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Promises We Kept: Middle School English Teachers Who Stayed amidst Ongoing Educational Reforms

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PROMISES WE KEPT: MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS WHO STAYED AMIDST
ONGOING EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

by

SARAH V. KLEIN

Under the Direction of Michelle Zoss, PhD

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study of middle school English teachers, I investigated the phenome-
non of why teachers stay, year in and year out, despite challenges brought on by educational re-
forms and negative depictions from the general public. The teachers' experiences illustrate the
dedication and perseverance of professionals committed to working with students year in and
year out. I framed this case study (Merriam, 1988) in theories of sensemaking (Maitliss & Chris-
tianson, 2014; Wieck, 1995) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). The participants
were three teachers who taught middle school English for over ten years. Within this time frame
they were exposed to multiple, ongoing reforms: No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and
Common Core State Standards. I used sensemaking and critical pedagogy lenses to explore how
these teachers experienced issues of power and interpreted educational reforms. I also examined
the reasons why they persisted in the profession. I employed grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006;
Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and Gee's (2011) Seven Building Tasks for analysis to identify four cat-
egories to illuminate the teachers' stories: 1) Public Perception of the Profession, 2) Pedagogy

and Curriculum, 3) Relationships, and 4) Being a Teacher. The teachers' experienced ongoing struggles and yet had longevity in the profession. Implications of the study point to the perils and promises of long-term teaching. The perils were challenges of the profession: demands from administrators, new and limiting curriculum, a negative public perception, and long hours. The promises these teachers kept were commitments to decision makers and the public, middle school students and their families, and to the profession. It is these promises that they kept each year that motivated the teachers and sustained them over time.

INDEX WORDS: Educational reform, Neoliberal, No child left behind, Race to the top, Common core state standards, Teacher morale, Teacher attrition, Teacher retention, Teacher experience, Teacher stories, Teacher longevity, Grounded theory

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A Dissertation

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DEDICATION

To Faith, Grace and Hope, your stories are a testament to the profession. Thank you for sharing them with me and allowing your words to shed light on the beautiful aspects of teaching.

To my students—old and new—and my colleagues, I thank you for all you have taught me. You are the reasons why I stay.

I was also fortunate enough to form what I believe is the best doctoral committee ever. *Dr. Alyssa Dunn, Dr. Laura May, Dr. Jayoung Choi*, and *Dr. Dana Fox* have provided me with more support, encouragement, and guidance than I ever imagined needing. They were always there to celebrate my successes and help me move beyond my struggles. Every meeting and defense was a positive experience because of my incredible chair and committee members.

As I continued through my journey, I met several doctoral students who were sometimes just as confused as I was and sometimes knew more than I did and could offer me some moral support. *Dr. Kelli Sowerbrower, Nicole Dukes*, and *Dr. Roz Linder* became my core group, and I looked to these amazing women for advice, help, and encouragement. The friendships that I formed with them will continue long after we have all celebrated the end of our PhD journeys.

I am fortunate to have a tremendous circle of friends. Their support and encouragement have kept me motivated, and I appreciate them all. If I listed every friend I would be writing for days; however, there is one person I feel compelled to mention because I could always count on her to tell me what I needed to hear—particularly when I did not want to hear it. *Kathryn Clayton*, thank you for your words of wisdom and the use of your dining room table any time I needed it! Much of this dissertation was written at that very table.

My brother, *Jonah*, is yet another source of support. He always inquired about my progress, and while he might not have had the most appropriate advice, he always made me laugh, which was sometimes the perfect remedy.

Finally, there are two people who have continuously motivated me throughout my educational journey. My mom and dad, *Vibeke* and *Gene*. While neither are here physically to watch me come to the end of my journey, I have caught glimpses of their support in unexpected ways. It is those moments that have moved me forward.

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1 INTRODUCTION

"When you teach what you love, and share what you know, you open eyes, minds, hearts, and souls to unexplored worlds."—Anonymous

I have always loved all things associated with English class: reading, writing, grammar, debates, and discussions. I relished those moments in class when my teacher introduced a new poet or essay or referred back to someone with whom I felt comfortable and familiar. While it took me some time to arrive here, it is no surprise to those who know me that I teach English and continue to seek opportunities to enhance my understanding of this beloved subject. While working on my first education degree, I envisioned my future classroom and the ways students would interact with literature through writing, projects, journaling, and class discussions. Believing that teaching was the greatest profession, I knew what I wanted to do was teach English and I could not wait to do it. Then the reality of teaching set in.

Eleven years into my career as a middle school English teacher, I have been through four changes in curriculum standards from Superior Core Curriculum (SCC) to State Performance Standards (SPS) to Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to State Standards of Excellence (SSE). I entered the teaching profession right in the throes of No Child Left Behind (2002) and experienced firsthand what it meant to teach at a school that was not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). I felt the frustration many of my colleagues expressed as students were pulled from their art, technology, music, and PE classrooms to receive reading, writing, or math remediation. I witnessed students crying from feelings of stress during the week of the state-mandated assessments. I experienced, more times than I would like, my colleagues and friends breaking down emotionally due to the growing demands put upon teachers because of new policies and curriculum changes. Finally, I dealt with drastic changes in my own attitude and

mindset as part of my public school teaching career. I attended data analysis meetings where I discussed the results of my students' standardized test scores and what strategies I planned to implement to help students improve. I participated in workshops that featured test taking strategies I was expected to expose my students to in time for the standardized tests. I filled out (and continue to fill out) weekly updates on the struggling students in my classes indicating the tactics I used and provided my input as to why the tactics did or did not work for each student. These examples were some of the added responsibilities I assumed as a classroom teacher and they were part of what fueled my frustration regarding the current emphasis on standardized tests and a standards-based curriculum. The tactics and workshops frequently reduced the vibrant human beings in my room to simple numbers. This was quite a different reality from what I pictured when I first began my journey into education. Yet, despite all of the negativity and requirements, I held strong to my belief that teaching is the greatest profession and I remain a middle school English teacher. In this study I examined the reasons why three middle school English teachers demonstrated longevity in the classroom despite the demands and challenges brought on by educational policies and current portrayals of the teaching profession in the media. The questions that guided my research are

1. How do middle school English teachers report experiencing their profession, pedagogy, and curriculum amidst ongoing educational reforms?

2. Why do middle school English teachers demonstrate longevity in the classroom despite pressures associated with educational reforms and negative impressions of the profession?

Purpose Statement

In this qualitative study of middle school English teachers, I investigated the phenomenon of why teachers stay, year in and year out, despite policy reforms that assumed a change is needed in education. This assumption lent itself to the idea that there was something wrong with education and public opinion suggested that teachers were the primary factor wrong with education (Aoki, 2014; Twomey, 2008). This study addressed three educational reforms, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT), and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the influences these reforms had on the morale of middle school English teachers and their ideas about teaching and the teaching profession. The purpose for this study was to identify the factors that kept three middle school English teachers in the classroom in spite of the negativity they encountered. Middle school English teachers were the focus because English has consistently been a subject heavily tested since NCLB (2002), which created an atmosphere rife with pressure and expectations. Often labeled the most challenging of all grade levels (Lipsitz, 1984), the middle school environment does come with its own set of characteristics that require teachers to be prepared to handle the demands and needs of adolescent students. It is important to note that by the end of my research, two of the teachers were no longer teaching—one due to retirement and one due to a better opportunity for her family. I provide a more detailed explanation about each teacher in Chapter 3; however, the teachers who left did so on their own accord and after lengthy careers. They left when they were ready and were not driven out by the negativity of the perils associated with teaching. The stories they shared about their years of experience in the classroom are important to this study despite the fact that they have left the profession.

Perspective of the Researcher

My decision to teach middle school English, as opposed to elementary or high school, stemmed from the simple fact that I preferred this age group of students to any other. I was aware of my strengths and establishing positive relationships with students was one of them. I felt that this influence I had on students in my classroom was a powerful, yet positive one. Middle school is a significant time for most students because they experience a variety of changes: physically, emotionally, cognitively, and academically (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014a; Mee & Haverback, 2014). Middle school students need teachers who can relate to them during this exciting, yet challenging, time in their lives (Mee & Haverback, 2014; Nichols, 2008). Fresh out of the elementary school setting, today's middle school student is expected to make decisions about future career goals and college choices. This change includes taking assessments and talking with guidance counselors about a future career; middle school then is a place where the role of a student is to figure out what to do for a profession. In the middle school where I taught, a program called Teachers as Advisors was implemented five years ago. The initial intent of this program was to provide an adult in the school with whom students could make connections and establish positive relationships. Students were placed with a teacher not in their current grade level and met monthly at a prearranged time. In my case, I had a group of female students in grade 6. With these girls, I talked about the transition into middle school, their interests, and life in general. Over the past three years, the goal shifted and the teacher advisors were now expected to talk exclusively about future career paths and present information about specific careers and college choices based on results of career assessments taken by the students. Thinking about a career path or college major can be an overwhelming feeling for students who may not have any idea of what direction their future will take.

In the past, the middle school years were often viewed as bridging the gap between elementary and high school (Kopkowski, 2008). The middle school classroom was a place where students began moving from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* (Robb, 2000). While the middle school may have offered remedial reading classes for students, the expectation was that students entered middle school with the skill set to read, comprehend, and interact with curriculum material independently. However, the reality was that many students entered middle school without having mastered these skills, placing them at a disadvantage before the first day of school had officially begun (Buly & Valencia, 2002; Kamil, 2003; Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). Putting a heavy emphasis on testing influences the ways in which teachers can actually implement a rigorous English curriculum. I experienced working with students who struggled with reading and written expression. At the same time, I felt the pressure of having to teach a specific amount of content within a particular time frame, and this led me to feel frustrated because I was unable to reach my students the way in which I felt they should be taught.

More recently, the state adopted curriculum standards that affected all academic content areas in the middle school and no longer was it just the English teacher who was expected to concentrate on reading and writing, but the math, science, and social studies teachers also had to teach discipline-specific literacy content (National Governors Association for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). According to the International Reading Association (2013), literacy skills are crucial as today's adolescents are asked to perform more reading and writing skills that any other generation. Consider the fact that many students enter middle school reading well below grade level (Irvin, Meltzer, Mickler, Phillips, & Dean, 2008). More pressure may be placed upon English teachers as the default reading teachers for all

contents areas, despite the fact that the new standards require all teachers to address literacy. Further complicating the matter, middle school teachers were in a difficult situation because they were expected to differentiate their instruction in an attempt to meet students at their individual reading levels; yet, when standardized test time came these students were expected to perform at their current grade level on tests that were the same for every student across the state (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Irvin, et al., 2008). As a result, middle school English teachers found it necessary to provide reading strategies not aligned with their grade level curriculum in an effort to prepare students reading below grade level. In addition, English teachers were expected to cover reading material that was outside of the typical English realm, such as informational texts and non-fiction texts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). What does a scenario such as this say about the educational reforms that assess students and teachers based on standardized test scores? As policy changes continued to perpetuate a system focused solely on quantifiable results, middle school English teachers continued to demonstrate they were a valuable resource by ensuring their students were exposed to the curriculum while at the same time helping students adjust to the typically confusing phenomenon known as adolescence (Mee & Haverback, 2014).

When I made the decision to continue with my own education and pursue a doctoral degree, I never imagined choosing a study that dealt with educational policies. As an English teacher, I knew I wanted to do something with literacy, but I was not fully invested in any specific topic. After taking some classes and becoming exposed to authors who wrote about the ways in which education was influenced by No Child Left Behind (2002), I began to think about my role as a public school educator. My first thoughts were that I was merely a puppet being told what to do, and I did it mainly because I did not know any better. The more I thought about that, the angrier I became. I did not get into teaching so that I could teach a prescribed lesson

plan and give multiple choice tests and then create spread sheets based on these results that were supposed to indicate where my students' weaknesses lay. I did not get into education so that I could "teach to a test" and participate in door decorating contests and pep rallies that were expected to motivate students to "do your best on the test!" And, I definitely did not get into education so that I could spend countless hours analyzing testing data and Lexile scores and then make decisions about my students that were based on results from this numerical analysis. What made this even more frustrating was the results I analyzed came from a test given several months before I would even see these students in my classroom. But, I must admit, that these scenarios, along with a host of other data-driven scenes, were very much my reality as a middle school English teacher. I hated what I was doing to my students and, in turn, to the profession. I felt defeated when I realized that I was giving power to the test scores and numerical data, but I did not see a way to avoid it. I loved teaching and working with students, but the expectations to solely consider these numbers as a means to drive my instruction went against all of the reasons why I went into teaching in the first place: to share my passion for English and foster a love for reading and writing. The misdirected emphasis that test scores received was disheartening. As a classroom teacher, I was aware of the fact that so much more goes on in a class period that could never be assessed quantitatively (Berliner, 2014). But, the fact that something cannot be measured with numbers does not make it any less important than something that can be quantified with numbers (Eisner, 2002). In my opinion, unmeasurable moments were often more valuable.

Alas, the standardized tests loomed over me, and I succumbed to the pressure. As I continued to take graduate level classes and had conversations with other public school teachers who experienced the same dismay, I began to feel empowered. Yet, at the same time, I felt, and

continue to feel, like a hypocrite for cultivating a culture that supports testing. I definitely felt conflicted. Maya Angelou's (n.d.) words sounded in my ears "When you know better, you do better." I knew that I had to do better. But, what would that look like? I realized that my study *had* to focus on educational policies and the consequences (unintended perhaps) that teachers experienced. I also knew that I wanted to learn more about what it was that kept teachers in the profession who were facing the same sort of defeat and demoralization I encountered. What was it that made teachers get up in the morning and walk through their classroom door, ready to work with students, in a time when teachers were routinely blamed for their students' failures? This study was an attempt to answer this question and remain positive about a profession once highly revered by society, now shaped by educational policies that created a culture of testing and teacher accountability (Ingersoll, 2010; Sowerbrower, 2015).

Significance of the Study

As educational policies continued to place more demands upon teachers, the classroom environment shifted. The role of the middle school English teacher changed as a result of educational policies, and middle school teachers felt the pressure to adjust to these new expectations. With the onset of the literacy standards found in CCSS, all teachers across content areas were expected to regularly incorporate reading and writing into the classroom (NGA, 2010). Math and English teachers had new standards to unpack and implement because the format of the standardized tests changed to incorporate a writing component in both subject areas. The preparation for the standardized tests became high priority and middle school teachers began taking on new roles as they incorporated new standards reflected in the tests. As James (2015) asserted "educational policy is only as effective as those who are implementing it into classrooms" (p. 17). Though middle school teachers were expected to address the changes

and implement new standards and curriculum, the ways in which teachers interpreted these changes and policies looked different in every classroom. The intention of this study was to demonstrate how middle school English teachers interpreted NCLB, RTTT, and CCSS and how these interpretations shaped their teaching and affected their morale. The stories of the teachers I interviewed warrant a place in the research as an indication that middle school English teachers' perspectives are valuable and worthy of acknowledgment. Teachers are the ones who witness what happens in classrooms everyday as they put policies into action while working with students. With the stories of middle school English teachers, there can be a more nuanced and developed understanding of how policies play out in the classroom and a clearer picture of the reasons that keep teachers teaching.

It is important to discuss some of the factors that shaped my research interests and led me to this study of middle school English teachers. Teacher attrition has always been something that caught my attention (Ingersoll, 2003) even before I got into the teaching profession. I grew up in a time when teaching was a profession that people rarely left and where jobs appeared to be plentiful. When I decided to become a teacher, I seldom heard anything negative about the field. To me, it was a noble profession and once you became a teacher, you stayed one. So, once I began teaching, it was both interesting and disheartening for me to hear of colleagues wanting to leave the profession. Having a curious nature, I did not hesitate to ask why they decided to leave. While some teachers stated they were leaving to stay home and take care of small children, the majority admitted to feeling emotionally and professionally burned out, and they did not think they could remain in a profession that was so draining. On the flip side of this, I was also interested in those teachers who stayed despite the chaos seemingly spurred by curriculum changes and more administrative demands; those who stayed despite the defeated

feelings expressed by colleagues. I wondered what made those teachers stay. I attributed these conversations as my first glimpse into the other side of education—the side that expected teachers to change grades, or to continuously prove via paperwork how effective their teaching was—and my first glimpse into the ways in which teachers reacted to these experiences.

I began teaching after NCLB (2002) became a law, in a school that had been identified as a Needs Improvement (NI) school. One of NCLB's requirements was for schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which measured year-to-year student achievement (US Department of Education, 2003). When a school did not make AYP for two consecutive years, they were placed on NI status. Different interventions were put into place with the intention of getting the school off the NI list (US DoE, 2003). Aside from one assignment in an undergraduate class that asked me to read a section of the NCLB law, I knew very little about this reform that played such a considerable role in my career. For example, I had no solid understanding of what it meant to teach in a NI school or that this label was a result of not making AYP for two years in a row. I heard, from time to time, reports on the news discussing the pros and cons of NCLB, but I really did not think much of it. I knew I was a government employee and simply accepted the fact that I had to adhere to certain expectations. It was not until I became a doctoral student that I started to pay attention to what NCLB actually stated and required of teachers. I explored public opinions about standardized testing and what role these test scores actually played (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2014). I was appalled when I learned of the magnitude that was placed on test results and how they affected not only me, but also my students, school, administrators, county, and state. Decisions and assumptions about me as a teacher were made based on these scores. I recalled feelings of shock at discovering this information and chastised myself for not being aware that these policies had such a large role in

determining my effectiveness as a teacher, yet they had little to do with my daily interactions with my students.

When the talk of Race to the Top (ARRA, 2009) and Common Core State Standards (2010) began to swell in my state, I became even more interested because, as an English teacher, significant changes in my subject were coming with the new English curriculum standards found in the CCSS. As I conversed with my colleagues about the new policies, and the probable changes, my interest in policy grew. I reflected on the conversations I had with my peers who considered leaving during the push to adopt and implement the CCSS and made connections with their dissatisfaction in their daily experiences. Yet, after connecting the policy demands to teacher dissatisfaction (Lynch, 2014), I also questioned why many of my colleagues remained in a profession that was repeatedly denigrated in the news media and other outlets (Aoki, 2014; Edwards, 2014; Ripley, 2008; Twomey 2008). It was a rather powerful moment for me, and continued to be, as I learned more about the ways teachers interpreted NCLB, RTTT, and CCSS and their reasons for staying in the profession.

Background of the Study

Educational reforms and policies have no doubt affected the ways in which teachers view the profession. The notion of teachers leaving teaching due to mounting pressure from changes in educational policies was a reality many districts faced (Walker, 2014); however, many teachers made the decision to stay in their schools. Additionally, middle school students bring a host of challenges to the school setting that the middle school teacher must be prepared to handle. These challenges include, but are not limited to, academic struggles, peer acceptance or not, teacher approval or not, and dealing with physical and hormonal changes (Lipsitz, 1984; National Middle School Association, 2010). In the next section, I discuss teacher attrition rates

as well as focus on the reasons why teachers stay in a time when educational reform demands seem to be at an all-time high (Clarksen, 2014). This section also demonstrates the distinctive characteristics of the middle school years and why middle school students require teachers who are equipped to foster supportive environments to meet their needs.

Teachers: To Stay or To Leave?

Over 500,000 US teachers left the profession in 2012 (Haynes, 2014; US DoE, 2012). According to Ingersoll (2003), a staggering 40-50% of novice teachers leave before their fifth year of teaching. One cannot turn on the television, open the newspaper, or access the Internet, without coming across some statistic about education and teachers leaving the profession. Much of the problem with the rise of teacher attrition rates was in the notion that teaching has become an industry in which teachers were expected to meet top-down demands in order to improve test scores (Ingersoll, 2003; Kopkowski, 2008). Such conditions lead to teachers feeling demoralized as they continued to work in an environment that no longer supported creativity and autonomy, but rather dictated federally-mandated, scripted lessons that purported to lead to increased test results. Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001) asserted "when a professional realm loses some of its most thoughtful people because of constraints that they see as endemic, it has ventured into dangerous territory" (p. 141). Teachers left due to a lack of autonomy and growing concerns that their voices were being silenced. These teachers included the thoughtful professionals Gardner et al. alluded to. Put simply, when good teachers leave, students miss out. This was a valid concern because if schools continued to lose strong teachers, what did that mean for students? What would the loss of experienced teachers mean for the profession?

Demoralization is a term associated with teacher attrition and teacher morale. Santoro (2011) explained that a teacher feels demoralized when "conditions of teaching have changed so

drastically that teachers are continuously frustrated in their pursuit of good teaching," (p. 2).

Different from burnout, which implied that a teacher reached his or her limit and could do no

more (Santoro, 2011), feeling demoralized was a struggle many public school teachers faced.

When teachers find themselves focusing mainly on achievement via test scores and reading

levels, this often lead to feelings of demoralization because teachers feel as if they have no

choice but to give up what once was considered valuable. Teachers did not see the value in what

they were doing with regards to students and that loss of value led to a decline in morale

(Noddings, 2014; Santoro, 2011).

Santoro (2011) talked about the notion of good teaching. Good teaching is characterized

as a sense of satisfaction of reaching students and presenting the curriculum in a way that is

relevant and meaningful to students (Fatima, 2012; Santoro, 2011). Good teaching differed from

successful teaching, which indicated that teachers were just looking for improved test scores that

were representative of success (Santoro, 2011). Though good teachers may recognize the

emphasis placed upon test scores and their connection to success in relation to top-down

standards that were enforced, good teachers are more concerned with facilitating learning by

connecting with students and acknowledging that the students in their classrooms are more than

just a test score. Teachers in Santoro's study felt as though they were "violating their moral

principles" by succumbing to the scientifically-based strategies they were expected to implement

without any regard to the fact that this kind of teaching went against their pedagogical beliefs (p.

56). When a teacher's ethical life is constantly undermined, it becomes difficult to remain in that

environment. Cochran-Smith (2004) conducted research on teacher retention and what teachers

needed to stay in the profession. The results indicated that a supportive working environment

where teachers were not made to feel demoralized was the number one factor in retaining

teachers. This finding further supported Ingersoll and Merrill's (2010) results that a low level of

teacher control regarding social and instructional decisions led to a higher attrition rate.

Teachers want and need to feel valued as the professional people they are. When such validation

does not happen time after time, teachers make the courageous decision to leave (Dunn, 2014).

Despite the fact that teachers were leaving, there were those who remained in the

classroom (Clarksen, 2014; Cockburn & Haydn, 2007). Looking at the flip side of Ingersoll's

(2003, 2010) research shows that 50-60% of teachers remain in the profession after five years.

The reasons teachers chose to stay in the profession amidst the increasing demands and negative

depictions tended to reflect their own experiences with education. Many teachers entered

education because of an influential teacher and stayed because they felt inspired and encouraged

when working with students (Curtis, 2012). Teachers also stayed because of the shared

interactions with other teachers who shared their passion for a subject or grade level. Teachers

learned from one another and the feedback received from peers was yet another reason why

teachers remained (Curtis, 2012; Guskey, 1988). As with other professions, there was a sense of

fellowship among teachers that came from the lived experiences only a teacher can encounter

and then share with another (Craig, 2014). This powerful connection of living and telling and re-

living and re-telling their stories was what kept many teachers fueled to remain in the profession,

even when the feeling of defeat was palpable (Craig, 2014; Friedman & Reynolds, 2011). Craig

(2014) described teachers as both *knowers* and *doers,* meaning regardless of the negativity

surrounding education, teachers were willing to do what needed to be done to ensure students got

what they needed.

Sowerbrower (2015) and James (2015) conducted studies examining teachers amidst the

demands of educational reforms. Sowerbrower (2015) looked at three high school English

teachers in one school and their experiences with *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and No Child Left Behind (2002). She examined what teachers did in relation to the demands of reforms when they shut their doors and taught. Did these three teachers change their teaching methods because of federal, top-down initiatives? Sowerbrower discovered that teachers felt as though they were already doing what was being asked for in the reforms; therefore, did not change much, if anything, about their teaching. One interesting point to note was that by the end of the research study, one teacher shared with Sowerbrower that she would be leaving at the end of the school year. Because of the requirements of the Common Core State Standards, this teacher felt as though her professional judgment was being questioned and devalued when she was expected to demonstrate common assessments with other English teachers in her grade level. Believing that education was not something that could be placed into one common assessment or category, this teacher made the difficult decision to leave a profession about which she was passionate.

James's (2015) study focused on three elementary teachers and the ways in which they navigated the demands of educational policies, particularly high-stakes testing and accountability, in a politically restrictive environment. In addition, James examined power relationships as the teachers in her study shared their experiences with negotiating their daily teaching practices within the context of the reforms. Through her research, James discovered that the teachers were at a crossroads. The teachers were frustrated with the taxing expectations brought on by the policies, yet they did not want to leave the profession. Their passion for teaching and working with students ultimately compelled them to remain as teachers, consistent with the findings of the Curtis (2012) study.

While the overwhelming data point out that teachers were leaving (Ingersoll, 2003), the teachers I focused on in my study, and those in Sowerbrower's (2015) and James's (2015) studies, have longevity in the field. My study adds to the research on teacher experiences with reforms by looking at middle school English teachers across two different middle schools and three different grade levels. By focusing on middle school teachers, I acknowledged a different grade level than Sowerbrower (2015) whose study looked at high school teachers, and James (2015) who examined elementary school teachers. Gathering perspectives from multiple teachers yielded rich descriptions of the teachers' experiences, thus adding to the ongoing inquiries on teachers and educational reforms. The contributions from the teachers' stories in this study explored a phenomenon worth understanding: Why do teachers who have experienced defeat and demoralization in their profession return day in and day out, year after year? My hope was that these teachers' stories would inform readers about what kept them in the classroom for decades and what it meant to teach in an era of accountability (Sowerbrower, 2015) and ongoing attention to a national legislation for education.

Policies and Education

The policies that I focused upon in this study were the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), Race to the Top (2009), and Common Core State Standards (2010). I have personal and professional experience with these policies as a teacher. When I began teaching, NCLB was about four years into its ambitious goal of ensuring that 100% of students would be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Standardized tests were beginning to set the tone and drive instruction because proficiency of the curriculum standards was measured by these tests. At the same time, the term *standards based* became a new adjective used to describe a school setting that addressed the state's curriculum standards. Making sure classrooms were standards based

was just another requirement administrators placed on teachers in an attempt to meet the new expectations of NCLB (Nieto, 2009; Santoro, 2011). Essential questions and enduring understandings that indicated specifically what students focused on throughout a school day were posted and word walls displayed the vocabulary for specific units. Anyone walking into a classroom would be able to identify the standards being taught.

In graduate school I continued my efforts to become more aware of the changes in educational policy, and I learned about Race to the Top (2009) and the criteria that were required for states to apply for this grant and ultimately "win" funding for education. Ravitch (2010) argued that states accepting RTTT funding were in fact not winning anything at all, but were instead agreeing to stipulations for education that mirrored and extended NCLB expectations. When I learned that my state applied for this funding, I wondered what this money would be used for and how it would affect me in the classroom. The federal government awarded the state the funding during the second round of applications. While the school district I taught in was not an official RTTT district, meaning the district did not receive RTTT funds, it turned out that I was still directly influenced by RTTT. One of the funding requirements was that states applying for the grant must implement a common set of standards. My state chose to adopt the CCSS (2010), which introduced new standards for English and math teachers, as well as a set of literacy standards for science, social studies, and technology teachers. When I first heard about these new standards, and learned what would be required to familiarize myself with these new standards, I felt uneasy because I was not sure what I thought of the idea of common national standards. Part of me saw the logic in every student across the nation (or at least those in states adopting these standards) working on the same grade level curriculum. For a moment, I bought into the rationale that so many policy makers were espousing that students who moved from one

state to another would not have to worry about being behind or not yet introduced to the material. I taught in a school where students come and go and it did concern me when a student entered my class and was not familiar with what I was teaching. So, this idea of a shared curriculum made sense to me. But, then I came to my senses and realized that national standards might sound good on paper, yet the reality was that I taught adolescents. And, adolescents are human beings who bring to the table a host of experiences—many that support their own education and some that may not. To think that a national set of curriculum standards and aligning standardized tests to these standards would improve student achievement did not make sense to me. I no longer bought into the notion of a one-size-fits-all curriculum because I knew firsthand the reality of what occurred in middle school classrooms and expecting my students to all be at the same level was not the least bit realistic.

While I knew I had little choice but to accept that I would be teaching CCSS (2010), my confusion turned into frustration. At the point of implementation of the CCSS in my state, I had been teaching for seven years and the CCSS were the third set of standards required by the state during those seven years. I questioned what could possibly be so different in teaching my content area that necessitated another overhaul of the standards. I quickly learned that there were some major changes, and while I did not necessarily think that CCSS were ineffective, I understood that education is political and could not help but wonder if there would be another overhaul of the standards when a new president was elected in 2016.

Rose (2015) asserted that in today's public education arena "learning is defined as a rise in standardized test scores and teaching as the set of activities that lead to the score" (p. 4). Only concepts that could be quantified and were specific to certain academic content areas were important to those writing the policies and reforms, yet there was so much more to education that

was crucial to student success that had no way of being counted and measured. As Eisner (2002) declared, "Not everything that matters can be measured and not everything that is measured matters" (p. 146). These sentiments from Rose (2015) and Eisner (2002) are telling, yet there was little evidence that those writing educational policies and reforms actually gave consideration to what educators had been trying to point out for decades. For years, in the state in which I taught, students were assessed by multiple choice tests in math, English, social studies, and science. The results of these tests determined whether a student exceeded, met, or did not meet the standards set by the state. Everything a student had been exposed to in school for that year came down to the results of standardized tests. Teachers knew that there was much more that happened in classrooms that was not and could not be reflected as a question on standardized tests, yet the tests remained and decisions about students, teachers, schools, districts, and states were made based on standardized test results. Policy makers at this point did not seem to recognize that so much of what occurred in any given classroom, on any given school day, were events that could not be standardized, yet they were equally as important and should not be ignored. Teachers felt the pressure to perform and the negative results on the teaching profession included good teachers leaving altogether and others staying but feeling defeated and demoralized (Lynch, 2014; Noddings, 2014; Santoro, 2011).

In the Middle

It did not take being an educator to understand that the middle school years were perhaps the most challenging years for school-aged children in the United States. Apart from infancy to toddlerhood, adolescence is the only other time when youth change drastically— cognitively, physically, and emotionally (Eichhorn, 1966; Lipsitz, 1984). The notion of transitioning from elementary school to middle school could be a terrifying one for children, yet

it is this very transition that determines whether middle school could be a positive or negative experience for students (Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007). The primary factor leading to whether or not middle school was successful for students was the classroom teacher (Mee & Haverback, 2014). Middle school teachers share a responsibility to educate their students, yet more importantly, they have an obligation to connect with their students to ensure that middle school is a positive experience (Nichols, 2008). Moving from childhood to adolescence, middle school students become more independent and experience acts of being held accountable for their own behavior. These years are when middle school students begin to further develop opinions and ideas about themselves and the world that may be different from what they previously felt and knew. This realization can be trying for students and it is critical that they have adults who can offer necessary support as the students navigate new territory (Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007). A student's sense of belonging in middle school is a key factor to academic success (National Middle School Association, 2010). While student-student relationships are essential, a crucial relationship is of the teacher-student variety (Mee & Haverback, 2014). Though teachers at all educational levels should provide a positive and supportive relationship with their students, the middle school teacher has a specific role to fill as they deal with students who are in need of adult approval while seeking peer acceptance during a time of physical, emotional, and hormonal changes (Lipsitz, 1984; Mee & Haverback, 2014).

Middle schools that are "responsive to students' basic and developmental needs" are more likely to foster a positive school experience for both students and teachers (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014b, p. 2). This finding meant that teachers in the study listened to students vent when they had personal issues, or worked with students one-on-one on social skills, or perhaps simply acknowledged a specific hobby in which students had an interest. Students

interviewed in Nichols' (2008) study claimed that they "just wanted to know they had an adult to talk to" (p. 148) and middle school was the time when they most needed those opportunities to talk. Middle school teachers are aware of the qualities this age group presents. For example, teachers are prepared to deal with the trials and tribulations that may have nothing to do with learning the curriculum standards and passing a test, but have everything to do with fitting in and feeling accepted by peers. Though the teacher-student relationship is important at all levels of education, it is a critical piece during the middle school years and, therefore, it is vital that middle schools teachers are prepared to build and foster these relationships with students (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Mee & Haverback, 2014; Nichols, 2008).

In this section, I explained the motivation for my study. I addressed teacher attrition and teacher retention, the educational policies at play in this study, as well as what it takes to teach middle school. Next, I describe the theories that guided my study.

Theoretical Framework

Meant to serve as a guide for research, a theoretical framework is a necessary part of a qualitative study (Anfara & Mertz, 2014). Merriam (2009) asserted that without some sort of "structure or scaffolding" researchers would not know what to do (p. 66). As I considered the framework and theories that have guided me to this point in my research interests, the ones that have consistently shaped my study are *sensemaking* and *critical pedagogy*.

Sensemaking

Defined as a "process through which individuals work to understand novel, unexpected, or confusing events," sensemaking strives to make connections by giving meaning to experiences (Maitliss & Christianson, 2014, p. 57). Sensemaking is a social activity that promotes the evolution of conversation in regard to personal experiences (Watson, 2009; Weick,

1995). In other words, an experience is shared when an individual engages in conversation and tells his/her story. This story then is preserved, retained, and retold as a way of gaining meaning and understanding (Watson, 2009; Coburn, 2005). Teaching is a social profession, but often it is isolated and this isolation can influence the ways in which teachers deal with experiences. Sharing experiences through talking and listening is a means of building a community (Craig, 2014). Teachers tell and retell their stories as a way of establishing a circle of trust among fellow teachers (Curtis, 2012), particularly in today's educational climate, which can leave teachers struggling with feelings of defeat and invalidation (Santoro, 2011). I aimed to make sense of the stories middle school English teachers shared regarding why they remained in teaching during a time when the pressure to perform continued to rise and the public continued to belittle the profession. The stories of these teachers are not only necessary to be heard, but deserve to be heard as a way of lifting up a profession that has been beaten down by reports of teachers blamed for failing school systems (Thomas, 2010).

There are seven traits of sensemaking that Weick (1995) used to explain the way the process works. Sensemaking is restrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and extracted by cues, grounded in identity construction, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995, p. 17). This theory was appropriate for me to frame my study because of the nature of my topic. Being *retrospective* entails reflecting on something that happened and making sense of it. The three teachers in the study reflected on their experiences about teaching in the era of accountability (Sowerbrower, 2015) during interviews. The goal of the interviews was to elicit the stories and begin to develop an understanding about the role of reforms in their teaching. Weick (1995) explained being *enactive of sensible environments* as the enactment of people "creating and making sense of their own

environment" (p. 31). The teachers made sense of their environment by acknowledging that test scores and state standards drove many of the decisions made about their students.

The *social* aspect of the framework focused on the relationships teachers had with other teachers, administrators, students, families, and others connected to the school. Weick (1995) defined the trait *ongoing* by declaring that, "Sensemaking is clearly about a process and not just an outcome" (p. 13). Teachers shared their stories about the ways in which they continually revisited what was happening with public education and the implementation of new educational standards aligned to standardized tests. While the reforms, and subsequently those in powerful administrative roles, focused on test scores as the most important outcomes, the teachers focused on the process, the day-to-day interactions and teaching with students. This situation was, and still is, ongoing in many public schools. By *focusing on and extracting cues* from the teachers' stories, I found that they often painted an unflattering picture of teaching, administrators, policy writers, and the public. And, yet they also had stories of endurance and perseverance to illustrate why they stayed.

The three teachers I conducted research with relied on their *identities* as middle school English teachers and expressed the way that their views of what it meant to be a teacher was shaped due to the mandates in the educational reforms. In order to put these stories in context with the larger picture of educational reforms, I relied on *plausibility rather than accuracy*. Their stories illuminate what happens in English classrooms. While there is no way to go back and check to make sure that every story is factually accurate, the importance is in the believability and plausibility of their stories as indicators of what it meant to be a teacher for the last 20-30 years.

Sensemaking places its origins in social constructivism (Weick, 1995). The basic principle behind social constructivism is that individual learning takes place in particular social contexts and the developing understanding occurs during interactions with others (Maitliss & Christianson, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Experiences play a large role in sensemaking. Dewey (1938) described the act of experiencing as "something we act upon, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences" (p. 139). In relation to this study, Dewey's quote supports the idea of teachers returning year after year to the profession. Despite the consequences teachers underwent—blame for low test scores, negative comments in the media, continuous changes in curriculum—teachers returned and created new experiences by acting upon the situation because this is what teachers do. Many teachers persevere in their profession; sharing their experiences with other teachers provides one form of support to remain in the profession (Craig, 2014). Establishing a sense of trust with other teachers is important (Byrk & Schneider, 2002). Teachers need to know that they can tell their stories to someone who will listen and understand and help put the experience into perspective.

With regard to the role experience plays in constructivism, it is necessary to take into account the impact of a person's cultural and social backgrounds (Smagorinsky, 2008). Smagorinsky (2001) identified culture as "the recurring social practices and their artifacts that give order, purpose, and continuity to social life" (p. 133). In simple terms, culture is comprised of a set of social practices that members of a particular culture understand, accept, and contribute to in their daily experiences. The teaching profession is an example of a specific culture. Teachers bring to the classroom a host of experiences influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds. These cultural backgrounds were important to consider when examining the ways in which teachers react and interact to mandated changes in their schools. As with most

professions, teaching creates its own culture and within each individual school, there is another culture created based upon the climate and the practices that have become deeply ingrained (Smagorinsky, 2001; Sowerbrower, 2015). How teachers constructed meanings of educational policies could influence how teachers implemented such reforms. It is important to consider that teachers' experiences are based on the school culture sanctioned by the leaders of the school and how both teachers and leader interpret the policies and reforms. Griffin and Ross (1991) explained that "different individuals and groups construe 'objectively' similar stimuli quite differently" (p. 207). In other words, teachers and administrators may not necessarily share the same opinion about policies and these shared or not shared opinions may influence the ways in which policies are carried out in schools as a whole and within individual classrooms. For example, I taught in a school whose leaders took the state implementation of the CCSS literally, meaning they expected the English department to follow exactly what was suggested in the state curriculum guide. Frameworks reflecting the new standards were created by the state education agency. In talking with other middle school English teachers in the county, I realized that my middle school was the only one in the county following these frameworks so strictly. This was not to say that the other schools were not using portions of what the state provided for schools in online curriculum repositories, but I recognized that my administrators construed these documents differently than other administrators. In addition, my colleagues and I viewed the frameworks in a different manner from our administrators. The community created by the English teachers in my school provided an outlet for teachers to share their frustrations and disdain for the literal interpretation of the state's frameworks. The ways in which individuals or groups interpret events, like the implementation of the CCSS in a school, is part of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) or developing understandings through conversation and other social acts, a quality

of the framework that made it appropriate for my study. While sensemaking provides a means for understanding the cultural and social aspects of teachers' experiences, I also needed a framework to understand the issues of power at work in these stories.

Critical Pedagogy

A merging of critical theory and education, critical pedagogy focuses on the ways in which those within the educational system who hold power influence others without power (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Critical pedagogy considers the voices outside of the dominant culture within schools that are silenced due to existing societal norms. In the context of this study, the dominant culture of educational policies silenced the voices of teachers. Teachers were influenced daily by top-down demands to increase test scores and follow the latest changes in curriculum, all of which affected teachers' pedagogy and morale (Coburn, 2005). Giroux (2011) asserted that critical pedagogy should "illuminate the relationship between knowledge, authority, and power" (p. 30). In this study, I considered the way teachers' interpretations of the policies influenced their teaching and morale. As a stakeholder in education, the perspective of the teacher should be considered, but this was not always the reality. The disregard for teachers' perspectives merely perpetuates the power struggle between the dominant culture of policy and school teachers.

Freire (1970) is perhaps the best known critical pedagogue. His knowledge came from his experiences as a student living in poverty who witnessed the ways in which he and his classmates were oppressed by education. Freire wrote about the banking approach, the idea that students were empty containers and teachers had the task of dumping knowledge into students' minds. For some teachers, the banking approach was relevant and explained a sense of complacency or comfort level in being told what to do and how to teach. Teachers who

identified with Freire's banking approach became what Smagorinsky (2001) referred to as *products of culture* and engaged in specific behaviors that had become deeply ingrained and were a daily practice. However, other teachers did not feel this sense of complacency but instead may have felt defeated or devalued by changes that continued to dictate what happens within the classroom (Freire & Macedo, 1996; Santoro, 2011). The notion of teacher agency—the capacity a teacher possesses to draw from experience and knowledge to effectively handle a situation (Priestly, Edwards, Miller, & Priestly, 2012)— had all but vanished for teachers who no longer felt they had autonomy in the classroom. Giroux (2003) addressed a valid point when he stated that schools should "not become synonymous with the language of capital, oppression, control, surveillance, and privatization" (p. 14). Yet an iron-fisted climate in public education placed more stringent expectations upon teachers who felt they had little control over their situation. The teachers who participated in this study, and subsequently the students they taught, are the people who experienced the repressive societal norms mandated by the reforms and policies of NCLB, RTTT, and CCSS.

Language is an important tool in critical pedagogy because critical pedagogy examines the way "language serves as a form of regulation and domination" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 58). Teachers experienced firsthand the regulating and dominating language found in the policies they must follow and in the standards they must implement. Giroux (2004) urged teachers to develop a *critical language* that could be used when discussing critical issues, specifically related to government policies, as an avenue to an academic discourse that may elicit change. In regards to this study, middle school English teachers can create a critical language when interacting with one another in order to understand their experiences with changing policies for how and what they teach. As Giroux and Friere encouraged, teachers need a

dialogue that both represents and includes them. This study was an opportunity, ideally, to include teachers as knowledgeable peers who had important stories to share about what it means to teach in the current environment. In the analysis, I used long quote from the teachers to share their language in the hope that this language can be one tool for making changes to value teachers. Teachers can create a culture among themselves that includes a critical language based on experiences with the reforms. Moreover, my goal in this study was to have conversations with teachers to better understand their experiences. These conversations were social interactions, an important part of sensemaking (Maitliss & Christianson, 2014; Watson, 2009; Weick, 1995), and as such they may potentially become the critical dialogue advocated by Giroux and Freire.

Conclusion

The introduction allowed me to share some of my personal stories and experiences that led me to focus on a study dealing with the reasons why teachers stay in the classroom amidst a climate of demanding educational policies and negative media attention. In addition, the introduction provided background information on the main features of this study: teacher attrition and retention, how educational policies affect instruction, and teaching middle school. This chapter outlined the theoretical framework that guides this study. Chapter 2 provides a thorough exploration and analysis of the literature surrounding the concepts that drove my research: educational reforms, limiting curriculum, testing and accountability, positive effects of educational reforms, and teaching middle school in an era of multiple reforms. Chapter 3 discusses in detail my method of data collection and analysis. In Chapter 4, I provide the findings in relation to the public perceptions of teaching, pedagogy and curriculum, relationships, and

what it meant for these teachers to be teachers. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of

the perils and promises of teaching and the implications of this study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

"Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."—Einstein

Over the past several decades, public education in the United States has been subjected to significant reforms that shaped the teaching profession in a myriad of ways. From state standards to high stakes testing to value added assessments, public education faced many changes. One thing, however, remained consistent: when it came to placing blame for low test scores and failing schools, teachers were the first to be blamed (Kumashiro, 2012; Long, 2013). The expectations that teachers faced have changed drastically, largely due to these new reforms (Cheng, 2012; Noddings, 2014). Though teachers continue striving to meet the needs of students, accountability factors for teachers increased and these factors have affected the morale of teachers, often creating a divide between teachers and those making observations about them (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). In this literature review, I address the available research regarding the ways teachers have perceived and reacted to educational reforms. I also examine the middle school environment, in particular, to demonstrate the ways in which teaching middle school is different from other school settings. In addition, I define teacher morale and how it relates to these policies. Finally, I address studies that examined the question of what is it that keeps teachers in the middle school classroom despite the adversity surrounding the profession. While there is a large amount of research on the topic of educational reforms and their influence on the attitude and morale of teachers (Craig, 2014; Curtis, 2012; Friedman & Reynolds, 2011; Intrator, 2003), my aim is to show a lack of research of middle school English teachers, specifically, and their reasons for remaining in the classroom in spite of the demands of educational policies and the media's negative portrayal of teachers.

I began my research by using databases such as ERIC, ProQuest and EBSCO. I found many articles by searching the following key terms/phrases: educational reforms and teacher morale; educational reforms and teacher attitude; No Child Left Behind and teacher morale; Race to the Top and teacher morale; Common Core State Standards and teacher morale; critical pedagogy; standardized testing and teacher morale and attitude; teacher empowerment; teacher job satisfaction; teacher attrition; public perception of teaching; teacher retention; teacher satisfaction; middle school teachers; middle school teachers and educational policy; and middle school transition. In addition, I relied on resources that I collected while writing my comprehensive exams and other research-related papers. While doing the readings and ongoing note taking, I discovered that educational reforms and teacher morale were closely connected. This literature review focuses on the following terms and ideas: educational reforms, limiting curriculum, teacher morale, testing and accountability, positive effects of educational reform, and teaching middle school amidst educational reform changes.

Educational Reforms

The notion of educational reforms dates back as far as Plato (n.d.) when he claimed that children would only learn if they wanted to learn and expressed his disdain for compulsory education. The answers are not as easy or immediate as reflected on by the various reforms and changes schools continue to experience. While education reform has existed for centuries, I chose to begin my review in the 1960's, with the birth of a federal education act. The Elementary Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was enacted as a way of working to close the achievement gap between low-income minority students and middle-income Caucasian students in reading, writing, and math by suggesting schools establish high standards and accountability. A federal law that authorized funding for programs in K-12 schools, the act has been

reauthorized almost every five years (US Department of Education, 2006). With each reauthorization, new addenda were added on to the law in an effort to keep up with changing pace of political discourse as education becomes more standardized, thus becoming more neoliberal (Lipman, 2011; Ross, 2006). The term neoliberal was used to describe many of the tenets current educational reforms promote: global competition, curriculum standards aligned to standardized tests, focus on a stronger work force, school choice, and charter schools (Apple, 2000). This study examines teachers' responses to three specific reforms that spanned the last 15 years: No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), Race to the Top (RTTT, 2009), and Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010). No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are education laws and the Common Core State Standards were designed as part of the incentive under RTTT. States that applied for the grant were expected to adopt a common curriculum standard on which students would be assessed via standardized tests.

It is important to note that *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which preceded NCLB, also brought about reforms at the local, state, and federal levels in an effort to prepare students to be successful in a competitive workforce. This report paved the way for state standards and standardized tests by focusing on content, standards/expectations, time, teaching, and fiscal support. While standardized tests were not enforced by law, the commission strongly encouraged that such tests be administered and the results then used to determine if academic gains had been made. I mention *A Nation at Risk* because it was one of the original calls for educational reform by the U.S Federal Government that encouraged standardization.

No Child Left Behind

  Signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was a reauthorization of ESEA, which had been reauthorized six times prior to NCLB. The main intent of NCLB was to ensure that all children would be educated and achieve in schools, thus ensuring no child was left behind or ignored. NCLB required the use of accountability, flexibility, and choice to enforce the law. The law implemented factors such as developing challenging state standards that had assessments tied closely to the standards, improving teacher quality by ensuring subject mastery, and holding states accountable for student achievement (US DoE, 2006). Standardized test scores became the measure to determine student promotion. Instructional tracks were designed for students not mastering the standards in an effort to meet the ambitious goal of NCLB: by 2014 100% of all students would be proficient in math and reading. States were allowed flexibility when determining what strategies they used to create curriculum standards and associated tests. Parents of students attending a school that did not meet the requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress—demonstrating student achievement gains through test scores and attendance rates—two years in a row were offered transfers to higher-performing schools. In addition to this school choice, affected students were also offered flexibility options in the form of after school programs and free tutoring in an effort to provide academic support (US DoE, 2006). The neoliberal ideals found in NCLB made this reauthorization different from past iterations of the law. NCLB used scare tactics such as placing schools deemed low-performing on a needs improvement status; an emphasis on standardized test results as an indicator of a school's performance; and, an increase in the federal monitoring of schools (Ravitch, 2010; Russom, 2011).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the NCLB (2002) legislation in relation to this study was that any public school receiving federal funds was required to administer a state-wide standardized test, for each academic content area, to be taken by all students under the same testing conditions. Each state was expected to design an exam that indicated student gains. Three performance levels identified students' performance in each subject area test in the following ways: Exceeds Standards, Meets Standards, or Did Not Meet Standards. In addition, states needed to present a timeline that displayed how, by the end of the 2013-14 school year, all students would be proficient in reading and math (Ravitch, 2010; US DoE, 2003). Schools were assessed on student performance, attendance, and graduation rates—all numbers used to determine if schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools not meeting AYP were placed on a Needs Improvement (NI) status and state intervention was required. These AYP results were published in online report cards available to anyone with access to the Internet (US DoE, 2006). Publishing these scores and other demographic information about each school elicited debate because no explanation was provided regarding schools that did not meet AYP. Consideration of outside factors that influenced student performance did not occur in these reports and schools began garnering negative attention from the public (Spring, 2011).

Race to the Top

By 2008, the federal government, now under President Obama's leadership, realized that schools were not going to meet the NLCB goal of 100% student proficiency in reading and math by 2014 and developed a plan to dismantle NCLB. While President Obama claimed that the goals of NCLB—standards and accountability—were good goals, he did not want schools to continue in what he felt was a lowering of standards to avoid being identified as a failing school (Obama, 2012). What evolved was Race to the Top (ARRA, 2009). A component of the

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, RTTT was a competitive grant that all states could apply for if certain criteria were met. Funding allowed for only a limited number of states to be rewarded for meeting the requirements of RTTT (ARRA, 2009). In a press release, President Obama (2009) stated that "with RTTT we will reward states that come together and adopt a common set of standards and assessments." This component of RTTT meant that states applying for the grant were expected to enforce rigorous standards on which students were required to be tested via standardized tests. The results of the tests would indicate school success (NGA, 2010). Many states applied for this incentive program and those meeting the criteria were able to file a waiver stating they no longer had to meet the demands of NCLB, including the 100% proficiency benchmarks in reading and math. In addition, RTTT required that teachers and administrators be evaluated by performance-based standards designed by the state departments of education and teachers' evaluations would be linked to student test scores.

Designed as a contest among the states to "transform education" through encouragement and promotion of innovative ideas and programs, RTTT (ARRA, 2009) endorsed the following: use of test scores to evaluate teachers; shut down or reconstitute failing schools; expand privately run charter schools; and, implement a statewide longitudinal data systems to access student data. According to Russom (2011), RTTT followed the *neoliberal playbook* because it promoted stimulus funding and increased the involvement and monitoring of the federal government. Capitalism, competition, and intervention are key facets of neoliberal beliefs. While there were similarities among NCLB and RTTT requirements, there were some significant differences as well, one of these being state standards. Under NCLB, states were permitted to create their own standards so long as each district within that state followed those standards and the tests associated with them (US DoE, 2006). States who were awarded RTTT funds were required to

follow a common set of standards. These standards were developed to prepare "college and career" ready students, and the recommendation was to use the Common Core State Standards.

Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) were initially designed with the goal to prepare students for either college or a career, as stated in RTTT. The assumption was that the preparation for these future goals could be done by implementing rigorous yet relevant standards in math and ELA. A common set of standards across the nation would allow students to have "consistent learning goals" regardless of where they lived, as well as provide teachers and parents with strategies to ensure students reached these goals (US DoE, 2010). For many states, these new standards set a much higher bar for student learning. Under NCLB, standardized tests were watered down and did not accurately reflect student achievement (Kahlenberg, 2015). Educators were concerned because they knew with more rigorous tests, students' performances could potentially decline. This decline in student performance might draw negative attention to schools (Kahlenberg, 2015). In addition, a decline in student performance on these tests could result in teachers receiving subpar evaluations now that student performance was a direct indicator of a teacher's performance (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010).

Under RTTT states were required to adhere to a common set of standards that ensured students graduating from high school were prepared for either a college track or career track (ARRA, 2009). The track was determined by surveys and assessments students began taking in middle school. The surveys addressed various career choices. Based on the findings of these surveys coupled with results from standardized tests, students were encouraged to take classes that would assist them with their future goals. Sponsored by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core State Standards

(2010) provided a detailed map of what K-12 students should master by the end of each year in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math. Student mastery in this framework was determined by standardized test results. States not adopting CCSS were still expected to create curriculum standards and align these standards to standardized assessments. 46 states adopted the CCSS; however, current research indicated that nine states have withdrawn completely while many states made revisions or modifications to the CCSS (Academic Benchmarks, 2015; NGA, 2014). It should be noted that within the language of the CCSS, there was an expectation that as written these standards could and should continue to evolve over time.

Subsequently, debates centered on CCSS and RTTT, especially as states began to "opt out" of the standards and the testing consortiums initially created to support the development of the required standardized tests. The commitment to adopt the standards in order to receive monetary incentives under RTTT motivated states initially. However, with states revising or repealing the standards and other states creating their own standardized tests, as opposed to using the same tests for each subject area in every state, the idea now stood that a national set of standards may not be necessary or even possible (Gewertz, 2012; Strauss, 2015).

Limiting Curriculum

Most teachers generally have a signature approach to their delivery of instruction. The idea of this individual teaching style could be an attractive fringe benefit to a profession that was becoming more and more scripted (Remillard & Reinke, 2012). Some teachers used props and manipulatives regularly while others may have relied heavily on textbooks. Perhaps these ideas came from their own experiences as students or came from ideas learned in their college courses. Some teacher styles could be described as more enticing than others as evidenced by student enthusiasm. The point is that teachers come into the classroom with ideas and visions of how

they want their classroom to run and what this will look like (Eisner, 1985; Lortie, 1975; Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004). When I taught writing, for example, I frequently used video clips containing interesting topics to the students. I did this to capture and keep their attention because writing was often a subject not favored by my students. Asking questions about the video prompted writing and before the students realized it, they had written a response and had fun while doing so. This technique fostered a level of confidence many students may not have possessed when it came to writing and was helpful when assigning larger writing projects. I enjoyed teaching writing and I especially enjoyed witnessing those moments when students felt successful at something with which they once struggled. The timing of these moments of struggle and success come in the give and take of the daily life in my classes. The fact that there were timelines for when a student needed to master a specific standard frustrated me. Within my school, teachers were expected to provide a pacing guide detailing the standards to be taught each week and how many days were needed to master the standards. In my experience, students do not all learn at the same pace and sometimes teaching a concept takes more time than anticipated. The reality of students not learning at the same rate can pose a problem and may force teachers to alter their teaching styles in order to accommodate the timeline. Limiting the curriculum and dictating how and when a teacher should implement a certain concept has had adverse effects on teacher morale.

With the onset of NCLB (2002), one of the major changes teachers found was the decrease in autonomy due to a new, and what many teachers called, limiting curriculum (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; McCarthey, 2008). Teachers were not necessarily accustomed to a prescribed curriculum, specifically one that included mandatory state standards that students were tested on at the end of the year. A central theme among the empirical studies was teachers' feeling that

they lacked the ability to provide creative lessons and instruction stemming from the pressure to cover all of the standards in time for testing (Deniston & Gerrity, 2011). Byrd-Blake, et al. (2010) studied high school teachers in a high poverty school district and discovered that many teachers felt there was a decrease in creativity in their classrooms. Activities considered fun by students were cut due to an over-emphasis on subjects that weighed heavier than others on standardized tests as students were pulled from their art, music, and PE classes to receive more time studying math and ELA. There was also a rush to cover the standards. "Draining, boring, and frustrating" and "this reform kills the learning buzz" were common descriptions of high school teaching under NCLB, according to a study conducted by Palmer and Rangel (2011) of high school teachers. These portrayals demonstrated a lowering of morale. In contrast, teachers who were motivated to teach yielded motivated students (Whitaker, Whitaker, & Lumpa, 2000). Noddings (2014) stated that "creative planning facilitates spontaneity" (p. 18). Likewise, critical thinking for both teachers and students occurred when creative instruction happened. Establishing an environment that stifled innovative teaching promoted the idea that schools were simply intended to produce learning for the sake of passing standardized tests and acquiring a job. Nancie Atwell, a globally recognized, award-winning middle school English teacher, recently advised students interested in pursuing a career in teaching to reconsider their plans. Arguing her point in an article by Moeny (2015), Atwell asserted that teachers are now simply technicians teaching to a test. While she certainly did not fault the teachers, she did place blame on the reforms and reform makers who discouraged teacher autonomy while promoting prescribed curricula. Schools are much more than that. They are places where students can associate with others sharing similar interests. Schools are also places where students learn from being around those with whom they have nothing in common. Finally, but certainly not least,

schools are places where teachers foster an appreciation for learning by implementing a variety of strategies that excite their students and encourage questions to be asked and mistakes to be made. This was not the reality for many teachers, however, as they continued to feel constrained by policies mandating a limiting curriculum (Lynch, 2014; Noddings, 2014).

Cheng's (2012) study of high school teachers showed their feelings of displeasure when teaching the standardized curriculum. These feelings stemmed from a lack of detail found in the standards and an increase in how many topics needed to be covered in a given grading period. Described by classroom teachers as "a mile wide and an inch deep" these new state standards touched lightly on a lot of topics, but there was no time to dig deep or ensure that students had a true grasp of the material (Cheng, 2012; Noddings, 2014; Schmidt, 2000). Frustrated, teachers began to question why their knowledge and expertise was no longer valued and felt as though their observations of what students were mastering and/or struggling with was something they could not act upon (Cheng, 2012). Lynch's (2014) research on over 20,000 teachers of various grade levels in Chicago yielded results consistent with prior studies. Teachers in her study felt that the incessant testing deprived students of "meaningful instruction" and expressed that there was no room for teacher creativity. In contrast, Smagorinsky (2008) asserted that "teachers are the authorities in their classrooms" (p. 8). He encouraged teachers to acknowledge that there would be times when they had to deviate from their plans and suggested that they view the limiting curriculum as a "necessary evil" and to find a balance between what happens when teachers have to address these restraints that affected their instructional delivery and what happened when they simply closed the door and taught (Smagorinsky, 2001).

The top-down emphasis on covering the standards as the only way to ensure students will perform well on standardized test was also a limiting factor. Noddings (2014) asserted that

schools were "not just centers for the production of learning…but that some days the job of the teacher is to inspire or to discuss a social or ethical problem" (p. 17). Noddings further declared the sole purpose for teaching was to "produce students who are morally good, intellectually competent, socially sensitive, spiritually inquisitive, and committed to living full and satisfying lives" (p. 16). The reality for most teachers was that not only did they have to educate students academically, but they also taught and modeled appropriate behaviors necessary to interact successfully in society. Noddings (2014) supported the idea of teachers and schools being the cornerstone in which this education for citizens occurs and acknowledged that academic success was not the only important concept taught in schools. Educational standards promoted by the Department of Education did not emphasize these goals, yet teachers were expected to foster classroom environments that encouraged critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, and creativity (Lynch, 2014; Noddings, 2014). Valli and Chambliss' (2007) study illustrated the contrast between focusing on educating for testing achievement and educating for thoughtful adults. They studied elementary teachers who taught the same material in two different settings. One setting was a child-centered classroom and one was a testing-centered classroom. The findings indicated that students in the child-centered classroom were more personally invested in their learning, while those in the testing-centered classroom did not establish a strong personal attachment to the curriculum. In May's (2011) study in an elementary school classroom, she examined the teaching of comprehension strategies within a high-stakes testing climate. She found that when there was an emphasis on the comprehension strategies as defined by the state standards, the students were more concerned with choosing the correct answer than making real-world connections with the texts. These results were consistent with Valli and Chambliss (2007) found and suggest that in order for students to be vested in their learning, they need to know that

what they learn is more valuable than the test score they earn. Valli and Chambliss described a

dichotomy that teachers experienced as they "try to create positive classroom environments in

which students can learn" while also preparing students for the high-stakes test at the end of the

year (p. 57). Teachers in the study and those who teach and have not yet participated in research

studies likely already know that the standardized test results are what drives decisions made

about students (Valli & Chambliss, 2007). Providing students with an atmosphere that is

conducive to learning and mastering the curriculum on which students will be tested is the reality

for today's public school teachers. A positive classroom setting is not a bad idea; however, it is

the limitations within the curriculum that result in negative feelings.

In a study conducted with high school teachers in the dawn of NCLB (2002), teachers

expressed concern about their classrooms moving toward a test-centered approach in an attempt

to address the material prior to students taking standardized tests (Deniston & Gerrity, 2011).

This move to a test-centered approach led to a decline in morale as teachers in the study believed

the focus on new standards and test pressure diminished the notion that teachers have a strong

understanding of what their students need to be successful. This sentiment supports findings in

other studies that teachers' opinions were no longer trusted to make decisions about students as

they had done in the past, before NCLB (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan,

2008). Ketter and Poole (2001) yielded results supporting the idea that teachers felt they had less

control over their classrooms and that their abilities as professionals were no longer valued due

to the constant demands and pressure surrounding the standards and the standardized tests. Ketter

and Poole's study dealt with three high school English teachers and their students as they

prepared for a state writing assessment. Using interviews, participant observation, and analysis

of student writing samples, the study found that reflective writing practices valuable to the

student-teacher evaluation process were diminished because of the amount of pressure for students to learn a formulaic writing style to ensure their success on the exam. The teachers realized that the new style for teaching writing left little time for feedback other than focusing on ways to model the writing formula. There was no time to give input on the actual content, which is what they were accustomed to providing in prior years. As a teacher of writing, I have seen the growth that comes from giving honest commentary to my students. When teachers are concerned with ensuring that students can write in a certain style, along with covering other standards that will be tested in the future, they may have to let some things go, such as teacher-student writing conferences, despite knowing these moves may be detrimental to students.

Similar to Ketter and Poole (2001), Anagnostopoulos (2003) observed high school teachers preparing students for a state mandated writing test. They expressed concern about "time constraints" and "modifying the curriculum" in response to pressure from administration to prepare the students (p. 192). Bloome, Puro, and Theodorou (1989) also discovered that high school teachers did not have time to provide in depth instruction for several literary elements because of imposed timelines to cover specific standards before the standardized tests. Teachers in this study gave students credit for assignments they had not adequately covered. In this situation, teachers felt frustration for shortening the instruction and giving credit for something that was not explicitly taught because of the pressures to address standards before the mandated tests. The concern of not having sufficient time to teach concepts because of testing pressure is something I have experienced in my own classroom. Like the teachers in Anagnostopoulos's (2003) and Bloome and colleagues (1989) study, I gave grades for assignments that did not fully demonstrate student understanding. I felt pressured to deliver cursory lessons sometimes, glossing over the details and realizing that some of my students did not understand the material.

Yet, I moved on with the instruction in an attempt to prove in my lesson plans that I had taught the standards.

Teacher Morale

Many teachers' experiences with past educational reforms have a direct effect on the ways in which they respond to new educational reforms. This effect in turn shapes the implementation of new reforms in the classroom (Cheng, 2012). The attitude of the teacher also plays a significant role because to be implemented with fidelity, educational reforms need teacher buy-in and low morale is not conducive to implementation (Cheng, 2012). The literature reviewed in this section addressed different components associated with teacher morale and how it has been has been influenced by educational reforms from 2000 to present day.

Today's classrooms are more "culturally, linguistically, ethnically, economically, and academically diverse" than ever before, and this diversity is rarely considered by those writing and enforcing educational mandates, such as curriculum standards (Friedman, Galligan, Caitlyn, & O'Connor, 2009, p. 255). A one-size-fits-all approach to instruction did not produce the desired outcomes when teachers were facing diverse students who brought to the classroom their own experiences and perceptions of education (Santoro, 2011). No consideration of outside factors (e.g. family dynamics, socio-economic status, living conditions, absentee rates, etc.) was given by the policy makers, yet these factors could be correlated to a student's academic performance and teachers had no control over them (Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Ravitch, 2010). To place all of the responsibility and accountability on the classroom teacher was not only unfair to the teacher, but the students as well. This expectation, however, was very much a reality for teachers, specifically those who taught in schools with a large population of students who struggled with mastering the standards. The fact that teacher evaluations were tied to student

performance could potentially lead to practicing methods in the classroom to ensure students perform well for fear of receiving a poor evaluation (Kahlenberg, 2015; Sachs, 2005). McCarthey's (2008) study of high school teachers and their students found that teachers were concerned about students with performance lower than what the state deemed acceptable, yet their opinion was that some students would never be at grade level, despite the multiple efforts of the teachers. This reality contrasts with the declaration set forth by NCLB (2002) that all students should reach proficiency by 2014 because those who enter the grade at a significant disadvantage often do not meet the standards (McCarthey, 2008). This realization combined with the pressure to ensure students meet the standards can lead to a defeatist attitude of the classroom teacher, which over time can affect morale (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Morale is defined as a person's mental state that is exhibited by assurance, control, and motivation to perform a task (Webster, 2010). Johnsrund, Heck, and Rosser (2000) support Webster's meaning by defining morale as "a general feeling related to one's sense of value within an organization," (p. 96). With regard to the teaching profession, morale is a crucial point to consider because teachers provide support and motivation to students and in turn teachers' level of morale has a direct connection to student performance (Govindarajan, 2012; Noddings, 2014). Miller (1981) asserted, "The social climate of the school and morale of the staff can have a positive effect on pupil attitudes and learning" (p. 483). Teachers who exhibit a higher level of morale tend to foster environments in which students feel comfortable taking risks and being creative while learning the curriculum (Houchard, 2005). Higher teacher morale leads to successful students, while those teachers displaying a lower level of morale tend to have students with lower levels of morale in regard to their academic success (Whitaker, et al., 2000). In order to promote a positive school climate, teachers need to know that they have a stake in what is

happening within the school and, in turn, they need to receive a level of support and motivation from administrators and other stakeholders (Kessler & Snodgrass, 2014).

Testing and Accountability

One of the most heavily debated topics regarding educational reform was that of high-stakes testing and the accountability factors associated with it. No Child Left Behind (2002) was the first policy to mandate that all states implement standardized testing of students in an effort to determine academic achievement and then use the results to evaluate school effectiveness. In prior research, teachers began to feel as though their hands were tied with regard to delivery of instruction due to the emphasis on covering the standards (Anagnostopoulos, 2003; Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989; Deniston & Gerrity, 2011; McCarthey, 2008). *Teaching to the test* became a widely used phrase and practice as the pressure for students to pass the tests grew. This type of instruction, known as "washback," refers to the effects high-stakes testing can have on classroom practices, particularly for delivery of instruction (Spratt, 2005). Palmer and Rangel (2011) asserted that the focus on teaching to a test was contrary to authentic teaching, which was the concern of many teachers who did not get into education to teach to a test. Test scores became the focus of teachers and administrators as they made valiant efforts to meet the expectations laid out in NCLB (2002). As Ravitch (2010) pointed out, "test scores have become an obsession." Nichols and Berliner (2007) conducted a study of 25 states that indicated negative effects on both teacher morale and instruction as a result of the pressure and demands brought on by high stakes testing. These findings were consistent with the results of Afflerbach's (2005) study that pointed out the alienation and defeat teachers began to feel from the constant pressure and regularity of testing to determine students' strengths and weaknesses and the

subsequent data analysis to address those who did not master the standards. In schools across the nation, test preparation increased as teacher morale decreased.

Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus (2003) looked at the results of a nationwide survey of teachers working in states that required mandated testing. They reported that teachers' attitude and morale declined as a result of "undue pressure" to ensure that their students' performances improved based on the instruction received at school. In addition, this research indicated that teachers spent more time on test preparation, which negatively influenced their morale, because the teachers felt as though the emphasis on the test was forcing them to "contradict their views of sound educational practice" (p. 1). As teachers in the United States are expected to do more and more each year with the pressure and demands that high-stakes testing brings, the level of morale of any given teacher can decline rapidly resulting in those teachers feeling defeated and ineffective, and thus contemplating leaving the profession for which they once were passionate (Kessler & Snodgrass, 2014; Noddings, 2014).

Valli and Buese's (2007) discovery that teachers were overwhelmed with the number of extra tasks that stemmed from the test pressure, while also experiencing feelings of defeat due to a constant sense of being controlled and monitored, reinforced the findings that teacher morale is declining. As a result of this downward spiral in morale, teachers started to consider the idea of leaving the classroom. Dunn (2014) interviewed teachers who struggled with the decision to leave the profession or remain in a job that felt stifling and limiting. One of the teachers' biggest frustrations was the fact that the amount of instructional time devoted to teaching students decreased while the amount of time spent on testing and analyzing the data increased. Teachers in this study expressed having a "moral disagreement with the policies" as they continued to succumb to top-down expectations demanded of them (p. 91). The battle among pedagogical

views, testing, standards, and accountability demands continues and creates a struggle for many teachers.

In her research study on the influence NCLB has made on writing instruction, McCarthey (2008) focused on the attitudes of high school teachers as they prepared their students for a high stakes writing test. Her findings indicated that teachers' motivation and attitude toward teaching and curriculum had diminished as a result of the writing test (Finnigan & Gross, 2007; McCarthey, 2008). Teachers in the study overwhelmingly felt that the over-emphasis on testing coupled with the pressure to cover the standards in time for the test did not improve instruction or performance. In addition, the participants did not support the idea that standardized tests provided an accurate assessment of the students or school (McCarthey, 2008). Teachers also reported that students were expected to retest and redo assignments until mastery of the standard was achieved. Students who needed to redo a test or assignment were often pulled from their art, PE, technology, or music classes or from other outside activities. Students were not happy about losing time in classes they often viewed as fun and exciting, and a decline in student engagement occurred which, in turn, influenced teacher morale negatively (McCarthey, 2008).

Another finding related to morale and testing in Anagnostopoulos's (2003) study was several teachers felt the need to *explicitly* provide students with details about the literature addressed in the state mandated writing test. They also found themselves encouraging students to simply memorize concepts in an attempt to be prepared. Teachers made provisions by providing one-on-one or small group instruction when they realized that some students were not "getting the material" and time was drawing closer to the test date. The teachers who admitted to this explicit instruction were discouraged and frustrated. They expressed a lack of support and resources to reach the struggling students, which in turn led to feelings that there was no other

way to provide instruction to ensure their students would be successful on the test (p. 196).

Likewise, Lynch's (2014) study supported the reciprocal relationship between teacher morale

and the mounting pressure to prepare students for high stakes tests. More than half of the

teachers in Lynch's study indicated that morale was "extremely low" at their school and listed

several factors that led to the decline (p. 51). The emphasis on testing and public perception

were among the two highest influences teachers cited. These teachers listed testing as the least

effective outcome of educational policies and expressed concern for their students who were

being tested excessively and missing out on valuable lessons and discussions that were often cut

short due to time restraints (Lynch, 2014). These studies and others showed that teacher morale

and student achievement can, and do, influence one another (Anagnostopoulos, 2003; Lynch,

2014; McCarthey, 2008; Miller,1981; Whitaker, et al., 2000). Though the pressure for students

to do well has long been a driving force in education, the pressure teachers felt with the onset of

NCLB (2002) was new and the ways in which to handle it did not always result in experiences of

which teachers were proud (Abrams, et al., 2003; Anagnostopoulos, 2003; Bloome, et al., 1989).

Positive Effects of Educational Reforms

While there is research that points to the negative effects of educational policies on

teacher morale, the research also yielded some positive aspects. The most commonly discussed

benefit of an emphasis on testing and mastering standards was the identification of lower

performing students (Cheng, 2012; McCarthey, 2008). Teachers indicated that while some

students were easy to identify as struggling students, the data analysis from standardized test

scores that aligned with the newly implemented standards provided teachers with valuable

information on students who might not necessarily have been identified as struggling. The

identification of these students was seen as a positive outcome because strategies were then put

into place to assist such students in being successful (Cheng, 2012). Despite the emphasis on testing, teachers felt this form of student recognition was positive.

Another favorable result to come from the emphasis on testing was higher performance leading to more confident students. Abrams, et al. (2003) conducted a study of high school writing teachers and found that preparation for the state writing test led to better writing instruction, which in turn led to more successful writing students. Through surveys and examination of student writing, this study also pointed out that certain areas in which students were confident did not require much instructional time. The identification of students' strengths allowed teachers and students to spend more time on the areas of writing in which students struggled. Teachers found that the emphasis on students' weaknesses led to a more effective use of instructional time and more confident students. Results from Phelps' (2012) study further support instructional time described by Abrams and colleagues (2003): teachers in the Phelps (2012) study were expected by their administration to be very familiar with the standards. The familiarity enabled teachers to quickly identify which standards needed to be addressed and which had been mastered. As a result, teachers discovered weaknesses in the curriculum. This discovery of flaws provided teachers a chance to revise their curriculum guides and align them more to the needs of their students. In addition, teachers in the study noticed a change in the behavior of many students that led to their academic success. As students felt more confident in their abilities, they exhibited more involvement in their classes.

Reflecting on the idea of teachers' attitudes affecting students' attitudes, Evans (2007) asserted that a positive teacher attitude was connected to students actively participating in their classes, which led to positive academic outcomes. The teachers in Phelps' (2012) study felt as though their positive approach to new standards and a high-stakes test worked to their advantage

because students were involved in their learning. Research from Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, and Harrigan (2014) indicated that while teachers experienced longer hours, excessive paperwork, and pressure to not stray from the standards, they felt a great deal of satisfaction in determining the needs of the school and adjusting their curriculum to address at-risk and disadvantaged students. Although the demands of new curriculum standards that aligned with standardized tests influenced teacher morale, there were some positive results to come from all of the attention placed on student performance. The teachers in my study recognized that the identification of at-risk students was a good thing to come from all of the emphasis on mastering standards and meeting the requirements of the high stakes standardized tests.

Teaching Middle School in the Era of NCLB, RTTT, and CCSS

Supportive teachers who are prepared and willing to take on the role of nurturer are a necessity in the middle school years (Mee & Haverback, 2014). Today's middle school educators need to consider the distinct traits of middle school students, as well as the educational reforms that are a part of the ongoing changes in the public education. With the onset of RTTT and CCSS, another acronym has emerged—CCRPI. This stands for College and Career Ready Performance Indicators and schools are expected to provide students with opportunities that will prepare them for future jobs upon graduation of high school. The middle school is an environment where students begin to consider career options and take courses that begin their preparation for future jobs (Reform for the Future, 2014). In addition, middle school is a place where teachers can target those students who possess the characteristics of a high-school dropout. For those students who are at-risk of dropping out, intensive interventions are put into place to promote a higher success rate (Robertson, 2012). All the while, middle school teachers are expected to be prepared to meet the diverse needs of their students. In this section, I discuss

the importance of the teacher-student relationship in middle school and the consequences reforms have had on the middle school environment.

Radcliffe and Mandeville (2007) conducted research on middle school teachers and found four commonalities among the participants: a) desire to work with the age group, b) ability to better and more genuinely connect with this age group, c) stronger interest in the middle school content; and, d) more job openings in middle school faculties. Whatever the case may be, it was safe to assume that those who decided to enter the middle school realm were equipped with certain qualities to effectively reach students during this unique time in their lives. Ellerbrook, Kiefer, and Alley (2014) asserted that the teacher-student relationship was the crucial factor in a successful middle school experience. Students interviewed in this study expressed that while it was important for them to learn the curriculum they really wanted to feel a *sense of belonging* and wanted to know that their teachers knew who they were. Chaskin and Rauner (1995) supported this notion by claiming that school is a critical place for nurturing and it was the teacher who took on this role as schools become more and more diverse and students experience more emotional turmoil than in previous decades. Mee and Haverback's (2014) study of middle school teachers maintained the notion that being prepared was a necessity to providing a positive learning experience. The teachers in their study all felt they had received instruction from their college courses that assisted them in creating an environment in which middle school students felt safe to ask questions and make mistakes, and even more important, felt valued by their teachers and peers.

Middle schools that were responsive to the needs of their students were more likely to foster a positive school experience for students (Ellerbrook, et al., 2014; Nichols, 2006). As students transition from elementary school to high school, their level of anxiety and anticipation

can increase for a number of reasons. Having at least one adult students can talk to and express themselves to openly is critical for their development. When adolescents feel supported at school and feel as if they belong, they tend to have academic success as well (Nichols, 2008).

While middle school teachers needed to create a positive environment in which their students felt secure, they also needed to recognize the expectations found in the educational reforms. One of the requirements of RTTT was for schools to demonstrate accountability that was determined by the CCRPI score. This score comes from a number of factors that vary based on the grade. For middle schools in the state in which I conducted this study there were 13 indicators ranging from the percentage of students who meet and exceed in all content areas of the standardized test to eighth graders' Lexile scores to the percentage of students participating in at least two career related surveys (State Dept. of Ed., 2014). Though standardized test scores have always had a role in English classes, the number of students who exceed the set score on the state English exam was not a factor in the past. Teachers who concerned with test results and how those results may affect their career may now feel a new pressure to ensure more students exceed the expectations set on the standardized tests.

Addressing the changing standards is another effect of educational policies. At the onset of NCLB, the state in which this study was conducted had used Superior Core Curriculum (SCC) since 1985. A revision of these standards occurred in 2002 and led to the implementation of the State Professional Standards (SPS), which brought about a visible amount of change for teachers. Superior Core Curriculum standards were criticized for covering topics that were not tested in addition to being very broad. In scope, SPS provided a much narrower curriculum that was tied to the standardized tests (State Dept. of Ed., 2014). For middle school English teachers, both curriculum reforms meant a major adjustment to lesson plans. "Standards do not implement

themselves into the classroom. Teachers must read these standards, interpret them, and create activities designed to provide students with opportunities for mastery" (Davis, Choppin, Drake, & McDuffie, 2014, p. 12.). A valid statement; however, drastic changes in a curriculum can also lead to frustrated teachers if they are not provided the time and resources to adequately meet the changes and provide quality lessons to their students (Davis, et al., 2014).

For English and math teachers, in particular, the new CCSS required another overhaul of lesson plans and curriculum guides. These two subjects were the only ones that received new state standards, though all content areas were expected to address reading and writing as outlined in the CCSS literacy standards (State Dept. of Ed., 2014). In addition to new English and math standards, CCSS brought on a host of other concerns. Since 43 states followed a common curriculum, it followed that a similar set of standardized tests be given that aligned with these new standards. Thus, with new standards came new tests that would prove to be more rigorous, just as the math and English standards aligned with those tests were already proving to be. A result of the expectation of rigor is the reality that students' test scores in math and English could drop drastically (Understanding the CCSS, 2014). The demands of the new standards and subsequent tests were already contributing to low morale, but now teachers needed to prepare and manage feelings associated with low scores, not only for themselves but for their students. The pressure from these policy changes, therefore, had the potential to influence the ways in which middle school teachers felt about their profession.

Staying the Course

While there are teachers who leave the profession, many within the first five years, (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2007; Ingersoll, 2003, 2010), the reality is that many teachers remain each year (Riggs, 2013). This study aimed to understand the longevity three

teachers showed in their careers. There are several reasons why I have remained in the profession; the top two are my dedication to the students and the relationships I have established with peers and students. Perhaps if more research focused on why teachers remained more people would understand the role of the teacher and the decisions they make to return each year. Teacher retention not only benefits many teachers who choose to stay, but many students gain from having teachers who remain (Buddin & Zamarro, 2009; Henry, Bastian, Fortner, 2011; Spradlin & Prendergast, 2006). In addition, teachers who are considering leaving the profession could potentially benefit from reading the stories of those who persevered and perhaps decide to remain.

Clarksen's (2014) study of elementary teachers who remained in the profession longer than five years attributed the reasons to five factors: drawn to children, passion for the subject, positivity of the profession, teaching is routine and structured, and desire to mentor new teachers. Teachers who persist in teaching do so because of the satisfaction they feel from working with adolescents and supporting the success of their students (Clarksen, 2014; Cockburn & Haydn, 2004). Knowing that they could potentially make a difference in how students perceive education or decisions about their future were important factors in teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2007; Riggs, 2013). In addition, the shared experiences teachers have with others in the profession was a strong indicator of why teachers stay (Curtis, 2012; Guskey, 1988).

Quartz (2003) conducted research on teacher retention rates in urban schools. The title of her article "Too Angry to Leave: Supporting New Teachers' Commitment to Transform Urban Schools" suggests that many teachers have something to prove to those who place doubt on their abilities and what they do day in and day out. While this article focused on a specific category of teachers, the title speaks volumes about the emotions that all teachers can experience. Teaching

can be a rewarding profession, yet it can also be emotionally draining at times. Those who enter it want and need to feel supported (Curtis, 2012; Riggs, 2013). One of Quartz's (2003) findings indicated that when there was strong parent and community involvement, there was an increase in retention rates. Forming positive relationships with parents and community members eased the sense of detachment felt by teachers and families. When there was a lack of support from the community in which teachers worked, they were more inclined to leave the profession (Inman & Marlow, 2004). Additionally, the participants in Quartz's (2003) study found that peer connections and the creation of networks among teachers led to higher teacher retention rates. Teaching can be a demanding profession and when having a bad day, there is a level of comfort in knowing that somebody can relate and offer support. On the flip side, when many teachers have good days, that same level of comfort is created in knowing that the experiences can be shared with other teachers. Sharing positive moments motivates others in the profession (Craig, 2014). Collaborating with their peers, both professionally and personally, is vital to retaining teachers (Clarke, 2012; Inman & Marlow, 2004).

Teacher satisfaction was another indicator of whether or not teachers remain in the profession (Thibodeaux, Labat, Lee, & Labat, 2015). One way that teacher satisfaction is determined is based on the relationship between the teachers and the school leaders. When teachers feel valued and respected, their satisfaction level is higher as opposed to those teachers who do not feel as though their efforts are appreciated (Curtis, 2012; Fatima, 2012; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Ingersoll (2010) found that teachers felt disempowered because of the lack of autonomy they experienced. When administrators relinquish some of the decision making, particularly those decisions that directly affect what occurs in the classroom, many teachers feel empowered. Teachers are, after all, prepared professionals who are capable of

making decisions about how to implement lessons and manage the students in their classrooms, among other things. Fatima (2012) asserted that when teachers feel satisfied with their jobs, they will be more effective. This effectiveness demonstrated by teachers can in turn lead to more effective students, which ultimately benefits the school. In other words, teachers who are valued and supported are more likely to remain in the profession.

Research also indicates that aside from intrinsic reasons for staying in the profession, teachers remain for extrinsic reasons such as a consistent salary and retirement benefits (Sedivy-Benton & Boden-McGill, 2012). Another factor that kept teachers in the profession was a lack of jobs in other related fields, so teaching provided a feeling of job security (Inman & Marlow, 2004). Curtis (2012) conducted a random sampling of over 5,000 middle school and high school teachers in an effort to discover what kept them in the profession. While the majority of the results dealt with emotional satisfaction and a love for children, many teachers stayed because they had school-aged children and the schedule and calendar was convenient.

In spite of the demands and changes associated with educational reforms and the top-down requirements associated with these reforms, as well as the negative depiction of the teaching profession from mainstream media, teachers are staying. This study examined the reasons why three middle school English teachers persevered under the current pressures for performance, thus demonstrating their commitment to the profession.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the three educational policies that I focused on in my research. In addition, I detailed how prior studies of teachers investigated school reforms and teacher morale. I also looked at empirical studies that focused on what it means to be a middle school teacher and how there are different requirements of the teachers who work with this age group,

as well as addressed the ways in which reforms have played out in middle school environments. While there are studies on morale and standardized testing that include middle school teachers, my study addressed the need for an in-depth analysis of the ways in which English teachers in middle school responded to reforms that in turn influenced their longevity in the profession. Finally, I reviewed the existing literature on teacher retention and earlier studies of why teachers choose to stay in their chosen career. In the next chapter, I discuss the research methods I used for data collection and the steps I employed in data analysis.

3 METHODOLOGY

"Every child deserves a champion—an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can be."—Rita Pierson

Expectations associated with educational reforms over the last twenty years have influenced the ways in which teachers react to the reforms. Often this may be a negative reaction (Walker, 2014). Yet, despite this negative reaction, the teachers in this study demonstrated longevity in the profession. In this study, I sought to examine reasons these teachers persisted in teaching in spite of the challenges brought on by educational policies and popular portrayals of the teaching profession. In order to have a clear understanding of the adversity as well as the benefits teachers face daily, it was important to investigate the ways in which middle school English teachers were influenced by educational reforms and how this influence shaped their pedagogy and affected their morale.

According to Roberts (2010), qualitative research examines the experiences of participants and the ways in which participants interpret these experiences. This description of qualitative research aligns with a social constructivist paradigm, which "seeks understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). I aimed to understand the world of teachers who deal with the demands and pressures of educational policies and rather than leave the profession, remain as teachers, year in and year out. Duke and Mallette (2011) stated that qualitative research is important and useful in constructing meanings by way of observing, exploring, discovering, and describing. My goal was to explore and describe the experiences of my participants in an effort to discover their reactions to educational reforms and their reflections on staying in the teaching profession. In this chapter, I explained the research design I used and

follow with a description of the setting and participants. I then discussed data collection. Finally, I end with how I analyzed the data and the limitations of the study. The research questions guiding this study were the following:

1. How do middle school English teachers report experiencing their profession, pedagogy, and curriculum amidst ongoing educational reforms?

2. Why do middle school English teachers demonstrate longevity in the classroom despite pressures associated with educational reforms and negative impressions of the profession?

Research Design

I designed this study with teachers in mind. In order to learn about their experiences persisting in the profession for 10 years or more, I needed a method for capturing their experiences while maintaining the particular details of each teacher, thus I used a qualitative approach. Studying middle school teachers who have continued to teach over the last two decades is a phenomenon worthy of being researched because their experiences can shed light on what keeps teachers in the profession despite ongoing changes and souring public opinion. I employed a sensemaking lens to explore the reasons why middle school English teachers remain in the profession amidst a lowering of morale (Weick, 1995). Framing my study around sensemaking was appropriate for this study because I wanted to understand and make sense of what it is that keeps teachers coming back year after year.

Toward these ends, I chose case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995) to guide the design of my inquiry. Baxter and Jack (2008) define case study as, "an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon" (p. 544). The phenomenon I studied was the case of middle school English teachers who continued teaching throughout the

era of accountability (Sowerbrower, 2015) that was ushered in with the passing of NCLB (2002).

Stake (1995) asserted that issues examined in a case study are neither simple nor clean; rather

they are "intricately wired" to political, social, historical, and personal contexts. A case study of

teachers with long careers in middle school that examined the role of policy can thus take into

account how the politics of education reform relate to a teacher's experiences and sense of

morale. Cultural settings were important to consider because school settings are specific cultures

and social climates that contribute to and are contributed to by teachers (Smagorinsky, 2001). In

other words, schools are places in which teachers both shape and are shaped by the cultures in

those schools. By locating the study with teachers who work within one school district, I

focused on social (school and community culture) and historical (teaching for the last decade)

aspects of their teaching careers. In addition, the reforms at hand were political in nature and the

stories shared by the participants were personal. Taking both the political and personal into

account, alongside the social or historical context in which the phenomenon occurs provided the

means to bound my study (Stake, 1995).

According to Merriam (1988), case studies should be bounded, particularistic,

descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. This study focused on middle school English teachers in

one county. As a result, these teachers were bounded by subject, location, longevity in the field,

and grade level. Examining teachers from the same school district provided me with an

opportunity to see how different schools reacted to the reforms thus keeping the study grounded

locally. Representing a particular situation or phenomenon makes a study particularistic. This

study examined the phenomenon of why middle school English teachers remained in a

profession that is a constant target for teacher bashing while they, at the same time, navigated the

expectations and demands of educational reforms. A descriptive case study allows for thick

description of what was being investigated. The teachers' experiences were full of detailed description, thus supporting the necessity for the study to be conducted. Heuristic studies contribute to a reader's understanding of the specific phenomenon. Deeper connections are made through a heuristic study. Because I explored the reasons why middle school English teachers stay in teaching despite potential feelings of defeat, I developed a thorough appreciation of what it is that kept these teachers coming back year after year. Inductive case studies allow for theories to evolve as the research is examined. As I identified patterns during data analysis, I was able to address my research questions.

Context of the Study

The process I used for participant selection borrowed characteristics from Patton's (1990) notion of theory-based sampling and Schatzman and Strauss's (1973) selective sampling. Considered to be purposeful sampling, both sampling techniques allow the researcher to choose relatively small groups that will provide rich information and "illuminate the research questions" (Patton, 1990, p. 177). Researchers use theory-based sampling when participants' experiences work to highlight the issue at hand: teachers who have remained in the profession amidst changing reforms, expectations, and a negative public portrayal. Purposeful sampling allowed me the chance to identify individuals who were knowledgeable about a specific topic (LeCompte & Priessle, 1994; Patton, 2002). In this case I sought middle school English teachers who had persisted in the profession despite pressure from educational reforms and public opinion. Selective sampling occurs when the researchers choose participants based on preconceived criteria (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). The use of this sampling method to find participants allowed me to establish a set of parameters to select teachers for the study (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). I searched for middle school teachers from one school district who had a

minimum of ten years' experience teaching middle school English. Teaching in the same district was important to this study because the way administrators at the district level interpreted changes brought on by educational reforms is an important factor in determining the life of a teacher. I wanted to know why teachers remained in the profession and conducting research within the same district bounded the study and provided a unique perspective consistent to one county. Having a minimum of ten years' experience was a necessary requirement because I was looking for teachers with exposure to the educational changes that occurred in light of NCLB, RTTT, and CCSS. In middle school, English is heavily influenced by educational policies and consistently assessed in state-mandated, high-stakes, standardized tests. For example, starting with the 2014-15 school year, the English portion of the annual standardized exam was given over two days and included extensive writing components both days. Before this iteration of exams, middle school English tests were given on three different days. One day for reading, another for language for arts, and a third day for writing. No other content area requires two days of testing or incorporates a writing section. In addition, the teachers' longevity helped me understand why teachers remain in the field long after the average three to five year pattern (Ingersoll, 2003).

I began by sending a recruitment email to all middle school teachers of English within the district. The district is in a suburban school district near a major city in the Southeast. The email explained the purpose of the study and invited those interested in participating in one-on-one interviews with me about their teaching to respond. I received many replies from interested teachers; however, the majority of those who responded did not meet the career longevity requirement. In addition, many teachers did not respond at all. Five teachers out of roughly 60 met all of the criteria. As the process of setting up interview dates progressed, two participants

had to withdraw. Both were due to unexpected personal reasons. Their withdrawal left three willing, eligible participants, all Caucasian female. These three teachers represented three different middle schools in the district and collectively have nearly 80 years of teaching experience, 40 of those years in middle school English. In the following section I introduce each participant and explain the reasoning behind their pseudonyms. Because we all worked in the same district, there were opportunities for me to become familiar with each participant and develop a sense of their demeanor and teaching style. This familiarity is important to note because it helped me create and support their pseudonyms.

  Grace. Grace is a 61 year old female who retired at the end of the 2015-16 school year. Grace taught for 35 years and her career spanned grades 1-8. She taught middle school English for 17 years and served students who had diagnosed learning disabilities as well as those identified as gifted or exceptional. In all interactions I had with Grace, she was always seemingly calm and relaxed. Grace brought a sense of peace wherever she went. Students and colleagues relied on her years of experience and viewed her as a mentor. Younger, newer teachers who worked with Grace often referred to her as their "school mom." Suffice it to say, Grace came across as wise and tolerant.

  Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines *grace* as a controlled, polite, pleasant way of being. When I think about Grace, she encompassed all of these descriptions. Each time I met with Grace for interviews, I left feeling impressed with the way in which she used diplomacy to describe her frustrations and dissatisfaction. In addition, when she spoke about the highlights of her teaching career, her word choice demonstrated the reverence she felt. Grace was the perfect pseudonym for her because her words and actions exemplified the word.

Faith. Faith is a 41 year old female who taught middle school English for 18 years. Remarkably, all but one of those years were spent in 8th grade English at Community Middle School. Faith left the profession at the end of the 2015-16 school year to pursue a passion for helping those in need. She began volunteering for an organization that has served members of the community in which she lives. As the vision for the organization grew, Faith found herself spending more time volunteering and knew this was what she was meant to do. While she loved teaching and stated she would still be teaching if not for this chance, Faith admitted that this opportunity was coming at the perfect time because she felt defeated and devalued in her chosen profession. She no longer felt she was making a difference and began to lose confidence in the educational system. I had the pleasure of working with Faith in different roles at county level workshops over the years. Dedicated and caring, Faith brought to the classroom a wealth of knowledge and high expectations. Students often bucked her methods of teaching and found her tough, but she never relented and continued pushing her students. Ultimately, this led to students who were not only well-prepared for high school, but appreciative of her ability to see in themselves things they sometimes could not.

Faith is a strong belief or trust in someone or something (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I do not think there is a pseudonym better suited for Faith. Her strong convictions in her students' potential and her idea of what teaching should look like never faltered regardless of what was coming in the form of reforms and changes, both nationally and locally. She persevered and held firm to her faith in her students and her abilities as a teacher. Each time I interviewed Faith, I could sense the determination and confidence in her responses. The fact that she took a "leap of faith" and left a profession that, despite its frustrations, provided a stable income and other

benefits, to pursue her passion with volunteer work, further supports my reason for choosing this pseudonym.

      Hope. Hope is a 48 year old female with 26 years teaching experience. Her teaching covered grades K-8 and she taught all subjects as well. She currently teaches 8th grade English at Falcon Middle School. Because we teach the same subject and work in the same district, we have participated in many workshops and professional developments over the years. I know Hope to be an energetic, forward thinking educator who is passionate about teaching and the students in her school. When I moved from 7th grade English to 8th grade English last year, I often reached out to Hope for ideas and ways to implement the novels or writing activities. She was always willing to help and share her ideas. She serves as a mentor teacher for new teachers in her school and is also the English Department Chair, a position she has held for several years.

      After each interview, as well as almost every interaction I had with her beyond the study, I left feeling encouraged, inspired, and hopeful about education. I knew that the pseudonym for her had to be Hope. Merriam Webster (n.d.) defines *hope* as the feeling of wanting something to happen or be true. When Hope addressed questions about education, she was consistently optimistic even when addressing downfalls she experienced. It was uplifting to re-read the interview transcripts and relive the zeal and passion with which she spoke about her profession. I could sense the hope in her voice and word choices, believing that any reforms or changes came from places of good intentions. When she addressed questions about what she would like to say to policy writers and implementers, she spoke as if she were talking to them and they were listening to her plea. I walked away from each interview session rejuvenated and excited about education. There was no pseudonym more appropriate for her than Hope.

Data Collection

My goal for this study was to discover the ways in which educational reforms influenced the pedagogy and morale of middle school English teachers. In addition, I sought to identify the reasons why these teachers have remained in the profession by exploring their experiences with No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core State Standards. While it was my aim as the researcher to interview participants to help answer my questions, I also had a responsibility to be sensitive to the responses and reactions I collected. Alvesson (2003) referred to this sensitivity as the neo-positivist conception of interviewing and stated that the participant may offer a side of him/herself that is not typically visible in day-to-day interactions but appeared due to the topic of the questions. I was aware of the importance of minimizing my talk and focusing on asking the questions. The types of questions I asked may have steered my study in a different path than I anticipated, but that often happens during qualitative research, particularly when the participant is sharing a personal experience that may elicit emotions (Roulston, 2010). Talking about teaching can bring strong emotions to the conversation (Augustine & Zoss, 2006; Zoss & White, 2011), so it was important to have an interview environment that was comfortable for teachers.

As a middle school English teacher who has also experienced these same reforms, I began my data collection with some thoughts about my own career and wondered if our experiences might be similar. Before I interviewed any of my participants, I took part in a bracketing interview. A former classmate interviewed me, asking me the same questions I planned to ask my participants. Participating in this bracketing interview allowed me to share my stories about teaching and experiencing the same reforms. The bracketing interview process was beneficial to my data collection for many reasons. One, I was able to address my opinions and

biases out before interviewing my participants. This opportunity was helpful because having similar experiences to my participants could have led to me influencing—albeit unintentionally—my participants to answer a certain way. I wanted to be able to listen to what the teachers said without feeling like I had to add in my experiences, unless it helped to clarify the question or the topic at hand. So, having the opportunity to express myself beforehand was helpful. Second, I was able to hear the questions, revise them for clarity, and create follow up questions that would better serve my inquiry. Finally, being in the role of interviewee I recognized ways that I could ensure each participant felt comfortable when sharing personal information with me.

I interviewed each participant individually two times and then followed up with a shorter meeting in which I employed member checking. Each interview shed a new light on the phenomenon: what kept them in the classroom while facing ongoing educational reforms. During each interview, my participants were eager to address my questions and did not hesitate in sharing their perspectives and opinions. Their honesty and candor was at times unexpected and always appreciated. During our member checking sessions, each participant offered additional details and clarified any questions I had.

One-on-One Interviews

One of the purposes for using interviews in qualitative research is to create opportunities to learn about the social world. In my study, I conducted phenomenological interviews with teachers. This type of interview generated responses that told a story using in-depth details about a specific experience (Roulston, 2010). The questions I asked were open-ended, a move that supported phenomenological interviewing (Roulston, 2010). In this case, I asked questions specific to the teachers' experiences with teaching English over the last decade. Spradley (1973)

defined descriptive interview questions as questions that "take advantage of the power of language to construe settings" (p. 85). I asked descriptive questions based on the experiences of each teacher. For example, they discussed ways in which their pedagogy shifted to address new standards and testing requirements. I also asked the teachers to describe a typical day in their classrooms and how it changed or did not change over the years.

I conducted two one-on-one interviews with each teacher during the months of February 2016 through April 2016. Each interview ranged from 75-100 minutes, and they were all conducted at off-campus locations. During each interview, I wrote memos regarding the non-verbal cues the teachers demonstrated. More informal than journaling, which occurs after the data has been collected, memoing is defined as recordings that indicate what the researcher is learning from the data collection (Groenewald, 2008). For example, in one interview, Faith became very quiet and leaned back with her arms crossed after being asked a question regarding her perspective on accountability. It was a chance for Faith to gather her thoughts before answering. This action lasted a matter of seconds, but the look on her face and her body language told a lot about her feelings on this topic. It was evident that Faith was concerned and frustrated about the level of accountability she had been held to and what it meant about her as a teacher. Other types of non-verbal cues I noted were smiles, hesitations and then laughter, pounding of fists, and other hand gestures used for emphasis. Those types of visual cues or reactions were important to the meaning of their stories and experiences.

I transcribed each interview and found this part of the process to be a beneficial way to help with my interpretation of the data. Listening to each interview during transcription gave me more insight into the moments when the teachers laughed, lowered or raised their voices, or hesitated before answering. I became aware of the words and phrases they repeated and used

regularly in their answers. The emotions associated with these words and phrases provided me the data needed to examine more critically the word choices made by the teachers in response to some of the questions.

After each interview, I recorded my thoughts and reflections in a journal. By doing this, I was able to record and retain my sense of the particular story told by each teacher rather than rely on memory (Glaser, 1992; Merriam, 1998). This type of reflexive journaling is a part of the qualitative research process and provided me with a space to clarify, discuss, and question the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ortlipp, 2008). Journaling coupled with the memoing I did during the interview process added to the credibility of my study. Both provided me an opportunity to keep an ongoing record of data, information, ideas, and questions that answered my research questions and connected to my theoretical frameworks.

Data Analysis

The ways in which researchers analyze data determines the rigor and credibility of a qualitative study (Duke & Mallette, 2011; Tracy, 2010). DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) explained that while there may be "aha" moments or hunches, it is still critical to carefully categorize, organize, summarize, and review the materials at hand. I used elements of grounded theory and constant comparative theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I also employed components of Gee's (2011) method of critical discourse analysis, specifically using portions of his seven building tasks.

Grounded theory seeks to discover understanding and meaning of the participants' behavior by reviewing and re-reviewing the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using grounded theory was appropriate for data analysis because I wanted to understand how these teachers reacted to changes found in educational policies and how they formed new meanings about their

profession. Grounded theory typically includes two phases: initial coding and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006). By using initial coding, I was able to examine the data through sorting words and phrases that conveyed similar experiences or emotions. To accomplish this phase, I highlighted and labeled the transcripts with key words. After completing this phase, I assigned initial codes based on the key words. With these codes I could make further connections among the data, which prepared me for selective coding. I closely examined the data again and identified more ways in which the data were related to each other based on my research questions. I then created more codes to help me describe and understand the stories the teachers told. In other words, this process of making connections among the initial codes and the data, known as axial coding, led to more inclusive codes (Saldana, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I used the constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to examine the responses of each teacher and form new codes and adjust other codes. The purpose for using this method was to identify categories that helped me explain what the codes meant when grouped together (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As I read and re-read my data, I collapsed many of the initial codes I had identified into the final categories. I started with 51 in vivo codes that I labeled based on the word choices used by the participants. Some of the codes that led to the major categories included: *stress, frustration, morale, testing, school climate, leadership, standards, connections, accountability,* and *disrespect*. This analysis resulted in four categories, with the codes grouped under each one. The four categories were 1) Public Perception of the Profession, 2) Pedagogy and Curriculum, 3) Relationships, and 4) Being a Teacher. I explain each category using illustrative pieces of transcript data to illustrate my findings in the next chapter. I provide a chart in Table 1 to offer a visual representation of the coding process and how I arrived at the four main categories.

Table 1. Codes and Categories

Categories	Codes
Public Perception of the Profession *Teachers' perspectives about the assumptions the public holds for teachers both inside and outside of their classrooms*	accountability, disrespect, expectations, family, feelings, frustrations, higher standards, media representation, morale, professionalism, public perception, respect, scrutiny, teachers' time, teaching is easy, trust, value
Pedagogy and Curriculum *Styles, methods, and content of teaching used by the teachers over the years and how these may have changed, including curriculum changes and how these changes influenced teachers' instructional delivery*	administrators, decisions, demoralized, educational standards, good teaching, loss of autonomy, politics, pressure, reforms, standardized testing, teachers' voices, testing preparation
Relationships *Professional connections teachers established with people within their classrooms, school buildings, county, and community*	administrators, burnout, connections, decision makers, disillusionment, frustration, morale, peers, policy writers/implementers, stress, students, support
Being a Teacher *Ways in which these teachers define being a teacher, being a middle school teacher, and being an English teacher.*	change the world, college major, grading, literature, middle school, morale, passion, peers, school climate, students, teacher identity, teaching English, teaching profession, testing preparation, trust

Coding Interview Transcripts

I transcribed the interviews upon completion of each one, and immediately began looking

for ideas and commonalities (LeCompte & Preissle, 1994). I labeled these ideas, commonalities,

and tensions with key words that eventually developed into the in vivo codes. In keeping with

constant comparative analysis sensibility, I used these key words and codes as markers of each

round of reading and re-reading of the transcripts. According to Tesch (1990), there are eight

necessary steps in the coding process. I used these steps to help guide the ways that I made sense

of the data. These steps included

1. Get a sense of the whole by reading all transcriptions
2. Pick one document and ask "what is this about?"
3. Make a list of all topics and begin to cluster similar topics together

4. Analyze the data using the list and abbreviate codes
5. Find the most descriptive wording for categories and turn them into labels
6. Make final decisions on abbreviations and then alphabetize
7. Assemble the data by category
8. Recode if necessary

These coding steps aligned with my use of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) because each step led to a closer understanding of the data. My study sought to understand the ways in which teachers have interpreted educational reforms and the reasons teachers demonstrated longevity in the profession. As I read each transcript the first time, I highlighted words or phrases that struck me as emotional or powerful expressions of how the teachers felt. When I re-read the transcripts, I focused on one transcript at a time and, using a different color to signify an additional reading, I highlighted any words or phrases I may have missed on the first read that addressed my research questions. Next I sorted these words and phrases into similar groups and assigned an initial code for each group. For example, one of the initial codes was *teachers are frustrated*. Another initial code I assigned was *school climate is important.* When I moved on to the next interview transcript, I followed the same procedures. If something from another transcript was similar to one of the initial codes, I added the information to the group. I also created additional initial codes as I continued to re-read the transcripts.

At this point, I used Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis tool, to further organize and categorize my data. Using Dedoose allowed me to see the many connections among the data, and I applied them to my research questions. I continued analyzing the transcripts, looking for patterns and relationships until I saturated the data. Data saturation occurs when the researcher determines that no new information can be identified through the coding process (Saldana, 2013).

Layering in Gee's Seven Building Tasks. Critical discourse analysis examines discourse to identify how inequality plays out at the level of interpretation (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Discourse, both spoken and written, is a social practice (Fairclough, 1992). Gee (2004) explains that discourse becomes critical when the researcher acknowledges the power relations found in discourse. Within a school environment, one discourse may be placed above another, particularly with regard to educational policies and the various ways in which school leaders and school teachers interpret policies. Critical discourse analysis is frequently used to demonstrate the creation of power relationships and how the dominant discourses influence those considered less powerful (van Dijk, 1993). In this study, the discourse within the educational policies may be a dominant discourse as it dictates what teachers do with regard to curriculum and pedagogy. Furthermore, how the policies are interpreted by administrators and teachers may create power issues if the interpretations differ. In the case of this study, there were times when reforms were interpreted by school leaders in a manner that contrasted with how the teachers interpreted the reforms. This breakdown in communication had a negative effect on the morale of the teachers. Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak (2011) support van Dijk by asserting that power relations need to be examined using critical discourse analysis. Language is political and allows people to do and be things as well as inform others (Gee, 2011). Using features of Gee's (2014) Seven Building Tasks of Language, I analyzed the ways in which the teachers perceived the language in the reforms and how their interpretations did or did not shape their teaching. Gee's (2014) Seven Building Tasks are as follows:

   I. Significance: How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?
  II. Practices: What practice (activity) or practices is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as going on)?
 III. Identities: What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as operative)?

IV. <u>Relationships</u>: what sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?

V. <u>Politics</u> (distribution of social goods): What perspective on social goods is this piece of language communicating (i.e., what is being communicated as to what is taken to be "normal," "right," "good," "correct," "proper," "appropriate," "valuable," "the way things are," "the way things ought to be," "high or low status," "like me or not like me," and so forth)?

VI. <u>Connections</u>: How does this piece of language connect or disconnect things; how does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?

VII. <u>Sign systems and knowledge</u>: How does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign systems or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief? (pg. 95-97)

Gee claimed that "discourse analysis can illuminate problems and controversies in the world and illuminate issues about who gets helped and who gets harmed" (p. 10). This characteristic of critical discourse analysis supported my reasoning for using it as a form of analysis. The experiences the teachers shared with me provided stories detailing the ways in which they have been influenced by educational reforms as well as the reasons why they remained in the profession.

Foucault (1988) stated that discourses are "knowledge systems" that inform thinking socially and politically. The teachers in the study shared a discourse that was specific to teaching. Discourse is social and the teachers discussed educational policies and decisions that were political in nature. According to Fairclough (2013), the primary focus of critical discourse analysis is "the effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs" (p. 8). My study explored middle school English teachers' experiences over a time of ongoing reform in a subject that is regularly tested and required to adhere to state-mandated curriculum requirements. Using a critical discourse lens to analyze the experiences of the participants was an appropriate analysis tool for my study. Examining the various discourses found in the interviews helped me understand why these English teachers stayed in teaching for so long in middle school. In each of the four main categories identified, I chose one excerpt and employed components of Gee's

(2011) seven building tasks to critically analyze the discourse shared by the teachers. When choosing the excerpts, I made certain I chose each teacher at least once to include the varying perspectives each teacher shared.

Sample of coded text. Using the excerpt below, I demonstrate how I used the coding process and critical discourse analysis. Here, Grace expressed some of her frustrations with experiencing a loss of autonomy that ultimately caused her to feel diminished in her role of a professional teacher.

> I guess just feeling like I was a child again in some ways. Feeling like if I did stuff out of line, I was going to be chastised. Always feeling like I had to have a plan and an answer to support it in my head in case I was asked. Always on guard. I felt like I would have to have an answer before [the principal] asked me. So, that was stressful. What I didn't like was feeling like I was doing everything I could but it was never enough. It was never enough.

I began by assigning the initial code of *negative morale* because of the word choices chastised, stressful, and never enough. Further, these words and phrases signified *emotions* associated with a lowering of morale. She chose strong words to describe the way she felt having to justify her every move to administrators despite the fact that she was a *professional* and had *experience teaching* for decades. As I collapsed codes and created categories in the analysis process, I returned to this quote and assigned the category of *loss of autonomy*. Grace interpreted the behaviors of her administrators to mean that she was no longer permitted to make decisions or take actions that she had done in the past without some sort of explanation. Grace's statement illustrated how she not only faced but *endured* scrutiny because of the level of high stakes associated with teaching English. Thus, the loss of autonomy Grace depicted a concrete example of what prior studies found of teachers having to justify every move they make in classrooms (Cheng, 2012; Lynch, 2014).

Language played an important role in my analysis which was why I used Gee (2011) and components of his Seven Building Tasks of Language. For this excerpt, I used his Identities Building Tool and the Relationships Building Tool. The Identities tool suggests that researchers examine the "socially recognizable identity that the speaker is trying to get others to recognize" (Gee, 2011, p. 116). In this case, Grace positioned herself as an *experienced teacher* who began to feel like a child who might be scolded or punished for her teaching methods. While this was a statement situated solely in Grace's experience, hers is similar to other teachers experiencing lowering morale and loss of autonomy (Dunn, 2014). Grace's use of the phrase "out of line" is reminiscent of what a child may feel when being scolded, not what a professional who has been teaching for decades should feel when talking with a school administrator. Yet, the reality was Grace had these feelings regularly. She took on a new identity—that of a teacher who had to prove and justify every move she made—and yet, despite this loss of autonomy, Grace remained in the profession.

Using the Relationships tool, I examined the way Grace established a relationship between herself, her administrators, and other teachers by the words she chose. First, Grace portrayed a relationship with her administrators that clearly depicted an unequal playing field. Administrators in this case were typically the teacher's bosses. The idea that a teacher with years of experience would have to begin justifying everything she planned to do with her students implied that Grace was not qualified to do what she had been trained and certified to do. Thus, the relationship between teacher and principal now as one in which Grace had to prove herself. The relationship required Grace to "be on guard," which is an indication of defensiveness. The principal is an antagonist in this quote, someone for whom Grace must produce answers, justifications, and actions that will forestall punishment—in this case, chastisement. Finally, it is

worth noting that Grace compares herself to a child awaiting the judgment of a parent. Despite the fact that she had two education degrees, 35 years of teaching experience, and a long-term career in the county, she still felt belittled and diminished enough to feel treated as a child and not the seasoned professional she was. The relationship with the principal in particular helped to foster this image of herself.

Limitations

Teaching is a topic about which I am rather passionate. Discovering the reasons why teachers demonstrate longevity in the field despite negative media coverage and demanding educational reforms is another topic about which I am passionate. Having said this, I recognize that one of the limitations to this study was my bias as the researcher. I am aware that as an educator, I have experienced many changes related to educational reforms and the influence these reforms have had on my own teaching and morale. This study provided three teachers a chance to share their stories. However, in order for this study to be credible, I had to be fully aware of my role as the researcher and take measures to ensure my bias was minimized when working with the participants. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) asserted the following regarding researcher bias:

> Acknowledge that no matter how much you try, you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe, and what you value. Being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable. The goal is to become more reflective and conscious of how and who you are may shape and enrich what you do, not to eliminate it. (p. 38)

This quote helped to remind me that there is simply no way to eliminate bias and that my feelings on this topic are valid and valued; however, I remained professional as I collected and analyzed the data, meaning that I did not allow my personal opinions to influence my analysis. That said, being a member of the school district community helped me to gain access to potential

teacher participants. Having a shared set of experiences proved invaluable in fostering a sense of comfort or confidence that the information the teachers shared would be analyzed with care and attention.

Role of the Researcher

I acknowledged that my role as a middle school teacher who has experienced firsthand the pressures associated with educational reforms and standardized tests was a factor in this study. The topic for this research study evolved as a result of my feelings towards educational reforms and the ways in which I saw these reforms influencing my colleagues. However, I took the role of a researcher seriously and did not intentionally engage in any sort of behavior that would influence the research or participants.

Working with teachers from the same county where I taught forced me to think about my relationship with each participant. There was the possibility of the interviews eliciting strong reactions due to the evocative topics and questions. Two of the participants were teachers with whom I had worked at professional developments for the district, and we had established a friendship. While a shared past put a level of trust in place, I recognized that I needed to assume the role of researcher and refrain from trying to control the situation and simply allow the experiences with each teacher to happen naturally (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Credibility

I aimed to complete a study that will promote trustworthiness and credibility. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) qualitative research should focus on the social sciences and humanities and become a place that allows for "critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community" (p. 3). This study used interviews with teachers that dealt with the experiences these teachers had with educational

policies and the reasons why they persisted in the profession. One of the roles of good

qualitative research is to provide the reader with a study that provokes emotion due to shared

experiences of the participants in the study (Eisner, 1998; Tracy, 2010). This type of credibility

is referred to as transferability. Transferability occurs when the reader feels as though something

within the research connects with his/her own situation and a transfer is made intuitively (Tracy,

2010). My hope as a researcher is for readers of this study to recognize some familiar aspects of

teaching and feel a sense of belonging to a community of dedicated teachers who persevere and

persist amidst adversity.

This study has the potential to lend itself to situations in which the reader may experience

transferability thus creating a level of trustworthiness (Crotty, 2011; Tracy, 2010). Lincoln and

Guba (1985) suggested eight strategies that indicate the credibility of a study. Among these is

triangulation. Used in qualitative research to establish validity, triangulation is an important

method the researcher employs during analysis. The researcher examines the data and provides

multiple perspectives to obtain consistency (Patton, 1990). By journaling and memoing,

interviewing at different points in time, and using grounded theory and critical discourse analysis

I implemented triangulation. Patton (1990) asserted that the use of triangulation in qualitative

research keeps the researcher from any sort of questioning that may occur if only a single data

source was used.

The use of member checking is another strategy suggested to establish credibility

(Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used member checking throughout the data

collection process, not only to check in with the participants but to ensure that I interpreted their

responses accurately. At each member checking session, I showed the excerpt in question and

asked for further clarification. I explained to the teachers my reasoning for doing this was to

avoid putting my thoughts or words into my analysis and to remain true to what their initial response intended to convey. After I wrote my rationale for their pseudonyms, I shared these with the respective teacher. I did this because I wanted to be sure Faith, Grace, and Hope were comfortable with how I articulated specifics about their careers while at the same time maintaining their confidentiality.

Finally, in this study I addressed the researcher bias that is inevitable to almost any study (Creswell, 2014; Tracy, 2010). I acknowledged that my experiences as an educator included being influenced by these reforms. By addressing this influence as part of my bias, I informed the reader that there will be moments when it is clear what my stance is, as it is virtually impossible to be free from opinion about such a sensitive topic.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by discussing the value of qualitative research and what is possible to discover and explain in relation to my study. I then described the research design I used: case study. Next, I described the context of the study and provided information regarding the setting and participants. Data collection came next followed by data analysis. I ended with an explanation of the limitations of this study. In Chapter 4, I discuss the findings from my data analysis. In Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of the data.

4 FINDINGS

"The best thing about being a teacher is that it matters. The hardest thing about being a teacher is that it matters every day."—Todd Whitaker

In this chapter I present the findings I identified during data analysis. These findings answer the research questions and align with the theoretical frameworks that shaped this study. I developed four categories to discuss the experiences of the teachers. The four main categories are 1.) Public Perception of the Profession 2.) Pedagogy and Curriculum 3.) Relationships and 4.) Being a Teacher. Each of these categories illustrate why the teachers in this study demonstrated longevity in the middle school English classroom and how educational reforms and negative public images influenced their perspectives of the profession.

Public Perception of the Profession

This category showed both how the teachers perceived public assumptions about teaching and their feelings about those assumptions. Within this category, two ideas about public perception stood out: Expectations Inside the Classroom and Expectations Outside of the Classroom. These perceptions illustrate the feelings the teachers shared about the competing sets of expectations that teachers face.

Expectations Outside of the Classroom

Teachers have many expectations to meet. Some expectations come from their administrators, some come from themselves, and some come from people in the general public. The teachers in this study acknowledged that much of the frustration they experienced was due to what the public thinks teachers should do when outside of school and how teachers should spend their free time. These teachers shared their perspectives about the expectations outside of the classroom placed upon them by society.

Lack of respect. Feeling respected and valued in the workplace is a common desire. A

lack of respect can lead to lower performance and a decrease in morale (Ketter & Poole, 2001;

Noddings, 2014). Respect for the teaching profession has diminished (Owens, 2013; Ravitch,

2010). For these teachers, their experiences of respect diminished over time. While there are

many theories as to why this is, the teachers in this study stated that the public's perception and

portrayal of teachers is in part responsible for their feelings of disrespect. In other words, public

talk and public images contributed to the teachers feeling that they were not respected and not

valued. Faith expanded upon this idea.

> It's a thankless job on many levels. The lack of respect. The fact that we have friends
> who are past the 20 year mark and they are making less each year because insurance rates
> go up each year, but they are capped out on step increases. It doesn't make any sense to
> me. We should be paid and respected like doctors. We are raising people's kids eight
> hours a day.

It is not uncommon to compare a profession to those in the medical field, specifically comparing

doctors and teachers. Throughout the interview process, the teachers spoke about the manner in

which other professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, are treated with reverence. Weick (1995)

described sense making as "the enlargement of small cues" in an attempt to gain understanding

of a situation. Faith took the cues of physicians earning a higher salary and enlarged that idea to

make sense of her experiences with teaching salaries. She felt disrespected because of her low

base salary, the salary cap that the district had in place, and the increased costs for insurance.

Taken together, this meant that her salary was lower, and her job was therefore less respected. In

her mind, the role she took on as a classroom teacher was no less valuable or important than that

of a doctor. Both deal with human beings by providing the necessary care. Teaching is a

profession and teachers are professionals. Teachers have to earn a college degree in the

education field and then take an exam to acquire the necessary certification to teach a specific

grade and content. Many teachers obtain advanced education degrees. Teachers have ongoing professional learning requirements to remain current in the field. Yet, in spite of all this, the salary of teachers remains lower than that of other professions (Westervelt, 2016).

The notion that teachers only work eight hours per day, have evenings and weekends free, and spend every summer vacationing is one that elicited strong emotions from teachers. While the teaching profession does provide an extended amount of time off during a given school year, the teachers in this study brought up the fact that their time away from school is often an extension of their school day rather than simply a break. The public gives this impression of the profession, as being a simple job with relatively short working hours and an abundance of time off, yet the reality of what the public portrays is far from accurate.

There is a value of time that seems to be overlooked and unacknowledged. Public perception of how a teacher's academic year and personal time schedules functioned and are used were different than the reality. Hope used the word stressor to describe her disdain for the public perception of time.

> One of the stressors I think teachers face is expectation that teachers will work outside of their contracted hours and spend significant amounts of time away from family and other responsibilities to get things ready for school. I think the illusion that we don't do anything on nights/weekends/summers and that we get paid for our summers is so warped. Am I not entitled to go home and be with my family for the evening?

Hope and her colleagues worked in a district that had contracted hours from 8 am to 4 pm. This schedule for in-school work did not take into account the number of hours the teachers spent selling tickets at sporting events, chaperoning school dances, attending parent meetings held before or after school, tutoring before or after school or during lunch, grading papers in the evenings or on weekends, planning lessons on the weekends, etc. The public perception that these teachers identified was that they arrived at school at 8 am and left at 4 pm, and then

enjoyed work-free evenings and weekends. The reality was that in order for these teachers to grade papers, attend sporting events, plan effective and exciting lessons, and work one-on-one with struggling students, they had to put in time beyond their contracted hours.

The general public makes assumptions about what teachers can and cannot do with their time off. The overall sense is that teachers have many weeks, even three months, off for the summer. Grace explained how this perception angered her but was also incommensurate with the realities of what she did with her time outside of the academic calendar.

> It makes me mad. It makes me angry. I have said to people who tell me "oh you have three months off in the summer." No, I don't. You're always trying to get those accreditations and re-certifications. Being called in for meetings. So, I try to make it clear that we don't walk in at 8 am and leave at 4 pm. You have no idea what I am taking home.

As a follow up, Grace explained that on average she took home papers to grade a minimum of two nights per week. In addition, Grace spent time working on the weekends on lesson plans, grading, and other preparations for lessons. James (2015) discussed this notion of time in her study of three teachers who felt consumed by the amount of time they spent beyond their contracted hours on grading and other tasks for their teaching job. Referred to as "School Work Sunday," this term was coined because the teachers described the fact that Sunday was the day they spent preparing for the coming week (pgs. 127-28). Further complicating the matter for the teachers in my study was an assumption about the role of family during the academic year. Put simply, in order to be good, professional teachers, the expectation was their families were less important that the time required for meeting, teaching, and advising at school. Grace recalled a conversation with a peer that expressed her frustration about the assumption of teaching coming before family.

> She brought up a concern that due to meetings she had dropped her children off at day care at 6:30 am and was not picking them up until after 5 pm. She was told by the

assistant principal in that meeting that she should have thought about that before she had children. Talk about a morale killer! Would you say that to an attorney? To a physician? To a fire fighter? Or a policeman? I think that is something that is discouraging teachers from remaining or entering the profession. I mean, if you're going to be working until 5 pm you might as well have a job that ends at 5 pm and get paid for those hours.

Hope's and Grace's comments indicate how both public perceptions and school administrators' perceptions create expectations about a teacher's schedule and their personal time. Teachers dealt with both a lack of respect and insensitivity about decisions regarding family issues. In other words, having children and caring for those children was somehow not supposed to impede in any way on their professional duties. This is important to recognize because it furthers the notion that teachers often deal with a lack of respect or sensitivity toward decisions regarding family issues. Grace shared this story because it was not an isolated incident and the way she interpreted what the administrator said added to her frustration and disappointment. Her ability to make sense of what happened did not justify the treatment her colleague received, but it did shed light on the attitudes teachers can face during their careers. It begs the question of how many teachers have postponed family planning due to concerns of disapproval or of how many people chose not to enter the teaching profession because of demands and expectations about their personal lives.

Higher standards. I identified this category using the data indicating teachers face more scrutiny and different expectations than other professionals particularly with regard to social media and general public behavior. For example, teachers are constantly reminded to be careful of what they post on social media. When I attended the new teacher orientation for my district, I was advised not to consume alcoholic beverages in a public establishment within the district. I was 35 years old when I began teaching—well above the legal drinking age—yet I had been instructed not to drink alcohol in public places for fear I might be spotted by the parent of a

student I taught. At the first faculty meeting of every new school year, administrators also

recommend that we not befriend students on social media because they might use some of the

posted content on our pages in an unflattering manner that could result in the teacher being

questioned by legal authorities and possibly terminated. These public behaviors of using social

media and drinking in restaurants are viewed as typical in other arenas and professions, yet in the

teaching profession, teachers are held to a different, seemingly higher standard. This following

quote from Grace suggested the frustrations that stemmed from working in a profession judged

by others outside of the profession.

> Well, for one thing I think teachers are held to a higher standard. I mean, if we were at a
> bar and a parent walked by and you were having a glass of wine. Depending on the
> parent, they might say "Oh, I saw Ms. So-and-So having a glass of wine." Well, so what?
> Ms. So-and-So is an adult. She's not sitting at her desk at school having a drink. I just
> think there is a higher standard with Facebook and other social media.

Grace's observations showed her disappointment with the expectation that the general public has

a right to place stringent social expectations on teachers, expectations that can include judging

teachers photographs and posts on social media. Further complicating the issue was that teachers

could be judged for past events documented online, thus prompting teachers to filter, clean, or

scrub their social media presence. The concern about public judgment for behaviors such as

drinking or posting pictures on social media sent the message that they were not able to conduct

themselves in a professional manner. Thus a contradiction became apparent. On one hand,

teachers were viewed as adults and professionals. Yet, on the other hand, teachers were

encouraged not to participate in certain legal, adult behaviors and if they did, they must be

prepared to be judged for their actions and their employment could be threatened. Trying to

understand contradictory information and how something came to be rather than why the

contradiction exists is a part of sense making (Weick, 1969, 2005). Grace was frustrated with the

situation that her personal life was subject to interrogation or public scrutiny. The fact of the matter is that teachers are adults who should not be made to feel they are doing something wrong or improper by consuming alcohol in the county or showing details of their personal lives on social media. This example lends itself to the question of how it ever came to be that teachers are subject to such scrutiny. For Grace, being questioned for doing something she was of legal age to do made her feel diminished as a professional and as if she was unable to handle certain rights that come with being an adult. In her mind, it was one more example of devaluing teachers as professionals.

Looking at this through a critical discourse lens, one thing that stuck out to me was Grace's use of the phrase "higher standards." I applied Gee's (2011) Significance Building Tool and Relationships Building Tool to further analyze the language Grace chose. The Significance Tool suggests looking at the way words are used to "build up the relevance or importance of some words and not others," (Gee, 2011, p. 98). Higher standards was used two times in this quote in an effort to get her point across that teachers face more scrutiny and judgment than other professionals. The idea of being viewed as unprofessional for drinking an alcoholic beverage was significant to Grace. The higher standard she described was one of her main frustrations about how the public viewed teachers and placed certain expectations on those in the profession. Though the scene Grace described was hypothetical, it depicts the competing identities that teachers are faced with when it comes to their personal lives.

The Relationships Tool asks that researchers examine how words are used to "build, sustain, or change relationships among the speaker and other people or social groups," (Gee, 2011, p. 121). As I analyzed Grace's word choices, I found her use of the word "adult" suggested that certain people do not view teachers as adults. This is not to say that the public, the social

group who has placed higher standards on teachers, think teachers are children; however, they do have certain opinions when it comes to adult behaviors, such as consuming alcohol thus changing the relationship to where one group is superior over another. Grace explained herself by saying that the teacher in question was not "sitting at her desk having a drink." This declaration in support of teachers engaging in adult behavior in a public setting without judgment implied that Grace was trying to create a level playing field, thus changing the relationship. This time the relationship changed to one of equality, where all members were viewed as adults and therefore able to participate in adult behavior. In this imagined scenario, which was how Grace believed it should be, teachers were empowered as fully realized adults with the power to drink in public on their own accord.

Expectations Inside the Classroom

Another frustration the teachers experienced developed from the idea that people outside of their classrooms and schools place certain expectations about what should occur inside their classrooms. The category *teaching is easy* comprised the notion that, in general, people view teaching as an easy profession. The category *accountability* covers a variety of ways the teachers identified accountability in their respective schools and how it influenced classroom expectations.

Teaching is easy. Teaching is a rewarding profession, yet it comes with multiple demands and requirements. The teachers in this study dealt with many classroom expectations that they knew would be a part of the job. For example, they knew when they entered the profession they would have to grade student work, attend meetings, and handle challenging student behavior. One thing they did not expect to do was defend their profession when people outside of the classroom claimed their job was easy. In Friendship County—where this study

took place—homeschooling was an option for parents seeking school alternatives for their children. The growing popularity of homeschooling created a backlash associated with public school teaching. Hope said,

> Homeschooling…[it implies] anybody can be a teacher. No… not everybody can be a teacher. That you don't have to have an education to be a teacher. The reality is you need someone who is educated in how to teach children. That is one thing that really bothers me.

Hope's response answered the question to name something that frustrated her about education. Hope expressed her thoughts about parents pulling students out of school with the intention of homeschooling their own children. She felt frustrated because, in her experiences, none of the parents were certified teachers, yet they were permitted to teach their child using curriculum that was equivalent to the mandated curriculum Hope used. This made Hope feel as though it did not matter what her credentials were because essentially these parents were being told they were qualified to teach. Hope had to earn a four year degree in education and take an exam to be certified in secondary English language arts; however, these homeschool parents did not. In her mind, allowing uncertified people to homeschool children undermines the teaching profession by sending the message that anyone can be a teacher. Hope further explained that untrained and unlicensed people cannot perform surgery or defend a case in a court of law. The idea that homeschooling can be done by anyone is another example of not viewing teachers as the professionals that they are and perpetuates the notion that teaching is easy.

Grace and Faith experienced feelings of frustration when they discussed views the public had of the profession. One perception they mentioned multiple times during our interviews was the fact that many people who have never been in the classroom other than when they were students believe teaching is an easy profession. They shared similar responses to the question I

asked about what they would like to say to those people who feel being a classroom teacher is easy.

> I think they should have to sub for a week in the classrooms. I think they should have to live the life of a teacher for two weeks at least, including faculty meetings, parent conferences, lunch, having to go the bathroom and not being able to. I think they should have to do that (Grace).

> I think the parents need to come in and be the teacher for a day. I would love for them to come in and prepare lessons and stand in front of the kids and dispense the information, assess it, grade it, enter it, and then take the backlash from parents after its been entered. I would love them to be in those shoes for a day. It's not as easy as they think (Faith).

Their suggestions for having parents and other adults experience teaching illustrate many of the expectations teachers face inside the classroom. While Grace and Faith were formally educated and prepared to grade papers, plan and write lesson plans, instruct students, and assess student work, they never assumed these tasks would be easy. Grading essays for 110 students takes a considerable amount of time. These English teachers graded on average four to five writing assignments each nine-week grading period. Compounded with demands and deadlines from administration, as well as parents and students, keeping up with the responsibilities a classroom teacher has each day, teaching was not something Grace and Faith described as easy. Yet, despite the complexity and at times difficulty related to teaching, there formed among the public an overwhelming misconception that teaching is an easy profession. This mindset frustrated Grace and Faith and was another example of public perception reducing the worth of teachers as professionals. Sensemaking (Weick, 2005) points to the way in which people outside of a culture create their own meaning and how at times this can lead to being misinformed. Hope, Grace, and Faith provided examples of their experiences with the public being misinformed about the culture of middle school English classes and what actually occurs in the classroom. For these teachers, the ramifications of a misinformed, or even uninformed, public were feelings of being

disparaged as teachers and professionals. The feelings of disparagement that these teachers

experienced were heightened upon recognizing the level of accountability they were being held

to. Yet again, their professionalism was in question when it came to assessing blame for low test

scores.

Accountability. Accountability was a topic that the teachers brought up many times

during the interview process, even if it was not something I directly asked. Hope and Grace

shared examples about how they experienced accountability throughout their careers. Grace

shared how the word took on a new meaning for her since the implementation of state standards

and high stakes standardized tests.

> Well, accountability means being accountable and responsible for the job you were asked
> to do. However, it has taken on a negative connotation with education. I think teachers
> are being held accountable for things they don't have control over. [For example] The
> child's home environment. What time they go to bed. What and if they eat dinner. What
> time they get up in the morning. What they're exposed to at home. The limits or lack of
> limits. So many factors that teachers have no control over. So, I would say it has a more
> negative connotation with me than it used to.

Grace's explanation of how the word accountability had evolved for her is indicative of what all

three teachers felt. There are multiple factors that influence a student's performance in school

that teachers have no control over, yet the reality was that these teachers were being held

accountable for the students' performance on the standardized tests regardless of any outside

factors. The expectation was that teachers would do what they could to ensure students perform

well on the high stakes standardized tests. Grace felt this expectation continue to grow the longer

she taught. By the end of her 35-year career all that seemed to matter were the scores the

students earned on the tests, what she had done to prepare her students, and what she could have

done differently to better prepare those students who, based on the test results, did not perform

well. Whereas, earlier in Grace's career, the determination of her teaching quality came in the

form of assessments created by the teachers. While test scores were still used to determine the effectiveness of her teaching, the difference was that these scores came from tests Grace created rather than those that were designed by people who did not know the students in Grace's classroom. Having the autonomy to design tests and administer them when she felt the time was right, served as a reminder that she was a trained professional who could make informed decisions about her students when the time was right in relation to the curriculum she taught and in relation to the particular needs of the students. The pressure associated with the expectations about testing Grace faced in later years coupled with the reality that her teacher evaluation was tied to student performance became a stressor that Grace could not avoid, hence the negative feelings about accountability. Grace explained that she did not mind taking on some of the responsibility of student performance, in fact she knew that was part of her job, but there did not seem to be any accountability placed on the students or parents. This lack of accountability for even the student frustrated Grace. All of the accountability, as she saw it, rested squarely on teachers. Hope expanded on this feeling of frustration and shared a similar perspective.

> Well, it's interesting because I think so much of our evaluation system is set up to look at the accountability for teachers. But, I think there needs to be that accountability for the students. For example, in 8th grade [students] have to pass the Landmarks [the state annual exam] or you don't go on and everyone talks about how devastating that is. But, at some point there needs to be a level of accountability. I mean, I look at some of the students in my class who are in danger of failing the Landmarks and I'm like, "absenteeism, absenteeism, absenteeism." So, where's the accountability on the parent and student? Where is the accountability for kids actually handing in their work and doing their best? There is a point where kids don't feel that pressure to learn what they need to learn, where they don't feel that pressure to do what they need to do and perform. Again, the accountability. I mean I had students in my homeroom who, during Landmarks testing, Christmas-treed science and social studies [exams for middle school] because they knew those tests didn't count towards retention or promotion. I feel bad for those teachers who are being evaluated on growth and the fact they will be held accountable for those students' scores.

Hope expressed her perspectives about what happens when students are not held accountable for their education, but the teacher of record is. Her belief was that success on the exams required more than just the teacher, and accountability should include students and parents or guardians. As Hope shared, there were many factors that she had no control over and the reality that these factors were not taken into consideration was a concern for these teachers. Students who were chronically absent was a circumstance that teachers could not control. Yet, for these teachers, students with habitual absences were not held accountable nor were their parents, but these students still took the Landmarks. Student scores were then factored into teacher evaluations. At the time of this study, student test scores accounted for 50% of teacher evaluations. Hope witnessed students marking random answers, the "Christmas-tree" approach to filling in, on the science and social studies Landmarks, which furthered her point and frustration that teachers were accountable for so much, yet the students were not. These examples from Grace and Hope support the notion that they felt there were expectations inside and outside the classroom that they could not control. Teaching is easy and teachers are the sole owners of accountability for student success were two facets. The perceptions of what teachers do opposed to what teachers reported they did offers a different view. The reality is that teachers are continuously blamed by those outside of the classroom for low test scores (Owens, 2013). This blame is another example of how the teachers felt devalued as professionals. The fact was that these teachers were adjusting to curriculum changes and ensuring their students were exposed to all of the standards they would see on the test, yet there was no recognition for their actions.

Pedagogy and Curriculum

I identified this category after analyzing the data surrounding the style in which the teachers taught at the beginning of their careers. I then compared this information to how they

were teaching at the time of the interviews. In addition, I examined data addressing the content

and the curriculum the teachers taught and how these have evolved over their careers.

Educational Standards, Changes, Testing Preparation, and *Loss of Autonomy* were the four sub-

categories.

Educational Standards

When conducting a study that examines the ways No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to

the Top (RTTT), and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have influenced teachers'

pedagogy and curriculum, it would be highly unlikely that standards were not mentioned. One of

the components of NCLB, and the subsequent reforms, was educational standards which were

aligned to the standardized test. Teachers were expected to address these standards to ensure

student mastery on the standardized tests. The teachers in this study discussed their experiences

with state standards, as well as shared some stories about what it was like to teach before the

heavy emphasis on content specific state standards that surfaced in 2002. While they all

acknowledged changes in how and what they taught, Faith and Grace shared different

perspectives on state standards. Faith did not feel the standards played a significant role in her

teaching style.

> I just don't think they make a big impact on my teaching. I mean, if you're a good
> teacher, you're a good teacher. A new reform isn't going to change that. It doesn't matter
> what policy is in place. Connecting with students matters. But, if you're a good teacher, it
> doesn't matter what policy is coming down the pike.

Faith's response to my question asking how educational policies influenced her teaching

supported Santoro's (2011) notion of "good teaching." She expressed clearly that reforms were

not what made her a good teacher; it was her ability to connect with her students. This

connection led to stronger lessons and implementation of instruction which furthers Santoro's

point. Good teachers know what their students require to learn. These teachers know what their

students need to learn because they have established a vested interest in their students by taking

the time to know them. The state and federal educational reforms and initiatives Faith

encountered in her 18 year career were not created by teachers who knew the students in her

classroom. Faith acknowledged that the reforms were not going to go away and stated that she

did alter some of her lessons to address the standards. However, she did not allow these

mandated changes to interfere with what she considered made her a good teacher—establishing

positive relationships with her students. For Faith, providing an environment in which her

students knew that she cared about them as human beings was most important. She knew this

positive connection would promote student success, and not only success on a test.

On the other hand, Grace recognized that some of the changes she made were for the

better of students and that she probably would not have made such changes had it not been for

the emphasis on mastering the standards.

> I think probably the biggest thing was pointing out those students you knew were not going to be successful when it came to testing and making sure you worked with them after or before school or during lunch. I think, despite my grumblings, it probably is a pretty good idea to have that connection and work with those students. I do think NCLB shed light on those students who were low performers and could target those who needed that extra push. I think CCSS made me really think about what I was teaching and doing and was it valid.

Identifying students who needed extra support was a positive aspect Grace discovered after her

experiences with educational reforms. While she admitted to feeling frustrated at the expectation

she would give up part of her planning period to work with low performing students, she felt this

opportunity allowed her to establish a relationship with struggling students. Grace made sense of

this situation as a means to foster the student-teacher relationship with students identified as

those who may not pass the state standardized test. Looking at the language through a sense

making lens (Weick, 2005), Grace took an individual situation and created a new environment

for herself and her students. At Grace's school, teachers who taught English, math, science, and social studies were expected to provide tutoring sessions either before or after school or during lunch. The tutoring was intended to offer additional help to students who struggled with concepts and standards they needed to master for the standardized test. This tutoring was an extension of the teachers' day and was not compensated, yet administrators expected it to be done. Grace took this expectation and made it work for her and her students by offering lunch time tutoring. She struggled with the idea that she was essentially "teaching to a test." This supports similar findings identified by Noddings (2014) and Valli and Chambliss (2007). Teachers in their studies were concerned about student performance, yet they struggled with the notion of simply teaching the material that was going to be on the state mandated test.

However, Grace was able to justify that her role as a classroom teacher was to ensure she did all she could to help her students be successful. If that meant providing extra support for students during her lunch period, then she was willing to do it. In her mind, it made sense to support her students in this manner. Grace's recognition of struggling students supported Cheng (2012) and McCarthey (2008) who discovered that through identifying students who are weak in certain content areas, strategies could be put into place to assist those students and provide support to help them master specific standards. What was interesting was that, aside from the use of the word "grumblings" one time, Grace did not complain about the fact that she had to devote her lunch period, or time before or after school, to work with students without extra pay or comp time. It was a clear expectation from her school leaders that tutoring would occur which is another example of the notion of time. The administration infringed upon Grace's time and Grace simply accepted it as part of her responsibilities.

Changes

One of the ideas I wanted to learn more about was what sorts of changes did the teachers make in their teaching style because of the reforms. As with the standards, each teacher interpreted the reforms differently which, in turn, influenced any changes that were made in their classrooms. Hope expressed the ways in which she changed over the course of her career and the influence the standards have had on her evolution as a teacher. In the first example, Hope reflected on her first day of teaching and how she taught the textbook. The second example is a description of how Hope teaches now and the role the standards played in this change.

> They walked me into my classroom and said, "Here's your room" and they handed me the Teacher's Edition [of the ELA textbook] and said, "Here ya go." And, I was like, "Oh, holy crap. Do they realize I don't know what I am doing?" I was like, "Where do I begin?" I mean, I had seen it being done. But, all of a sudden it hit me that I've got to do this! Standards? What were they? So, yeah. I taught textbooks as opposed to now where I am a lot more purposeful with what I teach and why I teach it. When I started teaching, it was more of, "Here's an assignment." And, why did I choose it? Because it was the next one in the book.
>
> [Now], I am a lot more rigorous and a lot more purposeful. I mean, I really look at what I am doing, what the end result should be, and is the activity I am going to give my students going to take them there versus when I first began teaching and I was like, oh I'm going to teach this and this looks fun, let's do this. And, oh it's Valentine's Day, let's make valentines. I was much more spontaneous and not as planned out. It was painless, but was it really purposeful and getting them prepared for the next grade? Now, I'm really choosy and am really careful. Ok, I need to teach this standard. What is a good, creative way with a high DOK [Depth of Knowledge- the various levels of complexity for test questions] using different learning styles to get the kids to that point? I put a lot more work into that. I'm a lot more sophisticated than I was. And, I think the students are a lot more aware of why we are doing things and what the end goal is and the benefits.

Hope began teaching in 1993 in a Midwestern state. Her recollection of her first day was that standards were not mentioned, in fact she had never even heard of them in her education courses in college. At that time, there were no national standards for English education (Marshall, 2009). While Hope was able to implement lessons that did not really have a purpose attached to them, as was the case with making valentines with her students to celebrate the holiday, in retrospect

she did not feel the connection with the *what* and *why* of her lessons. She simply taught the lessons and concepts based on what came next in the textbook. This example does not necessarily mean that Hope was an ineffective teacher; however, it provided a contrast to her current style of teaching, which she attributed much of the change to the emphasis of standards.

I applied a sense making lens (Weick, 2005) to examine Hope's progression as a classroom teacher, specifically her pedagogy. On that first day of her teaching career, she was handed a textbook and told to teach it. After her initial shock and apprehension, she did just that: taught the lessons in the textbook as they appeared. As changes in education came down from the federal government and educational standards were put into effect, Hope's experiences with instruction and her implementation of the curriculum changed to address the new standards. Hope continued to make sense of the situations she was in as a classroom teacher and shifted her thinking. She focused on preparing students not only for the next grade, but their future. This was a mind shift from what she needed to teach to recognizing what her students needed to learn (Zoss, 2007). Hope realized the value in getting to know her students as more than just who they were in her classroom, but as individuals, and this has helped her transition from a teacher who literally taught the textbook to a teacher who provided her students with the support they required along with an explanation as to why they were learning specific topics.

In her current role as an 8th grade middle school English teacher, she used the word "sophisticated" to describe her teaching style and attributed part of this sophistication to the standards. For Hope, it did not make sense to ignore these standards. While she acknowledged that she found the continuous revisions of the standards frustrating, she knew that it was part of her job as a teacher to address the standards and incorporate them into her lessons. Hope altered lessons to reflect the various levels of thinking in an attempt to reach all of her students because

she knew that not every student learned the same way. This was quite a contrast to her first few years of teaching when she presented instruction the same way to every student. In her mind, this made sense not only for her, but for her students. She witnessed students make connections to the assignments Hope gave them, and this connection was the justification Hope needed. Like Hope, Faith viewed the structure of the Common Core as something positive when she shared her perspective about how standards influenced her pedagogy.

> I'm not a "dumb down" teacher so it [NCLB] really didn't have a lot of influence in my classroom. I offered tutoring or extra help for the kids who didn't get it, but I didn't think dumbing down the information was going to help the other 25-30 kids in the classroom. I did not let it affect my teaching style. CCSS- I like the structure that Common Core puts into place; that works for my personality. This is what you have to teach when [based on state produced curriculum guides] and then you can put your own spin on how you deliver it and make it yours.

The phrase "dumb down" can be traced back to 1933 when a group of screenwriters revised a film script that would be more appealing to those with lower levels of intelligence (Hagopian, 2014). With regard to the education system, the term gained popularity as a means of insulting the ideas behind educational reforms such as NCLB and CCSS (Gatto, 2002). These insults insinuated that the standards and curriculum that arose from these reforms were forcing teachers to "dumb down" the curriculum by altering it to reflect the lowest possible challenge for students in hopes that all students would pass the state mandated standardized test. Faith used the term to indicate what kind of teacher she was not and explained that it was unfair to the majority of the students in her class to "dumb down" the material. As a classroom teacher, Faith set high expectations for her students. To water down the material was not doing her students any favors, and she refused to participate in such behavior. For those students who required more attention, she provided tutoring outside of the assigned class time and worked extra with them, but she did not feel it would benefit any student to simplify assignments for the sake of scoring higher on a

standardized test. For Faith, the notion of dumbing down information was contradictory to what she believed in as a teacher. It was her goal to encourage critical thinking and making those implicit connections with literature through speaking and writing.

Faith explained that the CCSS standards allowed her to become a bit more structured and that this seemed to benefit her students, which in turn benefitted her. Faith was quick to point out that while she did accept the structure, she remained true to her innate teaching preference and never once felt that she had to alter it. Simply put, structure did not mean change in teaching style. Sowerbrower's (2015) study of three high school teachers' experiences with educational reform showed that new reforms do not require teachers have to change. The teachers in her study did not change because of the reforms, which was what Faith held fast to. While she did acknowledge that the added structure associated with the new CCSS benefited her students, she did not admit to making changes. She appreciated the structure and having a suggested guide for when to teach certain standards but stated that she was able to continue to put her "own spin" on how she implemented those standards. Of the three teachers, Faith is the only one to state that she did not adhere to the set format of the state curriculum guide. She used it simply to remind her of what needed to be covered, whereas Grace and Hope tended to follow the guide more closely. What is interesting to note is that all three of the teachers felt that the way they made sense of the new CCSS allowed students to be more aware of what and why they were learning certain concepts.

Testing Preparation

This sub-category reflected the feelings the teachers expressed about test preparation in their schools and county. The teachers explained the different pressures associated with preparing for a high stakes standardized test and how that changed over the years and with new

educational reforms. In addition, they discussed their feelings about how the emphasis on test

preparation and test scores affected the students.

Faith used words such as *sad* and *insane* to recount her experiences with testing

preparation and how this emphasis affected her students.

> I think the kids are overtested. I think there is too much pressure associated with test performance. There is no pressure on depth of knowledge and understanding; there is pressure on a score. It's sad. I feel like we want to be at the top of the food chain when it comes to education, but we are going about it in the wrong way.

> When I was in school, that's what I took [ITBS]. There was no pressure affiliated with it. It was just given, you took it, and that was it. Zero pressure. No tutorials three weeks in advance. No Saturday school. So, if you want to give a test to see growth, then do it pressure free. These kids already have enough going on. It's overkill. And, the students think it's the only thing that matters. We need to incorporate more of the arts in school. And, kids need to be kids more. I feel like we expect them to sit and learn for 8 hours a day, then go to tutoring, and then go home and do homework. It's insane. Let them be kids.

Ravitch (2010) asserted that test scores have become an obsession and Faith's reflections support

this notion. Faith was frustrated not for herself, but for her students, when she recalled all of the

preparation for the high stakes standardized test each year. Her use of the words sad and insane

help with the portrayal of what occurred at her school each year: contests, pep rallies, small

group tutoring, cash prizes, and Saturday tutoring to name a few. Faith strove to make sense of

the fact that her school was essentially perpetuating the idea that the test was a competition and

all of these methods meant to improve student confidence and scores were tools to help them

achieve. Because Faith was a teacher who did not "teach to the test" or "dumb down" the

material, she was frustrated with these initiatives because she believed that if she taught

everything all year long and took time to get to know her students, they would receive all of the

material they needed for the high stakes test. In addition, Faith acknowledged that more of the

arts needed to be included in the students' schedules. This comment was in reference to her

school pulling students who struggled in English or math from art, PE, band, chorus, and technology classes to receive additional support. Removing students from their arts based courses was yet another frustration among the teachers because they saw firsthand that for some students, these other classes were the whole reason they loved coming to school. To pull a student from art class and others like it that were not associated with a high stakes test could be detrimental to a student's education, (Eisner, 2002).

I applied Gee's (2011) Significance Building Tool and Identities Building Tool to analyze this quote from Faith. She used the word "pressure" six times to describe the situation surrounding the standardized test. Her use of this word applied to several situations. First, she used it to identify the pressure students faced with the amount of testing that is mandated in schools. Then she used pressure to explain what teachers in her school experienced with regard to standardized tests and accountability. Finally, she used it to discuss the lack of pressure she felt when she was a student taking the ITBS. In each instance, Faith expressed the significance of the word pressure. She implied that the current educational setting is only concerned with the scores a student makes rather than the critical thinking skills that were used to answer the questions. She compared her school experience to that of today's students when she described what her experiences with standardized tests were like when she was a student. The fact that there was no pressure and no Saturday school or lunch time tutoring, implied that her school environment was not as focused on test scores as public schools currently are and was a more desirable situation for students and teachers alike. Thus, in her experience stress had an inverse role—she was not stressed as a student, while as a teachers she and her students endure stress. Faith drew on her experiences as a student to make sense of what was being asked of her in the name of new curriculum and ensuring students have mastered the standards by the time of the

standardized test. While Faith was not a supporter of this kind of pressure driven system, she eluded to the value that was placed on these tests by those enforcing the policies when she used the phrase "top of the food chain." The use of this analogy was directed at leaders at the federal, state, district, and school levels because they are the ones placing the pressure to raise test scores. Yet, Faith did not believe this emphasis was working the way it was expected to. By suggesting that "we are going about it the wrong way" Faith placed significance on the problems the pressure has caused.

Faith also used the words such as "crazy" and "insane" to depict the present state of public education. Gee's (2011) Identities Tool examines the identities the speaker is trying get others to recognize. In this case, Faith identified with the students in her classrooms who were tested incessantly. Some of these students even lost time in their electives classes such as art, music, and PE to receive additional instruction in reading and math. Faith did not agree with this practice and asserted that students should be allowed to be kids. Again, connecting with the identities of her students, Faith portrayed a situation where students were overwhelmed because of the pressure and added instruction. These students receiving extra instruction did not even have the chance to "be kids" because of the pressure placed upon them to pass the standardized test. This description characterizes what is viewed as important in schools. As Faith pointed out, test scores are the most important thing and to her that was sad and insane. Gee (2011) suggested that "who you are is associated with what you are doing" (p. 46). Faith was stressed in this school and while she said the system was sad and insane, it is possible she associated these words with herself as well. While she was invested in remaining a teacher she also had to contend with the testing practices that she both disparaged and had to adhere to as part of her professional responsibilities.

Loss of Autonomy

This sub-category came to fruition after I analyzed the data regarding the mounting

pressures associated with test scores and state standards. These teachers expressed one of their

concerns was the lack of autonomy they had over how and what they taught. The teachers

discussed how they felt devalued as professionals who were not only trained and certified to

teach but were experienced teachers. Combined these teachers had spent over 75 years teaching.

This longevity in the field should count for something and furthers the issue of their frustration

about losing autonomy. They did not appreciate being told to make changes to their curriculum

and style of instruction by people who had never taught. Grace shared her dissatisfaction with

losing her autonomy and how this loss influenced her morale.

> There is too much of a lack of autonomy. I know there has to be basic guidelines because
> you can't just have people in classrooms saying whatever they want to say and teaching
> whatever they want, but if you truly hired professionals then you tell them an outline of
> what you need and let them do it the way that works best for them.

> Not to beat a dead horse but losing that autonomy and being questioned about why you
> were doing certain things. And the grading. Grading. Grading. Grading. Lesson plans. I
> think there was a turn and by the time I ended my career, I was having to have a specific
> number of grades in total but specific grades in each category and being questioned about
> it. I always did lesson plans but never had to follow a specific structure for writing them,
> just no autonomy.

Grace's examples illustrated some of the ways teachers have experienced a loss of autonomy,

especially those, like Grace, who have been in education for many decades. She pointed out that

if teachers were viewed as professionals they should be treated as such. Her experience with

being told by her district administrators how many grades needed to be in each category

diminished her ability to determine what needed to be graded and how much weight should be

assigned to specific assignments. She was the teacher who assigned the work and therefore

should be able to assess it accordingly, and not because a district mandated gradebook was in

place. Grace also explained that she needed to have an explanation ready in the event an administrator or parent questioned her about a specific assignment or grade in the gradebook. Grace felt she was no longer trusted to make decisions about her lessons and grading procedures—decisions she had been making long before the emphasis on high stakes tests became the norm in public education. She wondered why she was not trusted anymore which led to feelings of demoralization. She was a professional, a certified teacher with decades of teaching experience, who had established relationships with her students and made decisions based on what she saw from her students. For Grace, this lowering of morale was difficult to accept because it felt like a personal attack on her teaching abilities. She was hired based on her credentials yet was being told how to perform certain teacher roles. However, despite the lowering of morale from not being trusted to do a job she had been doing for years, Grace continued on in her teacher role.

Along the lines of losing autonomy, Hope spoke about her concern for methods of instruction she no longer felt she had the time to implement, such as creative projects, "It's kind of sad that we don't have the time to be as creative and have to spend more time on skills and standards." Using the word "sad" to describe the expectation that she had to focus more on what would be tested on the state standardized tests speaks volumes about the current state of education. Hope knew those lessons that incorporated art or drama or some other multimodal strategy were important to student achievement (Choi &Yi, 2016). Not every student learns the same way (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014). While Hope recognized that some students benefitted from the structure of how she delivered her lessons, the bottom line was that she felt pressured to instruct this way thus leading to a loss of autonomy.

Faith expressed similar feelings about the notion of teachers losing their voice about what happened in their classrooms. She stated, "Educators don't have any say in what they do. No say." Ingersoll (2010) asserted that when teachers feel as if they are being told what to do and have little say, they feel disempowered. Faith's sentiments about the turn education has taken that now allows little input from teachers support the feelings of disempowerment that Ingersoll (2010) described. For Faith, the loss of autonomy did not necessarily influence her classroom practices because she continued to teach in methods she used prior to the emphasis on state standards. However, she was still influenced by the lack of autonomy felt by other teachers and it began to shape the way she perceived the mandates as well as her view of the profession. As an advocate for the profession, this shift in thinking bothered her.

Relationships

Relationships—whether positive or negative—can have a significant influence on a person's life (Knoell, 2012). Teachers establish many relationships throughout their careers. From the front office staff to the administrators at school and district levels to the parents of students, teachers have the opportunity to develop and maintain a number of relationships. The teachers in this study attributed the relationships they created with their students and colleagues as one of the primary reasons for their longevity in the profession. They knew these relationships were necessary to foster in order for them to return year after year. Another type of relationship these teachers acknowledged were the ones with administrators—both at the school and district level. While these relationships were not necessarily listed as reasons for their longevity in the classroom, the teachers noted these relationships were important and influenced their levels of morale. In this section, I discuss the relationships along the categories of decision makers and personal connections.

Decision Makers

I identified the Decision Makers category after analyzing the teachers' responses when asked what they would like to tell administrators and policy makers. Their replies indicated they did not feel as though their needs were being addressed as decisions about what occurred in their classrooms were made without teacher input. Hope urged those decision makers who make choices that ultimately govern what happens in the classroom without consulting current teachers to listen to what teachers have to say.

> Listen to us teachers. Listen to us. Hear our needs. Support us. Value our opinions. Sometimes what we need is to be heard and valued. I can climb a mountain if I know I am valued and supported. Even if it's unbearable conditions.

Hope's comments about the need for teachers to be heard were indicative of a culture in education that does not listen to what teachers have to say regarding the changes and requirements they face. Though her current teaching situation viewed her as a professional, she also drew upon a time when she taught at a school that did not meet her needs thus creating a negative working environment for her. Hope's experiences at that school provided her an opportunity to discover what she needed as a professional. She explained to me that had she received any form of encouragement or support in her previous teaching assignment, she would have remained. But, she could no longer stay in a school where the leaders did not seem to value her and her colleagues and continued to make decisions that directly affected her without consulting her first. Hope's frustration at not being heard or acknowledged as a professional led to feelings of defeat. Hope used the words valued and supported, and while she may feel valued and supported by her current school's decision makers, Hope recognized that this was not the case for all teachers, as was her case in a previous setting. In addition, there were other decision makers—specifically policy writers—from whom she did not feel that encouragement. As a

teacher advocate, her words serve as an example of what it might look like, if only the decision makers would listen.

I applied Gee's (2011) Identities Tool and Connections Tool to Hope's comments. Hope directed her response to policy makers and those who implement the policies at all levels, including the school level. Through the words she chose, Hope identified as a teacher who has something to say. She implored those decision makers to "listen to us teachers" and to "hear our needs." These words indicated that teachers were not being heard nor were their needs being met, which suggested there was a power struggle between teachers and decision makers. By speaking out for all teachers, Hope took on the identity of a teacher advocate, tired of teachers not being acknowledged by those in a higher position. Her comments about "climbing a mountain, even in unbearable conditions, if she was valued" suggested that the one thing teachers were lacking was feeling valued by those in positions of power. She declared that regardless of the school environment, if she felt valued and supported she could and would do anything she was asked. Hope's words were not inclusive to her and her needs; they resonated with other teachers from past studies who did not feel respected or valued or heard (lynch, 2014; Noddings, 2014).

I used the Connections Tool to examine ways that language connects or disconnects people or ideas. When applied to this case, Hope illustrated the disconnect among teachers and decision makers. Further, she suggests that decision makers, particularly policy writers, were disconnected from what really happens day in and day out in schools. Her point was that if policy makers would actually listen to teachers, then perhaps meaningful connections between teachers and decision makers could be made, because "sometimes all we need is to be heard and valued." Hope wanted to be heard not only because she was tired of being ignored, but also

because she knew that if the divide between those in power (decision makers) and those who are

powerless (teachers) was ever going to close, there needed to be dialogue where all parties feel

valued and respected. In her experience, those in power have chosen to continue not to listen.

Faith spoke about what a lack of support from her school's decision makers meant to her.

The emphasis on tests. The lack of encouragement and support. When administrators
think that support means buying you an extra book, you know, that isn't the support we
are looking for. We aren't looking for financial support. For those who work like I work,
only being offered support in materials does not meet a need.

In this response, Faith described what she needed from her local administrators and how not

having her needs fulfilled made her feel. The fact that encouragement came in the form of

monetary means did not motivate Faith and only made her feel less valued as a professional. The

materials and supplies were not for her; they were not meant as appreciation for her job

performance. Faith explained that in these instances of receiving novel sets or other resources to

be used in the classroom she did not feel valued by her administration as a professional. Instead,

she felt silenced, as if the material items were all she needed to feel appreciated and be quiet.

What she really needed was to hear from her administrators that she was doing a good job and

acknowledged for her teaching skills. This acknowledgment could have come in the form of a

note of thanks or an oral recognition of a job well done. But, Faith did not receive any of this

type of gratitude and this lack of appreciation led to a lowering of morale. She interpreted the

material and financial support as a way for her administrators to protect themselves by appearing

supportive of teachers. However, this was not the case for Faith, and she remained frustrated

because her needs as a seasoned professional were not met. Financial support was not the only

kind of support teachers needed. In fact, for Faith, financial support was not even a consideration

despite the fact she was an experienced, professional teacher. This situation lends itself to the

opportunity for teachers to form a critical dialogue (Giroux, 2011) and create a culture of

empowerment within their schools and districts. Financial support is not a bad thing; however, teaching is a profession that requires moments of acclamation and praise. The expectation Faith had of her administrators to acknowledge her as a teacher who had performed a good job—one not solely based on test scores—was not met which made it difficult for Faith to feel valued and appreciated. Yet, despite this unfulfilled need, Faith persisted in the profession for many years.

Personal relationships the teachers established is addressed in the next category. In this, a contrast will become evident between the kinds of feelings relationships with decision makers evoked as opposed to the feelings evoked from relationships with students and colleagues.

Personal Connections

Schools provide many opportunities for teachers to form positive connections with their peers and students. Hargreaves (1994) described good teaching as "charged with positive emotion," (p. 835). For the teachers in this study, the relationships they developed with their peers and students were a large part of why they persevered in the profession for decades. The teachers referred to the relationships they formed with students and colleagues multiple times during our interviews and member checking sessions. Faith used the term "crazy pride" to depict the relationships she formed with students and continued to maintain, long after they left her classroom.

> I enjoyed building relationships with my kids. I was on Facebook the other day and I started thinking about all the grown students I am friends with now and where they are in life and I just felt this kind of crazy pride. So, that's good. I think that's a huge reason why I stayed. I knew I was impacting kids now, [who were] not so far away from being adults.

Establishing relationships with her students was something in which Faith felt confident and took tremendous pride in doing. She created the necessary trust her students needed to feel she cared about them as more than a number. Her students knew she valued them as people who had

opinions and ideas they wanted to express. In a sense, Faith was modeling the sort of behavior

she expected to receive from her students and other stake holders, such as administrators,

parents, and the general public. Keeping in contact with her former students was a form of

encouragement for Faith as she leaned on those relationships to remind her why she was teaching

and for whom.

Grace shared a similar recollection.

> The students. Thinking about them. Last year for example, I had a few students who were
> my rocks. And, I would think about them. I had a young man who I tutored and he looked
> forward to it every day and just thinking about him and others... Feeling like I was
> making a difference to them.

Grace's response was to the question of what kept her in the profession for so many years. Like

Faith, Grace thrived on the connections she made with her students and used this as motivation.

She recognized that an authentic relationship was necessary to get results from students (Knoell,

2012). Her use of the phrase "they were my rocks" signified the value Grace placed on her

students. Grace explained that the school year she referenced was a particularly challenging year.

She struggled with students in some of her classes as well as battled feelings of frustration

because of certain leadership decisions. For her, there were certain students she leaned upon as a

form of support. While she was an experienced professional and behaved as such, this example

supports the notion that the student-teacher relationship is valuable. Not only is it important for

the student to know his or her teacher is supportive, but it is just as important for the teacher. In

this case, Grace relied on several of her students and viewed them as reminders of why she

became a teacher to begin with and remained in the classroom for as long as she had.

Hope succinctly supported this notion of why she stayed in the profession when she

asserted, "It's about the kids. It's about the kids. And a lot of people forget that." In an era of

testing and accountability (Sowerbrower, 2015) it is no surprise that some stake holders—policy

writers and administrators to be exact—many who are so far removed from the classroom, place their focus on test scores and data analysis. However, when numbers become the primary concern, it is easy to lose sight of the human beings sitting in the classrooms. Hope's comment served as a reminder to some, and a warning to others, who have a vested interest in education that students, the human beings and not simply their test scores, are the number one focus. The teachers in this study did not lose sight of their students and that was what helped sustain them in a profession that reform after reform has reduced students to a number. For these teachers, developing and maintaining relationships with their students was a crucial factor to why they stayed as long as they did. With each new school year, they had the opportunity and privilege to foster connections with their students. These connections were valuable because, as Hope stated, these teachers were in it for the students. Though they had to manage the pressures associated with testing, the teachers knew that developing positive student-teacher relationships was often the key to a promising school year. The fact that many of these student-teacher connections persisted over time was another benefit to their profession. A benefit that provided these teachers with the motivation to remain in the field in hopes of establishing more positive connections with students.

Another benefit and explanation of what helped these teachers persist in the profession was the chance to build relationships with their colleagues. Having positive work relationships helped to counter the negativity the teachers experienced due to demands from the reforms as well as expectations from their administrators. Knowing that there were people in the school building to talk to was invaluable. Faith shared her feelings about working on a supportive team.

> I was on a great team and coming to work when you love the people you work with and [you view them] as your second family, that is a good day! That was your second family so talking them, I knew they got it because they had probably had a similar day. We all encouraged each other.

Faith described a relationship with her colleagues that was encouraging and supportive, which contrasted with the relationship she had with her school leaders. This sense of family and community she mentioned was necessary to sustain her in a career where she often felt defeated and unappreciated. The fact that other people were experiencing similar situations served as confirmation that her feelings were warranted. She was able to find support from her teammates and they celebrated one another. Faith explained that this family bond was irreplaceable as she and her colleagues moved beyond the role of coworker to that of close friends. For Faith, these relationships were pivotal to her longevity in the profession.

Grace shared a similar perspective about working on a team, "Having awesome teams to work with definitely made the work environment more fun. Being supportive of each other was one of the best parts of working on a team." Grace explained that she looked to her teammates for support and encouragement when she had a bad day as well as looked to them when there was something to be excited about, such as witnessing a successful moment with students or a personal accomplishment or family announcement. These positive work relationships were an important part of Grace's day. She admitted to me that when she retired, her work friendships were one of the things she missed the most.

Hope expressed that having a confidante at work was necessary and part of what she liked and appreciated about teaching, "She is the one that I can go to and just [gestured like she was spilling her guts] and know that it won't go any further and that I won't be judged." It was important for Hope to know that she had someone with whom she could share her frustrations or celebrate an accomplishment and that the conversations they shared would remain confidential. For these teachers, their work relationships were invaluable and proved to be an important component to the longevity they showed in their careers.

Being a Teacher

There are many reasons why people choose to go into teaching (Watt, Richardson, Klusmann, Kunter, Beyer, Trautwein, & Baumert, 2011). Some reasons may be working with children, passion for the subject, and a somewhat flexible schedule. For the teachers in this study, they described their passion for teaching English in the middle school setting as what helped shape their identity as a teacher.

Love for English

Faith, Grace, and Hope all identified themselves as English teachers. In fact, they all expressed that they could not imagine teaching anything other than English, and in years when they taught another subject they were not as comfortable. Their love and passion for reading and writing was what motivated them to become English teachers. Faith's rationale for why she pursued teaching English is simple yet says so much about the 18 years she remained in the profession, "I loved reading and I loved my English classes when I was in school, so that just seemed natural to me. I would never have thought to teach anything else." Faith's enthusiasm for the subject was a large part of why she remained for so many years. She expressed that she enjoyed making connections with her students through teaching literature, and one of the reasons why she established such positive connections in her relationships was because of her passion for English. She was able to pass it on to her students as she encouraged critical thinking and honed their writing skills. During those times when Faith felt frustrated with the mounting pressures of her career—test preparation, grading, paperwork—she reflected on students making connections with the novels they read and helping students recognize their potential to become strong writers. Among other things, this touchstone of experiences with students and literature allowed her to

make sense of the situation she was in where one hand demanded too much and the other hand required her full attention and support.

Grace explained her reasoning for choosing teaching English as her career and shared a similar zeal for English.

> I think it's because school was always a safe sanctuary for me growing up because I loved to read. I used to go home from school and I would play school all weekend. This is when I was in elementary school. I would line up my stuffed animals and dolls and teach them. It just seemed like I should always be a teacher. I just never thought about being anything [else]. My love of reading and language is why I chose English.

Grace knew from an early age that she wanted to be a teacher, and her love for reading and language is what led her to teaching English. For Grace, it made sense to her to enter this profession because of the security it provided her as a child. She used the words "safe sanctuary" to describe what school was to her and this transcended into her own classroom where she created a welcoming place for her students to learn and read and ask questions. She stated that she could not imagine doing anything else, which may be another contributing factor to why she taught for over three decades. In addition, she remembered supportive teachers who taught her and influenced her to go into teaching. As I expressed earlier, for these teachers, the demands and often unrealistic expectations of their role as a teacher was problematic at times; yet, as Grace showed, they felt compelled to teach and provide opportunities for their students just as they had experienced as children.

Hope's passion for reading stemmed from childhood where she recalled studying her older siblings' textbooks.

> I love literature. I've always loved it. I've always loved to read, but I never had the availability of books in my house. I was the last of eight children, so we didn't have money. So, my mom would save all the [older] kids' textbooks and I would read those. A set of encyclopedias I would read for days. And, different things. I feel like between my passion of where a story can take you and no matter what your socioeconomic status or

> what you're dealing with personally in your life, you can pick up a book and you can escape.

Hope also said that her love for literature inspired her to pursue teaching English. She referred to her childhood and growing up reading her older siblings' textbooks as the origin of her love for escaping into a book. Acknowledging that her family could not afford to purchase new books, which is why her mom saved textbooks, Hope knew that a book could take her places and it was her intention as a teacher to share this kind of experiences with her students. Her description of the power books have to take readers places, regardless of economic status, demonstrated her passion for English and supported why she knew he had to teach this subject. Not only did these teachers know that English was the subject they wanted to teach, but they knew that middle school was the place where they would be most effective in the classroom.

I used Gee's (2011) Systems and Knowledge Building Tool and Identities Tool to analyze Hope's response. The Systems and Knowledge Building Tool examines the way people know and believe ideas to be true. In this case, Hope used her prior knowledge of growing up in a family that did not have a lot of money and, therefore, did not have a surplus of material items, such as books. Hope recognized that her parents did the best that they could to provide her with reading supplies, which was what mattered to Hope. Her comments about "reading a set of encyclopedias for days" suggested that she felt privileged to have these resources and that she had sustaining interest in using those books. She did not dwell on the fact that there were no new books, or even children's books, for her. Instead, she used the materials she had and made the most of the situation. As a result, Hope developed and honed her love for reading. This passion for reading is what ultimately led her to pursue a career in teaching English and is something that helped her connect with her students. Though Hope taught students of varying socio-economic statuses, what she learned from her experiences as a child in an economically disadvantaged

family allowed her to relate to students from similar backgrounds. Her belief was that she could always pick up a book and escape. She believed this because that was what she did as a child. One of the most popular reasons people cite about why they enjoy reading is due to escapism (Flanagan, 2014). Hope discovered the ability to escape as a child and since becoming an English teacher has undoubtedly shared this same sentiment with many students.

Using the Identities Tool allowed me to recognize the ways that Hope took on different roles. She took on the role of a student growing up with older siblings in a family that did not have much money. She also identified with those students who love reading because of the exposure to other cultures and places that she discovered in books. These different identities helped her as a teacher. For one, Hope had come across many students in her two-decades career who hailed from large families. Her understanding of what is like to grow up in that environment could play an important role in how she connected with students in large families and potentially with families with limited resources. As an English teacher, Hope furthered her "passion for where a story can take you" because she was able to talk about the diverse texts she used in the classroom with her students and shared her love for what reading can do. Being able to identify with families struggling financially was another way that Hope used her past experiences to manage current situations with students. Encouraging students to realize that no matter how difficult things may seem, reading a book could potentially help them deal with their circumstances was something that Hope appreciated about her role as a teacher. She liked the idea of promoting reading, which stemmed from her childhood, and ultimately shaped her identity as an adult and middle school English teacher.

Teaching Middle School

More times than not, when I tell someone that I teach middle school I am either offered an abundance of gratitude for working with this age group or questioned about my sanity, implying that I must be crazy to do it. Most days, I cannot imagine teaching anything but middle school, and the teachers in this study felt the same way. While some of them had experience in elementary levels, they knew that middle school was their level of comfort.

> I think in middle school you have to think about the hormones and the changes and other things. There's a lot of drama and a whole different set of counseling skills. And, the little ones you just have to be a really good listener and try to figure out what they need because they can't always tell you. So, I think it's just a different skill set. I think in middle school you really have to know your curriculum and know what you're doing.

Grace drew on her time spent as an elementary teacher and compared it to teaching middle school. Her emphasis on the hormonal changes that can lead to teenage drama was a factor in what makes middle school different from other grade levels. In Grace's case, the manner of handling the needs of students required more counseling skills as well as being knowledgeable in the content area. This is not to say she did not attend to students' need at the elementary level, but the needs in middle school were more diverse due to all of the changes students face in middle school physically, mentally, cognitively (Lipsitz, 1984; Mee & Haverback, 2014). For Grace, it was important to offer her students the appropriate support. Providing students with the necessary attention led to positive teacher-student relationships, which again were some of the reasons why Grace remained in teaching for 35 years. Grace knew that middle school was the place where she would be most effective both in delivering instruction and guiding students.

Faith drew on her experiences to explain why she knew middle school was the best grade level for her.

> Well, I think in elementary school the responsibility is huge because you are responsible for every subject. That just seems overwhelming to me and the kids are so needy. In high

school some of them don't want to be there or are there so they can get a driver's license. But, in middle school most of them want to be there. They want to be where their friends are. They have at least one interest—whether it be science class or art or English—they have one interest that draws them in so I feel like it's a good balance of they're not as needy as the little ones but they are more engaged then some of the older ones.

By contrasting students at both the elementary and high school level, Faith demonstrated why middle school was the right environment for her. One of Faith's goals as a teacher was to create students who left her room each year knowing how to think critically and write well. She knew that connecting with her students was the avenue for these goals to be met, and middle school students were the most willing participants. Faith used this knowledge to her advantage and for 17 years, she made those connections and helped create critical thinkers and strong writers. In Faith's mind, the middle school years were the most appropriate years for this to happen because students were, for the most part, eager to be at school. They did not require as much attention as those in the lower grades nor had they checked out as some in the higher grades. For Faith, the majority of her middle school students over the years wanted to be at school and wanted to learn. Faith has established a relationship with her students and knew what they needed. Middle school was the grade level most suitable for Faith.

Hope expanded upon why middle school was the appropriate grade level for her.

Well, even with the middle schoolers, once you've built that relationship with them, they are very good about giving constructive feedback. "I really liked this because…This really helped me…" Middle school students become more of an active participant in their learning. Also, I feel like middle schoolers are at the precipice of coming into their own identity. I mean, yeah they're doing that some in elementary. But, in middle school you can watch them and see them catch a glimpse of where they see themselves going as a young adult. And, as their teacher you can help them get to where they want to go. Or, sometimes you see them going down the wrong path and you know there is potential so you can help them in a positive way.

Similar to how Grace and Faith described the middle school students, Hope went even further with her depiction. She knew that this setting was fitting for her because of her desire to work

with students and watch them reach their potential. In addition, Hope expressed the importance

of developing positive relationships and how those promote student success. Sharing a love for

English and an understanding of what is required to teach middle school added to these teachers'

identity. Noddings (2014) asserted that middle school students often just need to know that

within the school setting they have an adult to talk who will genuinely listen to what they are

saying. Hope's description of being a teacher who was there for her students supports what

Noddings' research identified. Hope understood that if she built healthy relationships with her

students they would be more receptive to suggestions she offered them. Helping students find

their potential and see where this potential might take them was part of what being a teacher

meant to Hope. She viewed those opportunities as a privilege and did not take that privilege

lightly. Fox (1996) examined two pre-service English teachers and their experiences in college

and beginning teaching careers. One finding that was identified was that college courses could

not fully prepare you for the realities of what happens in the classroom. The ability to connect

with students was not something Hope learned in her education courses, yet through her

experiences in the classroom with students, she learned the value in being able to do so. These

relationships were part of what motivated her and kept her in the profession.

Teacher Identity

For the teachers in this study, putting into words what it meant to be a teacher proved to

be a difficult task, yet their definitions of what being a teacher meant covered a variety of

identities. Grace, with a 35 year career, shared what being a teacher meant to her.

> Well, I think [being a teacher] is obviously someone who teaches; however, it is so much
> more than just teaching students a set of skills. You have to be a counselor, you have to
> be a mentor, a model. So, I guess to sum it up, a teacher is a counselor, mentor, a model.
> Someone students feel comfortable with, someone they can look up to and respect. And, I
> think you have to have all of that before you can begin to teach them knowledge.

Grace asserted that a teachers' role was more than teaching a specific content area, that teachers were models, mentors, and counselors. Her comments were reminders that students are human beings who do not always come into the classroom ready and willing to learn. There is a sense of trust and level of comfort that must be established first. Grace's assertion supports much of the research on teaching middle school (Mee & Haverback, 2014; Nichols, 2007; Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007). Teachers need to be prepared to establish the parameters in the classroom and create a culture of respect among all those sharing that space. As Grace claimed, once that environment was established was when teaching and learning can occur, but not before then.

Hope expressed a similar sentiment.

Wow…to be a teacher…that's so multi-faceted. It's not just going in and teaching the curriculum and then leaving at the end of the day. It's helping create humans. Helping create productive members of society. It means having that guiding influence. It's teaching the whole child. You're the nurse, the guidance counselor, the mom, the career counselor. You're all of that all wrapped into one. It's just so hard the give one solid definition of what it means to be a teacher.

For Hope, the notion of creating productive members of society was what guided her explanation of what being a teacher meant. Like Grace did, Hope listed many other roles that a teacher assumes each day. These roles were not necessarily addressed in any teacher preparation course, yet they were positions Hope took on daily. In order to create an atmosphere of trust with her students, she knew she had to. Establishing trust with her students was important to Hope because she was aware that teaching encompassed so much more than being able to deliver a great lesson.

Faith furthered this idea of creating a trusting environment in her portrayal of what it is that makes a teacher a teacher.

I think this sounds so sad but when you first begin teaching I think you feel like you're going to teach the content and they're going to grab hold of it and you're going to change the world! You're going to be Robin Williams in Dead Poet's Society and then [laughter]

> Day 1 and reality kicks in. So, you start with that mindset, and then the longer you teach the more you realize that it's not everybody standing on their desk saying "Oh Captain, My Captain". It's you, just hoping that you make an impact on any one child, and that they stay in school if they hadn't planned on it. That they find something that they are passionate about and you can help connect them to something when maybe they had originally thought that they didn't have anything to be excited about. So, I think you go from feeling like you're going to change the world to being absolutely thrilled if you save one.

Faith's testimony about what it means to be a teacher supported her reasons for remaining in the profession for almost two decades. Her idealistic example of the new-teacher mindset of saving the world like a character in a movie suggests that teachers enter the profession unprepared for the realities teaching brings. Yet, Faith was able to grab a hold of that idealism, recognizing that students were not all going to get the material or relate to their teacher right away. For Faith that was okay. The reality was that it is unrealistic to consider all students will connect with teachers. But for Faith, knowing that there were some students who might have gone a different direction had they not been in her class sustained her and encouraged her. This sustaining ideal persisted, despite the ever changing reforms and continuous demands from administrators at all levels.

Conclusion

The categories that I identified in this chapter signify the struggles these teachers faced. Their struggles were a direct result of the pressures associated with reforms that mandated new curriculum standards, standardized tests, and a public that imposed their views on how teachers should spend their time. However, other categories indicate the reasons why Faith, Grace, and Hope demonstrated longevity in the profession for as long as they did. Establishing relationships with their students and colleagues sustained them in a profession that often left them feeling devalued and disrespected. In Chapter 5, I discuss why these findings matter and how they contribute to the literature. In addition, I will address the implications and make suggestions for future research.

5 DISCUSSION

"That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse." –Walt Whitman

The topic for this dissertation came after a discussion with my advisor. I shared with her how I felt upon learning that the ELA standards were changing, once again, due to my state's adoption of the Common Core State Standards. I expressed feelings of utter frustration because of the work it entailed for English teachers. I went to a professional development workshop to collaborate with the other middle school English teachers in the district, and I listened to how they perceived these changes and realized that I was not the only person who was frustrated. There I sat, working with experienced, capable, professional teachers who had to take time away from their students to attend a professional development on how to interpret the new ELA standards. In addition, people at the state level had created frameworks that we were expected to implement in an effort to ensure all of the standards were taught in time for the new state assessment aligned to these standards. My first thought was, "I wonder how many current teachers had input on these frameworks." And, my next thought, which was more of a declaration, was, "I don't teach standards. I teach *students*!" I was irritated that I had to miss time teaching my students to "learn" how to teach these new standards. After all, I was a certified, professional teacher with several years of experience teaching middle school English like the other certified, professional, experienced middle school English teachers who were surrounding me. I was beyond frustrated. I felt devalued as a professional and an educator. And, I was tired. Tired of hearing about how things were going to change for ELA teachers with the new standardized test. Tired of hearing that there would be more pressure associated with these tests because of the writing component added to it. Tired of hearing how ELA teachers needed to focus on a new style of writing to ensure students could address the writing prompts.

I loved my job as a middle school English teacher. I knew from the first day of my career that I was in the right setting and teaching the right subject. Working with middle school students was challenging yet exciting, demanding yet rewarding. Put simply, there was never a dull moment, and I looked forward to each day with my students. But, as I sat in that professional development workshop, and listened to what was coming down from the federal and state departments and how the district interpreted these changes, I grew more frustrated and more tired. And, I knew I could not possibly be the only middle school English teacher who was frustrated and tired.

That experience prompted me to talk with my advisor. I shared my thoughts about a study that looked at middle school English teachers. Specifically, I was interested in learning how educational reforms influenced their morale and teaching style, if at all. I also wanted to know why teachers demonstrated longevity in the profession. Leaving the profession was not an option for me because my passion for what I did far exceeded the negative feelings I was experiencing. I believed that there had to be other teachers who shared similar perspectives, and I wanted to hear what they had to say about the teaching profession. My inquiry led me to three middle school English teachers. These teachers shared their stories with me about their experiences with educational policies as well as how they dealt with public perceptions about teachers. Finally, they shared with me the reasons that kept them in the profession for a combined total of almost 80 years. In this section, I discuss the perils and the promises of teaching that I discovered after analyzing the teachers stories. In addition, I address the implications for suggestions for further research.

The Perils of Teaching

In Chapter 4, I presented the findings of my study. The teachers in this study experienced feelings of defeat, confusion, and frustration. These feelings were brought on by the expectations inside and outside of the classroom that the public and decision makers imposed upon them. Faith, Grace, and Hope expressed the multiple ways in which they felt disrespected as professionals because of speculations made about their time off. These teachers spent an inordinate number of hours working beyond their contracted time, yet the expectation was that this extra time spent working should, and would, happen. The teachers also spoke about the fact that people outside of teaching often viewed their profession as easy. Comments and assumptions that anybody could teach frustrated the teachers because they were often made by people who either had no experience being in a classroom other than as a student, or who were far removed from the classroom setting. Faith, Grace, and Hope felt they had to regularly defend their profession and their own professionalism.

Another peril for these teachers was the accountability factor related to student performance on standardized tests. For these teachers, they were the ones being held accountable for everything, including many factors over which they had no control, including attendance rates, and access to resources in the home environment. The lack of accountability on the part of the student and parents caused concern for the teachers because their teacher evaluations were largely based on students' test scores. To them, the fact they had to take on all of the accountability was an unrealistic expectation and diminished them as professionals. There were other factors to consider about a teacher's job performance, but at the time of this study, 50% of their evaluation was based on test scores. Faith, Grace, and Hope shared that their school leaders were primarily focused on test scores. This focus was a concern for them because they were

being judged on factors outside of their control, administering tests designed by people outside of their school setting, and had little autonomy to make choices about how to teach the students in their classrooms.

The new educational standards and test preparations were yet another peril these teachers faced. With the implementation of each new set of curriculum standards, the teachers were expected to prepare students accordingly for the high stakes standardized tests. Faith, Grace, and Hope all began teaching before No Child Left Behind (2002) was enacted. Each teacher reflected on what it was like to teach before teaching English became standardized and had a test associated with the standards. With the onset of NCLB, the teachers experienced a loss of autonomy and felt as though they were no longer trusted to make decisions they had been making for years.

The relationships with the decision makers—at the state, district, and school levels—were another peril these teachers faced. They spoke about how they felt when their needs as professional, experienced teachers were not met along with having to decipher unclear expectations from decision makers. This led to more feelings of frustration and a lowering of morale. These teachers were frustrated because with expectations from decision makers came additional work in the already limited time they had to devote to get their jobs done. Often, this extra work encroached upon time they had dedicated to family events. Grace and Faith were even expected to provide additional tutoring before or after school or during lunch. These situations are examples of expectations for which they did not really have a choice, which raises questions about how altruistic do teachers have to be in order to be considered good teachers.

Marshall (2009) asserted that more studies needed to be conducted on how teachers have been influenced by educational mandates. His suggestion was not to focus on student

achievement but to examine teachers' professional identities. In particular, he recommended exploring how these identities have been affected as well as any changes teachers made in their instructional delivery. The stories from the teachers in this study do what Marshall proposed: These teachers expressed what it was like for them to manage new educational standards and curriculum. They also shared how these changes influenced their views of the profession and what it means to be a teacher.

While Chapter 4 focused on the perils of teaching and may have placed a negative spin on the teaching profession, I also recognized positivity. A component of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) is re-examining what has already been said and using those cues to gain further understanding of a situation. Weick (1995) refers to this move as understanding and creating a new meaning. The teachers in this study understood their situation of having to incorporate the new reforms. While this implementation led to an increased workload and less decision making on the teachers' part, Faith, Grace, and Hope created a new situation for themselves and their students. For them, they still established positive relationships with their students, which in turn helped with the transitions with new educational standards and methods of instruction. As I continued to examine and understand their stories, I discovered that within the realistic portrayal they presented, there were also many promises these teachers made to the teaching profession. These commitments are what sustained Faith, Grace, and Hope.

The Promises of Teaching

This study illustrates the promises that three teachers kept. With almost 80 years of combined teaching experience, there have been countless commitments kept by Faith, Grace, and Hope. I identified four main promises that were paramount to this study and depict what these teachers have given to the teaching profession. Consistent with the findings of Clarksen (2014),

Craig (2014), and Curtis (2012), the teachers found support in and subsequently showed their

ongoing commitment to their students, colleagues, and school communities. The promises they

kept were to the following groups: Decision Makers and the Public; Middle School Students;

Students and Families; and, the Profession.

A Promise to Decision Makers and the Public

The teachers in this study promised to adhere to the educational standards and implement

them to the best of their abilities. By doing this, the teachers demonstrated their respect for the

profession. Though at times these teachers felt disrespected in their jobs by the general public

and those making decisions for them without teacher input, they continued to meet the demands

and changes that were expected of them. For example, the teachers expressed their concerns

about being held accountable for students' test scores despite having no control over outside

factors. This concern was valid because the test scores influenced their teacher evaluations. Put

simply, if their students had low test scores, these teachers faced negative evaluations. The

teachers also addressed their feelings about being told what and how to teach a topic for the

primary reason of covering it in time for the standardized test. For all of the teachers, this

demand for prescribed teaching was a new development in their jobs. They all began their

teaching careers before the emphasis on state standards and before assessments were intricately

tied to these standards. Faith's comment, "If you're a good teacher, it doesn't matter what policy

is coming down the pike," is a reminder that teachers are professionals who do what needs to be

done. These teachers did what needed to be done. Their stories are evidence of the dedication

they promised to the decision makers and the public when they first became teachers. In spite of

a negative public portrayal, policy changes, and a loss of autonomy, these teachers kept their

promise to adhere to the mandates. Yes, they had to make sacrifices that at times altered their

pedagogical beliefs, but they made these sacrifices because they promised to teach students according to the rules set forth by the school, district, and federal government. They did so because they are ethical human beings with a genuine passion for teaching English and sharing that passion with their students.

A Promise to Middle School Students

The teachers in this study made, and kept, a promise to middle school students. They knew when they chose this grade level of schooling they would be dealing with students going through transitions, some that might be described as awkward. By becoming middle school teachers, they promised to provide for the students, whatever their needs might be. All of these teachers spoke about what it meant to be a middle school teacher. Counselor, parent, coach, nurse, mentor were some of the roles they assumed when making their promise to teach middle school. These roles were important in order to maintain positive student-teacher relationships. The teachers recognized that in order to teach the subject matter, they needed to establish these roles first. They kept their promise to middle school students because they did not give up on middle school and leave for elementary or high school. These teachers did not want to leave middle school. They were passionate about teaching this specific age group because of the awkwardness and brilliance, the immaturity and wisdom, and the arrogance and compassion middle school students exhibit. They welcomed those opportunities to catch a glimpse of a student's future and encouraged students to pursue their own endeavors. By keeping their promise to middle school students, these teachers helped foster confidence in their students, allowing and encouraging them to become independent thinkers. Finally, they kept their promise to middle school students because they knew the particulars of this age group, and were prepared

to provide the right amount of support, tough love, and understanding their middle school students required.

A Promise to Students and Families

These teachers made a promise to students and their families to teach, not only the prescribed curriculum, but to teach students how to become thoughtful citizens capable of making decisions on their own. Hope shared this sentiment of what being a teacher meant, "[I am] helping create humans; productive members of society." Like Hope, the other teachers assumed this responsibility of helping to shape both individuals and society when they decided to become teachers. They knew that there was more to teaching than simply implementing a lesson. These teachers recognized that families entrusted them with their children. The teachers made a promise to all families, both those who supported the teachers and those who did not. The teachers promised to do all they could for the children. They committed to meet students where they were academically and emotionally and help students tap into their inner potential. They promised to foster an environment that provided chances for students to explore and try new things, thus moving them on to new challenges and experiences. Through their hard work and dedication, which often required working on weekends and during the summer, these teachers promised to give their all to their students and families. They viewed this privilege to teach students as an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities as professional middle school English teachers and that as a result of their abilities, students would reap the benefits of having been in these teachers' classes. Year in and year out, these teachers kept their promises to students and families. This promise matters because, as I illustrated in this study, teaching is demanding and often teachers leave after a few years because the demands are simply too much (Ingersoll,

2003). But, Faith, Grace, and Hope did not. They demonstrated longevity in the field because they had a promise to keep to students and families.

A Promise to the Profession

Through their actions and years of dedication, these teachers demonstrated their commitment to the teaching profession. Despite the pressures and demands from educational policy changes, a hypercritical public, and unclear expectations from administrators, these teachers stayed the course. Their longevity is not only a promise to the profession, but also to preservice teachers and those considering a career in teaching. This study portrays some of the realities of teaching that may have negative connotations. Though it is important to expose preservice teachers to such realities (Inman & Marlow, 2004), this study also provides stories of the beautiful moments in teaching that cannot be found in any other profession. Faith's, Grace's and Hope's years of teaching serve as an example to preservice teachers that even with the changes in legislation and processes, it is possible to make a mark on the profession. Faith spoke about the "crazy pride" she felt whenever she heard from former students, many of whom are now adults, and learned about their accomplishments and future goals. The pride she mentioned is a result of the mark she left with her students. The stories of the relationships these teachers established with their students are reminders of the ways in which these teachers left a lasting impression that was not tarnished by educational reforms or demands from the public. Theirs were relationships built on trust and respect both on the part of the teachers and their students. Their stories matter and should be considered examples of encouragement and inspiration for future teachers to stay the course and leave their mark. The marks are the bonds with students and the long lasting impressions they left with those students who hopefully go on to be

productive members of society. Although invisible at times, these marks are significant and are the reasons these teachers have demonstrated longevity in the profession.

Implications for Research

One of the reasons for this study was to call attention to the ways middle school English teachers have experienced educational reforms. Throughout the interview process and subsequent member checking sessions, they shared with me what it meant to be an English teacher, specifically in an era of accountability (Sowerbrower, 2015) as they faced new mandates, changing educational standards, and multiple high stakes exams. Each teacher expressed frustrations similar to the others and I can conclude that the ways in which decision makers—at the state, county, and school levels—interpreted the same changes in mandates, standards, and exams directly influenced these teachers. Hope recounted times at one school that left her feeling emotionally drained and defeated. Yet, when she left that environment and started at a new school within the same county, she began to regain her confidence as a professional largely in part because of her supportive administrators. Faith shared stories of how the different decision makers at her school played a hand in the way she interpreted the changes. The visions of her school leaders were focused on test scores, yet their differences in leadership style—one was more positive and empathetic and another was less personal and compassionate—affected her views of the profession. For Grace, she found that the all of the pressure on increasing test scores led to a loss of autonomy and that the singular focus on test scores diminished other moments of student success.

After hearing the examples of how these English teachers incorporated the changes into their classrooms, something that stood out to me was that their stories need to be heard by the decision makers and policy writers. Hope urged the policy writers and implementers to, "Listen

to us teachers. Hear our needs. Support us. Value our opinions." Indeed, Marshall (2009) called

for this listening to teachers when he suggested that more studies needed to examine how

teachers handled educational mandates. There is a divide among teachers who are working in the

field day in and day out and those who make decisions about what teachers will do. In an effort

to lessen this divide, teachers need to be heard. Hope's plea is vital to understanding how

educational policies play out in classrooms. Giroux (2004) encouraged teachers to create a

critical language in order to evoke change. This critical language has been created (James, 2015;

Lynch, 2014; Quartz, 2003; Sowerbrower, 2015) and the teachers in this study have added to it.

The next step is for those making the decisions and writing the policies to listen, consider, and

put to good use the perspectives of these teachers. Only then will teachers begin to feel as though

they are valued and respected in their profession.

Suggestions for Further Research

As I conducted this study of middle school English teachers, I considered other avenues I

could have taken. I focused on teachers in one district. This focus on one district provided me

with information about how the local leaders interpreted educational reforms and how this

trickled down to different, individual schools. Based on how the school leaders perceived these

reforms made a difference for these teachers. Each school has its own culture that influences and

is influenced by the teachers, students, and administrators in it (Smagorinsky, 2001). The culture

of a school is directly influenced by the schools' leaders. Put differently, one school may

interpret and incorporate educational reform in one manner, while another school may have a

different interpretation and implementation of the same reform. Faith, Grace, and Hope taught in

the same district but because they were in separate schools their experiences varied. Faith

addressed the different leadership styles she found among the leaders at her school and how this

influenced the climate and morale of the school. Grace found that her current school leaders often placed a great deal of pressure on teachers to attain to the needs of struggling students, yet previous leaders did not expect the same. Hope shared her stories about working in a toxic school setting and how refreshing it was for her when she changed schools. Future researchers might consider examining schools across the state because a more comprehensive look across county and city school systems will shed more light on the way a school's culture plays a role in the lives of teachers.

Another suggestion for further research is to consider a study that explores the role gender plays in the profession and if this has any significance on how teachers handle changes and deal with scrutiny. This study was limited in that the teachers were all females. One contributing factor at play was the low number of male middle school teaches in the district. At the time of this study, there were 11 male middle school English teachers. Of the 11, two replied that they were interested; however, they did not have the required number of years in teaching English. Historically, teaching has been dominated by females (Johnson, Bruce, Graham, Oliver, Oppong, Park, & Mansberger, 2005) so the low number of eligible male participants makes sense. Yet, a study that explores the ways in which male and female middle school English teachers deal with curriculum changes and judgments about how they perform their jobs could expand on prior studies (James, 2015; Noddings, 2014; Remillard & Reinke, 2015).

In addition, gaining perspectives on how male teachers view their wages compared to how female teachers view their wages could provide more insight into a profession that is known for its low salary. The teachers in this study spoke about how their salaries decreased each year due to a higher cost of insurance and capping out on salary steps, and they questioned why they were not paid like other professionals with similar education and certifications. On average,

teachers earn 20% less than people in other professions with the same level of education (Westervelt, 2016). Johnson, et al. (2005) asserted that this wage discrepancy stems from the idea that teaching is a second-class profession generally performed by women. It is common to hear teachers claim that they did not enter teaching because of the money, implying that there are other intrinsic rewards (Lortie, 1975). I know I have said it on numerous occasions. Like Faith, Grace, and Hope, there were other reasons that motivated me to become a middle school English teacher. Yet, the reality that teachers begin their careers earning a great deal less than other professionals begs the question, "Why?" Hearing from men and women about the issue of pay, as well as their reactions to changes brought on by educational policies, is a topic worthy of study.

One other idea for future research is to explore the ways in which middle school teachers of science and social studies, as well as English and math, have been influenced by educational reforms and how these changes have shaped their views of the profession. Since NCLB began in 2002, math and English have been the subject areas facing the most pressure surrounding test scores. Though science and social studies were also tested, these teachers did not endure the same high stakes that math and English teachers experienced. Hearing from science and social studies teachers would add to the overall picture of what reforms are actually changing and doing in schools. While some teachers of those subjects garnering less emphasis on test scores may have felt a sense of relief that they did not have to deal with such pressure, other science and social studies teachers may have experienced feelings of being devalued and may have questioned why their subject was not viewed by policy writers as equally important as math and English. Conducting a study that examines teachers within the same school could add a layer to understanding how those cultures are created and maintained.

Furthermore, I think considering the teachers of subjects that were not tested under the mandates of NCLB, such as art, music, PE, and technology, would further add to the knowledge base of teacher experiences and educational reforms. These subjects were often the ones from which students were pulled to receive additional support in math and reading. This extra support was given to students who had low scores on their math, ELA, and reading standardized tests. PE, art, music, and technology teachers could offer stories of how they constructed meaning of the standardized tests and the possible effects on their teaching experiences. Though their subject areas were not tested, the teachers were still influenced by these exams. Their experiences would enhance the literature by contributing another perspective of how teachers have been influenced by educational reforms.

Final Thoughts

When I began thinking about a study incorporating middle school English teachers and their experiences with educational reforms, I feared that the findings would come across as negative. I worried that the teachers' words would be viewed as complaints rather than honest accounts of what they dealt with. I concerned myself with the thought that readers—other than teachers—of this dissertation would chalk it up as simply an account of whiny teachers expecting more money and less change. The more I thought about these fears, the more irritated I grew. Why was I worrying about teachers being perceived as ungrateful? I realized the reasons I felt this way was because of how teachers have been depicted in the media. Despite the fact that I was a teacher, I bought into this culture of inept and unappreciative teachers that is currently en vogue in popular culture and social media. At that point, I knew that my study was important. I knew that the stories these teachers had to tell needed to be heard in an effort to raise a different viewpoint and shed light on the complex work that teachers do in the profession. Teachers

should not feel as though their concerns about testing, loss of autonomy, low pay, disrespect, and long hours are not worthy of being discussed. These issues brought up by Faith, Grace, and Hope add to the stories that have already been told by teachers facing similar situations (Cheng, 2012; Clarksen, 2014; James, 2015, Lynch, 2014; Noddings, 2014). Yet, their accounts contribute one more layer because their stories show how and why they demonstrated longevity in the profession despite all of the pressure associated with new educational standards and testing and the often hostile public portrayal of teachers. Their commitment to teaching is the reason this study matters because it serves as a testament to why teaching is the greatest profession.

When I started this study, I was in my ninth year of teaching middle school English. Though I loved my job, there were many frustrations about it for which I felt I had no control. As this study draws to an end, I am six weeks in to my eleventh year as a middle school English teacher. I still love my job, but I still find there are frustrations that are beyond my control. However, what I can control, and what makes teaching such a valuable career, are my relationships with students and colleagues. These relationships are what sustain me and have kept me coming back year after year rather than throwing in the towel. I know that I am meant to teach middle school English. Hearing the stories from Faith, Grace, and Hope inspired me and taught me in ways that I never imagined. Their honesty about this profession, for which we all share a passion, provided me with the reassurance that it was okay to be frustrated. It was okay to wonder why I did not get paid as much as other professionals with similar education. It was okay to be heartbroken about how the public perceived teachers. It was okay to cry about some of the changes coming down the pike and okay to blow off other changes. And, it was okay to establish positive relationships with my students and peers. My understanding of what it meant to be a

teacher in the era of accountability (Sowerbrower, 2015) was enhanced through their testimonies. For that, I am grateful as well as hopeful.

My hope is that readers of this study will strengthen their own understanding of what it means to be a teacher. When policy writers and implementers read this, I hope they listen and heed the suggestions made by these teachers. When school leaders read this, I hope they notice the promises that these teachers kept to the profession, to the decision makers, to the community, to the middle school students, and to the families. When someone outside of teaching reads this, I hope they gain a new appreciation for what teachers do to foster productive members of society. When families read this, I hope they recognize the ways in which teachers support their children. When students read this, I hope they realize how much teachers care about them and their futures. Finally, when teachers—novice and veteran—read this, I hope they see the beauty in our profession and that they will continue to stay the course.

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