

**BURNING WITH SHAME BUT HOLDING THE PEACE: A NARRATIVE
INQUIRY INTO THE FORMATION OF APPALACHIAN ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER IDENTITIES**

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For too long, Appalachia has been a region placed at the mercy of narratives. Some we own, some we perpetuate, and some we silence. The purpose of this study was to continue lifting contemporary Appalachian voices to the surface, explicating the history of a region with an eye toward its innovative future. This work would not have been possible without those willing to share their experiences with me and those who continued to walk alongside me, even when it led to more questions.

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Lastly, to Appalachia—all my life, I've collected stories of where I've lived. Held them like pennies in the palm of my hand, but now it's time to pay the tithe.

ABSTRACT

To tell the story of a singular Appalachian experience is to discredit and discount the multitude of voices that inhabit the various regions that make up Appalachia. As contemporary accounts strive to uplift marginalized or underrepresented narratives, researchers now aim to address questions as to how narratives of the region are constructed and what those constructions can tell us about life in portions of Appalachia. From a poststructuralist theoretical frame, this study examines the complexity of educational practices in Southern Appalachia and problematizes a singular, monolithic accounting of those lived experiences. Building on the work of John Gaventa, Amy Clark, Nancy Hayward, and Anne Puckett, this descriptive, narrative inquiry explores how first-year English Language Arts teachers engage with contextual and cultural factors of teaching in this region and the formation of their identities as educators in Appalachia. The resulting narrative inquiry addresses the following research questions: 1.) How do first-year teachers construct their identities as secondary English Language Arts educators in a Southern Appalachian region? 2.) What, if any, tensions emerge in these constructions? Findings reveal participant perceptions of English Language Arts Education in theory and practice, contributing to a broader understanding of Appalachian identity formation.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Where I'm from, the interstate winds a bit to the left before entering the gentle mountain curvature, which most would likely call a hillside, cresting over the city below. Nestled underneath the lights of the bridge, on the narrow two-lane strip, you can hear the cars passing overhead. The scuttle and bump cause squirrels to scatter on the riverwalk below while the eerie plumb-tinted water of the Holston River rises to meet the morning sky. Geese fly over the car, the familiar formation of my childhood, reminding me of nature's innate ability to regulate even when we are beyond regulation ourselves. When our bodies reject order and routine, and we feel the familiar churn of a sea inside of us. When considering where to begin, it seemed fitting to choose this moment. A singular day in the middle of days. Of years. Of over a decade in a single classroom, over twenty years in a single district, and an entire life, in a single town.

It wasn't the first day. Standing in front of new students, blissfully unaware of where this passionate naivety of mine had led me.

It wasn't the day I spent huddled under a whiteboard with unknown students, some sobbing, listening for steps to approach our door, and the way my breathing stopped when they did.

It wasn't the day I tried to console children about the loss of a child while four months pregnant with my own.

And it wasn't the last day when I slid my keycard under the door of my assistant principal's office. Carried a neon, pink plastic crate to my car and hit the two-lane headed home.

It was those morning commutes when I felt the pull of a life, where I reworked the previous day's conversations with my students in my mind, where I agonized over missed opportunities. It was those days in the middle when I felt my twenties disappear and watched my students enter theirs wondering, what, if anything, I had taught them.

Teaching felt like an impossibility to me. An enigma. I never really felt at home, as Rilke would say, in this talked -about world. I was searching for a reconciliation between what I loved and what I chose.

Statement of the Problem

The educational system in this country is exiting its teachers at a rate faster than it can produce them. With pathways to licensure becoming more diversified at the state level, the new teacher workforce is a conglomerate of recently graduated twenty-somethings to midlife career changers who will alter the landscape in what we can only assume will be phenomenal ways. Exactly how these teachers, prepared in the field on the job or via traditional residency models, compare in terms of longevity is yet to be determined; however, one element critical to teacher success is how teachers view themselves and their capabilities within the classroom.

Teacher identities are grounded in fluctuating constructs, their malleability based on the philosophical, historical, contextual, and cultural settings in which they teach. To better understand the lived experiences of teachers, researchers must account for the many different contextual situations that contribute not to a universal or grand narrative of teaching but rather a better understanding of teaching in a singular moment from a particular perspective. For my own story, determining who I am as an educator meant the unification of past, present, and future selves in juxtaposition with self-perception and

perception by others. Understanding the complexity of the regions in which we live and teach is critical to effective instructional delivery, and for the southern Appalachian region specifically, this means acknowledging the complexity of what it means to be “Appalachian.”

Appalachian Identity and Place-Making

For many, a definitive characterization of the Appalachian region feels elusive. Any attempt to define the region in singular terms, to put down parameters or draw parallels among people, is indicative of a moment in time rather than a comprehensive understanding of the region. Appalachia is always changing, and how the region is viewed is often dependent on unification of both those telling about the region with the historical, political, economic, and cultural associations of place. The characterization of the Appalachian region draws heavily from mythical elements of its past. To understand what it means to be Appalachian requires us to first immerse ourselves in the region's history, to define for ourselves how we understand elements of identity and place while carefully avoiding the tendency toward monolithic portrayals.

To understand the relationship between isolationist portrayals of Appalachia and our contemporary understandings of the region, it is critical to examine the complexities of identity formation for Appalachia. An initial challenge in categorizing Appalachia is a reluctance to expand our understanding and definitions of place. As William Schuman examines in the Introduction to *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, “place” is a human construct, an understanding of which is altered due to the narratives told of the region, the questions researchers elect to ask, and the changing cultural climate of the lens from which it is viewed (1996). The narratives

shared about a place contribute to the perception and development of new narratives over time. As we examine these histories closely, looking toward who crafted the previous narratives and recognizing the power dynamics at play in their creation, we can begin to conceptualize a place in terms of both the said and unsaid. Recognizing place as a construct allows for a critical approach through deconstruction, an opportunity to first identify whose narratives are lifted and recreate the narrative thread. Here, our fundamental understandings of identity formation are at play. Appalachian identities are a culmination of past, present, and future interpretations of the region and its people. To determine what it means to be Appalachian, we must examine the cultural and historical contexts of the established narratives.

Defining both place and perspective in a singular terminology becomes infinitely complex when we seek to describe a region or its people. Though the language exists, it is often expressed in terms of binaries or socially accepted forms of normalcy. Simply stated, we understand “what is” often in terms of “what is not,” and examining the grand narrative of “what is” can provide additional information as to the myriad of voices and experiences that are withheld from the narrative of a region. When confronted with these elements, the Derridean interpretation of the language used to describe the place can direct us to the voices often overlooked or marginalized. Through the act of deconstruction, we can analyze narratives centralized in our understanding of place and identify gaps in perspectives that vary across time. We can better understand a place in terms of what is, a complete accounting for a people where all narratives are valued and a single, universal narrative displaced so that the narrative of Appalachia becomes a

compilation of narratives from differing perspectives at different times, a rebuttal to a singular association or stereotypical representation.

Appalachia, in the minds of most Americans, is heavily connected to a sense of place. Schumann (2016) argues for the concept of place-making, one in which we accept the idea of place in terms of its fluidity; “place” is socially constructed by humans in a shifting landscape of historical, environment, and social changes. The social construction of a place indicates that its definition may shift over time. Therefore, how we define a place is malleable, reactionary, and oftentimes isolated to the historical context in which it was formed. Historically, Appalachia has been understood in a physical and geographical sense, often presented through land boundaries or romanticized depictions of the region (Clark & Hayward, 2013). Our depictions of contemporary Appalachia are reliant on the intrinsic elements of former characterizations; therefore, to understand Appalachia, we must first acknowledge the architecture surrounding its early portrayals.

Early Isolationist Portrayals of Appalachia

In its earliest depictions, Appalachia was represented in terms of its otherness related to the grand narrative of what it meant to be an American. Its initial representation in the travel writings of the mid-1700s throughout the 1860s aligning it with Jeffersonian ideals of America as an agrarian land of opportunity, one in which transcendence of the self was still possible through connection to the land, thus contributing to the formation of an Appalachian mythos, one where its residents, heavily tied to the land and the possibility of American idealism, represented a fundamental understanding of what it meant to be an American. However, as Amanda Hayes (2017) argues, this failure to

recognize Appalachian-ness in terms of its interconnectedness and relatedness can be damaging to those living in the region.

In *Appalachia On Our Mind*, Henry D. Shapiro argues by defining Appalachia in terms of its otherness, the focus shifts from examining and naming a phenomenon to a conversation about causation (1978). Shapiro accounts for depictions of Appalachia through the lens of otherness as committing to a singular view of the region without considering the perspectives from which these views were collected or how they have changed over time (1978). In some respects, this led to an emphasis on the conception of what America should be rather than how life in the region was perceived (Shapiro, 1978). Here, the language used by outsiders to describe the region directed its characterizations, and the naming of the region was part of the creation of the region (Shapiro, 1978). To form a new understanding, we must create a new reality (Shapiro, 1978), one that can be achieved through the deconstruction of currently existing narratives.

Some of the earliest scholarship of Appalachian cultures focused on tracing a beginning or rationale for the characterizations rather than attempting to determine which voices were unheard in these accounts. Thus, researchers in Appalachia are compelled to critically address gaps in research, examining the voices previously shared and why. Early depictions of Appalachia were divided based on the issue of insider and outsider perspectives (Schumann, 2016; Shapiro, 1978). However, these descriptions limited which “Appalachian insiders are defined as a unified distinctive class occupying a place of externally controlled resources” (Schumann, 2016). Here, the emphasis on the word “place” is critical. If early accounts of Appalachia were written in terms of the Jeffersonian American ideal, then the evolution of Appalachia’s depiction over time

coincides with the declaratory intentions of modernity. It is important to note where the insider and outsider depictions were developed and why these narratives have continued over time, appearing even in contemporary Appalachian accounts and perpetuated by insiders. As Shapiro (1978) notes, an influx of individuals to the Appalachian region relocated, considering themselves to be benevolent benefactors. Through both religion and education, individuals came to Appalachia as missionaries, determined to make life better for those native to the area. What researchers are left to consider is how the narrative of need was circulated and who benefited from its circulation, a pattern that continues in some regions of Appalachia today.

Voices of Appalachian Experience

Language is one of the fundamental ways in which identity is formed (Cramer & Burkette, 2024). For all communities who share commonalities, expressions of language will be experienced and thus should be examined to provide additional insight into member identity formation in the communities. Language markers are not limited to verbal communication but can be present in narrative construction and elements of social and nonverbal communication. When studying a group with common characteristics, it is important to analyze the structures in place used to communicate and to determine what, if any, shared characteristics this group has.

Here, understanding Appalachia in terms of “what is” is critical to depicting the region in an accurate way. First, we must recognize the complexity of voice associated with its characterization. These voices, though some historically muffled, have always been present but are lacking from early accounts of the region. While contemporary Appalachian writers uplift the voices of full communities, some areas of the region

remain tied to misrepresentations. A realistic portrayal of the region requires us first to determine how we define it in both physical and metaphysical terms. The voices of narration, power dynamics of linguistic expression, and elements of insider versus outsider perspectives abound in our interpretation of the Appalachian region. Primarily, we must examine which voices have been lifted in Appalachian studies and for what purpose. The juxtaposition of narratives with a socially constructed concept of place leaves us to question previous interpretations of insider and outsider contributions to defining Appalachia and how why those narratives continue to resonate.

In *The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity*, Todd Snyder posits how the characterizations of Appalachia and presentations of Appalachian otherness affect identity formation for those living in the region. Like Shapiro (1978) and Kephart (1913), Snyder (2014) describes both the mythological and realistic characterizations of the region, the implications of which shift our understanding of what Appalachia is and what it means to be Appalachian.

True to the earliest accounts of Appalachia, the region itself seems borderless, almost locationless, as the great frontier. Its primordial characterization portrays it as an ephemeral place. Appalachia is Atlantis. Its power exists in the mythology of being.

Author James Lane Allen writes,

The Gap seemed to be crowded with two invisible and
countless pageants of human life, the one passing in, the
other passing out; and the air grew thick with ghostly
utterances—primeval sounds, undistinguishable and

strange, of creatures nameless and never seen by man
(1886, p.73)

From its earliest accounts, Appalachia existed in the mythos, the primordial beginnings of a new world, represented in the possibility and vastness of the young country; however, it is the remnants of those characterizations in contemporary retellings that leave many Appalachians to feel the intentional effects of othering. Historically, we must examine the motivation for others to characterize Appalachia in this way. For Snyder, it is the consequence of this othering that affects how identities and new social constructs are formed. For those living in the region, characterizations based on outsider perspectives lead to further isolation of Appalachians, such as was the case with the terminology of “hillbilly.”

Education in Appalachia

The educational system of America is modeled after an industrialized call to satisfy the needs of the American workforce. It is a system that values reproduction, sameness. A system designed to reproduce the methods of production (Ayers, 2016). The process of education always seemed to be about moving learning away from one point and toward another, more widely accepted point, mostly aligned with the goals or initiatives of group education. This is particularly true in early educational initiatives in Appalachia.

One of the primary concerns with studies related to the Appalachian region is the elusive nature of what it means to be Appalachian and who or what is considered Appalachian. Though the geographical boundaries, as introduced by the Appalachian

Regional Commission in 1964, determined a physical sense of place, questions related to the interconnectedness of the Appalachian people prevailed.

In early depictions of Appalachia, the inhabitants were seen as living remotely in their communities and disconnected from the outside world. In one of the earliest accounts describing educational practices in Appalachia, James L. Allen (1886) writes, “There is little desire for knowledge or education. The mountain schools have sometimes less than half a dozen pupils during the few months they are in session” (70). While some students preferred the expansive, natural intrigue of the landscape to the formal setting of the school (Miles, 1905). This reluctance to embrace the schoolhouse could stem from familial beliefs associated with educational practices. Those who came to region earlier often came out of a sense of benevolence and the belief they could improve life through educational or religious instruction (Shapiro, 1978).

In *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (1963), Henry Caudill proclaims that formal literacy was two to three generations removed for the Appalachians at the time institutionalized schooling was enacted. It is imperative to consider how these early depictions of Appalachia could be biased toward the benevolence movement to refine and correct perceived Appalachian otherness. How education was brought to the region and who delivered the instruction mattered greatly to those constructing the narrative of the region.

How we examine educational beliefs of the region during the late 1800s should also be viewed in light of the isolationist depiction of Appalachia during this time. The motivational desire to remedy the perceived separation between Appalachia and the rest of the country was due in part to how the region was understood solely in terms of its

otherness (Shapiro, 1978). Similar to the approach in other enterprises of colonialism and true to the educational system's intent, Appalachia was identified as a region in need of unification with itself and the rest of the country. If views of Appalachia during this time were aimed toward correcting this "otherness" and how Appalachia was defined solely in terms of its otherness, it is easy to ascertain how many outsiders fell victim to the syllogism believing correcting Appalachian otherness would eliminate Appalachia in general. The implications of this othering played out in the grand narratives constructed about the region and propagated over time.

Early accounts of the region note the sparsity of formal locations and address the difficulty of students in accessing school on a continuous basis. Physically isolated from other communities, children traversed great distances to convene for school, and just as isolation became a critical argument relating to language preservation, isolationist narratives affected ideas related to the educational, social development of communities. Class numbers were sparse, and attendance varied. School teachers themselves may not have had extensive schooling; some receiving no more than fifteen months (Caudill, 1963). Teachers' wages were low, and characterizations of the profession varied. In some instances, they were described as heroic (Miles, 1905). While Caudill (1963) describes them as "embittered and dispirited" (p.240). However, teachers are described, those who relocated to the region most likely faced the effects of isolationist views of the Appalachian existence.

Understanding historical perceptions of education in the region is significant when determining how teachers develop a sense of identity in contemporary settings. Reading contemporary narratives of Appalachian experiences in education should also

consider the historical implications of the region's history. How education was viewed in the region affects how educators view systematic practices today, whether implicitly or directly, and this can affect participant reflection.

Alternative Forms of English in the Writing Classrooms

Though there have been studies conducted related to nonstandard American English in classroom studies, research is limited to elementary classrooms postsecondary classrooms or does not examine the implications of the Appalachian dialect of Southern American English. Specifically, Rebecca Wheeler conducted research related to nonstandard forms of American English in classrooms through the examination of reading instruction for African American students (Wheeler, 2004, 2006, 2016). Though her research was conducted primarily in elementary settings, her findings examine teacher perception related to nonstandard English inclusion in educational settings. Her research emphasized instruction on the formalities of English communication systems rather than introducing a value system in which one form of communication is preferred over another; in essence, models provided to students instructed them for situational use of language expression without delineating or negatively characterizing conversational elements of their language as incorrect. Here, the findings indicated how student identities were affected these practices, though there are still questions related to how language adjustments effect on comprehensive levels of reading competency.

Studies related to Appalachian varieties of standard American English have been limited to postsecondary experiences. Katherine Sohn (2003) found women in her postsecondary composition classes were self-conscious in relation to linguistics expression and that language and dialect strongly affected how they defined themselves.

Though the findings indicated how the participant's experiences with literacy affected their lives after graduation, there were implications in the study related to Appalachian identity formation and language. Sohn (2003) indicates that several outsiders have "caricatured Appalachian speech and culture and implied religious and cultural superiority" (p.439). These caricatured descriptions of the region are based on monolithic depictions relying on outsider perspectives of the region. Ultimately, Sohn found that the women suffered discrimination in relation to both Appalachian birth and class (2003). Amanda Hayes (2018) noted students in her postsecondary composition courses followed a more Celtic mode of rhetorical development, one in which the ethos is established through a trope like the medieval humility trope, leading questions related to how elements of Appalachian culture manifest in rhetoric in addition to patterns of dialect or vernacular constructions.

Sociolinguistics Implications for Writing Instruction

The evolution of the educational system in the United States changed dramatically as a new focus on standardization took place after the 1960s. These elements failed to acknowledge the cultural complexities of students across the country, specifically those in the Appalachian region as well as other regions where dialects of Standard American English prevail. Questions as to how Appalachian dialects are viewed in educational institutions are evident in writing instruction that fails to recognize variations beyond Standard American English. Students who are living in the Southern Appalachian region are forced to reckon with the country's preference toward standard American English in all matters of assessment and formal writing. State writing rubrics often prioritize grammatical elements of Standard American English or incorporate vernacular patterns in

the incorrect answer choice. Audra Slocum (2020) examines the role schools and teachers play in helping to construct adolescent identities, addressing which variations of standardized American English are prioritized in educational settings.

Continued generalization and traditional methods of grammar instruction over the years, in some cases, have led to a deficit mindset related to linguistic expression and cultural practices. For a region defined by its differences, the use of various dialects served to further complicate the unification effort or the desire to classify Appalachia as a singular unit. Early misinformation regarding the linguistic history of the region served to create mythological connections between the Appalachian dialect and Chaucerian, Anglo-Saxon, or even Elizabethan Englishes. Michael Montgomery (2014) argues that “pride, romanticism, and a desire for cultural validation” were behind the motivation of Appalachians to accept the claims of an Elizabethan connection (p.32). If one of the defining features of a region, its language and art of expression, has connections to a culture valued for its historical significance, then by association, does a region gain its own notoriety and respect? Nancy Hayward (2014) reminds us that language itself is a social construct. In the Appalachian region, translanguageing occurs, and our dialects evolve over time, and experience and questions related to the implications of these forced changes remain unclear.

Language is the mediator between action and interpretation; individuals act, and thus, their actions are interpreted through the lens of language. To better understand the actor, we must first examine the social constructs from which the language or interpretative measure was performed. How educators interpret manifestations of Appalachian Englishes within their classrooms influences their perception of

Appalachian identity for both themselves and their students. Ultimately, both Haywood and Montgomery argue against the oversimplification of Appalachian dialects as an all-encompassing, acknowledging the variations among the different regions and situations.

Ultimately, as we move toward a more equitable frontier in education, writing teachers must be aware of the connection between dialect, arrangement, and identity. Educators operating within the secondary English Language Arts classrooms should be informed as to how elements of dialect manifest in student writing and how those manifestations can be addressed in ways that are not critical of the student's identity but rather linguistic expressions connected to formal and informal expression rather than expressions related to grammatical errors. Students who are consistently corrected over time for the natural speech patterns without instruction as to the value of a variety of linguistic expressions are at risk of developing a negative view of themselves as people and writers (Hayes, 2017). Studying experiences of nonstandard American English in secondary writing classrooms will address a gap in research as it examines how dialects of Southern American English contribute to the identity formation of Appalachian educators in secondary English Language Arts classrooms.

In "Dialect and Education in Appalachia," Jeffrey Reaser (2014) argues that writing instructors must distinguish the differences in dialect expression and narrative, syntactical choices from those of typing or grammatical errors to accurately assess student work. Once educators are aware of linguistic patterns and variations of dialect, they are better prepared to address writing needs within their classroom. In his work, Jeffrey Reaser warns of the effects of educational policies that are biased toward

Standard American English, such as standardized testing and educator implicit bias (2014).

As Slocum (2020) notes, many of the standards in English Language Arts courses allow for variation in communication mode and style; however, these standards are not always addressed on end-of- course assessments and therefore, not always prioritized by educators or districts. While these measures do not remedy state writing rubrics or implicitly biased questions related to the secondary English Language Arts curriculum, educators can circumvent the problem by responding to students' understanding of their own linguistic identity. Reaser notes, "People naturally use language in a way that is right for them in that particular context" (p. 95). Therefore, instructors should guide students in determining what the context of a given situation may be without lessening the value or worth of their desired language expression. The first step toward equitable practices is an acknowledgment of various dialects of English and how students are instructed to navigate those systems across time.

Another factor to consider when examining sociolinguistic implications of writing instruction is to consider how secondary English Language Arts teachers are prepared to instruct writing in their educator preparation programs. In the article "Voices in the Appalachian Classroom," Amy Clark (2014) maintains her training in literary analysis did not prepare her to teach writing. She reiterates that secondary English Language Arts teachers often lack preparation regarding writing instruction and may emphasize the correctness of Standard American English (Clark, 2014). Clark (2014) and Wheeler (2016) both examine the role of contrastive analysis when encountering nonstandard forms of American English experimenting with narrative instruction written in their

vernacular dialects while Standard American English was incorporated into formal writing. Though there has been an emphasis on student experiences and student identity formation, little is known about teacher perception and identity formation related to the usage of nonstandard American English representations in the classroom. Therefore, a study investigating the lived experiences of secondary English Language Arts teachers should examine how teachers perceived themselves in terms of preparedness to instruct writing and their thoughts and beliefs related to evaluating student work.

When considering the educational implications of power expressed through Appalachian rhetoric, we must consider the role of teacher and student within the classroom. How teachers question their students, the language patterns utilized within those discussions, and whether the teacher is an outsider or insider to the community could affect not only classroom facilitation but also student responses to learning.

In cases of writing instruction in secondary English Language Arts classrooms, historically, the emphasis on standardized English as required by both state and national standards affects the types of instruction taking place in the classroom. For secondary English Language Arts teachers living and teaching in the region, questions related to Appalachian identity formation and linguistic expression are critical when examining pedagogical methodologies of writing instruction. In some instances, reflecting on personal associations with language can inform perceptions of the self in terms of narrative function and capabilities.

Previous studies related to nonstandard usage of American English have been conducted in secondary classrooms; however, these studies do not examine experiences in the secondary classroom related to variations of Southern American English. Rebecca

Wheeler (2014) analyzed the effect of contrastive analysis as an instructional methodology. In her research, students were taught both informal and formal circumstantial uses of language. In some instances, researchers modeled different ways to construct expressions in both written and oral speech, and students practiced recognizing how different patterns were effective at different times. Though research has not indicated how altering language affects literacy or comprehension elements, students were successful in determining the correct usage of terminology or appropriateness of responses. However, questions remain about how this ideology will affect the perception of identity or values associated with place. Examining these experiences in juxtaposition with the work of Amanda Hayes could provide additional theoretical insight into the practice.

The work of Rebecca Wheeler regarding the use of nonstandard American English references the work of Walt Wolfram (1978) who examines the linguistic implications of contrastive analysis writing, “the possible use of contrastive studies as a basis for pedagogy also seems to be an important factor in looking at the types of situations in which contrastive studies have been done.” Considering how elements of contrastive analysis are apparent through language instruction is a fundamental concern regarding writing pedagogy.

Wolfram’s principles of contrastive analysis in terms of what it contributes to the secondary English Language Arts classroom is important when considering how elements of culture are transmitted not only through the language itself, the connotations of cultural practice and nuance presented through our ideas about the means of language expression.

In *All That is Native and Fine*, author David Whisnant examines how cultural elements are reproduced and modified based on educational, social, and economic structures. In his accounting of the Hindman settlement school, the influences of those guiding the instruction of the region what fundamentally affected how participants developed a sense of identity. When referencing the influence of outside entities in the establishment of rural educational centers, Whisnant writes, “and yet from a cultured, literary, finishing school environment in New England to Hindman, Kentucky, was at the deepest levels a difficult move to negotiate” (1965, p. 43). How newcomers to the region adapted to the communal practices in place introduced tension to regional experiences. As Whisnant writes, “It became clear that such programs—however appealing—were of limited social use, and those which turned more and more toward cultural programs, as the hazards and frustrations of direct social action emerged” (p.45). Here, early introductions to formal educational institutions, though committed to meeting the individualized needs of those they served, often presented a contrasting view of how recipients viewed themselves versus how they were viewed by others. The experiences of the Hindman Settlement School directly relate to the experience of students in contemporary Appalachian classrooms. Acknowledgement of both implicit and explicit cultural characteristics, as well as tensions related to their perception of self versus the perception by others, determines how students perceive themselves at a particular moment in time.

Ultimately, recounting the experiences of secondary English Language Arts teachers in the Southern Appalachian region is significant when considering the narrative of Appalachia in general.

Purpose of the Study

Though previous research has been conducted on compositional studies and Appalachian rhetorical constructs at the postsecondary level (Hayes, 2018; Reaser, 2013; Snyder, 1981; Slocum, 2020; Sohn, 2014), there is a gap in research related to the experiences of secondary English Language Arts teachers and their own Appalachian identity formation.

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of secondary English Language Arts educators in the Southern Appalachian region, analyzing how they define English Language Arts Education and any tensions that emerge in those definitions. Ultimately, this study will compare newly constructed narratives of educators with historical representations of the region.

Research Questions

1. How do first-year teachers construct their identities as secondary English Language Arts educators in a Southern Appalachian region?
 - a. How do teachers define English Language Arts education?
 - b. How do teachers define English Language Arts education in Southern Appalachia?
 - c. What tensions, if any, emerge in their definitions?

Significance of the Study

As the narratives of Appalachia have been predominately singular accounts of the region, this study will provide insight into the various stories of teaching English Language Arts in a particular subregion of Appalachia. By recognizing the multitude of perspectives related to teaching and the region at large, the findings of this study will

inform contemporary accounts of first-year teaching of English Language Arts. The findings will inform conversation related to teacher education preparation and will comment on what, if any, tensions exist between what educators value as English Language Arts Education and the instructional practices taking place in their classrooms.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Power/ful/ness in Appalachia

“It’s about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it,”

J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*

Researchers bear more than the responsibility of simply sharing knowledge. Beyond uncovering “truth(s),” we are artisans, distilling ideas and marking moments of both progression and regression, and the responsibility of the work extends beyond the multidimensional prism before us. We are holding a gem to the light, tracing the refraction toward narratives, uncovering and illuminating, even if that means the light shines back into our eyes.

When I began this study, I thought I knew the nature of this place. I was born here, my family was *from here*; four generations tied to the same 15-mile radius of Northeastern Tennessee; I thought it was enough. What I wasn’t prepared to uncover was how differently individuals can experience the region(s) of Appalachia, and I learned the most dangerous voice in Appalachian Studies can be the person who speaks solely from “experience.”

On January 20, 2025, J.D. Vance was inaugurated as vice president of the United States of America in an election whose results are still in their infancy. Vance’s political career, undoubtedly launched by his memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, brought severe implications for the region and serves as a clear frame for discussion of power dynamics in Appalachia. While the community of Appalachian scholars has responded widely in the years following its publication (Catte, 2019; Harkins & McCarroll, 2019), this year’s renewed attention on the candidate has sparked a rejuvenation for elegy lore. New

readers, learning for the first time about Appalachia from Vance's perspective, limited and commercialized, buy into the single narrative of Appalachia, one that is steeped in archetypal misnomers, whose origins date back to some of the earliest accounts of the region. While these accounts are more notably based on those visiting and traveling to the region in the late 1700s to mid-1800s, he is not alone in representing himself as an insider who ascribes to these beliefs.

The success of Vance's memoir and the caricatures included within have real effects for those living and working here and illuminate the need for a poststructuralist approach to Appalachian studies. These effects are particularly important when we juxtapose the layers of social and economic developments occurring in the region in contemporary settings.

It is natural to believe the personal, to attach to the singular. It is true to the principles of American democracy and a rejection of the objective, feared-to-be-socialist leanings, but it is dangerous when spoken as a universal truth or experience. What Vance's memoir fails to do is acknowledge one of the fundamental characteristics of Appalachia: the diversity of the region in terms of its cultural practices, beliefs and people, in addition to the varied geographic and physical landscapes. While we cannot and should not discredit the experiences outlined in *Elegy*, embracing a poststructuralist theoretical understanding of Appalachia allows for a more nuanced understanding of place. Here, the narrative becomes narrative(s); truths become fluid and cognizant of time and perspective. Let this section serve as a eulogy for the way Appalachian was once defined and embrace the possibilities of new narratives to lift voices that aren't always the loudest. To characterize the people by allowing them to speak their own stories.

Because Appalachia can't fit into a box. Because the story of Appalachia does not exist solely in its past. Because eulogies mean more than elegies anyway

Socio-Economic Implications of Power in Appalachian Narratives

In *Power and Powerless: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (1980), John Gaventa introduces the three dimensions of power and the interactions of those dimensions in social, economic, and environmental issues in Appalachia. The first dimension focuses on the entity that maintains control in the bargaining moment; there is clear agency on each side, where A and B are equally attuned to the situation. Here, who is deemed powerful, whether it be A or B, has what appears to be an objective opportunity. Power is doled out in a judicious way, though the resources themselves may not be equitable. In the second dimension of power, the mechanism of power is now influenced by the mobilization of bias and non-decision-making power. Gaventa (1980) references the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1970), who define *mobilization of bias* as how entities can systematically affect the outcome by enforcing predominant beliefs and/or practices. However, a potential outlier in this mechanism is the consideration of what makes a belief predominant and to determine if the illusion of dominance is enough to influence the agency of either A or B, and idea I will explore further in this chapter.

However, it is the application of the third dimension of power that is most needed in contemporary studies of Appalachia. Gaventa (1980) writes,

Their identification, one suspects, involves specifying the means through which power influences, shapes or determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities, and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict. This

may include the study of social myths, language, and symbols, and how they are shaped or manipulated in power processes (15).

Here, decoding and identifying mechanisms of power in relation to social myths, language, and symbols can inform not only how these culturally defining elements are viewed by those in power but also how those beliefs can be accepted by those considered to be powerless. In the case of *Elegy*, we have a conflict of power and powerlessness where the tension occurs because the powerful is portrayed as powerless, which thus masks the greater issue. If we examine the mechanism driving the interpretation of a “culture in crisis,” we can begin to understand how the acceptance of social myth within the community is being propelled by those within the community, a phenomenon noted in some of the earliest accounts of the region (Caudill, 1964; Kephart, 1913).

While Gaventa (1980) posits a potential rationale as to why B remains in a state of powerlessness in response to A, two are most appropriate when considering contemporary issues in Appalachian studies. For the first consideration, B may remain powerless due to the inability to see alternative outcomes. In this relationship, the grievances are noted, and there is a willingness to act, but the path forward is not clearly defined or imagined. In the second consideration, the grievances are noted and there is a willingness to act, but the target may be incorrectly identified. Determining what, if any, role B plays in the misidentification of the target is critical when evaluating the effectiveness of this dimension in Appalachian settings. How insiders contribute to shifting the target may have political, social, and economic implications; therefore, it is

necessary to study how insiders propel social myths and customs, as represented in *Hillbilly Elegy*.

When examining relations of power in Appalachia, the agency of those living in the region is often in question. Gaventa (1980) argues that historically, the relationship between low socioeconomic status and participation or response to situations of power has often been attributed to “apathy, political inefficiency, cynicism or alienation” (7). Those ascribing to this philosophy of action indicate the cyclical nature of Appalachian isolationism. In *Elegy*, Vance writes, “We do not like outsiders or people who are different from us, whether the differences lie in how they look, how they act, or most important, how they talk” (2016, p.3). Here, the text is aligned with early depictions of Appalachian mountaineers as those who are isolated from not only each other but those outside the region (Catté, 2019). Kephart (1913) characterizes the region and emphasizes this isolation, writing, “No one can understand the attitude of our highlanders toward the rest of the earth until he realizes their amazing isolation” (p.8). Historically, isolationists blamed the geographical boundaries as a contributing factor to the continued seclusion of the people. However, even those ascribing to these beliefs were polarized in whether this isolation served a benevolent or malevolent purpose. Regardless of its inception, the concept of isolationist accountings of Appalachia contributes to the social myths propagated throughout the region.

What Gaventa describes is similar to what *Elegy* proclaims: the situation of those in Appalachia is a direct result of their own doing. However, in studying how the dimensions are at play in Appalachian settings, the diversity of narratives and representations, something *Elegy* excludes, is critical when studying the region. How

people in Appalachian regions respond to power relations, their awareness of them, and their sense of agency varies depending on the historical, political, and environmental contexts of the situation.

In *What You're Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, Elizabeth Catte (2019) emphasizes the actions of Appalachians that are often overlooked or ignored in conversations about agency in the region. By highlighting the participation of coal miner strikes and instances like the Battle of Blair Mountain, Catte broaches the false narrative populating the region, that of a people who are victimized, uninterested in participation in community and political arena. Her response is a poststructuralist one, embracing the narratives of Appalachia and discrediting the stereotypical associations of Appalachia as being culturally distinct. She writes, "Credibility falls easily to those given the privilege of defining who or what Appalachia is (p. 93). Here is a need in Appalachian scholarship, the examination of "credibility," the removal of "I" for "I's" sake, and a move toward accepting the diversity of people and communities within the regions by sharing various narratives of the region, those who refute a common experience, and those who are rich with historically muted voices.

Ultimately, it is the emphasis on speech patterns and dialect as "the most important" factor in Vance's description that most directly echoes Appalachian isolationist characterization. The instances of that language as what determines an individual's level of belonging in or away from a community seem most similar to isolationist characterization or the mythic Appalachia.

Appalachian Englishes and Language as a Mechanism of Systemic Power

The distinctiveness of Appalachian Englishes has proliferated in both historical and contemporary interpretations of the region. In the earliest accounts of Appalachia, writers described the language in terms of its historical and cultural prominence. Though later debunked by sociolinguists, some of the earliest accounts describe the dialect of those in western North Carolina, southeastern Kentucky, and northeastern Tennessee as language with Anglo-Saxon origin, preserved through isolated communities (Frost, 1899; Fox, 1901; Semple, 1901; Wilson, 1929; Caldwell, 1930). Determining how individuals both inside and outside of Appalachia characterize its dialect is significant for determining the mechanisms of power at play and their contribution to what Gaventa (1980) identifies as social myth and language.

The power dynamics at play in both the language used to describe Appalachia and the rhetorical traditions of Appalachia must be considered to grapple with the complexity of classifying the region. Anita Puckett (2013) argues there are two distinct power forms related to language usage in Appalachia: 1. Statusful power and 2. Interactional power. When exercising “statusful power,” participants have control of language based on their position in society; specifically, the role they have as a parent, teacher, religious leader, etc., may determine how the listener responds to the statement. In terms of interactional power, individuals can control language communication based on what they choose to discuss, the elements of the story, and whose voices are conveyed through the story (Puckett, 2013). Here, we must consider how both the speaker and the elements of the narrative work together to create a distinct representation of Appalachia.

Issues of interactional power within language patterns can contribute to how definitions of Appalachia are established. Michael Montgomery (2000) articulates the people's ability to choose their level of social interaction with outside communities in a sense regulating the influence of the outsider. His emphasis on the historical reliance on isolationist theories in relation to the preservation of Appalachian dialects and questions its validity. From this approach, we can move beyond the isolationist portrayals of Appalachia and shift our focus to the internal regulation of language within communities and the role of preserving and continuing dialect over time. Instead of analyzing the preservation of Appalachian dialect through a lens of cultural competency, "traits of independence and self-reliance were often seen by modern, mainstream culture to be remoteness and backwardness" (Montgomery, 2000). Ultimately, we must approach linguistic study from a lens relative to the cultural experiences of the region. Furthermore, it is important to consider how the evolution of social media and internet advancement has affected Appalachian dialectical preservation in response to the idea of Appalachian isolation.

Interpreting how individuals living in regions within Appalachia describe their dialect both directly and indirectly can inform how attitudes and social myths function as a mechanism of power. In their work, *The Social Life of Appalachian Englishes* (2024), linguists Jennifer Cramer and Allison Burkette demonstrate how attitudes and perceptions of language contribute to identity formation, specifically identifying how variation in language can be representative of individual selections made from a variety of options. For some, this social meaning is created through the process of stance-taking which can indicate the relationship between speakers, addressees, and the subject matter at hand

(Burkette, 2020). Burkette establishes the fundamental role storytelling plays in the creation of identity, emphasizing how conversational narratives contribute to the creation of social meaning (Burkette, 2020).

Language and Identity Development

When we consider language, specifically written and oral narratives, we look to the voice or oral expression of language. It is personalized; it is individualized, created through a combination of linguistic patterns specific to the individual with which it is associated. In oral communication, it is personalized further to the level of sound. Intonation, articulation, patterns specific to familial genesis, or allegorical meanings abound in speech. George Ella Lyon (2014) refers to it as “voiceplace,” the first voice taught to you in the place you're from. In essence, it is the voice least affected by outside influence or gained experience but the foundational voice on which these experiences were set. Recognizing and appreciating our “voiceplace” allows us to become critically aware of the lens through which we see the world. As Lyon indicates, it is not the seminal factor of who we are, but the element that allows us to become closer connected to our deepest truths (2014).

For those living in the Appalachian region, how we experience our “voiceplace” in response to how we have been conditioned to experience our “voiceplace” can have greater implications for identity formation, particularly for those who are still closely connected to their first voice. Lyon (2014) writes, “You can’t be a voice box for your own feelings and experiences, much less for those of your place, if you’ve accepted the teaching that your first speech was wrong” (p. 192). It is significant for writing teachers to recognize and honor the “voiceplace” of the communities in which they live and teach.

Given Appalachian characteristics are determined by those both inside and outside the region, we must examine the tension between how Appalachia is presented by others and how Appalachians present themselves. I propose the culmination of both Lyon's and Puckett's work with language and identity formation leads to two distinct categories of Appalachian English markers: Language of Relic and Language of Absence

Language of Relic

As some of the earliest accounts indicate, Appalachians have distinctive associations tied to how they view language usage in their communities. Many value the romanticized notion of Appalachian Englishes tied to cultures and or individuals of historical prominence. I consider this type of associations to be *Language of Relic*, a categorization in which the language usage brings value, worth, or merit to the individual who ascribes to this way of expression.

While Montgomery (2000) questions the validity of linguistic reliance on Appalachian isolationism, it is important to consider how these early approaches to understanding language affected the way we think about language today. Isolationists believed in seclusion, preservation, and purity; Appalachian Englishes, though distinct in pronunciation and patterns among other regions in Appalachia and not unified as a whole, is seen a positive. Ultimately, those who attribute to the language of relic structure find validation in their use of language.. Also, there is a clear recognition of a connection to the historical (Montgomery, 2014). In these readings, the rhetorical patterns of Appalachia language usage bring a sense of confirmation, though questions remain regarding whether these attributes are a source of pride.

The *language of relic* structure is noted in *The Politics of Appalachian Rhetoric*, where Amanda Hayes examines both the historical and contextual nuance of Appalachian rhetorical patterns in postsecondary student writing. Like Montgomery, she works in conversation with traditional elements of Appalachian speech, focusing primarily on Celtic influences in the narratives of postsecondary student writers. While noting the complexity of the region, Hayes refutes ideas related to monolithic portrayals of a greater Appalachian region but instead focuses on patterns present in the region of Northern Ohio. Hayes establishes four elements of the Celtic rhetorical tradition found in Appalachian rhetorical expression. First, is the establishment of ethos through connection with the audience rather than the intellectual or practical experiences of the speaker (Hayes, 2018). Unlike traditional understandings of the establishment of ethos as noted in more of the Aristotelian tradition, here, ethos is established through the leveling- of-the field, so to speak. The speaker should be believed because of experiences similar to the audience, or in some cases, should be trusted due to the vulnerability expressed in noting potential flaws or gaps of knowledge. Here, the *language of relic* tradition allows for a lens from which to view the rhetorical patterns of Appalachian writers in conversation with the Celtic influences of the region.

In contemporary contexts, viewing Appalachian rhetoric as a *language of relic* contributes to the cultural capital of the region to some capacity. Historically, many have felt that having speech patterns and dialects connected to cultural phenomena, such as Chaucer or the Anglo-Saxons, can provide a sense of validation (Montgomery, 2014). We must also acknowledge how the connection to home and generational familiar bonds may play a role in its development. When individuals repeat the language of their

“voiceplace,” they are connecting with the origin and the rootedness of the self. Thus leading to a more confident understanding of Appalachian “voiceplace” and strengthening identity formation and sense of self. Here, the relic terminology is flexible and related to either previous cultural connections (evidence from the mythos) or relic in terms of earlier life experience, such as relic of the previous self, family history, or even childhood. In this sense, understanding perceptions related to the *language of relic* may indicate participant perceptions of Appalachian identity constructed through language expression.

Language of Absence

A secondary marker of Appalachian Englishes, the *Language of Absence*, indicates perceptions related to expressions of Appalachian rhetoric in which one devalues the rhetorical structure in terms of cultural capital or historical merit. Interpretations of speech depicting a *language of absence focus* primarily on characterizations in which the Appalachian dialect, though acknowledged, is presented in terms of absence of meaning, significance, or individuality. Language of absence works in extension with Henry Shapiro’s concept of absence of community, “the central fact” of which Appalachian otherness is understood” (1978, p. 137). Language of absence can be traced back to some of the earliest depictions of the region. In “The Southern Mountaineer,” John Fox Jr. accounts for the lack of dialect in the Appalachian region describing the following:

In his speech, the mountaineer touches a very remote past.

Strictly speaking, he has no dialect. The mountaineer

simply keeps in use old words and meanings that the valley

people have ceased to use; but nowhere is this usage so sustained and consistent as to form a dialect” (p. 127)

For Fox, acknowledging the historical roots of *language of relic* are not enough to contribute to identity formation for an Appalachian speech. Here, the language is depicted as something that lingers over time due to lack of mobility or agency, and in his words, ultimately resulting in a nothingness, lack of dialect, or specificity. In *Our Southern Highlanders*, Horace Kephart (1913) describes the language of the region in terms of its connection to the past but acknowledges its variation across different communities. Here, language and expressive terminology are unique but fail to contribute to a universal understanding or classification of Appalachian speech. From this interpretive lens, an Appalachian dialect viewed as *language of absence* has a diminished capacity for contributing to identity formation in a positive way. Those who ascribe to this view are more than likely those who experience shame. As seen in the work of Katherine Sohn (2003), individuals can feel a deep sense of identity grounded in the expression of Appalachian speech.

Both the *language of relic* and *language of absence* concepts serve to identify ways in which the description of an “Appalachian speech” contributes in dichotomous ways to the development of self. For those ascribing to *language of relic*, linguistic patterns are noted for historical precedence whether this be in a personal or society capacity. While *language of absence* indicates the presence of speech as one lacking identifiable characteristics in the capacity of a recognized dialect or a speech in which the contributions are not associated with feelings toward positive identity formation.

Poststructuralist Theoretical Frame

Human beings, by their inherent nature, seek to understand themselves and their experiences in the world. The social ineptness that plagues the species is also allows for its most innovative and declaratory discoveries. Noted by Martin Heidegger as a species unique in its consideration of its own being, the question of our place in the universal order of things permeates modern thought. How we determine meaning is often in conversation with how we understand and experience “truth” in the world. Historically, from the time of enlightenment into modernity, truth was defined as a common experience, a singular concept or state of understanding that could be achieved with enough exposure and knowledge. However, a key component in how we make meaning is through both the narrative constructed and shared regarding experiences of living in the world. As an ideology, narrative contributes to identity formation and thus is an appropriate lens to study cultural phenomena and the human experience (Currie, 1998).

In the American literary tradition, the possibilities and avenues toward transcendence changed over time. Writers in the 1800s often turned to the Romantic inclinations of transcendence through nature, while Realist writers directed their attention to the individual self and the natural forces at play. Ultimately, modernist writers looked to continuity and myth, while postmodernists responded by questioning elements of chronological time and the idea of a universal experience. These fundamental, ontological differences in genres affected the construction of the narrative and ultimately reflected individual perceptions over time. How we understand what it means to exist in the world is demonstrated in both the subjects included in our narratives and the constructions of the narratives themselves.

Inevitably, these literary and narrative traditions contributed to our understanding of the United States in terms of historical and contextual commentaries. This is most notably true in representations of regions in Appalachia. However, to better understand the workings and lived experiences of the Appalachian region, we must accept the multifaceted aspects of human experience. By analyzing the lived experiences of those in Appalachia from a poststructuralist theoretical framework, we can explore the multiplicities of narratives, embracing the complexity of the region in response to its unified, historical representations. This study constructs narratives of those living and teaching in the region, describing how a single experience of teaching English can have multiple meanings, looking toward multiplicities of meaning and common themes emerging from their stories.

Key to understanding the lived experiences of teachers in the Southern Appalachian region is to acknowledge the monolithic representations that have plagued the region since it was first depicted in travel writings of the early 1700s, and instead to approach a new characterization of the region through a lens of possibility, contrast, and individuality. Poststructuralism as a theoretical framework embraces the fluid nature of the region, accepting that the narrative of Appalachia is composed of *narratives*, those which may be evolving over time and fluid depending on the perspective of which they are viewed and told. Poststructuralism insists that we know the world through the text (Hatch, 2002). Poststructuralism's tenets of textual significance make it an appropriate lens when viewing the lived experiences of others. It is through the narratives, both written and oral, that researchers can determine the individual's perception of the experience. As a poststructuralist researcher, I am not interested in the objectivity of the

experience itself but rather the individual's perception of it grounded in a particular moment in time. Thus, solidifying the value of narrative in educational research as we work to collect narratives, understanding both the fluidity and subjectivity at any given time.

Poststructuralism developed in response to the quest for a decisive, inherent, and knowable truth. It serves as a response to enlightenment theorists who determined the workings of the world and works in opposition to the idea of transcendence. Historically, enlightenment theorists' desire to juxtapose the concept of a universal truth with an accepted understanding of morality has counteracted our ability to deconstruct experiences devoid of the biased implications. While in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau (1762) espouses man's inability to know the true nature of things, poststructuralists' response to this charge is to question its viability. For those operating under the guise of a transcendent, universal self, we are left with a binary framework of right and wrong. Truth, though elusive, is existent and often sought through images of antiquity or, in the work of modernist poets, the image itself. The move toward imagism preempted the shift into the poststructuralist interpretation of the image. Questions as to perspective, frame, lighting, and depiction directed attention to elements beyond the representation itself. This poststructuralist response indicates that rather than asking questions about "right" and "wrong," we should be asking questions related to "right for whom" and "wrong for whom." In scenarios where cultural attributions and regional characteristics are at play, these frames allow for a more critical interpretation of the perception of a region and its beliefs.

Poststructuralist Study of Appalachian Identity

Examining depictions of Appalachian characteristics through a deconstructive lens allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the region and its people. A movement from outsider to insider perspectives can give voice to narratives likely withheld due to the need for a centralized, common narrative or a narrative from which a centralized meaning was extracted. Thus, the quest to understand the experience of Appalachians should be based on the elements of language, deconstructed in a way to identify the *différance* between the sign and the signified in the narratives of the region. A poststructuralist frame of study for the region accepts the complexity and rejects a singular truth of Appalachian experience; thus, poststructuralism is the most appropriate fit for the nature of Appalachian constructs. This identification, though not leading to a single narrative, in turn, values otherness in a way that allows for historically marginalized voices to be heard.

A Derridean analysis of Appalachian otherness allows for a critical understanding of the region in terms of how past narratives exist in contemporary retellings; the acknowledgment of difference allows for flexibility and layering of interpretation. As we experience the narrative histories of the region, we are thus assigning a new level of meaning to each interaction. In Derridean terms, these layers of interaction contribute to the differences but also bring with them additional difference, which, though bringing us a degree removed from the story, we must also recognize that each degree of movement contributes to both a new narrative and a new understanding of an event, processed, retold complete with personalized and nuanced connotative experiences of the language.

Derrida's work of deconstruction, when applied to the field of narrative research, can amplify questions related to Appalachian identity formation and grand narratives of the region. Given the poststructuralist framework rejects the idea of universal truth, we are then able to experience narratives of the region in a more organic way, providing instead a story that can exist simultaneously as different experiences for different people. Currie (1998) argues Derrida viewed the sign itself as an act of exclusion, repressing the difference in that the sign "represses the temporal differences between itself and the other signs in the sequence embedded" (p. 80). When viewing the sign as an act of exclusion, we can engage in conversation about power structures replicated through narratives.

Here, we reject the notion of a singular history but embrace the multiplicity of experience. In *Narratives in Social Science Research*, Barbara Czarniawska (2004) identifies analytic strategies for deconstruction. Just as defining Appalachia in concrete terminology is complex, attempts to discuss the origins or set characteristics of Appalachian narratives face similar challenges. Thus, for the purpose of this discussion, I will refer to the two language markers: 1. *Language of Relic*, in which language patterns are presented as nostalgic, reminiscent of Elizabethan English patterns often conflated with Chaucerian and Shakespearean attributions interchangeably, or 2. *Language of Absence*, language patterns, and dialects that refuse to comply with standard American English but have little if any intrinsic cultural value to those ascribing to this belief.

When studying the region, researchers must have a particular focus on the questions they choose to ask and how they choose to ask them, understanding the end is not the creation of a grand narrative that perpetuates Appalachian stereotypes and caricatures but narratives that take place simultaneously, through the lens of differing

temporalities and perspectives. A poststructuralist framework for studying phenomena in Appalachia allows for multiple lenses to be examined simultaneously, understanding how language identifications can be both *language of relic* and *language of absence*.

Deconstruction

Because language is an evolving construct, to analyze its use effectively, we must be cognizant of its fluidity regarding both time and space and what is deemed standardized at one point in time may have conflicting interpretations in either the past or present. This is evident in expressions and linguistic phrasing in which the connotation shifts over time and experience. The linguistic theories of poststructuralism account for a reality in which a single truth is not represented in language (Appleby, 2014). We must be cognizant that a single truth cannot be represented in language, and rather, our job is to identify the degree of separation from the experience and analyze how these separations can, in turn, affect the experience's representation in language. In essence, these degrees of separation are variant and fluid across time; the impossibility of a singular truth is reflected in the cyclical nature of reality; an experience can be both more true and less true dependent on the narrative constructed.

In response to theorists such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida articulates a philosophical understanding of linguistic study in which the relationship between language, meaning, and being, and the universality of experiences are examined. Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) defines how we understand language by expanding its fundamental definition. This evolution is noted through the explanation of understanding of the relationship between speech and writing. For Derrida (1976), spoken language is closest to the act being signified. There is less intentional focus on the

difference between writing and speech, as Derrida argues true meaning is lost at the moment of articulation, and we are closest to the experience during its vocalization. Therefore, analyzing the oral interviews of participants is aligned more directly with their experiences. It is through the act of writing we can determine meanings, though the meaning is not singular, and our experiences exist in the otherness created in *différance*. For Derrida, the sign itself represents exclusion in so much as the closest meanings are determined based on the gaps created between the sign and context rather than the sign itself. Writing is the act of understanding speech and, therefore, the process by which we can attribute meaning and understanding; however, the moment we interpret the writing to be a definitive reflection of the sign itself, it can be dangerous (Derrida, 1976). By focusing attention on the imitative elements of language, those seeking to represent the narrative as internalized by the narrator before sharing in either a written or oral format allow for a more comprehensive analysis of shared experiences. In effect, a singular meaning is not made in the annunciation of the experience by participants, but rather, multiple meanings are established through the evaluative process in which the linguistic attributes, metaphorical expressions, and cultural comparatives are noted through the analysis of collected experiences. Even through the interpretive elements of written analysis, poststructuralism rejects the idea of a singular, universal truth. Instead, this frame allows for a more inclusive understanding of experiences, acknowledging the multiplicity of experiences in which a singular event can have multiple truths for multiple participants.

For Derrida, delineating an event to a particular center or focus reduces the ability to understand a situation from a variety of perspectives. Historically, the failure to

recognize the complexity of perceptions has led to a grand narrative of a region or period, such as seen in contemporary interpretations of Appalachia. Derrida's argument for a decentralized interpretation of events, as described in his essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," articulates the movement away from centralized experience to a more complex understanding of culture. Essentially, the center of understanding restricts the event to a form determined by the parameters of the established structure (Derrida, 2014). Here, we can examine the role of historical narrative as a repetition of socially constructed centers that exist sometimes simultaneously in circulation (Hatch, 2002). To best determine the scope of experience, we must redirect our gaze as one of the overlapping circles in which understanding is garnered from the interaction of nonlinear experiences in a common frame. Thus, the understanding of an event is not limited to the acceptance of a universal experience but the evaluation of shared experience through a multiplicity of intersecting characteristics. By shifting away from a linear notion of time, we can evaluate Derrida's concept of *différance* in a way that best captures experience closer to the voice of the narrator, which is examined through various critical lenses such as time and perspective.

Derrida's work regarding the concept of *différance* has implications related to how we view memory in the role of storytelling and thus meaning making, affecting how we analyze narratives in research. *Différance* is related to both temporal and spatial elements of time (Currie, 1998). Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos (2001) argues Derrida's denunciation of the past in addition to the role memory plays in retelling past experiences. Instead, the emphasis on the dialect component of thought and reality suggests, according to Derrida, a nonexistence of the past in the same way he claims as a

nonexistence of death (Santos, 2001; Beista, 2004). Thus, Derrida's proposition of a nonexistent past and acceptance of a nonlinear, non-chronological experience lead us instead to determine the past as not solely a lens from which to view an event or experience but rather a mechanism for creating a new narrative from its inextricable connection to how we have experienced and thus translated these experiences (Hatch, 2002). In the act of narration, we are thus creating rather than retelling as the inevitable perceptions of our past and current realities coincide to form a new entity. For Derrida, the past, present, and future are inexplicably linked as they function together to create a new reality (Santos, 2001). Ultimately, Derrida's focus on alternative perspectives related to grand narratives encourages a renewed emphasis on the otherness otherwise suppressed by allegiance to an ultimate truth or originality, going so far as to determine the act of deconstruction to be one of affirmation of otherness (Biesta, 2004).

Narrative Theory

I utilized narrative theory applied through a poststructuralist lens as a theoretical frame for this study. Narratology is known as the systematic study of narrative, and analyzing the narratives collected by research participants can inform the new narratives we construct regarding teaching in Appalachia (Currie, 1998). In *An Introduction to Narratology*, Monika Fludernik (2006) posits narrative as a form not limited to a singular medium such as the novel, but rather an act closely associated with the telling of a story. In this essence, the narrative is thus created through the "restructuring of our own lives as stories," one where the act of reliving our lived experience creates a new definition of the self. (Fludernik, 2006, p 1). Ultimately, this act allows us to embrace the fictive nature of an otherwise assumedly nonfiction occurrence and expands our study of

narrative beyond the realm of literary criticism. Given this expanded understanding of narrative experience, the tools of narratology can be applied to narratives wherever they may occur (Currie, 2006). Essentially, all narratives that exist beyond the realm of experience itself are fictive in nature. Thus, the narratives constructed by participants can be described based on the narrative constructions as the moment of articulation indicates a separation from the experience itself and a move toward a more fictive representation. For Fludernik, the question of fictive possibility is not reliant solely on the invention of imaginary characters but rather on how our perceptions of events, or in the case of this study, lived experiences envisioned through the lens of both a psychological and interpretive lens, affect the retelling, reordering, and positioning of events in the story.

While narratology allows for the structural elements of the narrative to be examined, the inarguable convergence of fiction and nonfiction can be found in the implications of both real and imagined events. Perhaps the singular question to consider when examining these constructed narratives is not the universality of the event or experience but the emotional ramifications of the experience for the narrator within the context of temporality and continuity. From a poststructuralist lens, there is little differentiation between fact and fiction, going so far as to argue that all experiences are fictive.

Narrative and Identity Formation

Historically, the narratives of Appalachia have run parallel to characteristics of other literary movements in the United States. In some of the earliest accounts, the region was characterized by travel and local color authors; individuals who were traversing the landscape of a country to determine both its bounds and possibilities often described the

region in terms of American Romanticism. The land was presented as a mythos, a secluded space of the American frontier, one whose traditions were primordial and peculiar. In an early account, James Lane Allen (1886) characterizes the region as “undistinguishable and strange” (p.73). The language indicates how the region was depicted as the place where the past and present converged; however, it is also the introduction of Appalachian tradition as “undistinguishable and strange,” a refrain echoed later in the writings of William Goodell Frost (1899) and Horace Kephart (1913). The isolationist depictions of the region introduced through these writings are evident in our contemporary narratives of the region today.

The isolationist interpretations of Appalachia affected characterizations of the landscape, the people, and the language, with the earliest descriptions of the language comparing it to Elizabethan English. Writers such as William Goodell Frost, Charles Morrow Wilson, and Ellen Churchill Semple described the language as a preserved dialect. Contemporary linguistic scholars such as Michael Montgomery (2013) argue connecting Appalachian dialects with figures such as Shakespeare or Chaucer allows for a sense of validation or pride for those living in the region today, explaining how this frame of linguistic attachment still permeates the mythos.

In her research, Katherine Sohn studied the lived experiences of women in Appalachia after attending college, focusing primarily on literacy’s effect on their lives. Her study found that language and dialect influenced how women saw themselves (Sohn, 2003), and Amanda Hayes (2018) studied the compositional experiences of students in her postsecondary writing classes related to argumentative essay construction.

Ultimately, both found students to be affected by the variation of their dialect in terms of how they saw themselves or their writing abilities.

In *The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity*, Todd Snyder examines how characterizations of his Appalachian identity were perceived by others. In the prelude, Snyder argues the caricature of the “Hillbilly” as a rhetorical tradition in which otherness and isolation are attributed to those living in the region. The “hillbilly” as he sees it is a product of the isolationist and mythic portrayals of the region, propagating in the literature of the region since its earliest accounting. Snyder writes, “The Hillbilly as a rhetorical tradition, others, and positions Appalachian people in a way that is disadvantageous to their development as critical thinkers” (p. 32). Later adding that students in Appalachia are not provided with the opportunity to consider their relationship to these ideas (Snyder, 2014), an experience Snyder himself was unable to have until his own time in college. Questions as to whether this discovery of identity occurs within the postsecondary realm of experience related to movement away from the region or if it is associated with developmental progression from adolescence to adulthood. In the research of Hayes, Sohn, and Clark, students came to these discoveries while attending postsecondary institutions in the Appalachian region. Therefore, investigating how Appalachian identity is experienced in secondary classrooms can contribute to gaps in current research. Ultimately, how language use affects identity formation is critical for a better characterization of Appalachian experiences and may be dependent on the community being studied. Both views of linguistic inheritance stem from the isolationist characterizations of the region.

Those who ascribe to these views of Appalachian dialects are associated with an isolationist interpretation of the region. As Henry Shapiro (1978) claims the way Appalachia was understood was not due to factual or objective realities but based on the reality presented from a particular lens or viewpoint.

Closer examination of the degrees of separation from experience to retelling can provide insight into additional perceptions or experiences of a common event and is critical when exploring the narratives constructed by participants and the act of constructing the narrative findings. The relationship between narrative and identity formation is well-established. Currie (1998) argues for the origins of identity stating:

The first is that identity is relational, meaning that is not to be found inside a person but that it inheres in the relations between a person and others. According to this argument, the explanation of a person's identity must designate the difference between that person and others: it must refer not to the inner life of the person but to the system of differences through which individuality is constructed. In other words, personal identity is not really contained in the body at all; it is structured by, or constituted by, difference. The second type of argument is that identity is not within us because it exists only as narrative (p. 17).

The concept of relational identity as it relates to experiences in Appalachia is replicated in the region's understanding and acceptance of itself over time. Specifically, as Hayes (2018) and Shumann (2016) noted in the concept of identity constructs, historically, how

individuals define and understand what it means to be Appalachian is based on the insider and outsider perspectives which permeated the earliest accounts of the region. Therefore, approaching research from a poststructuralist lens allows for the complexity and multiplicity of its narratives to be considered. A poststructuralist theoretical frame responds to the inaccurate representations or the grand narratives of the region.

Here, the Derridean terms trace structure and narrative history are applicable theoretical frames. According to Derrida, trace structure posits because signs are integrated into cultural contexts, their meanings are influenced by all the signs that preceded and will follow it (Currie, 1998). Narrative theorists emphasize the role of narrative time as a determinant factor when determining meaning. The meaning-making process applied to the act of narration indicates a degree of removal consistent with not only each retelling but also the relationship to the audience, contextual elements of temporality, and interaction with place. Ultimately, meanings cannot be isolated in the present, and the sign bears the trace of all the contextual influences that have preceded it, as well as setting the roots for all that will follow. Though the possibilities of meanings are limitless, they are guided by the origin and pattern of previous signs. When applying this principle to Appalachian identity studies, this is noted in the previous discussion of Todd Snyder's *The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity*, in which Snyder traces the evolution of "hillbilly," a term propagated and tagged in stereotypical representations of the Appalachian region. When utilizing trace structure, determining the origin of the sign and its subsequent contextualization is framed in its earliest inclusion.

Critique of Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism as a theoretical framework is open to critical interpretations by scholars who seek research designed to provide a solution to a societal ill or one that offers generalizations to a larger community. As Hodgson and Standish (2009) acknowledge, poststructuralism tends to cause distraction because of its inability to provide solutions or to find a culminating answer to a research question. Poststructuralist researchers are interested in the multiplicity of experience, rejecting generalized narratives or even a common consensus. The nonlinear nature of this type of research can be disconcerting as it rejects the notion of a universal truth and, in instances of narrative-based research, can act in conflict with the temporal nature of plot constructions. For narrative researchers, this can be problematic in terms of the narratives, both constructed or collected. Even the tenets of deconstruction can work in opposition to the aim of most educational researchers. The deconstruction of a text is critical in the sense that the critique may not be possible because the nature of critique is in opposition to the fundamental tenets of the theory (Marshall, 2004). Poststructuralist researchers create narratives which enforce the multiplicity of experiences related to living and teaching in the region can contribute to the overall understanding of the region. If understandings of Appalachia are shaped by the questions we ask about the current narratives, questioning which narrative are shared and why, how they are perceived over time, and the dualities of meaning can aid us in understanding the lived experience of those in the region.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research study employed a descriptive narrative inquiry to describe the experiences of secondary English Language Arts teachers in the Appalachian region, exploring how participants defined English Language Arts Education and what, if any, tensions emerged in those definitions. The method of narrative inquiry is a particularly relevant methodology in the field of educational research, which often examines the experiences of both students and teachers in the continuum of learning (Hatch, 2002). For this study, the use of narrative is implemented in two ways: the creation of new narratives based on participant interviews and thematic analysis of those narratives. The exploration of narrative threads which emerged from the participant stories can inform larger, contemporary issues of power in systematic structures in regions of the Southern Appalachian region.

Narrative Inquiry

This research study is a descriptive, narrative inquiry, one seeking to describe the experiences of secondary English Language Arts educators living and teaching in the region. The purpose of this study is to determine how first-year English Arts educators define English Language Arts education and to analyze what, if any, tensions emerge through their narratives. Through the process of narrative inquiry, researchers seek to essentially create a new sense of significance and meaning while refuting a universalized truth or singular representation, one whose aims directly align with my poststructuralist lens. While poststructuralism rejects the stereotypical monolithic representations of Appalachia, the participant voices represent the variation of experiences within a singular region of Southern Appalachia. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue the importance of

narrative thinking when determining the meaning of experiences; thus, examining the individual experiences in a community makes it an appropriate methodology of study. How participants describe their experiences in the present while reflecting on the past creates a new sense of meaning to be examined in the current socio-political context. Given the complexity of Appalachian identities, this method is appropriate for examining individual experiences in comparison to other contemporary accounts of both living and teaching in a southern Appalachian region.

Poststructuralism and Narrative Inquiry

Poststructuralism as a theoretical frame blends well with the field of narrative inquiry as both prioritize the voices of participants and are cognizant of the fluidity of time. Framing narrative inquiry in a poststructuralist theoretical frame allows the work, at times, to be grounded by the political or rhetorical value of the narratives (Clandinin & Roseik, 2007).

Historically, most narratives of the Appalachian region were founded on the premise of isolationist theories in which those living in Appalachia were separated within their communities and from larger areas of the United States (Frost, 1899). Often, these accounts fail to recognize the interconnectedness of the Appalachian people and their role in preservation of both dialect and custom (Shapiro, 1978; Snyder, 1981; Montgomery, 2000). However, collecting narrative accounts from educators with varied perspectives and backgrounds will allow for specific stories to be told, contributing to a larger conversation about Appalachian identities and their formation over time.

Ultimately, I am rejecting a singular narrative that centralizes a universal truth but embracing a methodology exploring narratives representing what George Ella Lyon

termed “voiceplace,” the first voice we learn and the foundation for further narrative development (2014). Hodgson and Standish (2009) believe narrative research allows researchers to capture the voice of participants utilizing narrative inquiry as a tool to construct narratives of the region allows researchers to highlight voices that may have been inadequately represented in the early isolationist interpretations of the region while recognizing how participants reflect on elements of “voice place” for both them and their students. This application of the study correlates to Derrida’s ideas of origin and the sign and their essential role as elements of exclusion outlined in Chapter 2. Ultimately, the findings of this study contribute new narratives of Appalachian experiences to be contrasted with previously accepted narratives. Comparing these new narratives to prior accounts of the region, highlighting commonalities and differences in each participant narrative, while exploring associations with Appalachian identity formations and the English Language Arts classroom may inform larger issues related to curriculum design and writing instruction.

Temporality

In this study, temporality is significantly related to the educational setting and was examined based on Derrida’s concept of narrative time and narrative history. Though qualitative research studies have been conducted regarding nonstandard American English in classrooms (Wheeler, 2004, 2006, & 2016), none specifically have focused on Southern Appalachian English in secondary writing classrooms and studies on the attitude of secondary English Language Arts teachers toward verbal and written expression in the classroom is limited. Thus, the temporality associated with this study contributes to additional understandings of Appalachian identities with implications for

classroom instruction. The variation of participant experiences indicates a particular moment in chronological time, though the experiences themselves are united in the present. From a poststructuralist lens, acknowledging temporality as participants reflect on their experiences teaching in Appalachia in a contemporary time setting means recognizing the fluid nature of the narrative. The data for analysis takes place in the present while participants reflect on events from the past. From a Derridean sense, both the narratives gleaned from the data, as well as the narratives constructed by participants, were viewed from a lens of both past and present experiences.

Personal and Social Attributes

The personal and social characteristics of this narrative inquiry are founded on three conceptual levels. First is the level of the students. Though their voices are not the focus of this study, what they contribute both in the classroom and through their writing assignments informed how teachers conversed with me throughout the collection of data as questions. Participant perception of student language usage in the classroom informed the tensions identified in our discussions. The questions posed to participants related to educator's perspective of student learning and patterns witnessed in student writings were significant when considering what educators valued related to writing instruction and writing instruction in practice. The second level, personal and social attributes, is that of the participants themselves. The role of the researcher vacillates between the role of intermediary, interpreting educator narrative of student learning, to that of a translator, one who critically analyzes the narrative along with additional field text to craft a narrative in time account of teaching. The meaning-making that occurs as I engage with participant stories allowed complexities and tensions to be further explored.

The final situational consideration in this dimension is that of the social. The social dimensions refer to the factors outside of the individual that inform the individual context, i.e., the environment, outside forces, and other individuals (Clandinin & Roseik, 2007). It is important to consider the social and cultural context of the setting and time from which this data has been collected. In this study, the effects of both Hurricane Helene and the discussions related to the Tennessee Education Freedom Act were significant in the participant's lived experiences.

Place

As the concept of place is socially constructed in terms of physical and metaphysical interpretations of Appalachia as outlined in chapters 1 and 2, acknowledging how these constructs are experienced by the participants will inform the findings. How participants understand their own Appalachian identities, as well as the regional characteristics of their site, contribute to their overall experiences with Appalachian Englishes. This dimension was the foundation of early interviews as participants were required to define Appalachian and English Language Arts education in Appalachia, which may vary depending on the degree of belongingness shared by each participant.

Sample Population

Given this study required information from a particular population with expert knowledge, participants were required to be secondary English Language Arts teachers living in the Southern Appalachian region of the United States, specifically working in districts in upper northeastern Tennessee. Participants needed to teach secondary English Language Arts classes to ensure similar instruction of writing practice and written

assignments aligned with the Tennessee State Standards for that grade band and were recruited through email addresses linked to the district webpages. Purposeful sampling methods allow for experts in each area to participate in the study, and was the most appropriate method for sampling (Creswell & Creswell Baez, 2021). All were first-year English Language Arts teachers from the Appalachian region who identify as Appalachian.

The regional designations determining which districts were eligible for participation are drawn from the Appalachian Regional Commission designation of sub-regions within Appalachia. The Appalachian Regional Commission determines a county's level of risk by comparing three-year averages of unemployment rates, poverty rates, and per capita income with those of the nation. The study is based in the south-central subregions, with all participants teaching in districts deemed by the commission to be at risk for economic distress. Two out of four participants teach in districts heavily impacted by the effects of Hurricane Helene while all four teach in county school districts.

Participants

Nate

Nate is a first-year English Language Arts teacher in a rural school district in south-central Appalachia. The county his district serves is designated as "At Risk," with five economically distressed areas. Nate identifies as a Caucasian male in the demographic age range of 25-35. He completed his English Language Arts Teacher preparation program as an undergraduate student and has an advanced degree in media and library services. During his graduate study, he served as an interim English Language

Arts teacher for a city school district in the region for approximately twelve weeks. Upon completion of his graduate degree, Nate accepted a position teaching in the school district he once attended as a K-12 student. Nate currently teaches 9th and 11th grade English Language Arts at the county's only high school.

Camden

Camden is a first-year English Language Arts teacher in a rural district in south-central Appalachia. Camden has a bachelor's degree and master's degree in English literature and has completed the coursework required for a PhD in English literature at an out-of-state institution. Camden is currently a job-embedded teacher and is working on initial licensure while serving as the teacher of record. She/ They are currently in their second semester of teaching and are employed as a teacher in the district they attended for K-12. Camden identifies as she/her and is Caucasian in the age demographic of 25-35.

Jacob

Jacob is a first-year English Language Arts teacher in a rural district in south-central Appalachia. Jacob identifies as a biracial male in the age demographic of 18-24. He completed his initial teacher licensure at the undergraduate level where he majored in English literature and minored in secondary education. This is his first semester of teaching, and he now teaches 9th and 10th grades in the district where he attended as a K-12 student.

Caitlyn

Caitlyn is a first-year English Language Arts teacher in her first semester of teaching Middle School in an urban district of Appalachia. She completed her teacher licensure at the undergraduate level where she majored in English literature and minored

in secondary education. Caitlyn identifies as a Caucasian woman in the age demographic of 18-24.

Data Analysis

The field of narrative inquiry requires researchers to engage with the communities in which they are collecting data, as the final narratives are based on the experiences shared by both the researcher and the participant. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) articulate the importance of researchers in the field, emphasizing the role they have in becoming part of the community. As the findings of this study are narratives constructed based on the data collection, it is important to vary the means of collection and, as the researcher, to be cognizant of my role in the new narrative construction. Therefore, this study relied on two primary field texts collected during time spent in the field: 1.) Interviews and 2.) Field Journals.

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews with participants were one mode of data collection informing the findings of this study. The interviews, later analyzed through a poststructuralist theoretical framework, allowed participants to engage in conversations related to their experiences in the English Language Arts classroom. As J. Amos Hatch (2002) describes it, poststructuralist interviewers “seek to explore ‘truths’ that are local, temporal, and in flux” (p.24). The fluctuation is a critical area for me as a researcher because it allows me to move between past and present as I reflect on my experiences in the classroom in conversation with the experiences of participants.

The constructed narratives represent teaching in Appalachia during a selected moment in time; the act of narration itself was key to establishing common themes of experience. Monika Fludernik (2006) argues that the reconstruction of lives as stories “emphasizes how particular occurrences have brought about and influenced subsequent events” (p. 65). Therefore, examining the interviews led to exploring how participants differentiated between scene versus summary, the connotative characteristics of the language used to describe the experiences, and most importantly, the use of narrative frames to establish the action. I was interested in what examples they chose to describe in detail and what elements of the questions they summarized. The interview process allowed for the collection of language elements beyond grammatical expression, while the act of storytelling allowed for an intentional focus on body language and connection to the audience (Bamberg& Demuth, 2011). See **Table 1** for excerpt of interview protocol and Appendix C for the full protocol.

Table 1 Interview Protocol Excerpt

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	
QUESTIONS	
1.	How do you define English Language Arts Education? What are your responsibilities?
2.	Does English Language Arts Education in practice match your definition of what it should be? Why or why not?
3.	What does it mean to be an English Language Arts educator in this region? Does the context of the region matter?

The analysis of the interviews determined how these perceptions contribute to identity formation related to teaching English Language Arts and teaching in a specific region.

The questions were staggered intentionally allowing participants to build an initial response frame leading to the next question. Ultimately, the new narratives of each participant were compared with other participants during the coding process to determine a narrative thread.

Interviews were conducted in an open interview setting utilizing a university associated Zoom account and were password protected with a required waiting room for admission. The interviews were conducted in a locked office with a sign on the door to ensure data collection is not disturbed. The meetings were recorded and downloaded into a password protected laptop for transcription and coding processes.

Field Journals

For narrative researchers, walking alongside the research participant to understand the lived experience is known as the process of retelling stories (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). In the process of retelling, stories evolve from existing as a fixed entity and are reconfigured with the inclusion of present-day introspection alongside the contextual environment in which the story occurred. This is particularly important as this view allowed me to reposition the narrative and “restory” my own understandings of Appalachian identities. I, as the researcher, completed field journals and analytic memos following each interview to engage with the narratives presented by participants and to construct new narratives.

Coding Processes

Nowell, L. et al. (2017) argue the importance of including detailed procedural responses to coding the data to determine emerging themes and outlines six phases for establishing trustworthiness in thematic analysis. Below, I outlined each phase based on their framework and explained each step's significance to this study.

Phase 1: Familiarity with Yourself and Data

The first phase of interaction with data for qualitative researchers includes outlining how researchers initially engage with the information. Outlining preliminary coding is significant because as we engage in data collection, we are beginning to make associations internal to the participant experience but in relation to other participant responses. Preliminary coding began for this study began while collecting data during the interview process. After each interview was conducted, I recorded analytic memos related to each response. Often, these memos aligned with content shared by the participants during our conversation and included my initial reactions to the conversation in addition to reflections from my experience as a classroom teacher. As the coding cycles progressed, the roots of final codes can often be traced back to initial responses to the transcript. Initial responses to participant language and expression can be seen in the first memo as tensions were evident after the first conversation. Recording these ideas and my reactions to them allowed me to reflect on these ideas in additional participant responses, forming the basis of what would become axial codes after data review. See **Table 2** for an excerpt from the analytic memo.

Table 2 Analytic Memo Excerpt

Analytic Memo Excerpt	
Participant 1 Memo 1	<i>Immediately after the interview, I was struck by the emergent themes I already felt in the conversation. Continued use of nature, self-reliance, power, and connection to the region and its people. Insider/outsider tension between being part of the community and multi-layered responsibilities of teaching. Expectation and reality of teaching were explored as administrative tasks such as testing preparation.</i> <i>When I spoke with the participant today, his passion for teaching and helping his community was evident. He mentioned helping his community several times and that even came up as one of the responsibilities in teaching. A contribution to a larger need for society. Meeting with him in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Helene was emotional. He spoke to the utter devastation affecting his school and community.</i>
Participant 1 Memo 4	As I read through the transcripts, here are some noticing... • <i>Interconnectedness of community</i> • <i>Desire to help</i> • <i>Tensions between curriculum and definitions of ELA instruction</i> • <i>Technology and access to technology</i> • <i>Natural disaster implications and changing roles</i> • <i>Self-reliance versus desire to support one another</i> <i>There is a strong sense of pride, self-reliance, and community values tied into the narrative. Struggles with technology and access to technology affecting both experience as a student and as an instructor. Participant returned to district where he attended.</i> <i>The transcript of the second interview indicates a tension between the values of the instructor and the content that is being delivered. Increased instruction of standardized grammar and spelling to comply with rubric.</i>

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Saldana (2021) argues the significance of identifying preliminary responses to data utilizing a three-column system for organization. As I reviewed the transcript data, all data was inputted into the far-left column. Once the data was entered, I read the transcript in its entirety, highlighting specific elements from the narrative informing both the chronological arrangement of the participant narratives and themes emerging from participant responses. The second round of coding included *invivo* coding, which aims to prioritize the voices of the participants (Saldana, 2021). Because my theoretical frame prioritizes the various voices of Appalachian experience, replicating participant voices as they appear in the text was critical. In the responses, examples of dialect and regional nuance to speech are evident. The second round of coding, axial coding, occurred after all data was collected for the participant. While reviewing the data from each round of participant interviews, identifying the relationships between words and phrases along with determining their connotation signified how the axial codes developed. For example, while working with Nate, in his initial transcript data, he mentioned the word “pride” specifically. The word itself became part of the *invivo* coding and later developed into an axial code. This was also true for Jacob’s coding process. The word “pride” appeared directly in his descriptions and developed from *invivo* into an axial code. While for participants such as Caitlyn and Camden, the axial codes were derived from the connotative associations with the raw interview transcripts. In Camden’s case, the phrase, “badge of honor” associated with pride leading to the adoption of pride as an axial code. For Caitlyn, this code was most directly associated with a sense of belonging. Here, the reliance on the conative association of “belonging” and “pride” made the axial code an

appropriate adoption for her characterization. The process of determining conative relationships between codes was conducted through an associative word mapping exercise. See **Table 3** through **Table 6** for excerpts from individual participant codebooks.

During this process, I worked with each data set independently to determine both *invivo* and axial concepts. Reflecting on the analytic memos and notes from the interview, I took note of any overlaps. Initially, I noted feelings of belonging and self-reliance along with frustration with state accountability systems appeared frequently in participant responses.

Phase 3 Searching for Themes

Once the data was organized for each participant, I reviewed the axial coding notes and created an Excel sheet to discover themes. These themes emerged based on connotations and similarities of participant expression. In some instances, axial codes were combined to form a singular theme. For example, a sense of community and belongingness combined for “pride” in Appalachian identities, while attitudes toward Appalachian English expression in their classrooms were separated into the two distinct categories of the *language of relic* and *language of absence*. Themes were derived based on deductive analysis, the process in which researchers are guided by a theoretical frame or research interest (Nowell, et al., 2017). I determined my themes based on my theoretical frames of language of relic and language of absence in addition to previous literature on Appalachian identity formation.

Table 3 Codebook Excerpt Nate

CODE BOOK EXCERPT NATE

<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>Transcript</i>	<i>Invivo Coding</i>	<i>Axial Coding</i>
NATE	I most definitely think I do. Born and raised in this area. I have a strong connection, I think, to the area that we live in. And I think that's one of the main values that I think I hold, and a lot of other people hold this we're proud of where we live, and we want to preserve what we have. Also, like being self-reliant, I think is part of that definition. We want to be able to do. Stuff ourselves. I think we've set very easy with the where we come together as a community and do things in order to preserve the natural world around us. Other than that, though place of beauty. I think a lot of people around here love, and they value the place. They have a lot of natural hiking trails that kind of stuff. So, I think that's like the mainstay of people from Appalachian. If you had to define us, I think that would be like the main things that you could define our culture, I guess, or our area.	I most definitely think I do. Born and raised in this area. We're proud of where we live, and we want to preserve what we have. We want to be able to do. Stuff ourself. we come together as a community and do things in order to preserve the natural world around us I think a lot of people around here love, and they value the place.	Belongingness Pride Resiliency Community Pride and value

Table 4 Code Book Excerpt Camden

CODE BOOK EXCERPT CAMDEN

<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>Transcript</i>	<i>Invivo Coding</i>	<i>Axial Coding</i>
CAMDEN	Absolutely. first of all, I think our region is sort of known as first and foremost, for better for worse. Poor. I have several family members who over in R---- are from a little neighborhood called P--- Valley... I see the Appalachian people, if we want to call it that, as having common sense street smarts, you might call it but also being super resilient to anything that heads their way. I would define the area have a lot of struggles, have a lot of things that we have to tackle, but we are more than able to overcome them. Absolutely. I do trying to think. I mean, I know that I, too, have that background. Grew up not exceptionally like poverty- stricken. But we've struggled my entire life. And that's not been something that was a secret. It was, in many ways, like a badge of honor.	For better for worse. Poor. Being super resilient to anything that heads their way We are more than able to overcome them. But we've struggled my entire life. Like a badge of honor.	Resilient Resilient Pride

Table 5 Code book excerpt Caitlyn

CODE BOOK EXCERPT CAITLYN

<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>Transcript</i>	<i>Invivo Coding</i>	<i>Axial Coding</i>
CAITLYN	Okay. I think of Appalachia being the region, I guess, around, like Knoxville, east past Johnson City. So, like into Asheville, into North Carolina. I would say, yes, I do identify I don't know. I don't know if I can technically identify as Appalachian, but I would say, Yes, just because of living there for college and then living currently in that region. I feel like I moved a lot growing up. So, I would say that's probably the most amount of time. So I'm gonna take it.	I would say, yes, I do identify. I don't know. I don't know if I can technically identify as Appalachian,	Distinct culture Belongingness

Table 6 Code Book Excerpt Jacob

CODE BOOK EXCERPT JACOB

<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>Transcript</i>	<i>Invivo Coding</i>	<i>Axial Coding</i>
JACOB	I define Appalachia as a good portion of the area where we have the mountains where the Smoky mountains is located over in parts of Eastern Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, and in this area, we all kind of have our own culture that's very, very distinct. And I do identify as Appalachian. I've grown up in Eastern Tennessee my whole life so and very proudly. So, there's a lot of great culture and a lot of great just experiences and things that you get to see that you hear that you don't get to see anywhere else.	In this area we all kind of have our own culture that's very, very distinct. I've grown up in Eastern Tennessee my whole life so and very proudly.	Distinct culture Pride in Appalachian identities

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Once the immediate themes were established, I reviewed the full transcripts to identify additional examples from participant language that correlated with the theme. In addition, I reviewed the data to determine if there was conflicting information in participant responses that either invalidated or affected the theme in some way. For example, when reviewing participant responses related to notions of fixed Appalachian identities, I reviewed Caitlyn's transcript and noted the reluctance to define herself as Appalachian. In this instance, the discussion was enriched by this noticing, and provided an opportunity for additional commentary.

Phase 5: Reviewing and Naming Themes

After the participant responses were compiled and reviewed as a unit, themes were classified based on the similarities shared among the axial codes. Aligning with participant language was particularly important when determining the final themes. Specifically, when considering the category for fixed Appalachian identities, all but one participant incorporated a variation of "pride" in their descriptor while the final participant had language closely aligned with pride. In determining the themes of how participants defined English Language Arts Education, most characterized the subject in a way that provided a bridge to other subjects and life beyond the secondary classroom. For this theme, the participants were connected by the tensions they experienced in teaching the subject in addition to how they experienced the subject in their classrooms.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

In producing the report, engaging with the language of the participants, the narrative constructed from the data review, and my analytic memos were imperative. The

purpose of this study was to provide additional narrative representations of teaching English Language Arts in Appalachia while engaging with historical and contemporary representations of the region. Nowell, et al. (2017) argues the validity of the argument improved when researchers engage with the literature. The findings and implications of this study engage with contemporary issues in the region, analyzing similarities and differences between educational practices and other areas of economic and social systems in Southern Appalachia. The findings of this study are grounded in my own experiences as a secondary English Language Arts teacher and include my own narrative frame, the narratives constructed from participant interviews, and the narrative threads that emerged during the data analysis process.

Because narrative inquiry embraces the co-composition of research texts, participants were engaged in both the adoption of their pseudonyms as they appear in the findings and reviewed their narratives as they were constructed. All findings were shared with participants with the opportunity for alterations or updates based on their responses.

Johnson and Christensen (2020) argue three justifications for narrative inquiry: personal justification, practical justifications, and social/theoretical justifications. Personal justifications allow the findings of narrative inquiry to affect the personal beliefs or understanding of the researcher, while social/ theoretical justifications allow for the findings to alter current practices or affect the cultural capital in some capacity. The participant narratives and the narrative threads attend to both personal and social/ theoretical implications for the study. The above describes the process for thematic narrative construction. The creation of the participant narratives, a critical component of narrative inquiry, is described below.

The Process of Restorying

As previously mentioned, it is important for researchers to engage with the narrative of the participants throughout the process of collecting data. This awareness affects the construction of the new narratives, causing researchers to lean into and away from certain events shared by the participants. Christensen (2019) describes this process as “deep listening,” which may cause the researcher to make connections to their own related experiences. For me, this process evolved throughout data collection as participants recalled experiences related to end-of-course testing and specific encounters with content related to English Language Arts instruction. Below is an excerpt from the first interview with Camden in which Camden shares an experience teaching “Lamb to the Slaughter” by Roald Dahl to her 9th-grade class. Below, she describes how her instruction moves beyond the character and evolves into a critique of contemporary societal conflicts.

Camden: They get really into the murder most foul, but we get some really interesting responses about Mary as a character. And so it's essentially a character analysis. But it's informative in that you are pulling from the text and saying what it's saying.

And then we're also inferring and so sometimes well, a lot of times, because they're so early in their journeys, “Okay, she's crazy. She should be locked up.” Without thinking about what is necessarily going on behind the scenes before the story ever begins and not knowing, say, like the history of feminism. And you know, women's roles in the era, and because it takes place in the fifties, and so we have to. We have to have a conversation that it is more than just this sort of isolated incident that leads her to it, or maybe let's question whether or not something leads her to killing her husband in this kind of moment of psychosis or is she crazy.

Megan Krupa: That reminds me of some similar discussions that I had when I would teach *Of Mice and Men*.

Camden: Yes.

Megan Krupa: Because they get so angry at her [Curley's wife], for you know her comments to Crooks, and luring Lenny into the barn, but they don't always want to look at her as a character and try to, like you said, navigate the context of the time period, and what was happening outside of what was written. I think when you were sharing that, it just kind of resonated with me, that yeah, I've had similar conversations, for sure.

My exchange with Camden reminded me of a particular moment of instruction where I engaged with students to look beyond the text, critical thinking through character motivations. Camden, compared the instruction of ELA to teaching morality, and through this exchange, I was able to reflect on our shared experience with the texts.

Jacob and I shared a similar experience during an exchange in one of his interview sessions. The following is an excerpt from that conversation.

Jacob: Now, that is one thing that I've actually told my students. I was like, "There is not. There is not necessarily a right way to speak." Because I've had some students that say you didn't. You didn't phrase this correctly or whatever I was like, "Well, I'm just talking. I'm just talking with you, one on one. I'm not trying to sound very formal," and I've kind of used that as a as a learning experience. I was like, 'Well, we live in an area where you know a lot of times what you would see formally on a paper isn't how we speak.' And I think that's really everywhere, but especially in this area. And you know, they're like they're like, "Well, you're an English teacher." I was like, 'Well, yeah, but that hasn't changed where I'm from, you know'.

Megan Krupa: Yeah, and hearing you say that reminded me of something I hadn't thought about in a very long time, Jacob, which was, I used to tell my students that they're that writing and speaking are two separate forms of communication, and how you interact vocally may not be the way that you interact on the page. So that just it brings back a lot of memories and makes me

wonder that because I do wonder about our students, and especially you've mentioned dialect, and how do we see dialect in the classroom versus dialect on the paper? So? And that kind of brings me to the next formal question, which is, how would you describe the language used by your students in their writing? Jacob: I would say that it is very. I'll be honest a lot of times. It's very plain.

Engaging in this conversation with Jacob altered my thoughts on the language of relic and language of absence as it was developing as a theme. I reflected on my experiences with Appalachian Englishes in the classroom and was reminded of a poem I taught in tenth grade and the students' responses to the text.

Construction of Participant Narratives

When preparing to construct the participant narratives, it was important for me to frame the texts in a way that represented their language and perspectives accurately. After all data was collected and initially reviewed, I wrote one sentence that summarized the tone of each participant and their self-described associations with the profession. As I constructed the narratives, I framed the story based on those initial summaries. Initially, I reviewed data to highlight significant narratives within the text. Next, I chronologically arranged the data and determined which quotes from the participants would anchor each narrative. Finally, I framed the narrative with an objective, third-person account that, at times, took on the persona of the researcher. I intentionally managed three voices throughout the participant narratives: the removed researcher voice, "Megan" as the conversation partner and active research voice, and the participant's active responses. Each narrative shifts between each of the three to create the participant findings. Considerations related to temporality were especially significant for this part of the project as shifting from the present participant account in the quotes to the objective,

removed researcher voice of the present did not occur in the same present. Initial participant narratives were shared with participants before the inclusion of the final drafts in Chapter 4.

Reflexive Considerations

Because narrative inquiry requires researchers to become a part of the meaning-making process of the narrative construction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), it is important for researchers operating within this methodology to consider their roles in the community prior to and during the data collection processes. In addition, because this research study is focused on characteristics of Appalachian identity formations, recognizing the cultural implications of insider and outsider perspectives was crucial for an accurate representation of the experience. Here, I construct the “I” in terms of my positionality in this study. From a poststructuralist lens, I consider the self in terms of past, present, and future. Prior to entering the field of higher education, I was a high school English Language Arts teacher in a public school system in northeastern Tennessee. I entered the classroom at twenty-two years old after graduating from a four-year undergraduate teacher preparation program at a regional university. I accepted a teaching position in the same high school where I not only completed my student teaching but also attended as a student. In this sense, I am a true insider in the regional educational setting and feel my identities are fluid as teacher-researcher and researcher-teacher. In terms of conversational elements and experiences related to the experiences of teaching narrative writing in the region, I can reflect on my own experiences of teaching writing in the region when constructing participant narratives, specifically related to the administration of the TN Ready End -of- Course Exam to students in English II.

In addition, I recognize my position as a lifelong resident of Appalachia may affect how participants interact and communicate their experiences with me. Historically, the Appalachian region has been depicted through the lens of those outside the region or exaggerated through monolithic or stereotypical representations of the region. It is important that those conducting research in Appalachia be familiar with elements of Appalachian culture, specifically related perceptions of Appalachian, which are determined not only by its historical representations, but by the questions researchers are asking and the narratives constructed based on that research (Schumann, 2016). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that the centrality of the researcher's experiences within the context of the participant's experiences; therefore, my positionality in this relationship places me within the community.

From the lens of the present, my work in the field of educator preparation connects me directly to participants in a variety of ways. Participants in this study were once students during their licensure preparation. In such cases, participants may be more or less likely to feel they can share information related to experiences of educator preparation in conversation with their perceived ability to instruct writing, though I see this as strength and narrative inquiry requires researchers to be embedded in the communities among which they are writing.

In my current role, I have professional working relationships with many ELA teachers in these districts who serve as mentor teachers as well as alumni from the university affiliation. I believe my established working relationships with potential participants ensured active participation and response to the initial research invitation. My position allows me to move between the lens of student, teacher, and teacher

educator; I feel participants will be more likely to view me as an insider and more willing to share their experiences openly.

My experiences in the English Language Arts writing classroom were deeply influenced by contemporary issues such as school safety and social media usage among students, but during my time in the classroom, I failed to consider how other variable, such as geographic location or identity formation, affected my instruction and relationship with students. Specifically, there were missed opportunities to examine how elements of Appalachia manifested in the classroom and how these cultural characteristics affected the literature in the classroom.

Ethical and Quality Considerations

The primary ethical considerations of this study include the right to the story itself. Though approval through IRB was obtained, questions related to who has the right to consent may still arise. The lived experiences of students sometimes surfaced in participant responses, and those stories may be shared through the lens of participants rather than first-hand accounts. Because narratives are constructed based on an individual's perception in a particular moment, it is important to consider which voices are raised and which are not. The degrees of removal must also be considered when we trace the movement from the interpretation of events through the lens of a participant to the interpretation of an event through the lens of the researcher. Analyzing the subjectivity and decisions related to how the narratives are represented by the participant to the researcher will be remedied through the inclusion of the analytic memo. Furthermore, participants may have been less likely to share honest interpretations of accountability systems within their districts if those opinions were critical.

Because I am interested in multiple perspectives rather than a grand narrative, comparing how participants view their experiences at different points in time. Ultimately, a qualitative narrative inquiry will allow for the construction and deconstruction of narratives relaying the complexity of the region.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to lift the voices of those teaching English in Appalachia who are not always at the forefront of the conversation. The narratives included below are from four participants, each unique in the experience of teaching, and all coming to the profession of teaching in different ways with different end goals in mind.

Nate's Story

Background and Beginnings

The cool whip of the wind was welcoming for the early autumn morning heat. It was in the in-between. That time when it's hard to determine where summer ends and where fall begins. Nate walked up the rutted, muddy path of the mountain trail before him. In 11th grade and confused as to why his English teacher brought the class to the ridge beyond the valley of their school, he knew the task but not the meaning. Transcendentalist poetry, connections with nature, and echoes of Emerson all felt removed from himself somehow. Sure, the mountain ridge was his home, but the mud, still caked in the treads of his shoes from trench-digging, was the only connection he felt to the ground that day.

Nate's experiences as an English Language Arts teacher are grounded in the memories of both past and place, the culmination of what it means to be from a place and to be in it. A life-long resident of the small, rural community, he has returned to teach in the same district he once attended. However, identifying as Appalachian and embracing the complexities of what those identities mean is a consistent tension in his classroom.

We're proud of where we live, and we want to preserve what we have. Also, like being self-reliant, I think is part of that definition. We want to be able to do stuff ourselves. We come together as a community and do things in order to preserve the natural world around us. Other than that, though, a place of beauty. I think a lot of people around here love and they value the place.

As a middle school and high school student, Nate experienced the physical characteristics of the region and their effect on his studies in English Language Arts, highlighting both the element of connectedness and isolation of his school district. Often struggling to access clear Wi-Fi, assignments related to technology that required the use of computers and the internet were challenging. With the introduction to online homework in middle school, Nate reflected on technology and how he viewed himself as a student writer.

I remember it was a lot of grammar-focused stuff like to improve or increase fluency. And that kind of stuff. Because we needed it, we most definitely needed it. I remember in middle school, I needed that, but the issue was is that we were still on dial-up internet connections because they still hadn't run any type of wire to our house. I mean, it was very much as slow as you could get for internet.

Early on, the focus on grammar instruction and speech was significant in determining how Nate viewed himself as a student writer, a thread emerging later as he described himself as a teacher. Consistently, there was a focus on fragmented expression and an increased focus on fluency.

But our ideas and our sentences kept ending abruptly like we would have an idea, and then it would become a fragment because we wouldn't finish our thoughts completely. And maybe that's the dialect that we had at the time. We were trying to write like we spoke, and it didn't really work out that way because we would get halfway through a thought, and it would just cut.

As a middle school writer, he lacked “the confidence and fluency” he felt was needed to describe himself as a writer, and the ideas of his grammar being flawed permeated his thoughts. For Nate, the love of content came later. In high school, he was introduced to the works of Transcendentalist American authors, and the connections between the land, himself, and the content merged to form the foundation of who he would become as a teacher. His ninth-grade teacher, newly graduated from a regional university, and his eleventh-grade teacher, an interdisciplinary guru, were his most influential mentors. It is evident in hearing the stories of his coming-to-be as an ELA student and how his early experiences influenced his understanding of what it means to be an English Language Arts educator.

Pathway to the Profession

The decision to become an English Language Arts educator was not immediate. It didn’t appear to him, reflected in the opaque waters of a creek bed or howling through the barren branches of an overgrown sugar maple, as some contemporary Appalachian narratives would have us believe. It was not his destiny. It was a choice.

Originally, Nate planned to enter medicine, working in the field as a certified nursing assistant; he was waitlisted for a nursing program at a regional university, which gave him time to take some additional coursework. It was a pamphlet that brought him to teaching and a teacher who determined his choice.

The first time I was there (at the regional university advisement office), I was really into English, and they gave me the big list of pamphlets that you get every time you're interested in the subject. And I saw “teacher” was on there, and I always want to help people. I think that's always something I wanted to do. No matter what career I chose. I wanted to be able to help and inspire. Work with people. I

think that's what I've always enjoyed doing. So, when I saw a teacher there I think I automatically clicked with that.

It was the drive to help people. To connect with the cosmos in a way that extended his own experiences that drew him to teaching. For Nate, the definition of what it means to be an English Language Arts teacher relies heavily on the perspective he holds as an educator. He describes himself as a teacher who “values student experience above all else in their ability to not only master concepts but to overcome obstacles.” In his own words, it is the discovery of self that he values, an innate imitation of those who helped him discover his own path.

I value them as people, and I want them to at least leave my classroom with some outer knowledge that they didn't have before. And I've seen that so much this semester. We talk a lot about life lessons. I guess that's a part of English. I'm talking about theme every day. But I love when they leave my classroom, and they have the ability to read stuff critically and to be able to use that knowledge in an effective way.

Teaching in the Now

September 27, 2024

It was 10:00 in the morning when the wind began, and the snapping of branches outside the windows intertwined rhythmically until it became a sort of symphony. For Nate's community, the problem began earlier. A rainy September by all accounts, but this week's rainfall overwhelmed an already saturated soil, and by the time the remnants of Hurricane Helene entered the valley on Thursday, the tropical storm force winds brought unprecedented destruction to his community.

The destruction was caused primarily by the flooding of three major rivers: The Nolichucky, The French Broad, and The Pigeon River. The Nolichucky River rose from

43.42 feet to a staggering 62 feet by the time the storm passed on Thursday evening. Water flowed over the Nolichucky Dam at a rate of 1.3 million gallons per second, twice the rate of the peak water flow of Niagara Falls, and though the dam did not fail, the water seemed endless. In a nearby community, individuals were trapped on the roof of the hospital in Erwin, Tennessee. Hoping to be rescued by air after ground travel was halted due to the rapidly rising waters, 54 people were evacuated by air (Kekatos, 2024). While nearby, at Impact Plastics, seven employees died during the flood. Survivors claim employees were not released in time to escape the rising waters. Current litigation is pending.

I didn't know how bad it was until they sent pictures. I heard someone had a drone over the school and was showing me real-time footage of how bad it was, but it was ruined almost. I thought it was ruined from the way it looked.

With no physical building and no materials, reimagining English education as a first-year teacher during this time was critical. The school was closed for three weeks, two for the flood and one for a planned Fall break. During this time, Nate worked at the local shelter set up in the area where he taught. The definition of what it meant to be an English Language Arts educator became deeply embroiled in what it meant to be a community member; however, he questioned if this was a result of the devastation or a characteristic of English education in general.

I think it's very multifaceted as a career. You do more than one thing around here. You have to do more than one thing. And I guess on top of that, you have to be a communicator and a member of the community like a really strong member of the community. I feel like I'm kind of obligated to be that way because I'm so heavily involved in the future of this community, whether they know it or

not. These are the people that are going to live here over time, and if I'm not talking to their parents. If I'm not interacting with their brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, whatever. If I'm not doing that stuff, I don't think I'm doing my job as effectively as I can, and it's become a big part of it. And I've seen that like coming to the trunk-or-treat event, or going to the football games or helping do what you can.

The destruction caused by the remnants of Hurricane Helene reinforced how important community factors are in the profession of education. Nate views himself as a member of the community where he lives and teaches. The responsibilities of teaching English Language Arts extend beyond the curriculum, and this was evident before the storm. The significance of talking to family members and taking on additional responsibilities at the school became a part of what it means to be an English Language Arts teacher in Appalachia.

When reflecting on instruction taking place in his classroom, Nate often feels driven by state-mandated assessments, which affect what elements of writing instruction are prioritized in his classroom. Though he values the development of critical thinking skills and expression in student writing, his writing instruction relies heavily on teaching the conventions of standard English along with the organization and structural outlining of student writing.

I would much rather see their argument be developed with like a counterclaim and a rebuttal and have their statement be defended over and over again than see them, although this is important, and I tell this to them. I want them to have the standard conventions of an essay, but I would much rather see that argument developed and be able to be shown effectively than the grammar. If they can talk to me about the development of a character within that text.

I think that what good writing looks like. It is clearly identifying a topic and being able to write about it to me and explain it to me using details.

In the classroom setting, it has to follow the standardized grammatical format. So, you have to have your standard pronoun-antecedent agreement. You got to have subject verb agreement, so on and so on. You have to have all of these standard conventions of English, and you have to follow and abide by that. This is the English teacher talking. You have to be in the standardized format. You have to be able to cite and quote, and so on and so forth. I think that's what good writing looks like in my idealized setting. I guess, as a teacher, that's what I would want to see my students be able to do.

I see myself constantly saying, "Hey, you can't use 'I'". You can't use all of these others. We can't use contractions. Can't do that. I see myself constantly reminding them of that."

For Nate, the tension between what he believes is important in English education and the accountability tools used to measure student success are sometimes at odds with each other. His pride in his Appalachian identity is not reflected in his teaching practices because the tool used to measure student success does not account for variation in dialect or even conventions for writing, leaving him to feel pressured about how to instruct student writing and the impact of the instruction on student language expression in the classroom.

Using that rubric has been the big thing for me. Just because that's the standard I have. I don't have a choice. I have to uphold them to that standard.

It's late fall now. The students have returned. Football season is coming to an end. All is quiet in the classroom. Settled into his new space, we meet briefly on Zoom to discuss the student's return.

The damage that occurred to it [the school] with the flood and that kind of stuff. We have spent a lot of time talking about our region and students sharing memories of their favorite things to do. They can't really do anymore things that used to be there that aren't there anymore. What I talked about last time, I guess, was the appreciation of place. I guess that we have an Appalachian culture, and they've spent so much time just demonstrating that to me.

As Nate prepares for the remaining weeks of the semester, he greets his students each day in a borrowed building, a classroom he brings life to as they gather to discuss informational and literary texts. Hoping to see a reflection of themselves somewhere in the resiliency of the characters they read.

Camden's Story

A Sort of Beginning

“Long is the way, and hard, that out of Hell leads up to light.”

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

For Camden, a Ph.D. student in English Literature, a photo of John Milton included on the back of *Paradise Lost* was the daily motivation to continue, and ultimately alter, the course of her career: his stark, graying eyes, a consistent beacon of accountability and hope. Far from home, Camden left the region of southern Appalachia to continue her education. Having completed a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in English literature, the next step for her was continuing her studies as a doctoral student; however, after realizing the research required by a potential position in higher education, she decided to pause the journey to pursue her teaching license in a program closer to home.

But as I progressed in my Ph.D. work, I realized that job had more of a research aspect to it. And while I liked

research, it was really wearing me thin, and what I was there for was to teach. And while the plan was to teach kind of like in an R2 institution where you could bring and focus more on teaching, it really just like started nagging at me. Why am I working so hard to be a college professor when I could be doing the same thing, maybe a little bit modified, as a high school teacher?

Camden always “wanted to be a teacher, but [she] never knew what [she] wanted to teach.”

Literature was both like really encouraging to me as a budding English major, and just as a person in general, because the literature that I read in that AP English class spoke to my soul in a way that has lasted, and in many ways. I try to get my students to do the same things that that teacher was trying to get us to do, too, even though they're substantially younger.

Leaving her doctoral program to pursue teacher licensure at the K-12 level allowed her to closely align with her professional goals, even if that meant stepping away from one program and beginning another. Teaching was always the end goal.

Camden's love of literature developed in middle school, and the early impressions of her middle school and high school teachers affected the way she views her profession today.

I remember my instructors more than I remember the content. I think, at that point in time, because at our middle school, reading and grammar were separate classes. It was kind of like the beginning of equating English and English-related subjects with how you are as a person.

When reflecting on her experiences in middle school, the introduction of Robert Frost's poetry, along with the instructional methods of her teacher, affected how she views the role of an educator now.

[She] would explain it to me in such a way that, like, she would use literature to explain it because she knew that, like, I like to read. And in many ways, it was sort of like cementing that connecting point that is so integral to my teaching now.

As she progressed from middle school to high school, the emphasis on critical thinking became more embedded in her English Language Arts courses, providing an opportunity for Camden to explore ideas beyond the text printed in the books they read.

My English teacher in 9th grade and 10th grade was the same woman, and she really is kind of like my role model as somebody who teaches lower-level students now because it didn't matter to her. Like she was here to let you know that you could do it, no matter what, and she adored me and I adored her and I think I really got my confidence in English in that class. And even just something as simple as like one assignment or one assessment can like change your outlook on things so much.

The experiences Camden had in 9th and 10th grade English Language Arts class shaped the values she upheld in her own 9th-grade classroom later. Though enrolled in general-level English classes during 9th and 10th grade due to identified needs in Math, Camden was enrolled in an AP course during the latter half of her high school experience. Here, elements of critical thinking were valued, and the connection between English Language Arts and the larger society was solidified while the effect of misplacement was magnified.

I ended up in an AP English class, and our teacher for that class was very adamant about, like us, coming up with our own thoughts about things, not just reading something and having the teacher tell you what it means. Like she wanted us to start developing that like cognitive thought. But I think a lot of my like development as a person and just an educator in general has revolved around this idea that, like, I'm not good enough to do XY or Z. It's a great motivator in some instances, but also sad.

The consistent feeling of not being good enough resonated throughout our discussions, and how the sentiment affected Camden's ideas toward writing pedagogy in her classroom was evident later in our conversation.

English Language Arts Educator in an Appalachian Context

The windows of her middle school are boarded up. Covered with plywood to protect the glass or cover an opening, but she feels it is symbolic. The school doesn't exist though the memories of its existence, the experiences with literature she had within the walls developed her love of literature.

Years later, returning to the district where she once attended as an English Language Arts teacher, Camden grappled with the context of the region that affects her instruction in the classroom. She defines Appalachia as "poor" but "resilient."

But we've struggled my entire life. And that's not been something that was a secret. It was, in many ways, like a badge of honor.

The "badge of honor" indicates a characterization she can't escape, one that is placed upon her due to some great act of bravery and is proud to carry. What does it mean if we feel our history is given to us, prescribed to us, rather than writing the narratives ourselves?

When considering the effects of living in the region, she reflected on the values and beliefs she encountered when growing up.

Also, I wondered, too, and I wonder this about my own students from time to time, how being from Appalachia and being a woman, how that like doubt, like self-doubt that is just so ingrained in our being from like being polite to people who aren't polite to you to I don't know. Feeling in some ways like lesser. I don't know if that's the right word,

but that's something I've had to deal with for a really long time... you know, where you've grown up does affect how you approach the world.

Camden recognizes the role English Language Arts has in connecting her students to the outside world. With an intentional focus on critical thinking through literacy, she believes English Language Arts teaches her students skills they can use once they graduate high school to become “productive members of society.”

I definitely think that we, in some ways, are teaching. We're teaching critical thought. But we're also teaching in some ways, like morality. Because one of the like most shocking things to me is that a lot of kids come in now, and they like, or at least at my school, do not know right from wrong. Nor have they experienced things outside of their own experience, and so giving them this sort of window into things that are not just what they know. Especially in Appalachia, where so many of them. At least in my school district, have never traveled outside of their little town. And they might not ever.

Camden defines an English Language Arts educator as someone who teaches students to be productive citizens of a global community. When describing writing instruction in Camden’s classroom, she is quick to respond that there is no correct way to speak or to write.

You know, there are conventions, but conventions also are made to be broken, you know, and maybe that's me, like, coming from me as a creative writer. I would say in academic text, maybe less so like, there is sort of these like prescriptive ways that you should put ideas forward to be taken seriously. And I try to make sure that they are aware of that effect... For instance, maybe this is another thing that we struggle with. They have a really hard time using formal tone because all the time they're talking in the way that you know you would speak with somebody. And so I really try to show them that if you are not talking in such a way that you kind of, I guess, fit in with the rest of the way people are talking in that conversation, that you might not

be taken as seriously, and I hate that. I have to teach them that, in the first place, but I know that there are a lot of stereotypes surrounding the Appalachian region when it comes to things like academic conversations.

Here, the pressure to conform to the expectations of standardized American English is visible as both teacher and students navigate the tension of stereotypes related to the region. The recognition of an “accepted way” of speaking is evident in her descriptions, but the degree to which that view affects instructional practices is best evidenced in conversations related to standardized state assessments for students and writing practices.

Writing Instruction and Standardized Assessment

Camden describes herself as being drawn to writing, whether it be creative or academic, while one of the biggest challenges for her students is getting the paper started and spelling and grammatical conventions.

They tend to have a lot of trouble with spelling. And so they really like dwell on those things. And so a lot of the work that I do with writing is getting them to see that it's not as bad as your mind is making it out to seem.

How students view their writing in the classroom in juxtaposition with the expectations of how writing “should be” affects their ability to create. While a lack of attention span and a self-imposed mindset of what Camden refers to as “learned helplessness” also contribute to a lack of performance. Ultimately, Camden feels frustrated with the system of end-of-course assessments for her state. When discussing the end-of-course required assessments, she states the importance of proof of learning that is representative of a student's skills gained and progress.

Sometimes, we have to do things that we don't want to do.: And this is a time to realize that this is one of those things, and it doesn't just affect you or this class or even this school. It affects everything, and like, I've had to like apologize to them. I've not done anything, but, like, I feel like there's a need for me to apologize that things are the way they are, especially when they are as bleak as they sometimes are.

Because they shouldn't have to be worried about that, why can't they? Why can't they come in and learn about somebody's experience and relate to it and, like, learn that way or any of the other? Like wonderful project-based learning ways, we can't focus on that. And we can't focus on genuine like curiosity because we've got to be worried about this test coming up.

The tension between what is and what could be is strong in Camden's recollection of teaching. She values the individual and creative element of her subject but feels bound to what can be done due to accountability systems they must answer to as a district.

Caitlyn Story

Appalachian Identity

She's not sure if she's Appalachian.

She moved a lot as a kid and kept moving on and off until she began college. The requirements of belonging to a place and belonging in a place are vague, and there is a strong dissonance between being from a place and being in it.

Caitlyn teaches in an urban middle school, a place geographically labeled as Appalachian, but there is a reluctance for her to utilize the Appalachian description both related to her own identification and the identification of her school when she speaks.

I would say, yes, I do identify. I don't know. I don't know if I can technically identify as Appalachian, but I would say, Yes, just because of living there for college and then living currently in that region. I feel like I moved a lot growing

up. So, I would say that's probably the most amount of time. So, I'm gonna take it.

Though she has lived most of her life in the area, she is reluctant to identify as Appalachian because she was not born in Appalachia. When describing the school itself and whether it is considered Appalachian, we had the following exchange.

Caitlyn: Yes, like, technically. Yes. Do I feel like it on most days? No, and I think maybe that's my bias on how I perceive Appalachia. But I think it's also just a school that I'm in, like I'm in a very unique situation, and so I don't see a lot of Appalachia are writing in that way. So.

Megan: Kind of interesting, too, because when we think about it, the school itself is in Appalachia. So it's an Appalachian school.

Caitlyn: Right

She does not describe her school as Appalachian, though it falls within the political and geographic boundaries of the region, but she recognizes how the Appalachian context affects her instruction.

It has a diversity that is so unique because it's different in every single section of Appalachia. And I think that that relates back to literature because you have so much culture that is not only brought into the region, but you know, present in and of itself, like in Appalachia, like you just have Appalachian culture. And so, I think that should be more prevalent in literature than it is, especially when teaching.

Caitlyn's classroom is diverse, with "15 countries represented," and she teaches in what she describes as an "inner city" school. She recognizes Appalachia for its diversity but is not sure if the diversity where she teaches qualifies them to be part of Appalachia.

Early English Language Arts Experiences

Caitlyn's early experiences as an English Language Arts student influenced the type of English Language Arts teacher she would become. Early on, her teachers relied on interactive activities that promote student learning.

I remember a few things. So, I said, hands-on. One of them was group activities. This teacher specifically did a lot of group activities. I remember one being kind of like crime scene based. And so, it was. I assumed evidence. I can't say. I can't say that for sure. But I remember working in a group to try to figure out kind of the pieces of this text would have been like cut up, and she put them like we were trying to put them back together. Type of thing. She did a lot of that.

Frustrated by the transition from her experiences as a middle school student to her freshman year in high school, she felt the biggest change was in the expectation for student writing.

I hated it when I went in Freshman sophomore year because I feel like the standard changed, and nobody told me the standard changed.

It was during her junior and senior years that her attitude toward writing changed. In classes that allowed her to develop her critical thinking skills, she felt more agency as a student.

And then, when I got into those AP Classes, Junior and Senior Year. I liked writing again because it was honestly my teachers. They were phenomenal at giving feedback and doing it in a way that was personalized and pushed you. And so, they, instead of grading like a full essay again, would go back conference with you and then figure out, okay, how do we push you farther? And I'm someone who likes to feed off of that. And so, I liked it because I could see myself grow in it...It was making us think about society and kind of all those inner working parts.

Caitlyn's experiences in her high school English Language Arts classes set the foundation for what skills she would prioritize in her own writing instruction later.

The Writing Classroom

For Caitlyn, being an English Language Arts teacher means supporting her students to succeed in skills they will need both inside and outside the classroom. It is through the content she can help students connect and problem-solve situations they may face once they complete school.

I think for me, my goal as an English teacher, is was to have, and it still is, to have students see beyond their own world when they're reading literature, like to be able to make those connections of I'm not just reading this random piece of writing. I'm never going to read it again. Why does writing matter? Why does reading matter? That type of, you know? None of this matters, and I'm, you know, doing nothing but to have them actually make those real-world connections to see, you know. Okay, after I graduate, this is why I still read, or this is why I still write, or kind of that more art side of.

She values "real-world" connections for her students, so they are able to engage the world as citizens empowered to navigate the society around them.

My main goal is that they are able to communicate and to see themselves grow, and to see kind of that importance of writing more so than reading in their daily lives. I still want them to be able to make those connections and see society and see the world and figure that out for themselves.

Because her school system utilizes high-quality instructional materials, she relies on the creative skills modeled by some of her early instructors and her teacher preparation program.

I'm also very strong in the creative aspect of how can I teach this. And so, within the guidelines of okay, this is

what I have to teach. This is how I need to teach it. I'm also able to kind of bring in some of that training and create the classroom that I want within the guidelines I have to use.

Caitlyn found that differentiation and supporting individual students using high-quality instructional materials is possible when creative solutions are utilized in its application. However, she does express concern that how English Language Arts is taught today does not meet her expectations for how it should be taught.

I don't know. It's become impersonal. And I think English Language Arts is probably one of the most, you know, personable types of areas of academics. And so, I think, especially in middle school and especially in this educational climate, it's become more robotic than social, and I think it should be more of those conversations and less analytical, which is what I feel like I teach.

The focus on the social and personal is key, and for Caitlyn, determining a pathway for this type of learning to occur is found in her ability to navigate the curricular and accountability needs of her district. When asked what she believes motivated the change, she feels it is due to state accountability measures and the need for student data to prove success.

I think it comes from the drive for data in schools. And the fact that data is impersonal because we're, you know, we work, for you know our growth is measured, based on, you know, our students' growth.

There are immediate concerns about how this type of thinking affects students and teachers in the long run.

I worry for our students, but also for schools and for teachers. That makes us more robotic. And okay, I need to do A, B, and C to get them here. How is this actually going to impact them in the future? How they relate to literature? How they relate to writing? And how they see themselves

in it versus you know, they're doing a thing to check off the box.

For Caitlyn, the ability for her students to see themselves in the work they complete for her classroom matters. The English Language Arts education classroom is a space where her students can develop who they are outside of the classroom. They are consistently battling the outside perspective on who they are and who they should be. It is this fact that makes them more Appalachian than they realize. They are a culmination of what they believe to be true about themselves and what others tell them they should be true. They exist in the space of past, present, and an unknown future related to curriculum development. They are the most Appalachian of us all.

Jacob's Story

The Ghosts Who Move Around Us

There's a venue in the town where Jacob attended college named after a legendary mobster rumored to have visited the city during the 1920s. The name, most directly associated with prohibition, with Chicago, with violence, is so recognizable the establishment only needs to bear his last name.

But there is no written record of his visit. Instead, the stories are carried down through oral history. From those who allegedly played cards with him, who saw him, who drank with him. Whispers of his passing have found their way through over one hundred years later.

Stories like these abound in this region of Appalachia. Growing up, I often heard about my grandfather having coffee with Johnny Cash in Lynn Garden and about the path of Daniel Boone's footsteps as he crossed into Long Island, not a quarter of a mile from

my home. Sometimes, there are photos or written accounts, but inevitably, it is always led by the story, protected and promoted, nurtured and potentially altered, details added and removed. For many, our understanding of “Appalachia” is constructed from the stories we tell ourselves of our own importance, the pieces we choose to keep, and the past we leave behind.

Teaching As a Bridge

For Jacob, connecting where he grew up to famous historical and cultural moments of American history was integral to defining both how he identifies as Appalachian and how he connected with literature as a high school student.

I would say I've always just had a commendable respect for this region and how very close-knit it is. Yes, it's stories, and it's local. And it's really, its local heroes have really taken off and became really part of the mainstream, despite this area being so kind of idiosyncratic from different areas in the United States.

While reading *The Great Gatsby*, learning about the legendary mobster visits brought a sense of significance to the class and the region. If there was a connection between where he lived and the outside world, it seemed to bring additional value to both the content and the place.

It's kind of an area where a lot of people know each other. And there's not like that many major events or major people who come through this region, but a lot of times, they're very local, and they're very revered in this area. So what got me into reading *The Great Gatsby* was the kind of the bootlegging aspect of it, and how my teacher was willing and able to, you know, to tie this back to Capone's ties in the area, and I felt like that really grasped a lot of the students' attention, because anytime you're able to connect, especially a book as grand as *The Great Gatsby* into an area near us. I think that really does really well to help kind of grasp our attention for it... We have a lot of local stars here,

but it also has a lot of significance in the grand scheme of the United States.

For Jacob, connecting the storytelling practices found in Appalachia with the stories about Appalachia has a significant role in his classroom.

What I appreciate about Appalachia is I feel like there's more camaraderie between us than other areas in the United States. So, I think as a teacher, namely, an English teacher, it's important that you use that camaraderie in that area of how people are supportive of each other in your classroom and also incorporate the region's customs in some of the some of your reading.

The “camaraderie” and community aspects of the region are significant for Jacob, and he feels their inclusion in his English Language Arts classroom is a part of his responsibilities as an English Language Arts educator. He believes the English Language Arts classroom is a place where students are taught skills through the texts they read in class. English Language Arts is a bridge to critical thinking and living beyond the secondary experience.

Fostering their ability to write openly and freely about different topics and ensuring that they have the proper grammar conventions in order to go into the workforce with, with the ability to read things constructively, to write constructively, and to be able to form well-detailed sentences constructively, with proper grammar conventions overall. I think English is just one of the most important subjects students have in high school.

It is important for Jacob to show students how the skills of close reading that they are developing in their classrooms can affect their lives after high school. No matter what their career aspirations may be, he wants all students to develop successful critical thinking skills that can be applied later in life.

When reflecting on what motivated him to enter the profession initially, he credits his former high school English teacher as his source of inspiration.

So, really, what made me fall in love with English and its content was my high school experience. I was able to see that English is a subject of the humanities, and deep down, it is a subject where, if you could make it engaging, you can really promote equitable learning through engaging all the students and making sure that you're not only servicing your classes to the students who meet or exceed expectations, but the students who are approaching, or maybe below expectations.

The fluidity of the subject made it an appropriate medium for reaching students at all levels. What Jacob learned later was how significant his own positionality would be in the classroom for his students.

Windows and Mirrors

Many English Language Arts educators are familiar with the concept of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors proposed by Rudine Sims Bishop in 1990. Bishop posits that children's literature can serve as gateways into other ways of living or reflective surfaces where young readers can see themselves. While this metaphor is commonly applied to the potential for literary texts, these concepts also apply to real-life examples of the humans we encounter in our day-to-day lives.

Jacob attended the same high school where he now teaches. His fictional story, published as a high school student, is still in the library there. For many of his students, Jacob is an example. A potential future for themselves. The students sometimes see themselves in him, and when reflecting on what his responsibilities are as an English Language Arts educator in Appalachia, that positionality is sometimes the most critical.

I had a student who is biracial who went up to me, and she's like, 'you know,' she's like, 'you know you're the first biracial or any like different race teacher I've ever had.

Jacob, a little choked up with this revelation, recognizes the significance of the role he plays in the classroom.

Thinking about how you're going to be remembered in people's minds 10-15 years from now, is very striking for me. I feel like a lot of times you are remembered, especially in the community as well in the Appalachian community. I think that means a lot to me to be able to reach out to the Appalachian community and being remembered by, you know, future leaders of this community.

Jacob is a valued member of his community. In a region where education is consistently discussed as a method of producing exports, Jacob provides a mirror for his students in the classroom, an example of what success can look like. The text he wrote while in high school still sits in the library where he works. Students can read authors from around the world, or they can walk a few steps down the hall and read an author they encounter each day.

Narrative Threads

The participants in this study were united by their profession, by their years of experience, and by their love of content. All had different backgrounds and pathways to teaching, and their approach to defining English Language Arts education was nuanced, one they continue to craft throughout their first year of study.

Appalachian Identity and Culture

When asked if they identified as Appalachian, participants responded in various ways; however, all participants provided positive attributes to living in the region.

Ultimately, three of the four felt identifying as “Appalachian” was the result of being born in the region, and the identity felt immovable, fixed, and ascribed, while one participant felt the identification was not as easy, indicating she was not born here and was unsure of her level of belonging.

The complexity of how participants identified as Appalachian requires a continued examination of the fluidity of identity, specifically Appalachian identities. Here, questions emerged related to how identities might shift over time as individuals move away from or into regions considered to be Appalachian; these do not appear to be reflected in participant statements. Additional research is needed to assess how participants who have moved away from the region identify compared to those born in Appalachian regions. See **Table 7** for participant descriptions of Appalachian identities.

For Camden, identifying as Appalachian was easy; however, defining what it meant to be an English Language Arts educator in Appalachia was difficult. The consistent tension between how the region was characterized, in her words, “poor,” and

Table 7 Fixed Appalachian Identities

Participants	Fixed Appalachian Identities
Nate	<i>“I most definitely think I do. Born and raised in this area. I have a strong connection, I think, to the area that we live in.”</i>
Camden	<i>“I mean, I know that I, too, have that background. Grew up not exceptionally like poverty stricken. But we've struggled my entire life. And that's not been something that was a secret. It was, in many ways, like a badge of honor.”</i>
Jacob	<i>“I do identify as Appalachian. I've grown up in Eastern Tennessee my whole life and very proudly.”</i>
Caitlyn	<i>“I would say, yes, I do identify I don't know. I don't know if I can technically identify as Appalachian, but I would say, Yes, just because of living there for college and then living currently in that region. I feel like I moved a lot growing up.”</i>

her attitude toward that characterization were in opposition. Furthermore, whether this characterization was based on her own response, or an internalized belief based on an accepted idea of what it meant to be Appalachian was not evident. Ultimately, three participants demonstrated positive characterizations of the region utilizing variations of the word “pride” in their characterizations. These findings are concurrent with previous studies associating pride with Appalachian communities (Kephart, 1922; Montgomery, 2000; Gaventa, 1980).

The word choice is significant because unlike other variations of similar emotions such as “joy,” “pride” indicates ownership and or belonging to an accomplishment. There is an accountability associated with the word “pride,” for it, unlike “joy,” can also bring shame if the actions or characterizations associated with the entity for which one feels “pride” for are not positive. This agency or accountability is not always present with words somewhat synonymous with pride such as “joy,” and should be noted in participant expression. Brené Brown (2023) defines pride as having a “positive connotation and descriptors that include words like accomplishment, mastery, triumph, confidence, and self-worth. It is positively associated with self-esteem and negatively associated with shame - proneness.” When one feels “pride” toward something, we essentially connect ourselves to it and attribute a sense of belonging beyond our individual agency or action, whereas shame results from the absence of pride but carries the same associations. See **Table 8** for participant descriptions of Appalachian pride.

Table 8 Pride in Appalachian Identities

Participants	Pride in Appalachian Identities
Nate	“We're proud of where we live, and we want to preserve what we have.” “So, I think that we not only have, like a historical view of how proud we are, but we also have a modern view of it. If that makes sense, where we're, we're just very proud of the area that we live in. So, I most definitely think that that's a big part of our area.”
Camden	“...Surges with like pride for where I'm from, and you feel like home, you know.”
Jacob	“I've grown up in Eastern Tennessee my whole life so and very proudly.”

The participants who elected “pride” as their modifier articulated a clear identification and sense of belonging in what they considered to be Appalachia; however, the relationship between the degree to which they felt pride and their pride in language expression attributed to Appalachian dialects varied.

Language of Relic and Language of Absence in Appalachian Identity Formation

During the interviews, all participants displayed language of relic and language of absence markers in their accounts. In this context, “language” is referring to both written and oral expression as it relates to experiences as both an English Language Arts student and an English Language Arts educator related to language expression in writing. In all instances, while the language of relic identifiers were positive, the language of absence identifiers were negative, leading to a noted relationship between language or relic and language of absence. See **Table 9** for participant descriptions of positive characterizations of Appalachian identities.

Table 9 Positive Characterizations of Appalachian Identity

Participants	Positive Characterizations of Appalachian Identity
Nate	<i>"We come together as a community and do things in order to preserve the natural world around us. Other than that, though place of beauty. I think a lot of people around here love, and they value the place."</i>
Caitlyn	<i>"Right now, we're talking about myths, and so I'm able to kind of bring in some of those myths that I think are like the first one that comes to my brain. It's not the only one but is Bigfoot, because you see that a lot in Appalachia, everywhere. And so, that's been key for some of my students' connection to just their region. They know it. They've heard of their entire lives. And so, we can bring that into the classroom. And so yes, you see it in the classroom in regards to culture a little bit"</i> <i>"It's such a unique region. I think, unlike a lot of places. It has a diversity that is so unique because it's different in every single section of Appalachia, and I think that relates back to literature because you have so much cultures that are not only brought into the region, but is you know, present in and of itself, like in Appalachia, like you just have Appalachian culture."</i>
Jacob	<i>"It's Southern culture, but it's a very, distinctive Southern culture that you don't necessarily see in other places. It's very well rooted in its origins really still, whereas I feel like with other Southern culture, it's kind of changed a little bit if that makes sense."</i> <i>"A lot of times when you look at the origins of Appalachia and what makes Appalachia, we still see those traditions that they did with storytelling and with folktales with bluegrass. We still see that very, very prominently in today's Appalachia, which I really appreciate."</i> <i>"Because in Appalachia we have our own dialect as well. They don't even recognize it a lot of times."</i>

In most instances, *the language of relic* markers were attributed to Appalachian identity and not specifically connected to language expression, leading me to question the relationship between the degree to which one feels pride in their Appalachian culture and the degree to which one feels shame for what is considered to be “Appalachian language expression.” Just as dialect and speech patterns vary, there are variations in expression in Appalachian Englishes, which are not clearly defined by participants. For three of the participants, there is no clear distinction between what is determined to be Southern descriptors versus Appalachian descriptors, though Jacob does make this distinction in his explanation, referring to Appalachian culture as “distinctive.” Nate, Camden, and Jacob specifically attribute their students’ writing habits as being similar to how they speak, while Caitlyn expresses this sentiment but attaches value to it. While participants voiced concerns about language expression in the classroom, all participants noted there were different social settings in which formality evolves and is required. None of the participants provided negative associations with the language expression of their students when speaking but voiced concerns related to state accountability, and all referred to state assessment rubrics. Nate and Camden exhibited *language of absence* markers when describing students’ written expressions parallel to their speech, while Caitlyn and Jacob demonstrated *language of relic* markers associated with the same sentiment. For Caitlyn, the speech comes across as “beautiful,” while Jacob recognizes that, as a teacher, he writes differently than he speaks. See **Table 10** for *Language of Relic* markers in participant speech.

Table 10 Language of Relic Markers

Language of Relic Sentiments Toward Appalachian Language

Participants	Language of Relic	Analysis of Marker Development
Caitlyn	<i>Their dialogue is not the, you know, academic dialogue. And so, when they write, it kills me because technically, you know, when they're graded on a state test I have to or I've been told. I don't even know if I've been told. I don't know if it's just stigmatized, but you know, cut out some of those more dialectal word choices and phrases, and how we say things because their speech comes across in their writing, and it's beautiful, and I love it,</i>	<i>"stigmatized" affected by outside expectations but maintains and appreciates variation.</i>
Jacob	<i>What you would see formally on a paper isn't how we speak. And I think that's really everywhere, but especially in this area. And you know, they're like they're like, 'Well, you're an English teacher.' I was like, 'Well, yeah, but that hasn't changed where I'm from, you know'.</i>	<i>Acceptance of duality of expectation but values "voice place" and variation of language usage</i>

The relationship between language or relic and language of absence markers in determining Appalachian identity expression warrants further studies. For these findings, the sense of belonging associated with participant descriptions of language expression is significant. As Cramer (2020) found, negative perceptions such as stereotypes or negative representations in pop culture can affect the sense of belonging; how participants engage with their own perceptions of language usage in the classroom can contribute to language or relic or language of absence associations in their characterizations. See **Table 11**.

English Language Arts Education and Expression of Critical Thinking

Determining the definition of English Language Arts education in Appalachia varied for participants; however, all shared a common thread when describing English Language Arts education as a subject that provided an opportunity for critical thinking beyond the boundaries of the content; they saw English Language Arts as interconnected and valued students' development in critical thinking and expression related to writing. See **Table 12** for participant responses.

All characterized English Language Arts as a cross-disciplinary subject that developed critical thinking skills beyond the secondary classroom. Nate refers to this as “life lessons,” while Camden refers to it as teaching “morality” and “critical thought.” Caitlyn refers to it as “real-world connections,” and Jacob emphasizes “reading constructively.” The significance of these responses lies in the assumption that all four English Language Arts classrooms are preparing students for an outside experience which may differ from their backgrounds or current approaches to thinking. Each teacher sees English Language Arts education as a subject where students can work critically in response to ideas and form independent thoughts and responses.

Table 11 Language of Relic Markers

Language of Absence Sentiments Toward Appalachian Language

Participants	Language of Absence	Analysis of Marker Development
Nate	<i>"We were trying to write like we spoke."</i> <i>"Students have their own way of saying things. They have vernacular that they use. They use slang often, and it's so hard to break these, I guess traditions, that they've built up over the years."</i>	<i>"Trying" indicates attempt to meet expectation or determined goal. Trying for what or for whom</i> <i>"Their own way" indicates alternative way exists. There is ownership. "Vernacular" and "slang" acknowledge variation in a predetermined expectation.</i> <i>"Tradition" in response to the way something is done or carried out. Indicates continuance in light of progression or evolution of idea.</i>
Camden	<i>"They have a really hard time using formal tone because all the time they're talking in the way that you know you would speak with somebody."</i>	<i>"Hard time" requires efforts when faced with something that does not appear natural or come easy or can be in response to something that is unnatural. "Speaking with someone" indicates altered expectation for writing.</i>

Table 12 Participant Attitudes Toward English Language Arts Education

Participants	Interconnectedness of English Language Arts Education
<i>Nate</i>	“I value them as people, and I want them to at least leave my classroom with some outer knowledge that they didn't have before, and I've seen that so much this semester. We talk a lot about life lessons. I guess that's as part of English. I'm talking about theme every day. But I love when they leave my classroom, and they have the ability to read stuff critically and to be able to to use that knowledge in an effective way. Having a critical literacy...I'm a teacher who values student experience above all else in their ability to not only master concepts but to overcome obstacles.”
<i>Camden</i>	“We're teaching that critical thought, but we're also teaching in some ways like morality. Because one of the like most shocking things to me is that a lot of kids come in now, and they like or at least at my school do not know right from wrong, nor have they experienced things outside of their own experience, and so giving them this sort of window into things that are not just what they know is integral, especially in Appalachia, where so many of them, at least in my school district, have never traveled outside of their little town. And they might not ever.”
<i>Caitlyn</i>	“I think for me, my goal as an English teacher is to have, and it still is to have students see beyond their own world when they're reading literature like to be able to make those connections of. I'm not just reading this random piece of writing. I'm never going to read it again. Why does writing matter? Why does reading matter? That type of you know? None of this matters, and I'm you know, doing nothing but to have them actually make those real world connections to see, you know. Okay, after I graduate, this is why I still read, or this is why I still write, or kind of that more art side of.”
<i>Jacob</i>	“English is a subject of the humanities” “Students really have to be able to read constructively in order to have success in really any job. And I always tell my students that. I'll say, ‘Hey, you know, whenever you're signing up for your health insurance, you got to be able to formulate and read constructively...’ And because a lot of times students, when they get in here, and they're reading these classics and they're just not into it. They're like, ‘I don't know why we're taking this.’”

Tension Between What is Valued/ What is Taught

While all participants indicated English Language Arts was a subject welcoming of critical thinking and individual expression, there was evident tension between what the participants valued as teachers and how they taught writing in their classrooms. All indicated the pressure of state assessments and district curriculum requirements as the cause of the tension.

While Nate believes there is not a right way to write, he is conflicted between what he values in writing and how he instructs students. Often, this tension is established through outside pressures such as district funding and state accountability systems. Nate's comments on the standardization of grammatical phrasing and instruction indicate the pressure to meet a standardized English expectation.

Nate: I see myself constantly saying, “hey, you can't use ‘I’. You can't use all of these others. We can't use contractions. Can't do that...you have to have your standard pronoun antecedent agreement. You got to have subject verb agreement, so on and so on. You have to have all of these standard conventions of English, and you have to follow and abide by that.

The repetition of “have” and “can’t” is significant when considering the contrast between what he believes to be important related to the subject he teaches. The use of “can’t” reflects the power here and the lack of agency he feels in response to this practice. A similar sentiment was also noted in Camden's response to writing practices in her classroom.

Camden: I hate that I have to teach them that in the first place, but I know that there are a lot of stereotypes surrounding the Appalachian region when it comes to things like academic conversations.

Here, the *language of absence* marker is noted in “stereotypes,” and like Nate’s response, the use of “have” indicates tension between what is valued and what is taught. While Caitlyn demonstrates the same tension in her responses, she leans into her creative interpretation of the curriculum requirements to adhere to her values as an English Language Arts educator.

Caitlyn: I'm also very strong in the creative aspect of how I can teach this. And so, within the guidelines of okay, this is what I have to teach, this is how I need to teach it.

All participants noted the expectations from state-mandated writing assessments directly influenced the decisions they made regarding instruction within their classrooms. The findings of this study do not seek to provide a singular narrative of an Appalachian experience. Rather, each participant’s narrative contributes to a contemporary account of teaching in a particular region of Appalachia, in a particular time. The participant demographics are varied, as are their perspectives on their identities as English Language Arts teachers during their first year of teaching. However, findings indicate that all participants attribute positive connotations to the region related to its history and culture, although participants varied in their use of *language of relic* and *language of absence* characterization of Appalachian language expressions within the classroom. Participants defined English Language Arts education as a subject that fosters critical thinking and prepares students for life outside of the secondary classroom, while all exhibited tension between this fundamental value associated with English Language Arts instruction and current practices related to writing instruction within the classroom.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

“There was no culture, you know, in Spoon River,
And I burned with shame and held my peace.
And what could I do, all covered over
And weighted down with western soil,
Except aspire, and pray for another
Birth in the world, with all of Spoon River
Rooted out of my soul?”

From “Archibald Higbie” by Edgar Lee Masters

I taught the poem “Archibald Higbie” to tenth graders for over a decade. We read it, commiserated with it, fought it, and sometimes were brought to tears by it. In the poem, the speaker, trapped by his past, mourns the extraordinary life he was not afforded to live because of where he came from. How similar he seemed to the narrative I’d heard about the place where I grew up. There was no culture, or so I was told. Charles Wright, former poet laureate of the United States of America, attended the same high school where I taught tenth-grade English Language Arts, but it was only while working on my master’s degree at The University of Tampa that I first learned about him.

There is the paradox caused by the myth of Appalachia, a primordial place of isolation where the country can look for its rose-colored past. Those who ascribe to a mythical Appalachia often fail to recognize the complexity of Appalachia itself. Elizabeth Catte (2018) argues the problems occurring in Appalachia are not necessarily unique to Appalachia. However, there is a historical precedent for characterizing individuals in this region as almost always poor and almost always white. When we fail to recognize the complexity of Appalachia, we are perpetuating a static narrative. But what role does myth preservation have on the continuation of power and powerlessness in Southern Appalachian communities, and most importantly, how do we respond when false

narratives are propagated by those living in the region? Unfortunately, the questions above, along with the findings of this study, led me to another question.

Education: The New Coal?

With the passing of the Education Freedom Act on January 30, 2025, the state of Tennessee formally took a stance on school choice, supporting parents with \$7,000.00 scholarships that can be applied to supplement the tuition of private schools. Though at the time of this publication, the legislation is new, questions as to how these changes will affect public education are heavy on the minds of teachers, community members, and parents. The predominant fear being the redistribution of funds will drive dollars out of public education and funnel them into private schools with no state-mandated accountability systems or requirements to accept all student applicants.

English Language Arts educators, those who have been pressured by fears of book banning and censorship of curricular materials, are left to question how a state whose own accountability system labeled schools as “failing” can now direct public funds away from the systems they seemingly destroyed through their own policy. The findings of this study indicate teachers are making curricular decisions based on the pressure of state accountability, with one participant going so far as to suggest it is a system designed without the intention of schools ever succeeding, the notion some schools were set up for failure to allow for closure or reorganization is prevalent in the minds of some teachers. Whether these sentiments are based on fact or solely on perception is irrelevant in the sense that some educators perceive it to be true, which can affect morale and interactions within school communities. A renewed focus on state

accountability practices in light of recent legislation is needed to address why schools are labeled as failing in the state.

However, for many who live in the region, the effects of private markets on Appalachian communities, notably through the exploitation of environmental resources for corporate consumption, is not a novel experience. As coal industries primed the country for the physical takeover of Appalachian land, there were three key patterns that emerged connecting the educational reforms of today with the consumption of coal: the prevalence of a monolithic Appalachian narrative, regional exploitation of economic systems, and the quiescence of government leaders and community members.

Monolithic Appalachian Narratives and Benevolent Benefactors

The earliest accountings of Appalachia present the region as a primordial spring of American innovation and hope. Appalachia, in its complexity, became a sought-after, nostalgic reminder of the democratic principles of a country just beginning to take form. As a region, it has been rediscovered, reinvented, and redistributed in each generational cycle of scholarship. In its infancy, the idea of Appalachia was representative of the core of American idealism, a romanticized, colonial drive to conquer, settle, and establish a way of life. A pre-Civil War Southern Appalachian region was a rugged, frontier land respected for its possibility and influence, while the Appalachia of American Reconstruction found itself grappling with the image of its past with the possibility of a new American future. Varied peoples, communities, and geography found themselves united by nomenclature, joined together more formally later in the 1960s by the Appalachian Regional Commission under a political definition determined to outline the economic needs of a region. While the publication of “The People Left Behind” in 1967

introduced the idea that Appalachian's original characterization as the new frontier was now inverted, the inclination to refer to early isolationist interpretations created the perception of needed intervention, a land unable to save itself.

In most aspects of Appalachia, major economic and social changes have been driven partly by controlling the narrative of experience and contrasting it with a benevolent benefactor prepared to assist those in the region by essentially saving them from themselves. While these methods have varied over the years, they share a centralized goal of shaping the way the world views Appalachia and how the Appalachians view themselves. In *Modernizing the Mountaineer* (1994), David Whisnant argues how these missions affected the region in catastrophic ways, claiming the natural resources of the land have led to "systematic extractive, exploitative and special-purpose development (such as tourism), controlled initially by individual entrepreneurs and more recently by corporations" (p. xix). Whisnant's analysis of the singularity of an Appalachian stereotype juxtaposed with the various geographical, political, social, and cultural practices of the region indicates the irony abounding in early Appalachian studies, the propagation of the myth of a singular narrative of Appalachia. Fisher (1993) argues how the evolution of Appalachian studies in the 1980s and 1990s outlined the origin of Appalachian stereotypes.

They [Appalachian studies scholars] document how economic problems faced by many in Appalachia are a result not of isolation and lack of economic development, but the types of modernization that has occurred there.

They describe the nature and extent of the region's many

problems and make clear that the traditional solutions to these problems – changing people’s cultural values and trickle-down economics are misguided and have done more harm than good. (p. 2)

The question of contemporary Appalachian scholars is not only about the type of modernization but also the prevalence of the mythic representations of Appalachia continuing in contemporary accounts. Questions about the enigma of Appalachia that provides for continued reliance on a benevolent benefactor and how the modifications of this role might affect the contemporary social and economic infrastructure of the region abound. While many contemporary Appalachian writers examine these complexities in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, the narratives embraced on the largest scale continue to promote a social myth.

Regional Exploitation and Disruption of Economic Systems

Regional exploitation is not a new concept for the Appalachian region. Historically, as British companies settled into regions of Appalachia and began mining operations, landowners were left to fight larger corporations for their homes, their land, and the valuable minerals underneath. In 1967, there was double the capital exported from the region than imported into the region; the irony being Appalachia is full of wealth its people are not always the recipients of that wealth” (Gaventa, 1980).

Educational reforms in the region run the risk of falling into a similar pattern as the extractive practices of the past. As the new state scholarships will allow parents to utilize funding for private schools, regions without access to private schools may be open for private corporations to build for-profit schools in the regions. Again, taking the funds

from being invested into public schools serving all students and funneling them into private for-profit schools who do not face the same accountability measures or admission requirements, the amount of which dollars are invested per student versus for-profit is uncertain.

Acquiescence of Government Leaders and Community Members

Another mechanism for maintaining power is the role of government and community members who support policies set forth by those in a position of power. These decisions can be made in terms of perceptions of powerlessness set into motion by the manipulation of narratives and pressure to agree. This pattern is evidenced in the passage of the Education Freedom Scholarship Act and the local government's support of its passage. Gaventa (1980) argues,

Through the invocation of myth or symbols, the use of threat or rumors, or other mechanisms of power, the powerful may be able to ensure that certain beliefs and actions emerge in one context while apparently contradictory grievances may be expressed in others (p. 19).

Though not specifically outlined here, the manipulation of myth can also affect how powerlessness is perceived. In the most recent case of educational reform, seven mayors in Northeast Tennessee signed a letter supporting Governor Bill Lee's Education Freedom Scholarship Act (Lee & Scurry, 2025). However, questions as to how the disaster relief from Hurricane Helene's inclusion in the bill may have affected governmental support as five out of the seven experienced devastations as a result of the

storm. Here, the threat to remove a particular form of aid could affect the degree of quiescence of governmental officials in supporting educational reform. Directly aligning again with Gaventa (1980) as certain values of the traditional culture, such as those of personal harmony, family, or religion, may be welded by an elite (less bound to those values) to shape ‘choices’ that the powerless ‘cannot refuse,’” (254). Here, we see the positionality of power established through the manipulation of traditional culture, family, and religious values, leading to a choice that is really no choice at all.

The parallel between the future of public education reform and the lessons we’ve learned from the coal takeover have yet to play out in the theater of Appalachian experience, but we can be certain the cyclical nature of continued regional exploitation is one to be watched. The rapid pace of educational reform leaves it in line to be the next major attempt at exploitation in regions of Appalachia. As funding for new, private schools becomes available, those outside the region are free to build new schools that can profit off the public schools rated poorly based on the state’s own accountability model. As the findings of this study indicate, teachers are making curricular decisions for writing instruction based on the required curriculum and end-of-course assessments mandated by the state. It seems the cycle of power and powerlessness is prorogated by a state in effect undermining the schools it funds and paying families to avoid sending their children to the schools it has created. Rather than effectively reforming accountability practices for both teachers and students, the state is directing funds away from the problems it essentially has labeled as the scales by which we measure school success are controlled by the state rather than an independent, outside agency.

Study Findings and the Third Dimension of Power

As the environment in rural Appalachian regions is uniquely positioned to follow patterns of power and powerlessness, questions as to how these structures can apply to educational reforms remain. At the 2025 Appalachian Studies Association Conference, John Gaventa addressed the crowd with remarks associated with the theme of the conference, “Rural Reimagined: A Grand Challenge for Appalachia.” In his speech, he emphasized the importance of reimagining a future for Appalachia, one that places it in conversation with global happenings and that cautions us to recognize new power actors who may emerge in areas where historical institutions of power are transitioning. Though his work is primarily associated with coal mining communities, the principles and practices of exploitation in Appalachia are not unique to coal. To understand how educational reforms are ripe to follow the same patterns as companies wielding power through extractive practices in Appalachia, we must compare how the findings of this study align with the third dimension of power outlined by Gaventa and referenced in Chapter 2. According to the third dimension of power, the manipulation of social myths, language, and symbols is significant in securing identities for those who are both powerful and powerless. As the findings of this study reflected attitudes and associations with both Appalachian identities and understandings of English Language Arts Education, it is imperative to examine how power structures exist in both identity expressions and classroom teaching practices and, more importantly, how new systems of power could emerge. For this purpose, I will outline three indirect mechanisms of Gaventa’s (1980) third dimension of power as they relate to the findings of this study.

Indirect Mechanisms of the Third Dimension of Power

Adaptive Response to Continual Defeat

Gaventa (1980) argues power systems may be maintained due to an adaptive response on the part of those deemed powerless. Over the course of repeated failure to assume power, it is possible those who are powerless may refute action as they deem an alternative consequence unlikely or impossible. In the case of educational reform, participant responses related to state accountability assessments and instructional practices indicate frustration with the system but do not exhibit agency in changing the system.

Since 2011, when I first entered the secondary English Language Arts classroom in the state of Tennessee, the end-of-course state assessment shifted through Measurement INC and Questar platforms before ultimately landing with Pearson and often oscillated between paper and computer-based assessment mediums. In addition, the curriculum standards shifted to Common Core in 2010 and again to Tennessee Academic Standards in 2017. Many districts in Tennessee have now shifted to the use of high - quality instructional materials through providers such as Amplify or Springboard. All this is to say that for the last fifteen years, English Language Arts educators have experienced critical changes in their instructional foundations almost yearly. Though the participants in this study were first-year English Language Arts instructors, they undoubtedly experienced shifts in educational reform throughout their own secondary English Language Arts education and are witnessing now in the early years of their profession. Here, I would like to extend Gaventa's initial argument of the indirect mechanism of adaptive responses and make the case for not only actions met with inaction but also

patterns of action as enough to promote inaction. In this instance, the relationship between power and powerless is not seen in an immediate lack of response but rather the result of a cycle of change so rapid and concurrent that action seems fruitless because additional change is inevitable. As Camden responded in her interview, “Why can't they come in and learn about somebody's experience and relate to it and, like, learn that way or any of the other? Like wonderful project-based learning ways?” Because the accountability system seems fixed with little input from educators. Because the end-of course-assessment gauges both the success of teachers and students. Because the systems change so rapidly, there is no consistent element to question.

Interrelationship of Participation and Consciousness

The second indirect mechanism of power was not directly captured in the findings of this study but should be investigated on a larger scale related to privatized educational reform: the relationship between participation and consciousness. According to Gaventa's framework, participation itself can increase awareness and inclusion in dialogue related to the community needs of community members. The lack of participation can lead to what Freire describes as a culture of silence in which participants become more dependent and vulnerable to the demands of those in power (Gaventa, 1980). In this instance of education reform in Appalachian regions, the participation of educators in making decisions can feel removed from those in positions to make the decisions. When the idea of school vouchers was first presented, there were opportunities for state legislators to meet with local government and school board officials. What was lacking were formal opportunities for legislators to sit down with educators or visit the public schools in question. Also, other than the same opportunities afforded to the public

citizens, student and parent voices were not sought out either. Gaventa (1980) argues this indirect mechanism maintains the status quo by intentionally including policy and demands that are not particularly formed or clear. In this case, I argue that these patterns have been enacted prior to this period of educational reform, as with the state testing systems that accounted for no variation between paper and computer testing. Here, the passage of the Tennessee Education Freedom Scholarship Act promotes a similar pattern. The information is ambiguous and vague, and those still new in the implementation time frame, it is the ambiguity of the problem that continues to lack participation in its discussion. How are community participants able to share their voices if the potential effects of the new program are unclear? Additional studies examining perceptions of educators related to policy formation and voice can inform if and how this indirect mechanism of power functions in these communities.

Invocation of Myth, Symbols, Threats, or Rumors

It is the third indirect mechanism of power associated with Gaventa's third dimension of power that directly aligns with the findings of this study. In this mechanism, power relationships are secured based on how those in power evoke social myths, threats, or rumors to ensure some issues remain hidden while others continue to surface. These elements of control are visible in Appalachia's earliest accounts, but it is the perpetuation of these ideas from within that leads to additional questions and opportunities for study.

In the case of *Hillbilly Elegy*, the isolationist and stereotypical representations in the memoir are reminiscent of Caudill or Miles. However, as previously stated, my intention is not to discredit the narrative or the narrator's experiences in *Hillbilly Elegy*. They are real, and they are in print. Rather, it is important to question what factors lead to

the spread of these ideas and how false narratives continue to propagate within the communities. In the findings of this study, all four participants exhibited pride in their Appalachian identities, but these emotions shifted when it came to Appalachian English expression, regulating them to language of relic or language of absence identifiers. In this framework, additional research should be conducted related on the relationship of power to the propagation of social identity in Appalachian regions. In the case of *Hillbilly Elegy*, the ideas presented in the book were accepted by insiders of the region prior to Vance's political career. How would these ideas have been received had they been shared by one who was already in a position of power? Does the "insider" status of its author allow for the narrative acceptance, and are there quantifiable differences between those on the inside who support the work and those on the inside who do not? What is unique about Vance's positionality is his ability to move between "insider" of Appalachia, deemed powerless in some responses to the exploitation of the region by external forces, while maintaining a position as an individual in a position of power.

This indirect mechanism is also visible in contemporary accounts of Appalachian regions. Furthermore, in this study, the participants' attitudes toward acceptable language expression resulted in the modification of their values related to writing instruction. The measurement of acceptance of appropriate written construction is based on the socially constructed idea of "formal" language expression and the state-created writing assessment rubrics.

Ultimately, additional research on the indirect mechanisms of power can inform how education reform in Appalachian areas mimics power relationships previously constructed in other areas of environmental and economic systems of the region. As

Appalachian scholars have echoed, the region is a mirror to some of the larger issues facing the country. As we enter a time of continued focus on public education, questions as to how the move toward a privatized educational system will affect people in rural Appalachian regions merit additional study and attention.

Limitations of the Study

Because this was a descriptive, qualitative study, the sample size for data collection was small. Though the specific narratives themselves may not be generalized, the trends found within the narratives can be compared to current narratives of Appalachian experience. Recognizing the duality of my positionality could be an additional limitation of this study. Because the participants were known to be me prior to conducting this research, this could affect how they described their experiences and how they described their educational preparation program. Additionally, participants may have withheld critical characterizations of their school systems or curricular practices.

Plans for Future Research

Perceptual Dialectology and Appalachian Identity Formation

The implications for the next steps in research involve further examination of English Language Arts educators' perception of language usage in their classroom. Because this study focused on the findings of first-year English Language Arts educators, future research can compare how mid-career and veteran teachers perceive language usage and if those perceptions are characterized by a *language of relic* or *language of absence* marker in their descriptions. Here, tensions emerged when defining English Language Arts education between how teachers perceived their Appalachian identities and what types of writing instruction were prioritized in their classrooms. Additional data

should be collected in other areas of Appalachia to compare findings for first-year English Language Arts educators. While data in the original zone of collection can include mid-career and veteran teacher perspectives, which may inform perceptions of Appalachian identity formations.

A future research project utilizing perceptual dialectology (Preston, 2011; Burkette & Cramer, 2024) as a methodology, having participants plot their language descriptions on a regional map and comparing those findings with qualitative interviews will inform my theoretical frame of language and relic and language of absence identity markers. Identifying what, if any, factors contribute to differences in *language of relic* versus *language of absence* markers in participant responses can inform Appalachian identity studies.

Polyphonic Narratives in Contemporary Appalachian Literature

From a poststructuralist theoretical lens, understanding Appalachian identities and their formation is best determined through the exploration of varied narratives rather than a singular account. However, most nonfiction accounts of the region often rely on a singular narrative voice (e.g., Frost, 1899; Miles, 1905; Vance, 2016) while many contemporary Appalachian fiction writers utilize a polyphonic narrative structure (e.g., Pancake, 2007; Smith, 2011; Wilkinson, 2016). The inclusion of polyphonic narrative structures in contemporary Appalachian literature leads us to question how this narrative structure aligns with Appalachian identity constructions. Additional work in the field of polyphonic narrative constructions can inform how Southern Appalachian writers engage with the tensions in their Appalachian identity formations. Specifically, this work can examine how contemporary Appalachian writers utilize this structure in the works of Lee

Smith, Crystal Wilkinson, and Ann Pancake while comparing it to modern writers such as Mildred Haun. Finally, examining coal exploration and environmental repercussions through the lens of contemporary Appalachian fiction can inform the current systematic reforms affecting current educational institutions, drawing comparisons to varying regional exploitative practices in Appalachia.

An Ending

The sun refracts a bright beam of light as the yellow haze fills the classroom. It is that time of the year when it can't quite decide when evening begins and afternoon ends. Here at the university, the windows of the building across the parking lot are copper as I lower the blinds and prepare our space. I can hear their voices in the hallway. Their shoes. Their cups and keys. They are teachers a few months away from entering their own classrooms. They will face an educational system very different from the one I left only four years ago.

When I began this work, I thought I knew what it meant to be an English Language Arts Educator. I thought I knew what it meant to be from Appalachia. What I learned is the cost of belonging to something can sometimes be much greater than we imagined. It can permeate who we are so that it is difficult to decipher who we think we are from who others believe us to be. In that respect, we are no different than anyone else living in a time when the primary interest is questioning the narrative rather than how the narrative began.

Understanding Appalachia means accepting that there is no singular Appalachia but rather a mythic notion of a region where those connected with it are left to grapple with their own fantastical history. It's ok to love that myth, hold it with pride, accepting it

as the narrative of a beginning, but when we fail to lift the voices of all who are connected to place, those from various backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, religions, and sexual orientations, we risk perpetuating the past. Those voices have always existed, those rebels who didn't agree, who fought back, who fought each other, who didn't fit, who weren't "Appalachian" enough. Their perspectives are visible in many contemporary Appalachian works which force us to reckon with an accepted central narrative. But there is still work to be done. As we see some contemporary insiders perpetuating the myth, we must justify continuing a conversation of a present does not invalidate a past. As our language of relic and language of absence structures contribute to the polarization of how we understand Appalachian experiences.

This is not the ending as I would have imagined it. This is not the ending at all.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Dear -----,

I'm reaching out to invite you to participate in a research study conducted through The University of Tennessee related to your experiences teaching secondary English Language Arts.

If you are interested in participating in this study, I have attached an informed consent letter outlining the projects and what will be required of you should you choose to participate.

I'm happy to address any questions you may have.

Thank you for your consideration,

Megan Krupa

Appendix B

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: *Secondary ELA Teacher Narratives*

Researcher(s): Dr. Susan Groenke, Professor, University of Tennessee and Megan Krupa, PhD Student, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

As an English Language Arts teacher in the Southern Appalachian region, you are eligible to participate in this study.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of secondary English Language Arts teachers in the Southern Appalachian region and to explore the narratives constructed by participants related to elements of writing instruction.

What will I do in this study?

You will be asked to participate in two interview sessions occurring on Zoom and lasting approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. You can expect to be asked questions regarding your experiences teaching writing within the Appalachian region. You may skip any questions which you desire not to answer.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to participate in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. Your relationship with The University of Tennessee will be unaffected by this decision.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact Megan Krupa, mhall108@vols.utk.edu or Dr. Susan Groenke, sgroenke@utk.edu to withdraw from the study.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information.

These procedures are described later in this form. Possible risks include social and emotional vulnerability based on participant response to interview questions and personal information shared during these sessions. These risks will be minimized as all interviews are recorded and housed in a secure location utilizing an approved video recording software system, Zoom, which is password protected. After interviews are conducted through Zoom, the files will be downloaded and stored on a password protected computer.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for further study. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study.

We will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

No, there is no anticipated cost for participating in the study.

What else do I need to know?

A maximum of 5 individuals will be enrolled in this research study. This is relevant to you because should a breach in confidentiality occur, it is possible someone could identify you more readily.

If we learn about any new information that may change your mind about being in the study, we will tell you. If that happens, you may be asked to sign a new consent form.

You will not receive compensation for your participation in this study.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Megan Krupa, mhall108@vols.utk.edu, (423) 367- 0098 or Dr. Susan Groenke, sgroenke@utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact

Institutional Review Board

2240 Sutherland Drive,

Suite 2, Knoxville, TN 37919

Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant Signature of Adult Participant Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member Signature of Research Team Member Date

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-24-08351-XM

IRB APPROVAL DATE: 10/04/2024

IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 10/03/2027

Appendix C

Interview Protocol and Questions

Interview #1

Hello, _____. Thank you for agreeing to this conversation today which is part of a research study describing the lived experiences of English Language Arts teachers in this region. I'm interested in learning more about your experiences as a secondary English Language Arts teacher here in the Appalachian region. Today's topics will be based on your early experiences as a student in the region. The interview should last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Please feel free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

1. Can we talk briefly about the region specifically and its context? How do you define Appalachia, and do you identify as Appalachian?
2. Will you share some of your experiences as a middle school English Language Arts student in the region? .
3. Will you share some of your experiences as a high school English Language Arts student in the region?
4. Will you share some of your experiences as a high school English Language Arts student in the region?
5. When you were in middle school, how did you feel about yourself as a writer? Did these feelings change over time or remain the same?
6. When you were in high school, how did you feel about yourself as a writer? Did these feelings change over time or remain the same? What did writing instruction look like for you in school? Can you share a specific example?
7. Tell me a bit about your journey to becoming an English Language Arts educator. Why this content? Why this place?
8. How do you define English Language Arts Education? What are your responsibilities?
9. Does English Language Arts Education in practice match your definition of what it should be? Why or why not?
10. What does it mean to be an English Language Arts educator in this region? Does the context of the region matter?
11. How does teaching English compare to how you were prepared to teach English?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to share about today's topics?

Interview #2

Hello, _____. Thank you for agreeing to this conversation today which is part of a research study describing the lived experiences of English Language Arts teachers in this region. Last session, we discussed your early experiences growing up in the region and your journey of becoming a teacher. Today's session will explore your experiences in

educational spaces such as the classroom, the school, and the community at large. Please feel free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

1. What does it mean to be a teacher in this region? Does the context of Appalachia appear in your classroom setting?
2. How would you describe yourself as a teacher? In what areas do you feel the most confident? Where do you feel the least confident?
3. How would you describe yourself as a writing teacher? What does teaching writing look like in your classroom?
4. What does “good writing” look like? What influences your ideas of “good writing”?
5. What are the biggest challenges you face as a writing educator?
6. In what genre of writing are your students most successful?
7. Is there a “right way” to write? To speak?
8. How would you describe the language used by your students in their writing?
9. How do these descriptions affect writing instruction?
10. Can you share a few moments related to writing instruction? Where were the successes? Where were the struggles?
11. Is there anything you’d like to add to our conversation for today?

VITA

Megan Krupa is the author of the poetry chapbooks, *Heirloom* and *Holler*. A 2025 representative of the Women of Appalachia Project, her poetry has appeared in *BOAAT*, *Broad River Review*, *Driftwood Press*, and is forthcoming in the 2025 Anthology of Appalachian Writers. A lifelong resident of northeastern Tennessee, she is an Assistant Professor at East Tennessee State University where she teaches courses for undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates.