energy was so off [on the first day of school]. I wish I could have started over on Thursday and done it differently” she reflected. Danielle expressed her dismay when her opening activity went awry; one of her students, when asked to share her name and a fact about herself with the class, began crying and Danielle was not sure why, nor was she able to really console the student. Annie had two students who

were “rude, disrespectful, and distracting” and pausing her teaching to redirect them had thrown her off.

The following Sunday, after each of the participants had over a full week of teaching under their belts, they celebrated connections with students and reflected on the ways in which teaching was both mentally and emotionally draining. They worked through their feelings by sharing not only what happened, but how they *felt* in the moment. It was cathartic to share their experiences and feelings, and to see that their fellow beginning teachers were navigating similar situations and feelings as well.

Danielle started us off by saying, “I’m doing good– I actually have like a better hold on everything this week.” She discussed meeting with her department chair and asking about curriculum, only to be told, in a roundabout way, that “everyone kind of does their own thing”, which was both liberating and concerning for Danielle. She explained that she was setting a goal to have her next unit plan done by the end of August, though she had some tensions about planning the unit because she did not understand her site and district expectations. She reflected:

I just was really stressed [about creating the unit], and it was causing me some major discomfort and stress, so I am very thankful for [having a] testing period [where I had time to work on the unit plan]. [The testing period] was kind of sprung on us, but it ended up working out just because, like I needed that time to just gather myself, and I don't know, I just needed a lot of time to process and get everything in order.

Having time to decompress and “process” everything on their plates was a common reflection from the group and one that we discussed in detail. The participants explained that they had never been in situations where they were needed by so many people at

once, while simultaneously navigating so many new, unknown issues; this caused them to feel overwhelmed. Annie explained:

I'm not really very well in the moment. I mean, I don't think I ever really thought about just how crazy it is to teach a class— you're going from like bell to bell, then you have like this five-minute passing period, and then you're back at it. It's pretty wild. Also, it's not like you just have that five minutes to sit and you're by yourself, you're, you know, saying goodbye to one group and then you're at the door greeting the next group, you're making sure your slides are [ready to go] or— just all this stuff. It's not— it's very non-stop, it's very fast paced, and I think that I just haven't ever actually thought about the logistics of that and it's, it's kind of crazy.

Annie discussed her schedule and how she felt there was little to no down time, and that she did not have adequate time to prepare for the next class, which was causing her to feel stressed and anxious. She concluded, “On Thursday- and I’m not even kidding you— I didn't have time to read the article that they were annotating before [I started teaching it].” I normalized and validated the feelings the participants were sharing and offered various strategies and practices to help them feel more prepared, but I also acknowledged that teaching is an incredibly stressful and busy career. Every teacher has been in a situation where they were five minutes ahead of the students. And even the most prepared teachers will go through the day having little to no time to themselves; teaching is an incredible amount of work. Hence why we must employ sustainable and restorative practices whenever and wherever we can to combat these feelings of stress and overwhelm.

On this particular day, I guided participants through a ‘two-word check-in’, an idea I got from Brené Brown’s “Unlocking Us” podcast. In this simple yet powerful exercise, which I was modeling for participants as something they could also do with their students, participants chose two words to summarize how they were feeling that

week. Danielle perfectly captured the nuanced, complicated, and complex duality of teaching, as she responded to Annie and added:

I am definitely right there with you— I get the feeling of like being anxious and like I don't even really know what I'm doing, but the two words that I chose were optimistic and enthusiastic just because it is my first week going into actual content, so I've been spending my weekend sort of planning out the week and looking at different activities.

Danielle said she was excited to start teaching content (and moving away from procedures, routines, and testing) and looked forward to designing units of study that were empowering for her students. Simultaneously, she felt nervous about all of the planning ahead of her and wondered if she would have time to find the best model texts and plan engaging activities. Feelings of stress and discomfort, mingled with feelings of excitement and joy, were common for all three participants. Though they all reported feeling “much more comfortable” as the weeks went on, feelings of stress continued to come up throughout the 12-week session.

Meri had a particularly difficult time in the beginning of the year. During one of our meetings in late August, as we moved into our tensions from the week, she shared the following reflections from her classroom experience:

Um, for me it's like getting the kids to want to try, or like care, just a little bit about something, and I've tried saying, ‘Oh, this is worth 50 points, it's a big assignment’, but I don't feel like that's the best motivator. So, I've tried to tell them why we're doing it and everything, but it's like, they just don't care. And I am on a team where pretty much all of our kids have failed seventh and eighth grade. They've just been pushed through to high school, so I think that they've learned that like, it doesn't matter if they try because they'll just get pushed through, but that changes in high school and so it's just hard because, like they don't care, or they just don't want to even try. Like, when I had them try and come up with an example of alliteration, I couldn't even get them to pick a word or pick a letter that we could brainstorm together, so it's just like, I feel I'm putting in 100% and they're not even giving me 1%.

In my response to Meri's tension, I validated her feelings, normalized the situation, and held space for this difficult experience. Meri was in a very challenging situation because she was not just teaching content or trying to cover more content than she originally planned, she was actively trying to teach her students to unlearn the message that they had been given for the past few years: that their work in the classroom was not a valuable use of time and that they would 'pass' regardless of the work they produced and the skills they mastered. I gave specific examples of how she could approach the situation by connecting with students and learning their genuine interests, and then build her lessons and curriculum in a way that was engaging and relatable while still supporting students as learners and thinkers. Then, I asked the participants how they might approach the situation. I did this so that my participants could see that (1) they all had important ideas and pedagogical knowledge to share, (2) different teachers approach situations differently, and (3) they could count on this group as a source of support.

Danielle explained that she was also struggling with student engagement and motivation, and that she was having particular difficulty navigating different learning styles and levels of comfortability while teaching the same lesson in different class periods.

First hour is a lot more engaging so I felt comfortable doing [the activity] as a class, but with my other classes, they kind of— they just stare at me. I could give them 10 minutes, they will not say a word, and I really struggled with that. I heard it all the time, like, “embrace the silence” but it was a lot, so I chose to put them in groups, and, for the most part, they were kind of working together. I did feel a little bit frustrated because a one-day activity turned into a two-day activity, just because they were off task and they couldn't decide on a topic and it was a whole thing, but once we went over it, they did really well.

And then I said, “all right, we're going to share”, and I also numbered everyone in the group so like person number one is going to share out. Then, it was the expectation that somebody from that group had to share and person number one is going to start. Otherwise, they're just going to stare at each other so that's something that really helped me out this past week. I would recommend, I guess, in whatever you're doing, make them talk about it first with their groups. That way when you ask, you kind of know that everybody had some type of discussion about it, I did have those students that were not— just didn't want to like share what they went over. But that was a waiting game, like, I did tell them, “we talked about it, I know you have it, what do you have in your journal?”, because I made them do the summary in their journal. That was just a lot of waiting games, but that's something I've noticed that has really helped my participation is getting them in small groups first or even talking with a partner.

Danielle's response represented her support of Meri and her efforts to help Meri work through issues in her own classroom, but it also represented a teachers-teaching-teachers model, popularized by the National Writing Project. In addition to using their own classroom experiences to support their fellow participants, engaging in this type of work also aims to support the identity development of teachers. When beginning teachers can see that they are a trusted advisor to other teachers, this supports their identity as a qualified, effective teacher in their own right.

Annie's response further illustrates this idea. She shared that she had found success using a deck of playing cards to assign each student a card, then used the cards to arrange groups, activities, and in-class responses. Annie highlighted the democratic element of this approach, noting that students might feel more comfortable if they were called on “by the cards” and not by Meri personally. “I was just like, wow— and because it wasn't me just like picking a name, they didn't feel like it was personal [to call on students to answer a question] like they're being picked on. It works so well! I was like wow, this is amazing. We actually had really great group discussions, just because I was pulling the cards.”

Meri appreciated the ideas and support of the group, sharing that she had tried several similar ideas but that the students still did not respond. She shared that she was questioning her career as a teacher.

I'm honestly like questioning everything about teaching for me because they do not respond. I just, I don't think they respect me. And it's been so hard because they don't do anything, and like I tried, like I've asked everyone on my [teaching] team and, like they are just not responsive. They just, they do not care and so I told them, on like Thursday, because they had—they were just behaving awful on Thursday and I asked my [colleagues], "hey, are you guys having a really hard time with them?", [and they responded] "yeah, they're being awful." My aunt just got put in hospice that morning, and so I [said to my students] "hey guys, like just to be quite honest, I'm having a really hard day like, there's stuff going on with my aunt and if we could just like, get this done that'd be really awesome for me because I'm having a hard day." And this one kid was like, "I could care less about anything you're saying, right now", and so I was like, well let's go chat outside like let's, let's go outside then, let's have a conversation, and he didn't get any better from there, so, and it's just like, I did— I just don't know what to do.

Meri looked defeated, and it was clear that this situation had been weighing on her. Annie asked if she had tried calling home and Meri said that she had called a few parents but did not have much luck. Meri was not going to get much outside support (when asked about her admin, she had said, "they've pretty much just been telling me to just write them up, but I'm like, I'd be writing up so many people every day") so I mentioned that in some situations, calling home or involving admin won't make any difference in student behavior—it could even make it worse. I encouraged Meri to focus her energy on the classroom community and culture; I spoke about the importance of boundaries (and holding them in a firm but warm manner), and not taking things personally (as much as possible), and how to work towards a supportive, collaborative classroom community by centering relationships. I also shared some of my own beginning teacher experiences with students who, initially, were very challenging and made me question my teaching ability,

but that, over time, became students who I loved dearly and who became some of my biggest supporters. Then, I explained that she would need to address the situation with her students and offered dialogue and rationale for how she might approach this.

Meri's struggles in the classroom were far from over; she still had challenging work ahead of her, but she had resources, ideas, and community support. "I appreciate it—all the support, it's ..." she smiled as we all nodded. We all understood the importance of support. "Thank you all so much" she said. Meri looked visibly lighter as our meeting came to a close.

Our meeting that day lasted for over an hour and a half, yet we never moved past the opening circle exercise because the experiences and issues that each participant brought to the table were important, complex, and required the group's time and attention. I use this example from our late August meeting to illustrate how our community of practice served its members in various ways—offering emotional support to members experiencing difficulties and emotional struggles with teacher identity, professional support and extension of methods and teacher preparation courses through specific advice, ideas, and strategies, and a way for beginning teachers to share their experience and expertise—but also to show how and why the curricular focus was so flexible. We needed to hold space for the real experiences that participants were having.

The Emotional Challenges of Being an ELA Teacher

Those of us in teaching know that this is a people-focused career. Though curriculum and content are critical aspects, neither are nearly as important as the *students* who are learning the curriculum and content. Throughout our 12-weeks of meetings,

students and their stories came up many times. Often, participants shared anecdotes where students made them laugh with clever and witty remarks or impressed them with their creativity, thoughtfulness, and ingenuity. There was no shortage of conversations about the incredible people that the participants were teaching. Similarly, there were no shortage of conversations that touched on how, particularly as ELA teachers, we must navigate emotionally challenging and charged situations, respond to writing that details traumatic events, and facilitate healing in our classrooms. These conversations allowed participants to grapple with the complexities and contradictory nature of the emotional dimensions of teaching ELA, and that they, as teachers, can feel many things at once when navigating these situations.

Meri began the year with personal narratives as a way to get to know her students and their writing. In October, Meri reflected on how she was feeling after reading through her students' narratives:

“I really enjoy [teaching English language arts]; I love those light bulb moments, getting those notes [from students] that said, like, “I feel seen as a person [in your class].” So those are the moments [where I think], this is for sure what I’m supposed to do. That’s been amazing. But it is challenging. There is so much pressure. The school that I’m at, many of my kids are in foster care; many have been hurt. You can only read a couple [of their narratives] at a time because it’s a lot, emotionally, for me to handle that. When they wrote them, they didn’t necessarily have as much of a connection with me as they do now, and yet they still trusted me to write [and share] this. Alessia wrote, “I don’t think you’ll ever even read this, but I just wanted to tell someone” and it’s just like—oh my gosh—it’s a lot. So, it’s been really cool being in this position with them, but it is hard having all of that on you, especially because sometimes I don’t feel like I’m the most—[prepared to handle] everything [emotionally]. So that’s been hard.”

Meri went on to explain that because her lived experience differed from the experiences that her students were writing about, while she had incredible empathy, she sometimes struggled before she knew exactly what to say since she had not been there herself. The

discussion moved to how it felt when students shared really heartbreaking and deep experiences, and that teachers often felt that they had to hold on to that.

Meri reflected, “that's like the best way to put it, it's like holding all of it, even though, sometimes I don't feel ready for that. I don't know what to do with this now because I haven't experienced anything like what [my student is] going through or anything like what [they are sharing]. So, I think, “how can I still be a person that can help you even though it's completely unrelatable for me?”

Meri's question is an important one. The tensions surrounding participants' focus on helping their students through the more personal and emotional aspects of life, in addition to helping them academically, came up quite a bit throughout our months-long-session. Some of the issues that students faced were indeed unrelatable to participants, and others were more familiar; regardless of the personal connections they may or may not have had, participants went above and beyond to support their students.

Annie spoke about her student who told her he had ‘nothing to be proud of’ and recalled their conversation where she tried to build him up, explaining that he had so much to be proud of and offering key examples in the moment. When another student was feeling down and lost, Annie sat with him to listen to his story—she offered a listening ear, a bit of perspective, and lots of support. Her reflection led our group to discuss micro affirmations and the many ways to implement them in the classroom. Over the course of several weeks, Danielle spoke about two of her students who would come to her room during lunch because they felt safe there. They were at odds with another group of girls and the verbal altercations were close to turning physical; there had been threats from the other side and Danielle's students did not feel safe in the halls during lunch. So, Danielle and her classroom became a safe haven.

During our meetings, we discussed the situation, validating Danielle’s feelings and experience as she tried to offer advice and mediation for the conflict, and offering support and ideas for moving forward in a way that supported all students *and* Danielle (though administration was involved, the conflict persisted). Since Danielle was often covering other classes during her plan period (due to the severe sub and teacher shortage in Arizona) having students in her classroom at lunch meant that Danielle rarely had time to plan during the school day. She wanted to support her students and provide a safe space, but also needed time to plan, reflect, grade, and eat her lunch. In many instances, participants reflected on the idea that they often put their students and the needs of their students first, almost instinctively, without really thinking through the choice. Their first reaction was to prioritize their students. Participants were always thinking about how they could support their students as learners and individuals—even if it meant they were putting their own needs second, or as Annie put it during one meeting, “I always put myself last.” This became a topic of conversation that we came back to throughout our session: how can we take care of ourselves so that we can take care our students?

The Mental Load of Teaching

Meri, Danielle, and Annie spoke often about the mental and cognitive load of teaching. Throughout our twelve-week session, one of the ways that the mental load came up again and again was the idea of not being able to ‘turn off’—that teaching, and their teaching obligations, were always at the forefront of their minds. As a result, they often felt like they never had time to truly take a mental break from their jobs. During a

meeting in September, Meri shared that ‘turning off’ was becoming a serious tension for her. She shared:

I feel like it's hard to turn off. Every time I think of something, like, “Oh, I could maybe use this in the classroom”, or you'll hear something—like my mom will watch TV and a commercial will come on, and I want to be like, “hey, can you record that? That's a great example for my persuasive writing lesson.” So sometimes just like turning that off or just being able to stop replaying [something that happened in the classroom], like, “Oh, this one student made me so mad today and I responded like, ‘I’m a person, too.’” Being able to, at the end of the day, you know [tell yourself], okay, that happened, tomorrow's a new day, so stop thinking about that or stop worrying about other things. Like, “Oh my gosh, I have this plan for tomorrow, but what if they finish it in 20 minutes and then I don't have my next day planned yet, because I don't have the time”, so what do I do there?

All three participants expressed that the constant mental “teaching commentary and to-do list” was wearing on them. Despite working long hours (they often arrived early to finalize lesson plans before first period and stayed well-after the final bell), all of the participants felt that there was always more to do. It was hard for them to feel “done” and “caught up.”

The truth was that all of the participants were overwhelmed by the incredible amount of work it takes to teach. And all of that work took time that they often did not have to spare. Danielle, Meri, and Annie all struggled with finding a balance between their teaching responsibilities (including lesson planning, class readings, feedback, grading, email, parent phone calls, site and district meetings, and much more) and making time for their lives and time to rest. More often than not, especially in our early meetings, participants found that they prioritized work over their own rest and lives because they “had to” in order to be prepared to teach.

In mid-September, Annie mentioned that even when she “tried to take the weekend off”, it “never happened”; she explained that even though she was fortunate to have her mentor handling much of the lesson planning, she still needed time to prepare, such as grading and time to read the model texts so that she could effectively teach the lesson and facilitate class discussions, and that finding time to do that was challenging in light of everything else on her plate. Though Annie tried getting work done while at school (she mentioned that while her students took a benchmark writing test she was “able to get a few things done” such as responding to “a bunch of emails”) but that there was always something more to do and never enough time to do it. Each of the participants discussed this in their own way:

Meri: I feel like I need more time to do everything. Between grading everything—and even if I’m just looking for one standard to use with grading, it’s still reading a bunch of stuff. So, I need time for that. I need time to plan and then, not just a plan, but sometimes you get like a really cool idea, but you have to make something, even if it’s just a graphic organizer it takes time to make it. [I also need time] to reflect and to look through new things. As I’m designing a new unit on writing, I want to go back and look through [Penny Kittle’s] *Write Beside Them* because that’s just one of my favorites and say, oh, she does this, that’s a really cool idea, I’m going to incorporate that now. I need time to create.

Annie: [There are many aspects of teaching that are] hard, you know, lack of planning time that’s on the clock, or even time to grade—it’s ridiculous to think that a teacher can do everything in a one-hour prep. It is literally impossible to do the job well, even to do to the job not well, in that amount of time—you can’t. And so that means that teachers work at home or they stay really late hours, which you know, equates to them being underpaid. They’re underpaid anyway. But the fact that teachers *have to* work on the weekends, or they have to work after they get home, it really sucks, it does. I don’t think hearing about it properly prepared me for what that [is actually like].

Danielle: The whole sustainable teaching is a little bit of a tension for me just because I’m trying to like, don’t do work on Fridays after school, just go home, don’t do work on the weekend, but then I’m at the point where it’s like, well, when do I do the work? If I don’t do it then I’m just not going to be prepared. I did have a meeting and my mentor—the district gives us a mentor—and I realized

that I'm not, I felt a little bit... I talked about this in the beginning of our meetings but I'm not being supported in the way that I should be [at my school]. The more that I talk with other departments, other teachers—they have support. When [the district] mentor found out [that I was not getting support from the department] and that every seventh-grade teacher is doing their own thing she's like, "Oh no, like that's not how it's supposed to be."

Teaching is a profoundly challenging profession—mentally, emotionally, and even psychically. It always has been. To some degree, the experiences of my participants feeling overwhelmed and overworked is to be expected. Not accepted. But expected given the current state of affairs with education in America, specifically in Arizona. But what I noticed from listening to their experiences was that there were indeed ways to lighten the load of early career teachers. For one, Annie's experience having a mentor that shared expertly designed curriculum made a huge difference in her ability to feel confident, be an effective teacher, and find balance between work and home. Though Annie still struggled with time (she had an hour+ commute each way and, as a student-teacher, she also had additional obligations on her time, such as attending seminar classes in the evening) she was not struggling with the time and mental stress of curriculum design (and aligning with state standards and district mandated curriculum) that her peers were.

Secondly, I noticed that, as a veteran teacher and facilitator of the group, my encouragement to take time off, to stop or take a break, even if they did not feel "done" with the work, and my testimony of doing the same, allowed participants to consider a different perspective and course of action, one that they often had not been charting on their own. If we, as a field, can collectively change the narrative around teaching to focus on the importance and imperativeness of resting, taking breaks, and turning off, it

could drastically change the experience of teachers and support longevity in the profession. As one of my favorite people and mentors, Jessica Early, has said, “great teachers have great lives.” An important aspect of our group was addressing this critical shift in perspective and moving towards a place where participants felt comfortable prioritizing themselves without feeling guilty.

Navigating Site and Department Relationships and Support

Annie and Danielle both found themselves in schools and departments where they needed to navigate complicated inter-department relationships and situations where department colleagues were at odds with one another. In many instances, these issues got in the way of participant’s need for professional support. Danielle noticed these issues early on in her teaching experience. She felt caught between needing the support and guidance of her lead teacher, and the fact that her lead teacher often ignored and refused to work with her grade-level colleague. This left Danielle between a rock and a hard place, as she needed support from both colleagues and also did not want to get caught up in the issues between them. During our meetings, Danielle was encouraged to continue her relationships with both teachers, advocate for herself as a new teacher needing direction and support from the department chair, and still lesson plan with her grade-level colleague. Danielle was able to navigate a tricky situation (that, unfortunately, too many beginning teachers find themselves in) by advocating for herself, though she still lacked the site-level support she was looking for.

Annie found herself in a slightly different, though no-less complicated, situation. As an emergency certified first-year teacher, Annie was also completing her student teaching and did not have classroom experience, as her internship had been delayed and

then was held on zoom, where she did not get the teaching experience she expected. For the vast majority of our session, Annie had, by far, the most site-level support, which I think correlated to her feelings of contentment and confidence in the classroom during our early meetings. Annie was thankful that, for the first few weeks, her mentor teacher shared each daily lesson so that she was able to make adjustments as she saw fit but was not required to create her own lessons or curriculum from scratch. She said:

I've been thankful that my mentor teacher was just like, "here's the lesson, this is what we're doing [today], here are the resources here's the slideshow, essentially. And then I would make adjustments or tweak as needed, and, you know, like obviously things might get taught a little different, but always ending up in the same place and that was communicated, that they want everybody on the same page doing the same stuff, for continuity, that's the message I had received.

Annie also expressed that she was looking forward to taking over the lesson planning as she grew more confident with the district curriculum and her own teaching. She said:

I was really looking forward to PLC planning. I was like, 'okay, I've got this first quarter under my belt, I feel like I'm going to start being able to contribute more, learning how to actually like, do this stuff on my own, [and] create things, contribute'—[this] was the conversation my mentor teacher and I had been having. She kept reassuring me, 'You're right where you need to be.' [I was excited to] actually, you know, feel like I was contributing in a tangible way.

In mid-October, right as our community meetings came to an end, Annie's supportive metaphorical rug was ripped out from under her. Annie explained that she walked into a meeting where the department chair was chastising all of the new teachers in the department, saying, "Essentially, it boils down to you all [new teachers] have basically been freeloading; [mentor teacher has been] doing all the work for you." Annie went on to say:

What really sucked about it is that all of us afterwards felt like, 'What just happened?'. Because I thought we had been in communication about this stuff

and that I had been open and like, ‘what can I do [to help plan]?’ So, I was really hurt. And also, I didn't really understand.

During the meeting, Annie also found out the principal was involved, which made her feel upset that the department head and mentor teacher had not come to the beginning teachers directly before involving administration. Annie expressed how confusing and disappointing the situation was, and how she attempted to resolve the issue with her mentor teacher.

It was just really like—we all just felt... it was really hard for me because I was so excited going into this quarter. I felt like I was moving into that place where I was going to do [all of the planning myself] so I felt like the wind was just taken out of my sails the rest of the week. I was so defeated.

I went to my mentor the next morning because I was, like I was upset, and I was like, ‘I thought we were good, and I thought I was doing what I was supposed to do. I express my appreciation of you all the time and I asked what I can do, and I thought we were good’.

[My mentor teacher said] it wasn't about me but [she said], “some of this is my fault and I was doing it wrong; I shouldn't have done this with you, and now I can't.” So, she can't share [any resources and/or lessons] with me.

As she reflected on the experience, Annie wished her mentor would have given her a heads up about the meeting. She explained,

“It's like,[I wish she would have said] ‘I can't say anything but I just want you to know, like, what you're about to walk into isn't about you’, that would have been nice. [I wish she would have said] anything, because then, I mean I'm pretty sensitive. My own personal, like, you know, things that I have to deal with is, I have a big-time problem with thinking I'm a burden to others like it's this thing I have, I'm working on it. Going into that, feeling like I've been a burden and I didn't even know it, and this is like my personal hang up, I was a mess, so I never want to burden others. I just have issues with it, so I was like in tears talking to her.”

In the aftermath of this event, Annie's administration reached out to see how she was doing and to reassure her that the situation ‘was not about [her].’ But Annie felt that,

regardless of the origin and reasoning, she was still suffering the consequences of being without support. Annie and the other beginning teachers planned to work together to at least offer some level of collaboration for lesson planning. Annie said that she was feeling “really low.” That week, as Annie opened her class with the Monday Mudita, an opening writing activity where students shared something that brought them joy, Annie felt she was struggling.

[I told my students], ‘you know, I am not really okay right now. There’s just been some things that have been happening, and you know, I’m feeling pretty low...but I’m using this as an opportunity to find one thing’—because I have some kids who won’t participate in mudita, they’ll say they have nothing to be proud of or joyful about—‘I would encourage you guys, like we can always find something.’”

Annie went on to share that, though she was struggling, she liked her pants. They were comfy, worn jeans, and she was able to find a bit of joy in wearing them.

It doesn’t have to be big guys, you can find something to latch on to, to have some sort of happiness and so they were like, “I like your pants”, “Your pants are really cool.” And after that, a couple [of the students who hesitate to participate] wrote things down and so I’m like, well, at least I was able to channel some of this into a learning opportunity for the kids, if nothing else, and to be transparent with them, open, and when, you know, like we’re not all— it’s okay to not be okay.

Annie’s reflection represents her focus on teaching and supporting her students even when she is struggling, as well as her ability to turn a hardship into a teachable moment. It also shows her commitment to sustainable teaching practices and social and emotional learning, as she acknowledged that it’s okay to be honest about how you’re feeling with your students, even when you are feeling upset, and took a moment for herself to feel regulated. And then, as students do the world over, Annie’s students took the opportunity to give back, they offered support and built her up, just as she had done for them so many times already. This is how teachers create authentic, supportive classroom communities

where students feel seen, heard, and loved, and where students learn to grapple with the emotional dimensions of life.

My case study analysis of my three participants indicates a need for early career communities of practice as a place to navigate the emotional dimensions of teaching ELA *and* as a space for both personal and professional support, camaraderie, and continued learning. Without a group of trusted teachers to lean on and learn from, beginning teachers are left to navigate student trauma, damaging department dynamics, their own feelings of stress and overwhelm, and more, all on their own. Given the incredible amount of work beginning teachers must engage in, adding isolation to mentally and emotionally draining experiences can push teachers towards burnout and away from feelings of contentment and commitment in the profession. When beginning teachers have a supportive group to turn to and reflect with, they not only have help figuring out how to work through these challenges, they feel less alone—which is crucial to feeling contentment and commitment in the profession.

Continued Learning:

The Many Aspects of Successful Classroom Teaching Not Covered in Teacher Preparation Programs

The First Days of School

The first days of school can be incredibly stressful for beginning teachers. The pressure to ‘get it right’ and make a good impression on their students, as well as set the tone for the year, is high. Yet, many first-year teachers do not have any experience preparing for the first day and days of the school year as their student teaching begins a

few weeks into the fall or spring semester. Coupled with the stress of starting a new job, meeting new colleagues, and attending district meetings, beginning teachers often feel overwhelmed before the first day even begins, and underprepared on the day-of. In light of how challenging the first few days of school had been, my participants wished that their teacher preparation programs had offered more support for these critical days. Meri said:

I really wish that there was more [support for the first week of school]. I happened to student teach in the spring, so I never got to see like that first day/week startup. Also, I wish that there was more talking about procedures and like, classroom rules and expectations, because I thought those would be things that you could just tell [students] and they would understand, like the first time, but I realized that you actually kind of need to teach them, and you need to train them on [those procedures and routines], so I wish I had more [of that] in my teacher preparation program.

Danielle echoed these sentiments, reflecting on her student teaching experience where she, like all student teachers in Arizona, joined the class after the first week of school:

I think that planning and starting the school year in our placements with our lead teacher would have been most helpful so that we could be a part of the planning from the very beginning. It is also helpful to see how a teacher starts out the year in terms of relationship building and setting those foundations for the rest of the school year.

Beginning teachers need exemplary curriculum, models, and ideas so that they are not attempting to ‘reinvent the wheel’ with each lesson and unit. To be clear, I am in no way suggesting canned curriculum. Rather, I am suggesting that site-level departments or district-level curriculum coaches should share specific examples for the first quarter (activities, project assignment sheets, student examples), as well as offer support and co-planning for beginning teachers.

Beginning teachers will often turn to places like google to get quick ideas for lesson plans without realizing that these sources are not aligned with research or standards. Providing beginning teachers with *adaptable* curriculum, models, and ideas should be commonplace, as should ensuring that teachers have the autonomy to adapt, adjust, or ignore the provided content as they see fit.

There were significant tensions around this issue: beginning teachers felt confined by district curriculum maps which required specific texts, themes, and skills, but did not offer practical, tangible methods for teaching. While this structure might work well for more established teachers, the beginning teachers in this study found the district parameters made lesson planning more challenging for them. This disconnect caused a lot of distress for beginning teachers as they were bound by maps they did not always understand or themes they did not want to work with, scrambling to find models, ideas, projects, and lessons to fit the parameters and themes of the district or site curriculum.

Extending Teacher Preparation

The community served as an extension of methods and teaching courses in many ways, from learning how to cultivate a classroom community to finding the right YA book for a particular student, many questions came up about teaching and teaching ELA. Throughout our session, teaching English language arts and creating curriculum was discussed every single week. In the beginning, many of these discussions began with a question. Following my workshop on cultivating relationships and building classroom community, Danielle reflected on how she wanted to implement this work in her

classroom, but that she was questioning how she might structure her opening writing activity:

For me, adjusting curriculum to add time for relationship building—I have been trying really hard [to do that] and I really love the idea of having them journal for bell work. But I've been having a tough time deciding whether that journal should segue into what we're talking about today, or just be a mental health check-in kind of thing. I would like to have kind of a mixture of both, you know, but I would like to segue, but I also want them to just be reflecting. So, I've just been having a tough time deciding.

I shared my own classroom experience, as I always began class with an Invitation to Write (following the work of the National Writing Project) as a way to get students thinking and working—and to give myself a few minutes to do whatever I needed to do at the start of class (there was always something); then, I encouraged Danielle to consider and discuss the purpose of her journal writing and prompts as a way to determine how much of the work was reflective and how much was leading into the day's lesson.

The participants had excellent ideas for writing and engaging students but struggled with how to implement their ideas. Annie said, “I had a question too, about invitations to write, I was wondering how much time because I don't want it to be something that takes over the whole class period, but I wanted enough time where [the topic] can be explored.” I advised the participants to allow for 4-7 minutes of work, noting that some invitations would lead into longer pieces of writing. Meri followed up by asking, “How do you, like, introduce [the invitation to write]? Can you tell us a little bit more about that?” Our conversation naturally moved into participants asking various questions that were coming up in their teaching. Danielle questioned, “I want to have my students do some of the reading [aloud in class] but how—how do you do that? How

would you set that up in your classroom?” Meri asked, “How do you motivate them?” when questioning how to get her students started with a new writing assignment.

The questions that came up throughout our session were vast and varied, ranging from specific teaching practices like the examples above, and the more logistical elements of teaching (“How do you organize everything? How do you collect and pass-back papers?” and “How long would it take to read six pages aloud?”), to issues about the teaching life (“How much do you grade at home?”). The community represented a third space where teachers could ask and discuss important questions with a supportive, knowledgeable group. These discussions, and the insights gained, made their way directly into participant’s classrooms. In late August, Meri shared:

So, as far as wins go, I have not had that many, but I did get to have “Meet the Teacher” on Thursday, and so I got to meet some of the parents and it was nice because they brought their kids and [my students] were like, “This is my favorite class” and I [thought to myself], oh my gosh, like I thought you hated me, you know, because of the way they acted in class, they're just brooding or whatever, and so to actually hear [them say], “Oh, well, she starts with an invite to write and it's actually really cool”, that was amazing, that was really cool.

Through offering a place to have these critical discussions, and a place where beginning teachers were able to ask all of the questions that were coming up for them, the community extended methods courses and teacher preparation programs for teachers in the field.

Within the larger umbrella of extending teacher preparation, the specific tensions around district and site mandated curriculum came up for all three participants: they did not feel prepared to create curriculum within the confines of school and district curriculum guides or maps. Since all three participants were in different districts, they had vastly different parameters when it came to curriculum design and autonomy, but

they all struggled to find their footing as they developed student-centered, standards-aligned curriculum that also fit the requirements of their school sites and districts.

Danielle spoke often about her struggles to design creative, engaging curriculum within the confines of her district curriculum. For one, Danielle taught as part of a team—a group of interdisciplinary teachers—and had to connect her curriculum to the thematic topic of that team. The first topic was space travel, and, for a time, Danielle’s lessons needed to somehow relate back to space travel. As a group, we discussed model texts that she could use that connected to space and brainstormed creative writing prompts, but the issues went beyond space-related ELA ideas. Danielle expressed her frustration with the strict parameters as well as her frustration with the lack of support from her lead teacher, who she had asked to lesson plan with her. She had a hard time getting the lead teacher to actually commit to a time and provide support.

The biggest tension seemed to be that participants felt that the parameters they were given stifled their creativity but did not support them in planning. In the first few weeks of the community, Danielle, in part, lamented the fact that everyone was “doing their own thing” and, though she appreciated the limitless opportunities, she wanted more structure and guidance from leadership. At the time, she said,

I actually have like a better hold on everything this week. It just took a lot of asking [the department chair what the expectations and supports were]. She gave me a long answer, but in essence, yeah, everyone kind of does their own thing. Like, okay, so I mean that's cool, you know, I get to just have all this freedom but it's also difficult as a first-year teacher, never having created anything, I'm to have all of this freedom, but— I just went through my [district] curriculum book this week and it's really narrative writing. I think we did a narrative unit based on a young adult novel [in one of my courses] so I've just kind of been taking [ideas] from that and just tweaking it to fit the readings [in the textbook] and I realized I need to do a lot more reading—just to have more resources because I'm not a huge

fan of the readings in the textbook but I don't even know where to look or how to look for other texts.

Danielle was required to use the textbook and the accompanying workbooks in her classroom, but she also wanted to supplement with her own ideas and materials to better serve her students. She struggled to locate the resources she imagined for her students because she did not have enough free time to read and plan. She was also bound by the themes of her team and the structure and topics of the textbook, which complicated the matter that much more. In her post-survey questionnaire, three months later, Danielle explained:

As for [teacher preparation classes], I think that it would be helpful to take an actual curriculum from a school and have us design a unit based on that curriculum. I know that I said creating a unit was helpful, which it was, but I think it would be more beneficial to create units tied to [district mandated] curriculum because in the classroom/at our sites, we don't have nearly as much freedom.

Meri had similar thoughts in her interview, sharing:

I definitely feel like there were a couple gaps [in my teacher preparation program]. Like in all of my education courses, we would write like a random lesson plan [...] and it could be for any grade level, you just needed any lesson plan.

Meri elaborated that she didn't have experience or examples of working with district curriculum and writing lessons and unit plans for that specific curriculum; she felt that experience with that would have helped her to design more cohesive unit plans that aligned with her district's requirements. Danielle agreed, writing in her questionnaire that,

The transition [to classroom teacher] has been rough. My student teaching experience did not fully prepare me for the realities. I know how to write lesson plans but the ones we are expected to do at our jobs are completely different. In my actual experiences, I did not get to do a whole lot with the students or

curriculum, or in the experiences where I did get to do stuff, the material was already planned.

In September, Annie came to similar conclusions, writing that her transition to classroom teaching was also “a little rough”, she explained:

Many things just have to be learned on the job, I guess. It’s exhausting and easy to slip into unhealthy habits. I was fortunate to have a really great team around me and lots of support, but there are so many things to learn and lots of different obligations that don’t have anything to do with actual teaching (trainings, etc.) that it was hard to keep up. I felt as if I was constantly failing in one area or another.

During her interview, I asked Annie how her teaching program prepared her for the realities of the teaching life. In her response, she brought up the disconnect between university courses, which allowed her freedom in creating lessons, and classroom teaching where she was working with a “set curriculum”:

In many ways it didn’t [prepare me for the realities of the teaching life]. Much of the classes did not really give practical advice. Also, so many things that are taught that you need to do are not applicable to the actual classroom. Our classes make it seem that you will be creating your lessons and plans from scratch but often you are stuck working with a set curriculum. Additionally, I think it would be beneficial to give students opportunities to work with commonly used curriculum and give lessons on how to tweak it to make it your own. Also, we need classes on how to interact and work with parents. Also, maybe some opportunities to practice grading using common systems for posting grades [learning management systems like Synergy and Canvas].

In some ways, my participant’s desire for preparation programs that focus more on mandated or set curriculum represented a tension for me as a teacher and researcher: while I wholeheartedly agree that beginning teachers need exemplary curriculum models and resources, I also have deep reservations about moving in a direction where teachers are not expected to create their own curriculum based on their professional expertise and,

most importantly, the students in front of them. Simultaneously, I also see how important it is for teachers to be prepared for the realities of teaching.

The previous semester, as I was talking with my methods students about their internships, I realized they did not know what curriculum maps were, and many had no idea that most, if not all, Arizona districts have specific and varying expectations for what is taught and when. In light of this insight, I adjusted my curriculum by adding a lesson in my Methods of Teaching Language course about working with district curriculum maps. I used Scottsdale Unified School District's Curriculum Map for 9th grade ELA as an example so that I could show students how to navigate such maps and had them work in groups to plan lessons that aligned with a local curriculum map. Yet, it was clear from listening to my participants that not only did they need more than that to feel prepared, they needed this support as *classroom* teachers, not just as pre-service teachers.

Overall, my findings indicate that beginning teachers struggle with the realities of not only classroom teaching, but of the larger aspects of teaching for a school and district, each with their own unique rules and regulations for curriculum and other aspects of the job. In light of these findings, I encourage all stakeholders to make slight adjustments: teacher preparation programs that support students in working with district curriculum would ensure beginning teachers were more familiar with the process and, even more importantly, would be more prepared to create lessons that comply with district curriculum while also hitting social and emotional skills, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and topics and ideas that are engaging and important to students. School districts and sites can focus on supporting first-year teachers by ensuring that department and site level leadership have offered to collaborate on first-quarter plans (and beyond). Local

affiliates of national organizations like NCTE and NWP could offer ‘The First Days of School’ workshops where a panel of teachers share and model aspects of their first few days in ELA classrooms, specifically. The goal is to demystify the process and set beginning teachers up (as much as possible) for a successful start to the year. The more prepared they feel, the more likely they are to feel successful, and ultimately, the more likely they are to be successful teachers.

Student Motivation and Behavior

In addition to struggling with the challenges of district mandated curriculum, all of the participants struggled with student behavior and motivation and felt that they were under prepared for the realities of classroom teaching in these areas, but that being in the community offered them applicable support. Many of our conversations in the first month of the community centered around cultivating relationships and building a classroom community. A critical part of those conversations was discussing how to handle behavior that was distracting or disrespectful as a short-term solution, but that the primary long-term solution to behavior issues in the classroom was cultivating positive relationships with each student and between students as well as holding warm but firm boundaries; we often discussed what that can look like in an ELA classroom.

In late-August, Danielle reflected on one of her ‘tougher students’, during our celebrations:

I guess one of my celebrations was one of my–looking back to like the first day of school for my tougher students, that I just thought I was not going to like them, because she came in just a very disruptive, disrespectful–for like, with the intention to just challenge me all the way. Um, I’ve gotten her to participate more in class just working through things with her. And she even shared things with me. Like, “oh I don’t like these other teachers, because they do this, but I really

like you, because you, you understand how I think.” and to me that was kind of a win. I was like, “Oh, I’m just asking you questions, you know, I’m trying to just do my job to help you get to where you are learning…” and it was just a moment of realization for me like, if I had not, I guess, if I had kept that idea that I wasn’t going to like her, it would not have worked well with her. And it just made me think about how other teachers react to her. So that was definitely a win for me, just to remind myself like, sometimes I do feel like I don’t know what I’m doing, but other times like, to the kids it doesn’t seem like that. So that was really—especially coming from her— given that— I thought I was gonna have a hard time with her, which I mean, I still kind of do, but I feel like I’m at the point where she respects me.

Our community had engaged in many, many discussions about fostering relationships and the power, importance, and reach of this work. Danielle’s insight so early in the school year shows just how much listening to and connecting with students really means to them, and how cultivating those relationships results in mutual respect. Meri had similar experiences; by early-September, Meri had grown more confident in her teaching: she was working to establish a supportive community of learners and was continuing to work on warmly yet firmly holding boundaries in her classroom, but she struggled with students testing boundaries and having to keep up the ‘strict’ and ‘firm’ persona.

I feel overwhelmed, it’s just hard because, like, I have had to be so strict because they just don’t stop talking, like even when I wave or even when I say, ‘hey guys, two minutes quiet work and then you can chat with your partner, just like two minutes, right now’, they just never stop, and so it is hard.

During interviews, towards the end of October, I asked Meri if she thought there was a connection between their experience in the community and her experience in the classroom. She said:

Oh, yeah, there were many times—the one that I keep going back to was making some of those, like, rambunctious, kind of [challenging] students into your

helpers. “You get to sit in my chair and advance the PowerPoint’ or ‘Can you collect all the papers today? Can you pass out the papers today?’ Um, so that was something that I fully used, like a tangible thing that I took over. But also, just some of the ideas and practices of like making it more relevant to students and realizing that, even though I am a first-year teacher, I still have stuff to offer and stuff to bring to the table, even though I’m not as seasoned as the other teachers on my team or in the school.

Once Meri had established positive relationships and a supportive classroom community, she was able to pull back ever so slightly, little by little, on her “stricter” policies and behaviors without sacrificing the focus and academic integrity of the classroom.

Continued Learning and Classroom Libraries

As a beginning teacher, I wished for a robust classroom library full of current titles that allowed students to see themselves represented in the stories. I wanted books that served as “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” (Bishop, 1990), but struggled to fund my classroom library, as well as a library of pedagogical texts. Like most early career educators, my school was not able to provide funding, nor was I in a position to supplement. Even if I had the funding, I did not have the time or bandwidth to find and research newer titles to purchase. I thought a lot about how to support beginning teachers in this area prior to my 2021 community. Using the books from my 2020 ALAN Book Box and my personal collection, I created a book display where my participants were able to choose titles that they thought their students would be most interested in to begin building their own classroom libraries. Since there were only three participants, each beginning teacher was able to take home a substantial pile of books to start their classroom libraries. I also purchased two pedagogical books, *180 Days* by Penny Kittle

and Annie Gallagher and *The Joyful Teacher* by Berit Gordon, to jumpstart their teacher book collections.

I knew that new teachers would need a book that was incredibly practical and pragmatic, something they could open before first period and implement that day. *180 Days* is that book. It aligns with the ethos of the community, offers research-based practices, ideas, and perspectives, and supports new teachers in developing into thoughtful, effective reading and writing teachers. I also wanted a book that covered the many aspects of successful teaching that often were not often discussed, and that included elements of sustainable teaching. *The Joyful Teacher* was the book that I chose to fill this need. Though it is not geared specifically for secondary ELA teachers, this book offers strong professional and personal development opportunities.

Annie reported back almost immediately that she had put some of the Young Adult Literature books on display in her classroom and students had been thrilled with the selections. They commended her for having current titles that dealt with situations students were really facing, such as moving through the world as a person of color, understanding and normalizing mental illness, and navigating sexuality and gender identity as a young adult. Annie was able to make connections with students, as well as build her ethos and credibility as a teacher and ally, by having these books in her classroom. Furthermore, her students were able to read books that they were interested in, invested in, and *chose* to read. Meri had similar benefits in her classroom. At the end of her interview in October, I asked Meri if there was anything else she wanted to share. She brought up the books.

So many of the kids have loved them. I displayed *This is America* on my bookshelf in my room; I want to read it now because a couple of the girls have come up and been like, “Oh my gosh I love this book, can I please take it home this weekend?” It's been so cool. I was always thinking, ‘they're not even going to look at my bookshelf except for when I make them read’ but a lot of them have been like, “Can I take this home tonight, can I like—promise I’ll bring it back tomorrow!” It’s been amazing, yeah, it's so cool. They've been able to really relate to the experience because they’re not the same kind of people that we see in so many books, so you've got different perspectives that my group of kids are able to really relate to, and I think that it's just so helpful. Someone else came up to me like, “I just can't put this book down; I stayed up all night reading it.” It’s really exciting because they are one of the people who, when I first introduced this independent reading, they just, leading up to it, they were like, “I'm not going to do it, I hate this”, and so it was just so cool that they came into school early one day to tell me that.

When I had asked Meri, earlier in the interview, if she ever used lesson plan templates, either from her teacher preparation program or otherwise, she gave a quick laugh, “no, never”. But, she explained, she did use books and articles from her methods courses and from our community. She said:

I still have some of my textbooks from [my methods course] in my classroom, so I can look at them as I was lesson planning. I went back to *Write Beside Them*. I looked at some of the stuff you gave us [during the community], from *Pose Wobble Flow* [a chapter about writing teacher identity] and *The Joyful Teacher*, which was another book from you.

Early career communities of practice offer critical support for choosing and supplying books for professional development, continued learning, and classroom libraries.

Though pedagogical texts and building classroom libraries are important aspects of teacher development and support, this community also recognized the reality of the beginning teacher life, that teachers are often 5 minutes ahead of their students, desperate for time-saving ideas, and barely keeping their heads above water. Books are an incredible resource, and yet, beginning teachers do not always have time to read multiple

books during the semester, so we, as a field, need to offer books *and* support beyond books.

It was important to me that we tap into English teacher networks at both the local and national level for several reasons: (1) Beginning teachers needed the immediate accessibility, support, and collective wisdom of English teachers throughout the country (2) being part of local and national organizations such as The National Council of Teachers of English, The National Writing Project, The Central Arizona Writing Project, and the Arizona English Teachers Association supports feelings of collective identity and teacher identity, not to mention offers exemplary professional development. Being members of these organizations helped beginning teachers to identify and see themselves as English teachers. Their membership also allowed them to have practically immediate feedback from other teachers in the profession.

I also made a point to use the Arizona English Teachers Association, our local NCTE affiliate, as a both a local network and an opening for professional development opportunities. I invited all participants, as well as all of my former methods students, to work with me on panel presentations for the annual AETA conference. Meri and Danielle recognized that this would have been more work than they wanted to take on, but Annie was interested in presenting. I knew Annie had created an exemplary unit plan around poetry and identity in my methods course, so I suggested we create a panel presentation about using poems in English language arts education, which we then presented at the annual AETA conference. Through presenting and attending, Annie was able to network and make connections with other Arizona English educators, connect

with other beginning teachers in the field (outside of our community), and share her expertise through our presentation—all of which supports contentment, commitment, and longevity in the profession.

As a teacher consultant with the Central Arizona Writing Project, I knew how inspirational and transformative NWP professional development was and wanted my participants to know CAWP and NWP from the onset of their careers. I asked a representative from the Central Arizona Writing Project to join us during one of our meetings to share a mini workshop and talk about the invitational summer institute and opportunities for PD within CAWP. I also invited each of the participants to join the private National Writing Project online community, the Write Now Teacher Studio, and showed them helpful groups to join and how they could post questions, look for resources, or seek support from the national community of teachers.

It was important that our community was connected to larger communities, networks, and organizations, but participants also shared how much they gained from our small and intimate community. During her interview, when I asked Annie if she felt that she made connections from her experience in the community to her work in the classroom, she shared:

Oh yes. Definitely, definitely made connections for sure in my classroom and, also, like you said, [having] that time to decompress, to talk things out [together], and then Monday is a fresh week you know. When I was able to, you know, get out the things that were [bothering me] and then start fresh— purging a little bit so you're not carrying that [negativity] into another week.

And then there's also being able to go in [to the classroom] with new approaches to problems [that you were not sure how to solve. The community offered] different perspectives and ways I hadn't thought to look at things. On my own, I might not have seen it that way, but then, given that new perspective from someone else being

able to look at my situation and then be like, ‘Oh, try this, see how it works for you’, so that was absolutely– like I loved it.

Our community of practice was grounded in collective knowledge and learning through authentic relationships, which allowed participants to experience the benefits of community and collaboration firsthand, and often led to them employing these same strategies in their own classrooms and seeking membership in other supportive communities and networks.

**The Value of Community and Support:
Early Career Communities of Practice for Beginning English Language Arts
Teachers**

Sustainable Teaching

From the very beginning, I wanted this community to promote sustainable teaching practices. To that end, I spoke often about sustainable teaching when responding to participant’s experiences and guiding conversations during meetings, and I developed workshops using a mix of content from the Sustainable Teaching Institute and my own design to encourage beginning teachers to reflect on their own practices through the lens of sustainable teaching.

About halfway through our session, I led participants through a sustainable teaching workshop to examine how they were spending their time and to, if needed, reevaluate. I merged the ideas of Burns et al.(2018) Wheel of Self Care and Kimothy Joy’s (2020) Wheel of Intentions to have participants map and illustrate their intentions for sustainable teaching practices. To do this, I first had our group reflect on the past few weeks: where were they spending their time? What did a typical day look like? Typical week? Then, we analyzed: what did their weekly schedule reveal about their time? We discussed their priorities: what did each participant value in their life? How did they *want*

to spend their time? We talked about our priorities, our values, our hopes, and what we wanted to prioritize and make time for in the future that was not happening in the present. (Did their schedules reflect their priorities? What needed to change?) Then, we developed plans to work on keeping our schedules in alignment with our values and priorities, creating a wheel of intentions to illustrate these commitments and serve as a visual reminder.

I wanted to see if the participants were taking time for themselves, participating in rejuvenating practices, and taking time to rest. And, if they were not, plan ways for them to add these restorative practices into their busy schedules. Often, our conversations about sustainable teaching centered around time. With the ever-present demands on their time, participants struggled to prioritize themselves. After teaching, lesson planning, grading, administrative issues, and other school requirements, participants barely had any time left for themselves. In August, Danielle had shared that practicing sustainable teaching felt like a tension for her (“The whole sustainable teaching is a little bit tension for me just because I’m trying to like, don’t do work on Fridays after school, just go home don’t do work on the weekend, but then I’m at the point where it’s like, well, when do I do the work?”). In our group, I had facilitated conversations that specifically address how to implement sustainable teaching practices when it feels impossible (and that there will *always* be times when it feels impossible) and I was curious to see if and how these conversations had manifested in participant’s actual behaviors.

I was particularly interested in Danielle’s experience, which she detailed on her questionnaire. In response to the question “did this community of practice extend learning from your methods courses and/or student teaching experience?” Danielle wrote,

“I would say yes. The biggest extension of learning for me would be sustainable teaching. Outside of content, this is my biggest struggle, and it is something that I have seen a continuous focus on.” When I asked if her work/life balance had changed in any way over the past 12 weeks, she indicated that it had, and she stated that she started to be more intentional with her time as a direct result of our conversations following the mid-session sustainable teaching workshop:

My work/life balance has definitely improved. The first month of school I was coming home and continuing work for at least another 3 hours. It was after a conversation within the group that I started to be more intentional with my time. I also began to keep my work at school as much as possible- even if it meant staying for an extra hour after school so that I did not have to spend those extra 3 hours at home doing work. Little by little I am recognizing the areas where I could do work and save time. Right now, I am most looking forward to being a 2nd year teacher where most of my content will already be created so any time that I have spent working outside contract hours this year should diminish next year. I have also gotten to a point where I can comfortably (for the most part) say “if it didn't get done, it didn't get done” and be okay with it.

Meri shared similar insights and connections during her interview in October, saying that her work/life balance was “definitely better [now] because during those first couple weeks, I was constantly so busy” and that, since she was getting better at asking colleagues (outside of her site/district) to share ideas and collaborate on curriculum, she did not need to spend as much time planning. She was also able to “manage [her] time better while at school” so she did not need to stay late or work as much after hours.

Danielle came back to sustainable teaching again when asked which curricular elements of the community she found most helpful. She said:

I found the structure helpful- starting with how our weeks went and looking at a win and something we could work on. I really enjoyed being able to share my experiences and get feedback or at least reassurance. I also really liked the focus on sustainable teaching because as a new teacher I just could not see how we were

going to leave work at [work]. In my head, if I didn't work outside of hours then I would not be prepared. And to some extent I still feel that is true, but I have been able to manage my time better and prioritize the things I need to get done.

Annie also reflected on how discussions about sustainable teaching practices had influenced her. In October, Annie said that she was focused on valuing her personal time and not taking work home with her, sharing that she was, “learning to [not let students take up every minute of my lunch and plan periods], and also not bringing work home with me as much during the week.” As the only participant who was also a mother, Annie also needed to spend time with her children. She expressed that it had been challenging during the first few weeks of school, as she left early and came home late, often with work that she wanted to complete that night. During her interview, Annie shared, “I'm trying to just have my time with my kids. They need me.” She said that she was choosing not to bring work home so that she could focus on connecting with her family.

Annie also reflected on how that was a stark difference from how she felt in the first few weeks as a teacher, where she was often up until 10 or later working, then had to be up at 4 for her long commute to school. As a student-teacher, Annie also had classes and homework, which were taking up a substantial amount of time:

driving home from work becomes dangerous because I'm so tired. So, I definitely learned from the first quarter that I have to prioritize some of my own time; I need to be better about the balance, and so I have definitely done that.

Later in our conversation, Annie spoke more about her experience as an emergency certified classroom teacher (who was also completing her student teacher requirement through a large public university in the southwest). Annie said she struggled with the fact

that she could not prioritize her time as a student (Annie was enrolled in 15 credits during her student teacher/first-year teaching).

That's the thing, I have always been very concerned with my GPA and now [I am] less concerned. That's hard. I still have As at the moment! But I don't like feeling like I'm failing. I have that recovering perfectionist thing happening. And so, feeling like I'm not meeting the expectation is hard for me. But I'm also getting better about being like, I can't meet those expectations. And [homework for coursework is] less important than being a good teacher. I have 140+ kids and they're more important than my grade, and my own children, they're more important.

Annie mentioned that she had recently gone out to dinner with her family and had been able to truly enjoy herself in the moment, without feeling the guilt that she “should be” grading or lesson planning.

I'm getting better about just like if I don't bring [work] home with me...because I started feeling guilty—I brought things home with me every night and then it's there, I didn't even get to it and I thought, “Okay, just don't bring it home, and you know you're not going to get to it so don't bring it home in the first place.”

This conversation represented a huge shift for Annie, who always goes above and beyond in her commitments. It was incredibly challenging for her to put herself first by placing a boundary around how much work she brought home and how much guilt she felt if that work was not completed. Danielle and Meri had similar shifts in their perspectives and abilities to create and hold boundaries around how much work they engaged in when they were at home. Ultimately, each of the participants determined that they felt much better when they were able to hold those boundaries and give themselves time for rest and rejuvenation. Through they struggled to get to this point and had moments where they felt it would be “impossible” to not work over the weekend, by October, all three participants

found themselves in positions where they were truly able to take time off, and to “turn off” so that they could actually rest.

Communities of Practice Value and Hold Space for Member’s Authentic Experiences

This community followed Wenger’s (1998; 2000) communities of practice, as opposed to a professional learning community or a professional development seminar because it was crucial that participants have time and space to explore, discuss, and reflect on the experiences that came up in their classrooms and lives as teachers. Additionally, it was important to have a place for beginning teachers to come together outside of their district. In many cases, beginning teachers needed to navigate situations *about* their site and district, so having a community that represented a neutral space where teachers could share experiences in a safe, supportive atmosphere was paramount.

One of my research questions asked which curricular approaches facilitated participation and engagement more than others and why, and to answer that question, I asked participants, in part, which elements of the community they found least helpful. In answering that question, both Danielle and Annie expressed the feeling that everything we had done had been beneficial in some way; they reflected on the importance of having support and a safe space to share their experiences and both touched on the need to vent and discuss site-specific experiences:

Danielle: I don’t think that there are any aspects that are not helpful. I have found the community to be extremely helpful. I enjoy coming together every week and even if we are just discussing the events of our week, it is still helpful because we are getting to hear other perspectives and even ideas for what other teachers that could work for us. It has also been helpful to know that I am not the only one who is struggling. I think these kinds of spaces are important, especially as someone who has been learning to navigate the professional world and trying to decipher what I want to share or maybe dwell on with others. This has provided me with a space that I feel is safe to vent but that also makes me reflect on the good things that happen, no matter

how small. It has also been incredibly helpful to have an experienced teacher with values that align to mine and what I want to practice in my own classroom to guide us through our first year. There has also been a plethora of resources shared and as a first-year teacher, that is the best thing I could ask for because feeling like I'm starting from scratch has been very overwhelming.

Annie: Having a place where it was safe to vent and were not your coworkers was the best. Also, the opportunity to discuss and bounce ideas off of others in similar situations was great. I enjoyed the various perspectives, and the support was invaluable. Least helpful is hard to pin down. I really didn't feel like anything about the community was irrelevant or did not serve me in some way or another.

In her post-community questionnaire, Danielle said she thought all new teachers should be "required to be part of a community like this" because of how positive she found the experience; she wrote:

I really enjoyed the experience and appreciate the opportunity to be a part of the community. I really do believe that this group has added a positive component to my first year of teaching. I think every new teacher should be required to be a part of a community like this. I currently have a district mentor and as a first-year teacher in my district, I am required to attend monthly meetings where they go over different topics. These are helpful in that they're adding more to our toolkits, but sometimes when there is a lot going on, all we need is time to reflect and get feedback on what is actually going on in our classrooms as first years, and that is something I feel this community did a great job of. It never felt like time wasted.

In response to my question about whether she felt there were connections between community, relationships, and sustainable teaching practices, Danielle offered the following insights, where she, again, expressed her recommendation for "every site" to have communities of practice for beginning teachers and connected this work to teacher retention:

I think to some extent communities and the relationships built within them have a positive impact on sustainable teaching. I think it is helpful to have some sort of outlet that is not our workplace. Not only do these kinds of spaces allow teachers to express themselves freely, but to also receive feedback and guidance from other teachers. I think if every site had some kind of new teacher community

where they got to actually work through their problems in the classroom, then there would not be so many new teachers contemplating leaving the profession after the first year. I also think these communities are good at helping us network and getting to know other workplaces and explore them through the lens of a teacher who works there.

Annie expressed similar feelings about the positive influence of our early career community of practice. At the end of her interview, as Annie and I were saying goodbye, she thanked me for creating the group and expressed her excitement about being involved. Annie shared that she found the community meetings not only extended her teacher preparation program, but were “much more practical”:

When I first heard that you were doing [this community], it was something that I was excited about and thought would be really amazing and then I was excited that I got to do it earlier than I [expected because I got emergency certified and began teaching earlier than anticipated]. The thing is, like all of my complaints about the teacher prep program—I feel like what you did for us and shared [in this community] was much more practical and helpful than a lot of the other stuff we got. So, I was excited, and I knew it would be beneficial for me to be involved with what you had planned because I knew you were a good teacher.

My goal with this community was to support beginning teachers (and their students) by offering opportunities for personal and professional growth because I know that it is impossible to prepare pre-service teachers for *everything* they will encounter in the classroom, and I am thrilled to see, through my participant’s experiences and responses, that this community was able to partially fill that gap.

Supporting Student-to-Teacher Transitions Through Caring and Authentic Relationships, Community, and Connection

One of the primary functions of this community was to offer support and a place of rejuvenation for first year teachers, particularly teachers in schools and districts that

did not offer much support, mentorship, or community. Danielle reflected on this exact situation, writing in her post-community questionnaire:

I would say that my transition was a lot smoother than it would have been if I had not had this community. My transition from student to teacher was rough because of lack of support at my school and within my department. I was able to use the community as a source of support and information. As a new teacher, this world is completely new to me so there were a lot of things going on that, at some point, I thought were normal and I had just set my expectations high. Through conversations within the community, I quickly learned that what I was going through was definitely not normal. Outside of realizing that my experience was not the norm or at least not how it should be, I was also able to reach out to the community when I needed further support or resources.

Though departments, schools, and districts are undoubtedly responsible for supporting their beginning teachers, too often, department colleagues are too overwhelmed and overworked themselves to offer the amount of support that first year teachers, in particular, *need* as they transition from student to teacher. The power of caring and authentic relationships, community, and connection to support beginning teachers through this monumental shift in their identity and career cannot be overstated.

The importance of community and connection was not limited to teachers; participants saw how valuable our time together was and applied that insight to their classrooms. During our interview, I asked Annie if she could describe any insights she had gained from her involvement in the community and if those insights had made their way into her teaching. She told me that there were many connections. She explained some of the ways in which her experiences participating in the community affected her as a teacher, particularly in her understanding of how valuable time to talk and connect is, not just for teachers, but students too:

I think the importance of connection with peers, absolutely, I would definitely take that away and like, making sure that my students have those opportunities to just talk to each other. To share where they're at with things. That was so invaluable for me. And also, to contribute to each other's work. And to support each other in a tangible way, being able to say like, 'Oh, you have this gap, I can fill it for you', like, either if [another participant needs] resources or ideas or just bouncing ideas off of each other.

I think [community] is important for learning in general, so giving students opportunities to discuss and work together in my classroom, I would definitely say I transferred just that model of behavior from [this early career community].

Annie also reflected on the various ways her participation in the community connected to her life as a teacher, mother, and person:

And then learning from each other, you know just the little things, which, you know, like [Meri, as a yoga teacher shared ideas for breathing techniques and videos]. I even took that into my parenting because my daughter struggles with anxiety and she had come home, not long after we had that conversation, and said that she had had to go see the psychologist at school because she was struggling and I was like, you know, talking through breathing [exercises to help her]. So, I said, you know, one of the teachers, she had some videos and she's going to send it to me so maybe you and I can practice doing them together at home and going through them. So, yeah, even just a life resource of having another person who is in the same position, going through the same things— and they also give perspectives to see how it is and other schools. What they're experiencing what their support is like, what their students are like. I feel like I learned so much from everybody, and I hope that I was able to contribute to them as well.

Our final meeting was bittersweet. The bonds that we had built over 12 weeks, sharing the highs and the lows and everything in between, had forged true, authentic relationships. As participants walked from the lobby to our meeting room, sharing updates and laughs along the way, it was with an air of contentment. No pretense. No posing. Just acceptance, understanding, and joy. The conversations of our last meeting flowed from classroom door décor (Annie's school was having a contest), teaching wobbles we wanted to focus on, and the many, many aspects of the teaching life that are

too often left unsaid. As always, our meeting was running well over the original “intended time” of one hour because we had so much to share, discuss, and reflect on.

The afternoon slipped by, as so many Sunday afternoons had in our group, and Annie explained that she had family obligations and would be running late if she stayed any longer. All of the participants had expressed an interest in continuing the meetings after our end date in October and we had been trying to find a suitable replacement meeting time, so we briefly discussed possible times but ran into scheduling conflicts. As Annie started to pack up her belongings and stand up, she lingered, still engaged in the conversation, laughing, sharing, and listening. It was hard to leave. “We have to keep doing this. Because I love you guys!” she smiled as she gathered her belongings, which had spread out across the table—everyone’s papers, pens, purses, and drinks mingled together. There was such a sense of community, lightheartedness, joy, and love in that room. Every member of our community knew that they were supported, valued, and cared for. And every beginning teacher deserves to feel that.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

Mark Hyman (2022) has said that “a defining piece of science is that it’s always changing, so we need to constantly assess what we know to be true. The more information we gather, the more we learn, and the more we understand.” I consider Dr. Hyman’s words, insight, and call for constant assessment when I think about teacher preparation and beginning teacher support. As with any system, organization, or model in life, we must constantly assess to ensure that our practices and purpose are in alignment. As we look to the future of teacher education, I hope we can all work towards a model that is both sustainable and effective, and that meets the dynamic and changing needs of teachers in today’s dynamic and changing world.

The purpose of this research was to provide insight into factors that support the socialization and professional development of English teachers as well as provide a better understanding of the kinds of programs that may be useful in supporting early career English educators on a larger scale. Perhaps one of the most important implications of this study is that we must change the culture of overwork and overwhelm in education, as well as the stubborn narrative that these situations are normal or unable to change. We must prioritize sustainable teaching practices in teacher preparation programs, methods courses, and pre-and-in-service teacher professional development opportunities, as well as in our own practices and habits as teachers. Districts and school sites must prioritize sustainable teaching and advocate for teacher wellness. State legislation and funding must also support teachers and reflect fair, sustainable working conditions. Providing

beginning teachers with communities of practice designed to support them personally and professionally can offer strategies, reminders, and support for this important shift.

In American education's current perfect storm, finding the internal motivation to stay inspired in the profession is no easy feat. But sustainable teaching practices and initiatives can offer much needed tools for bracing the storm successfully. Sustainable teaching encourages teachers to set boundaries so that they do not exhaust their resources. As horrific headlines pull at our attention and energy, sustainable teaching encourages teachers to adopt mindfulness practices and shows them how. Sustainable teaching practices facilitate connection and collaboration. And when teachers fall short of their own expectations, amid the pandemic or otherwise, the sustainable teaching framework calls for compassion and renewal. During this time of great shifts in our collective thinking and behavior, I hope we can prioritize sustainable teaching in our approach to teacher preparation and practice.

There are several additional key implications for teacher preparation programs and school districts, including mandated curriculum, continued education, first days of school, student behavior and motivation, and mentorship. Each of these areas represent a beginning teacher need that should be filled by *both* their preparation program *and* their district and/or site. As discussed in my findings, my participants felt significant tensions regarding site and district curriculum. Districts and school sites can use this information to prepare supportive elements for beginning teachers and adjust their curriculum and expectations in light of these implications. Teacher preparation programs and methods teachers can work with local school districts to access curriculum for PSTs to work with before they enter the classroom. Districts can prioritize professional development by

supporting teachers, financially and otherwise, to attend professional development seminars, workshops, communities of practice, and conferences. Furthermore, sites and districts can reevaluate teaching loads and schedules to account for additional time needed to plan and collaborate, as well as time to attend and participate in professional development opportunities.

Teacher preparation programs could reevaluate the timing of student teacher's start dates to ensure beginning teachers were able to see how their mentor teacher navigated the first week of school and should offer workshops in the summer for recent graduates. School districts often have onboarding and/or professional development meetings prior to the first day of school; during this time, all new teachers should be given resources, support, and guidance on how to successfully navigate and plan for the first week of school. Lastly, organizations and associations devoted to teachers can host workshops geared toward the first week and the beginning of the school year to boost excitement, joy, commitment, and knowledge.

Danielle, Annie, and Meri each shared their struggles with student behavior and motivation, and they each attributed their participation in the community as a factor in working through that struggle successfully. Communities of practice for beginning teachers are certainly an effective option for helping beginning teachers find ways to motivate and work through boundary issues in the classroom. As with the previous examples, the best course of action for addressing this implication is for all stakeholders to take more responsibility. Teacher preparation courses can and should focus more on student behavior and motivation, offering realistic and specific examples as well as strategies and ideas. Schools and districts need to work with teachers to develop and offer

trainings for positive behavior intervention and support *and* provide time for teachers to observe classrooms with effective teachers who model practices and strategies for motivating students and ensuring their behavior is supportive of the learning environment.

Lastly, beginning teachers need caring, effective mentors. Plural. Mentors need to be available and they need to reach out often to see how beginning teachers are doing. They also need to share curriculum or lesson ideas that new teachers might like (or need) and share resources they may not know about. Ultimately, districts should focus on a more sustainable mentoring model where they provide course release for site-level mentor teachers, ideally in addition to stipends and/or university credit (though this is unlikely given funding and budgetary issues), and districts should provide *effective and available* site and district level mentors to all first-year teachers. Teacher preparation programs and national teaching organizations are also responsible for providing mentorship to beginning teachers. If all sides were to take more responsibility in supporting new teachers and offering mentorship, beginning teachers would be in a significantly better position, the benefits of which would reach far beyond each individual teacher.

Limitations

Like all teaching contexts, this community of practice was unique and shaped by the individual participants and their experiences, as well as the authentic relationships between members of the community. My findings are specific to this community, its members, and their experiences, though they comment on general trends and issues for beginning ELA teachers. One of the primary limitations of this study is the sample size.

With only three participants, all female and former students from my own methods courses, my participants represent a small sample.

Secondly, the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic changed the experience of the beginning teachers; they were navigating a teaching world that was unprecedented, and those issues certainly became part of our group. Additionally, the ongoing CDC and Arizona state guidelines meant that our in-person meetings had to be moved online mid-session. Though we started meeting in person, Arizona soon became a national hot spot for positive cases, and we transitioned to zoom. Though we had incredible discussions virtually, the modality was restrictive in some ways. Side conversations, for example, were impossible. In our in-person meetings, though much of our work was done as a whole group, we often engaged in more personal side conversations throughout the meeting, as well as before and after, which was not possible on zoom. Meeting on zoom was also a limitation in terms of data collection. I had planned to administer and collect survey questionnaires and participant writing during our meetings, but due to our virtual modality, I was unable to follow that plan and needed to adjust my methods to fit the new modality.

Future Research

I am interested in the factors that enable or limit feelings of support and empowerment of teachers during their first years of teaching and beyond. In my career, I want to design, implement, and study communities of practice for pre-service and in-service English Language Arts teachers to support their continued learning, retention, and satisfaction in the field. I want to provide spaces and opportunities where teachers learn

to use their writing to engage their students and teach them to be agents of change, as well as to have a voice in the field and to connect to the profession as writers.

I will continue my work examining beginning teacher transitions to further understand what needs to be done to prepare and support teachers to find contentment, commitment, and longevity in the profession. I am in the process of expanding my research with beginning teacher communities of practice by collaborating with scholars and teacher educators in the southwest to host in-person sessions for larger groups of teachers, as well as online sessions to offer support and unity for teachers across the nation who find themselves without a community. Additionally, I plan to write a book for English language arts scholars and mentors who want to support new teachers by applying this work in their pre-service methods courses as well as through in-service professional development opportunities.

My sincere hope is that this research will aid in prioritizing the professional and personal support of beginning ELA teachers because prioritizing the social and emotional health of teachers is paramount to the success of schools, as well as the individuals and communities that they serve.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT FLYER

THE COMMUNITY FOR EARLY CAREER ENGLISH EDUCATORS



The Community for Early Career English Educators was created to empower and support new teachers through their first-year transitions, trials, and triumphs.

Designed with the new teacher in mind, our weekly meetings will serve as a space to discuss and apply scholarship in English education, navigate experiences in and out of the classroom, and cultivate sustainable teaching practices.

In this small and intimate PLC, we aim to foster authentic relationships among colleagues while supporting personal and professional growth. Meetings will cover topics important to our field through workshops, discussion, and guest speakers (including the Central Arizona Writing Project!).

Each participant will receive pedagogical texts (*180 Days* and *The Joyful Teacher*) as well as numerous teaching resources. This community will also provide an introduction to professional organizations and opportunities, and participants will receive exclusive invitations to workshops and summer institutes.

The community is open to all secondary English educators. There is no cost to participate.

WEEKLY THEMES INCLUDE:

SUSTAINABLE TEACHING PRACTICES

Learn about restorative practices that support longevity and contentment in the profession

INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM DESIGN

The community offers curated lessons and research, model teaching, and collaborate lesson planning

FINDING JOY AND AVOIDING BURNOUT

Learn researched-based strategies to support you through every classroom experience

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN YOUR CLASSROOM

The 'how and why' of putting relationship quality at the center of education

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Understanding the value and importance of community and support (as well as introduction to resources and organizations)

BALANCE IN TEACHING AND THE TEACHING LIFE


Learn essential strategies for student-centered learning and teacher-centered living

REGISTER AT [ARIZONAENGLISHTEACHERS.ORG](https://arizonaenglishteachers.org)

APPENDIX B

THE EARLY CAREER COMMUNITY WEBPAGE ON THE ARIZONA ENGLISH
TEACHERS ASSOCIATION WEBSITE

← → ↻ arizonaenglishteachers.org/early-career 🔍 📄 ☆ ⚙️ ☰



The Community for Early Career English Educators

WEEKLY MEETINGS

The Community for Early Career English Educators was created to empower and support new teachers through their first-year transitions, trials, and triumphs.

Designed with the new teacher in mind, our weekly meetings will serve as a space to discuss and apply scholarship in English education, navigate experiences in and out of the classroom, and cultivate sustainable teaching practices.

In this small and intimate PLC, we aim to foster authentic relationships among colleagues while supporting personal and professional growth. Meetings will cover topics important to our field through workshops, discussion, and guest speakers (including the Central Arizona Writing Project).

Each participant will receive pedagogical texts as well as numerous teaching resources. This community will also provide an introduction to professional organizations and opportunities, and exclusive invitations to workshops and summer institutes. A certificate of Professional Development (12+ hours) will be awarded to each member during the final meeting.

The community is open to all secondary English educators (regardless of AETA membership or affiliation). Weekly in-person meetings will begin in late July and last through October (exact meeting day/time will be determined by participants). There is no cost to participate.

Join the community!
CECEE Flyer

APPENDIX C
CONSENT FORM

The Community for Early Career English Educators (CECEE)

Title of the research study: The Community for Early Career English Educators

Investigators: Michelle Glerum and Jessica Early

Why am I being invited to take part in this research study?

We invite you to take part in this study because, as current and future English Language Arts teachers, your experiences and philosophies of teaching help inform the field of teacher education as we work to design more effective programs for pre-service and early career teachers. You must be 18 or older to participate in this study.

Why is this research being done?

This project aims to provide a bridge between methods courses/field experience and the first few years of teaching in order to support the student to teacher transition as well as foster authentic professional relationships and communities of practice. Our hope is that this research will provide a better understanding of the kinds of programs that may be useful in supporting early career English educators.

How long will the research last?

Research Element:	Timeline:	Time Commitment:
Community meetings	10-12 weekly meetings Fall 2021 (August-October)	60 minutes/meeting
Pre-session Survey	At the first meeting	15 minutes
Post-session Survey	Within one month of the final meeting	30 minutes
Demographics Survey	At the first meeting	5 minutes
Interview	October 2021-January 2022	40-60 minutes
Follow-up email	December 2022	20 minutes
	December 2023	20 minutes

How many people will be part of the case study?

In this study, we will have 3 participants.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

If you decide to participate you will join in a weekly meeting, facilitated by Michelle Glerum, in which each participant will share their experiences from the week and discuss recent scholarship in English education. Beyond these activities, participants will be asked to complete a pre and post-survey, participate in an interview, and write a short update email one and two years after the session. Prompts will be sent via email and will ask participants to rate their levels of contentment and commitment in the profession and update the research team of their teaching experiences.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later? You can leave the research at any time; it will not be held against you. Participants may choose to participate in some, all, or no parts of the study. There is no obligation to participate, and those who consent to one part of the study might, for example, decide not to participate in another part of the study. Participants can begin or end their participation from any part of the study at any time.

Will being in this study help me in any way? We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. For teachers who consent to participate in the study, possible benefits include a better understanding of shared experiences in English education as well as having their voice amplified through subsequent publication or presentation of data collected. Data will be used to better understand the kind of programs that may be useful in supporting early career English educators.

Will this study harm me in any way?

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to participate in this study.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

All materials related to the study including consent forms, demographic data, recorded meetings and interviews, pre-and post-study surveys, update letters, and field notes will be stored on the PI’s password-protected computer. Collected data will include the participant’s names and all names and identifiers will be stripped from the data during the analysis of the data. During publication and presentation of the work, it will be either anonymized or it will use pseudonyms. The master list of pseudonyms, attaching participants to their pseudonyms, will be stored on the PI’s password-protected computer, on the ASU server under double authentication. The master list and all other data will be destroyed after linking and data analysis is complete. Only the PI will have access to this data.

We are also asking your permission to record meetings and interviews. Meetings and in-person interviews will be audio recorded. Any interviews and meetings that take place via zoom will be video recorded. Only the research team will have access to the recordings. To protect your identity, please refrain from using names or other identifying information during the interview. Let me know if, at any time, you do not want to be recorded and I will stop. The recordings will be deleted immediately after data collection is complete and any published quotes will be anonymous.

Since the meetings are a group activity, complete confidentiality or indeed anonymity during the group meetings cannot be guaranteed because of the participation of others in the group.

Who can I talk to? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, talk to the research team at michelle.glerum@asu.edu (Michelle Glerum) or Jessica.Early@asu.edu (Jessica Early). or by email at research.integrity@asu.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to obtain information or provide input about this research.

Your signature documents your agreement to take part in this research project.

		Date
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		Date
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You may also talk to the Social and Behavioral IRB team by contacting them at (480) 965-6788

APPENDIX D
PRE-AND-POST-COMMUNITY SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Pre-community Questions

What led you to become an English teacher?

Tell me about your pre-service experience.

What did you gain from methods and seminar courses? What about student teaching?

Do you feel there was anything missing? Do you feel unprepared for anything you encountered or may encounter in your first year of teaching? Tell me about that experience.

How did your method of teaching classes prepare you for the teaching of writing?

How would you describe the transition from student to teacher (as a student teacher or classroom teacher)?

Is there anything that you feel would have helped you through the student to teacher transition?

Are you familiar with the concept of sustainable teaching? (Yes/No)

Definition: Sustainable teaching is the process of fostering self-compassion and renewal in educators who support the growth and development of students in turn.

Sustainable teaching puts educators first with the goal of creating a collaborative community that values an integrated approach to education and enables all participants to thrive.

In what ways did your pre-service training prepare you for sustainable teaching?

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being perfectly content), please rate your level of contentment with the profession and tell me why you chose that number.

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being 100% committed), please rate your level of commitment to the profession and tell me why you chose that number.

Post-community Questions

Please tell me about your experience in the Early Career English Educator Community.

What led you to join the community?

What effect do you think communities and relationships have on sustainable teaching?

How would you describe the transition (from student to teacher) with the support of the early educator community (if any different)?

Did this community of practice extend methods

In what ways did your involvement in the community impact your classroom experience, if any?

Can you describe any insights you have gained from your involvement in the Community for Early Career English Educators? How have those insights made their way into your teaching?

Tell me about your work/life balance. Has it changed in any way over the last twelve weeks?

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being perfectly content), please rate your level of contentment with the profession and tell me why you chose that number.

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being 100% committed), please rate your level of commitment to the profession and tell me why you chose that number.

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS*

**follow up interviews may be conducted to ascertain more detailed insight into the community experience. The following questions serve as a guide, though the interviews are semi structured and will primarily follow the dialogue of the interviewee.*

Do you think there is a connection between your experience in the community and your experience in the classroom? Tell me about that.

Can you describe any insights you have gained from your involvement in the Community for Early Career English Educators? How have those insights made their way into your teaching?

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being perfectly content), please rate your level of contentment with the profession and tell me why you chose that number.

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being 100% committed), please rate your level of commitment to the profession and tell me why you chose that number.

Tell me about your work/life balance. Has it changed in any way over the last twelve weeks?

In your survey response, you mentioned _____. Can you go into a bit more detail about that?

APPENDIX F
DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

Demographics Survey

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Additional languages:

Undergraduate degree title:

Advanced degree title(s):

Years of teaching experience (not including student teaching):

School(s) you have taught at:

Classes you currently teach:

Classes you have taught in the past:

Other teacher related responsibilities: (i.e. tutoring, advising, etc.)

Professional development experiences:

APPENDIX G
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EXEMPTION GRANTED

[Jessica Early](#)

[CLAS-H: English](#)

480/965-0742 Jessica.Early@asu.edu

Dear [Jessica Early](#):

On 6/9/2021 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	The Community for Early Career English Educators 2021
Investigator:	Jessica Early
IRB ID:	STUDY00014037
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• CECEE 2021 IRB (3).docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• Consent Form CECEE21 (2).pdf, Category: Consent Form;• Flyer, Category: Recruitment Materials;• Interview and Survey Questions , Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);• Study Materials .pdf, Category: Other;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 6/9/2021.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Michelle Glerum
Jessica Early
Michelle Glerum