

Oklahoma English Language Arts and Navigating Dissonance in Post-Democracy

Shaista Fenwick, Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education, University of Oklahoma

Abstract

In the democratic exercise of power, there are no irrelevant communities of fellow citizens. If, according to Parker Palmer, democracy itself depends on the cultivation of certain “habits of the heart,” (Palmer, 2011), then the mission of ELA teachers would be to curate books and guide experiences that have the capacity to reach the hearts of their students. Teachers within a democracy, especially those in English-Language Arts and related reading-dependent disciplines, have a civic responsibility to select diverse and representative texts in furtherance of the goals of democracy. Secondary ELA teacher excellence and duty includes the selection of diverse texts that represent their students’ lived experiences and the communities they may have to navigate, inhabit, create, or coexist with.

Teaching English Language Arts in Oklahoma can be a risky business, given the public attacks on books, reading access, critical thinking across curriculum from state office-holders, well-funded public figures, the risk of school violence by students and outside actors, and the increased stress of navigating ever-increasing taskloads and complexities in the profession. This paper presents the landscape of competing elements Oklahoma ELA instructors have to navigate and some implications of post-democracy for the teaching profession.

Introduction

The United States of America is facing a sea change in how we structure society’s wants and provide for the common good. The current public discourse is deeply divided over the social safety net, the general welfare itself, and the source of threats require a common defense as our policies are addressed in either global or domestic spheres. As Bellah et al. suggest, “the inability to make legitimate demands on others becomes an even more severe problem when one steps out of the face-to-face personal world,” (Bellah et al., 2007), such as the internet or in the varied media sources which now comprise most of our national arena. According to de Tocqueville, democracy as practiced in America was a substantive answer to a critical political question, ‘what is the best form of government?’ “Tocqueville contrasted the regular, stable, and effective institutions and mores of America with those existing in Europe at that time that contained relics of an aristocratic past that proved to be a stumbling block against political democracy,” (Craiutu and Jennings, 2004). These institutions of democracy, de Tocqueville postulated (Scherer, 1985), were due to certain habits of the heart in public life that balanced civic interest, identity, and loyalties against those of the individual themselves. Parker Palmer further postulated that several ‘Habits of the Heart’ were intrinsic to education, and the chief responsibility of families and teachers to instill in children.

These habits of the heart arose from the literature, civic discourse, and common cultural touchstones of the time—elements that are easily avoided in the current highly individualistic media landscape. The socialization of the country's larger voting blocks and the forced intimacy between disparate groups of people happens, in the United States, mostly in its public K-12 classrooms; in spaces where vastly different groups of young people are placed in proximity with one another and forced to contend with differing points of view and cultural microclimates as a whole body instead of in siloed, fragmented markets. Therefore, it is there that the battles of individualism versus cooperative governance must now be postulated and excavated in the minds and hearts of its electorate.

Parker Palmer claims there are five 'habits of the heart' which are integral to the functioning of a democracy, and without which we will falter in our educational quest to help people lift one another out of ignorant and ineffectual darkness. He codifies these five habits, adapted from de Tocqueville as:

- We must understand that we are all in this together
- We must develop an appreciation of the value of 'otherness'
- We must cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways
- We must generate a sense of personal voice and agency,
- We must strengthen our capacity to create community."

Palmer, after codifying these democratic 'habits,' exhorts the teacher that "when the heart is open and allowed to work its alchemy, suffering can generate vitality instead of violence," (Palmer, 2011). However, there are significant challenges facing those teachers who do the work of teaching through and with the habits of the heart which are at the formative core competencies of democracy. These challenges have significant implications for the future of democracy.

Post Democracy—Characteristics as applied to Education

Colin Crouch identified conditions for thriving democracy as conditions where "major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people actively to participate, through discussion and autonomous organizations, in shaping the agenda of public life, and when these opportunities are being actively used by them," (Crouch, 2000, p. 1). Crouch contrasted this state to nation-states where organizational and political will were being concentrated by financial and technocratic elites, public engagement with and participation in political processes were ebbing, and similar political distancing from out-groups were occurring between most political parties despite increasing rhetorical vitriol between those parties. In education, these de-democratizing forces also involve commercialization (Alikhani 2017). The post-democratic state still boasts the characteristic democratic structures such as social safety nets; legislative, executive, judicial and enforcement infrastructure; territorial ingress and egress mechanisms, the internal and external trade regulatory structures; suffrage; a reasonable expectation of public safety, but public confidence in characteristically democratizing structures is eroded or nonfunctional.

ELA teachers have a specific role in the democratic process, as they teach the skill of writing. Writing is not only a deliverable, but a task that requires examination of the world, formation of judgements about it, and then the effective communication of these ideas. According to Warner, students "struggle mightily with writing tasks that ask them to synthesize and create knowledge," (Warner 2018, p. 16). Students have the opportunity to examine and mimic these skills but rarely have the opportunity to form their own relationship to their shared reality through writing, the critical examination and response that Palmer claims differentiates autocracy from democracy (Palmer 2011). The simple rote mimicry or regurgitation of

information from experts is insufficient to prepare students to be in a democratic structure with their colleagues and predecessors—as Palmer observed, “democracy is not a spectator sport in which citizens can sit back and watch the pros at work,” (Palmer p. 133, 2011). Instead, citizens must do more. They must be the pros themselves.

“We Must Understand that We are All in This Together”

The key to the unique nature of American democracy as stated by Palmer is not only the obvious urge to plurality, humanization, relational connection, and affinity, but the idea of the radical “we,” that in a democracy of any stripe, there is no ‘them.’ This emphasis on the radical ‘we’ to be an educated ‘we,’ is a concern which Thomas Jefferson also expressed several times.

The urge to engage in public life on an equal basis was a core American value from inception, despite the obvious myopias of the American founders. Jefferson held the core issue of education in a democracy was to balance the understanding of the world with a similar understanding of rights and obligations. “To give to every citizen the information he needs...to understand his duties to his neighbors and country...to know his rights...” (Jefferson, 1818). Jefferson paired these elements—rights and obligations—as core requirements for American citizens to understand, in order for democracy to function as he had envisioned with his colleagues during the founding of the country. The urge to American unity of purpose in everyday political activity through a multiplicity of religious organizations was noted by de Tocqueville “The sects which exist in the United States are innumerable. They all differ in respect to the worship, which is due from man to his Creator, but they all agree in respect to the duties which are due from man to man. Each sect adores the Deity in its own peculiar manner, but all the sects preach the same moral law in the name of God,” (de Tocqueville, 1835/2003). In the organizational and information-sharing structure of early American churches, these functions were paired implicitly with the rights of citizens and commensurate obligations to preserve those structures which served the country.

This pairing of education and effective public life on an equal basis was a necessary component of democracy, according to Jefferson. In his words to George Wythe, Jefferson observed “I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness,” (Jefferson, 1786). The diffusers of knowledge—teachers in schools—are then at least partly tasked with the core competencies of democracy itself, namely with those dignities due from man to man, and the definition of human reciprocal responsibility and group endeavor within civic life. When those structures fail, democracy itself becomes precarious.

“We Must Develop an Appreciation of the Value of ‘Otherness’”

As public faith is eroded in governments in de-democratizing practices (Alikhani 2017), educators are affected both as governmental entities and as unique publics. Mass communications theory defines publics as distinct and complex groups of people who interact with mass communications distinctly. Although public school educators are by no means monolithic, they do experience a unique intersectional identity as both governed and governing, in addition to embodying the first experience most residents of a state have with governmental authority itself.

English and language arts (ELA) as a discipline is rooted in the art of communication. The goal of English teaching is more than just language competency, it involves critical thinking, communication, construction and understanding of rhetoric, appeals, and the ways in which we

relate and galvanize one another within society—and also how we construct society itself. In effect, the ELA classroom teacher must stand in the gap between the self and their government, mediating as authoritative force to train many different students in effective meaning-making, self-expression, skill application, and citizenship socialization. They must do this as a somewhat unified front within a school building or risk harm to the coherence of school and district policies to support and protect the school and its faculty, staff and students.

The story is the single narrative unit of understanding another human experience, whether one's own or another persons. English and language arts are the art of communication between people, understanding and crafting messages from one type of human to another. When selecting texts for students to consider and contend with, teachers are tasked with creating a space and an intellectual platform from which myriad students can contend safely with the task of decrypting literature. The curriculum in K-12 schools today does not require the skills of reading long-form literature but instead focuses on close reading of short passages. Teachers themselves must choose to teach longer or whole texts. They know the civic skills developed when reading long-form passages in narrative support the development of empathy and connection to other people (Gallagher, 2015) fundamental to shared interests in civic life. As Styslinger emphasized in 2017, "One of the most important political decisions we can make as English language arts teachers is deciding what to teach," (Styslinger, 2017, p. 13). As teachers of English, our curriculum can either support or challenge the status quo and systems of power in education and the world. John Dewey pushed strongly for education in the classroom to support and connect with lived experiences outside the classroom (Dewey, 1986). Rudine Sims Bishop famously referred to texts as providing mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. (Bishop, 1990) through which readers could reflect, see others, and inhabit others' experiences. As such, ELA teachers are tasked with including or connecting many different narratives and lifeways to their core texts, despite increasing reliance on short-form pieces driven by testing reform. These whole-text experiences offer the opportunity to consider the lives of other people and perspectives as a whole, not in decontextualized and essentialized snapshots.

"We Must Cultivate the Ability to Hold Tension in Life-Giving Ways"

When presenting differing perspectives to children, there will inevitably be tension between any students' thesis and other students' experiences as antithesis. According to Palmer, the responsibility to increase exposure and comfort with plural lifeways and experiences is an intersection between the discipline of the English teacher and the world, and is part of the core responsibility of engaging with democracy. In mentor texts or discussions of such, "...we must find ways to help people conduct an inner search free of any predetermined outcome while providing them with the guidance and resources they need to conduct it well. As we do so, we will be shaping some of the habits of the heart that make democracy possible." (Palmer, 2011). In addition to the complexity of working with other students, students also need to be able to make their own mistakes and learn from them in a space where they receive generative feedback and safety. These inner searches and opportunities for reflection and analysis are challenging to create and scaffold appropriately individually or in small groups, much less large groups of twenty or more students.

Teachers are trained to provide these opportunities in their classrooms for their students, and also are trained ethically to respect learners in the difficult stages of grappling with subject matter. As Palmer went on to address, skilled teachers are tasked both with doing enough, but not too much, namely "creating conditions under which students can conduct an inner search does

not mean dictating answers to inner-life questions, which by definition do not have answers in any conventional sense. It means helping students learn to ask questions that are worth asking because they are worth loving, questions that one can fruitfully hold at the center of one's life," (Palmer 2011). Instead of delivering reductive questions, the skilled teacher encourages students to grapple with rigorous questions and hone their skills with metacognition. Again, these limitations to teachers' intervention in the classroom and in a student's learning process are also a key element of developing the habits in students which contribute to reflective and responsible citizenship. Students developing the habits of connection, empathy, and plurality must grapple with the Other in the text and in the world, as well as the Other within themselves, in a civil and visible way. These methods and elements of connection and direct application of holding generative tension also tend to translate into tangible learning effectiveness (Warner, 2018).

This tension and reconciliation, the grappling with the Other is a generalizable skill which poses a disruption to the de-democratizing process of social siloing, especially those mechanisms tied to technocracy and social media saturation. The resulting humanization of others makes it far more difficult to discard their concerns. The ELA tools of democratizing are found in pedagogical tactics such as Socratic seminars, rhetorical analysis, narrative writing, and perspective-taking between students and in texts. Good ELA teaching at the secondary level can be accomplished effectively with minimal tools other than a space; the basic tools of paper and pen; and a teacher with the knowledge, drive, and curiosity to listen to and guide students.

Germinal linguist Walter Ong identifies writing itself as a technology which humans have adapted to relatively recently as a species, having primarily relied on orality and the tools of story to discover, further, retain, and transmit knowledge (Ong, 1979). The current media landscape is a place where devices send cultural messages which divide and essentialize student identities (Zeithaml, 1985), student attention is monetized, and children themselves are treated legally as possessions. The ability to disconnect from external publics in the educational space is inherently disruptive to the discourse of monetized engagement and control of public discourse. In a world where student attention is a deeply valuable commodity, disruption of corporate and technocratic access to children's minds is both a necessary and dangerous dissonance for a teacher to create. Yet these habits of listening to other perspectives and skills of reconciling them are necessary habits of democracy. They are created by skilled teachers who are able to take professional risks in the classroom, knowing they have the ability to provide effective guardrails for their students, and the students are able to trust their teachers enough to engage freely in the process of experiencing and resolving these tensions.

"We Must Generate a Sense of Personal Voice and Agency"

Teaching ELA—helping students communicate effectively and receive communication effectively—is a core subject in American High School and is frequently the last (and sometimes first) place where students truly are placed in immediate company with a representative sample of their peers. This democratic experience is facilitated by the teacher whose role is to perceive and respond to the expressed needs of students and create an atmosphere of trust (Noddings 2012). This atmosphere of personal trust is created through the experiences of benevolence, competence, reliability, honesty, and openness, according to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000). English curriculum in Oklahoma requires communication competencies from teachers, as it does from students as well. Peer to peer student trust thrives when students establish trust with teachers so they may develop further trust with their peers in the classroom, with the teacher arbitrating the social structure and ruleset. In this atmosphere of trust and intellectual safety,

students feel more able to take intellectual risks and expand their zone of proximal development (Eun 2017).

Students in the Oklahoma ELA curriculum are urged to respond to texts and make connections from their own experiences, meaning they must feel safe enough to share and understand theirs and others' experiences. This work is complex, and not typically part of the testing standards to which most curriculum is geared. Instead, these skills of expressing the self and using the civic voice in the world is a part of a democratic standard expected from active citizens in decision-making capacity. Students who are empowered have choice. They develop effective choice through practice—being offered choices and allowed to develop preferences and rationales, after having those skills modeled for them by trusted others. To that end, reading choice in classrooms and schools is a key tactic in developing intellectual and civic self-determination.

As the mechanisms of access to literature, ELA teachers and the tools of their trade have come under significant scrutiny. From book challenges and bans, to the heavy censure of research tools, the ELA classroom's operations have seen increased suspicion. The ELA curriculum has been at odds with the now-national mandate to erase principles and the words of diversity, equity, and inclusion from curriculums and texts from early childhood through university classes. ELA teachers run particularly afoul of this agenda when making plural and representative texts available to their students. When upper-grade students engage with reading on a regular basis, the core of engagement with reading involves student choice, "Selecting one's preferred reading material encourages engagement in the materials and enables the reader to attain a higher level of understanding of the written word," (Dougherty et al. 2022, p.21). The researchers also found student choice led to a greater absorption of the material and more effective trust-based relationships in the classroom. Having a teacher walk students through decrypting and treating their preferred texts as worthy of scrutiny is an empowering and resilience-building tactic.

These tools of choice and curiosity about the lived experience of others are crucial elements in building the exercise of student voice into the classroom. It also allows authentic trust-based relationships between teacher and students and between students themselves to form a resilient, academically curious community. For high schoolers, too often the high school English classroom is the last opportunity to exercise their candid face-to-face democratic voices with dissimilar peers.

Technocratic and capitalistic structures within democracy serve to centralize schooling away from the 'why' and instead focuses teacher attention on the 'how' of education—a transformation from reasoning and criticality to technological task execution. Additional process and task-driven curriculum and mandates from industry partners push agendas and curriculum geared toward technicalization—the process through which technique displaces purpose and centers itself as the core of the curriculum (Kincheloe, 2011). However, ELA can address both aims of industry and meaning-making simultaneously. Students in ELA classrooms learn the skills of communication as well as the purpose of the authors and themselves in writing—and make connections between patterns of the past to current situations. The authentic voice of communicating truths about the self is honed after learning to grapple with those voices in others, across difference, with the ability to focus on those stories and decrypt them with some depth. Then students can work to craft their own narratives with similar fidelity, using the tools of the writer and adapting their own in due course, as voice-building exercises.

“We Must Strengthen our Capacity to Create Community.”

Public discourse tends to bemoan the death of reading and writing in the technologically saturated spaces we inhabit, but the reality is we are conducting reading and writing activities on technology every day. We are “reading” cultural texts and the writing of social media, responding to them in kind, and having collaborative conversations where we “piggyback” or respond to memetic elements on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Bluesky, and other platforms. We simply inhabit plural cultures, subcultures and valences of power virtually instead of physically. As Ong put it during the nascence of the internet, “far from being destroyed by electronics, orality and literacy interlace in electronic communication more complexly than ever before—so much so that we have not yet developed adequate concepts and terms to describe the interlacing,” (Ong, 2002).

An issue with teaching in a fractured media environment is that many of our young people—and adults—do not have the skills to navigate long-form narratives or put emergent incidents into appropriate contexts with research or history, largely because classroom ELA teaching has become more focused on delivering test results that cater to excerpted material versus examining the entirety of an argument (Anagnostopoulos, 2005). Students are working instead on a survival level of patterning, and their lack of academic and structural knowledge makes them manipulable by public actors to achieve a separate agenda. In the hands of skills-based versus deep understanding models, education can render students as cogs in a Fritz Lang inspired mechanism, “We often look at schooling as a force which frees us from ignorance, helps us envision alternatives, gives us choice in the direction of our lives, and opens the doors of opportunity. Viewed in the context of ‘personality adjustment’ school serves not as a force for freedom but as a vehicle of constraint,” (Kincheloe 2011, p.4). The saturation of the classroom and school environment by personal devices and the constant permeability of adolescent and child attention is a vulnerability to those agendas of constraint.

ELA classrooms, however, are spaces in which teachers have the power of story, of communication competencies, and of community building—all of which are democratizing and empowering activities. Populist political discourse is a significant characteristic in the current neoliberal-administered public sphere, which is characterized by the idea that dissonant voices are not only differing, but *illegitimate*. ELA classrooms and the reading practices championed by Rudine Sims Bishop of texts as “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” (Bishop 1990) allow and promote a legitimization of many differing voices, in addition to practices of collaboration and feedback within reciprocally trusting spaces. As has been clearly documented, mutual and reciprocal trust is essential in any functional community, especially learning communities (Sopko & LaRocco, 2018). These practices are inherently democratizing and build tolerance and potentially mutual respect between students as a means of basic function within a classroom.

ELA teachers have explicit and implicit burdens within their specialty and grade band which may complicate these tasks. ELA at the secondary level is partly a deliverable-oriented skills class, but significant portions of the curriculum lies in decryption of texts, meaning-making, self-expression, and community engagement in the writing process. Best practices for ELA teachers require teaching texts that speak to student experiences of all kinds to support reading competencies and mutual engagement as a trusting community across differences, shared goals, and parallel experiences—the same competencies that comprise successful democratic engagement for an electorate. In Oklahoma schools, this work of democracy comes with risks

that ELA teachers must navigate in order to be successful professional and community leaders within their classrooms.

Oklahoma ELA Teachers' Awareness of Personal and Professional Risk

Oklahoma ELA teachers have been subjected to systemic and polemicized threat for performing best practices of their discipline in the classroom by weaponized virtual communities and the state officer in aegis over education. Over the past several years, individual teachers in the state have been censured for sharing a public library link with students, bringing vetted drag performers to read to children, having LGBTQIA+ identities or pastimes outside education, engaging positively with atheist organizations, and sharing personal commentary about the death of a political activist outside educational spaces—this censure was conducted by the then-head of the State Department of Education, Ryan Walters, who resigned in 2025. Teachers transferring to Oklahoma with out-of-state accreditation from California or New York have been required to take a formative ‘assessment’ with factual inaccuracies and misspellings issued by Prager University seemingly geared to create an understanding of safe versus problematized rhetoric for public life as teachers. Walters, after each of these incidents, engaged with social media and used the office of the State Department of Education to issue polemicized statements on legacy and state media.

Several educators such as Summer Boismier, Tyler Wrynn, and principal Dr. Shane Murnan have also been doxxed—targeted for harassment, reported to online lists, targeted for in-person retribution, and touted as threats by ideologues with reach within their communities by several online groups, primarily Libs of TikTok. The leader of LoTT, Chaya Raichik—a former resident and real estate agent in Brooklyn, New York, was subsequently appointed by Walters to the Oklahoma Library Media Advisory Committee.

Although she had to leave Oklahoma due to direct, physical threats to her and her family, Boismier was further targeted by Walters when he attempted to rescind her teaching certificate. Despite a judge recommending against revocation, the Oklahoma State Department of Education under Ryan Walters ultimately rescinded her teaching certificate after years of persistent administrative harassment (Wallis, 2024). Her students still talk about her as a remarkable teacher, and several parents of her former students remain furious she was forced to leave.

Dr. Murnan was forced to resign by his district. Although district administration resisted official state pressure from Walters, the ostensibly grassroots threats from online activists emboldened and directed by LoTT was directed at students and school sites, as district superintendent Brayden Savage disclosed to state news organization NonDoc.

“I’m not caving to Ryan Walters, but I have to ultimately keep the students and the staff of this school safe. The hate has not stopped. To bring Shane back to the building is a risk to safety for all,” Savage said. “I cannot be totally sure that one of those crazies would not show up to ‘cleanse the building,’ which is something that I’ve seen over and over again and something that we’ve heard over and over again.” (Brinkman, 2024).

The concern about children’s mental health and the ramifications of removing teachers who are visible supports and allies of nonconforming student populations is significant. It also speaks directly to the core professional dissonance for teachers, particularly ELA teachers who are immediate bystanders to students’ internal reflection and maturation processes. Teachers—especially those in poorly-compensated states such as Oklahoma where teacher pay regularly hovers near the lower 10% of the country (National Education Association, 2026), have significant personal investment in teaching as an identity and in the well-being of their students

as a professional duty of care, (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). The experience of caregiving identity is a component of choosing the profession of teaching.

Although teachers contend daily with the realities of political violence in terms of school shootings and other forms of violence, a far greater threat to educator mental health and career tenacity than an abstract exterior threat to students is the potential for a student's preventable life-threatening despair. Data show that the presence of even one caring adult in a child or adolescent's life can help them avoid despair and potential self-harm, especially when combined with a school culture of caring teens who recognize and refer their colleague (Joshi et al., 2015) to intervention. This hopeful data indicates the transformative power of school culture and places significant pressure on teachers. Wrynn was an eighth-grade ELA teacher whose classroom was a haven to various students including Nex Benedict. Wrynn was forced to resign after being targeted by Libs of TikTok in 2022 for his personal online content expressing support for students identifying as LGBTQIA2S+.

Benedict, a nonbinary student, died after ongoing bullying resulted in a confrontation at Owasso High School. After prolonged bullying in the district, a culminating altercation occurred in a bathroom where Benedict lost consciousness, was revived, and was later suspended. On the day of the incident at Owasso High School, Benedict's guardian was persuaded not to file a police report by the campus resource officer as seen on body cam footage (KOCO 5 News, 2024). After Benedict was suspended, they returned home and overdosed—their death the next day was ruled suicide by the Oklahoma Medical Examiner on March 13th 2024 (Mandler, 2024).

Murnan's situation encapsulates the position of the ELA teacher who is caught in between curating safety from scrutiny versus fidelity to best professional practice, potential threats to student mental health, and their right to self-expression outside and inside the classroom. ELA teaching exposes good teachers and effective purpose-driven classrooms to student thinking, because student thinking is the actual goal of ELA disciplines—not technologization. It is one of the few academic spaces in high school where the fidelity to students' purpose and identities is inherently centered and supported. The writing process, when conducted with efficacy and fidelity, allows students to express their understandings and inner landscape, including potential risks they experience. As mandatory reporters, teachers do have a team to rely on and do so through reporting and collaboration with staff and outside agencies—but not all teachers have the knowledge and training to effectively handle those situations and not all school communities are effective at navigating student concerns.

Lately, in states like Oklahoma, the nature of teachers' qualifications has become an additional valence of differentiation. Oklahoma's 2022 Senate Bill SB1119 removed the 270-hour cap for non-certified instructors to teach full time classes in public schools outside Special Education, Early Childhood and Kindergarten. There was an attempt to introduce a bill enabling adjuncts to teach Early childhood programs during the 2025 legislative session which failed. Standard teaching certificates require a lengthy university training process in pedagogy, content area, dispositions, and circumstances of classrooms. Alternative certification requires behavior management and other classroom instruction in addition to a content-area degree which may or may not involve educational structures. According to the Oklahoma Office of Educational Quality and Accountability in their March 2026 report, fewer than 90% of teachers in Oklahoma were traditionally trained and certified, almost eight percent of certified staff were alternatively certified, and almost five percent were emergency certified (OEQA, 2026). Adjuncts are not required to have any education beyond high school and are ideally given support by their districts and colleagues—but this support is not a mandatory element of the district in which they

serve. According to the OEQA's March 2026 report, 453 Oklahoman adjunct teachers taught approximately 27,000 students, mostly in elementary and middle school settings when formative inquiry, academic skills, and learning habits are established.

Oklahoma ELA Teachers' Role in the Post-Democratic structure

The post-democratic model suggests the structures of democracy are present but ineffective, and that the resulting lack of efficacy is purposeful. In the current neoliberal landscape, the structured depublicization of state endeavors such as education, justice, incarceration, healthcare, and even taxation have been calculated to redirect public monies to private corporations—essentially providing for the welfare of private stockholders over public stakeholders. These efforts do not spring whole from the ether but are frequently tested in potentially manipulable spaces such as Oklahoma before launch on a broader scale. In terms of education, deprofessionalization and privatization efforts normalized in Oklahoma are now being seen nationally. Titular deprofessionalization of teaching and deconstruction of the US Department of Education are an inevitable step in the post-democratic state. Oklahoma and similar southern states have been receiving the leading edge of such strategy, and ELA teachers in Oklahoma have been on the front lines of an ideological war for some time. In addition to their professional capacities and identities, teachers are whole people, and the scrutiny and surveillance they are under regarding cultural and social norms they may not share has been weaponized against their own professional and personal safety.

Between doxxing, direct partisan targeting by the state Department of Education, and various social and physical threats, Oklahoma ELA teachers are asked to put themselves in harm's way with every professional decision. They must also simultaneously be aware of and navigate risks to their students presented by intellectual passivity and the lack of inquiry, critical thinking, and dissonance with sophistic norms. Those potentially preventable harms are haunting and indelible from secondary teaching experiences despite all external threats to the classroom. However, there are teachers who respond with nuanced and fluid navigation of their internal and external realities, and persist in doing the curious work of teaching while constructing resilient structures in themselves and in their classroom communities. Those resilient teachers are the population most likely to generate best practices for their colleagues in the ongoing educational mission of information, skills, and care, and who present the best hope for retaining and reforming educational efficacy in the profession. These teachers are also most at risk of having their profession weaponized against them.

Standing in the Gap of Hope

According to Crouch, “the tension between the egalitarian demands of democracy and the inequalities that result from capitalism can never be resolved but there can be more or less constructive compromises around it,” (Crouch, 2004, p. 79). Public education is a public good, executed by the state for the benefit of the state, with the citizenry being of benefit to the state, and the state ultimately existing in service to the citizenry. Although this structure is somewhat more dubiously executed of late with the impact of massive wealth on egalitarian public structures such as court systems, its moral appeal remains consistent with precedent (Crouch, 2004). Crouch goes on to explain the nature of business hegemony and its extending influence into the public sector, particularly with respect to education. If free markets comprise a test of ‘fitness,’ and successful corporations are tested by their ability to gather and use knowledge; then the surviving, largest corporations are fit by dint of displaying superior knowledge. The business

community's assertion is that corporate influence in education is a beneficial public use of knowledge for the betterment of the country through developing its economy with a more knowledgeable workforce (Crouch 2004).

However, this reasoning has significant faults which are visible in the rise and fall of stock markets, companies, hedge fund destruction of thriving businesses, and layoffs of highly qualified workers as a result of global economic tensions. According to Palmer, "millions of us have lost jobs and homes because of high-level economic and political machinations that created great wealth for a few and devastation for the many," (Palmer p. 93, 2011). We are called upon to question the mechanisms that yield these results as inadequate to the purposes of democratic structures. In a democracy, financial tragedies happen to us all—there is no 'them.' But not all workers receive golden parachutes, and often the corporate architects of failure go on to fail again at workers' expense.

The democratizing structures in education focus on the perspectives of every student, family, and experience as adding nuance and information that improves decision-making as a whole. As our governmental structure has moved from exclusive benefits to elites like Jefferson, Washington, and Franklin to benefit all people in the country, anti-democratic forces have focused on redefining a politics of exclusion (Crouch 2026). As social structures, free markets, and hierarchical structures have been implicitly focused on the financial welfare of elites since the founders of Lloyd's met in a coffee house in 1688; it is critical to clarify that social safety nets for elites have become a significant portion of governmental work—as they simultaneously erode decades-old safety nets supporting other groups and classes of citizens.

Teachers, particularly ELA teachers, are called upon to do the work of hope...as Palmer calls it, "this is the place called human history where we must stand and act with hope even though neither we nor any of our descendants will see the gap permanently closed," (Palmer p. 191, 2011). Palmer's codification of the habits of the heart in democracy was a call to connect de Tocqueville and Jefferson's answer to the 'best form of government' to the form of government our shared culture is responding to, preparing for, and preserving in the habits it curates in students and educators at all levels. Regardless of the nature of the expertise teachers share, the way in which school is conducted also has impact—it forms the 'hidden' curriculum of democratization or de-democratization.

An autocracy demands that citizens become objects of a subject ruling class—that they keep their heads down, their mouths shut, and repeat the party line whether it is understood or believed (Palmer, 2011). Palmer also pointed out that the habits of democracy are not taught in all subjects—in fact they are primarily reserved for the humanities, in which the subject matter is more ephemeral than just the nuts and bolts of grammar. The ELA teacher has to teach stories as important building blocks of self, selves as important building blocks of citizens, citizens as important building blocks of community, and communities as the foundation of democracy. The humanities and the work of story build the skills and capacity of the democratic habits of the heart that perform the title of Palmer's book, "Healing the Heart of Democracy." If the school is the church of reason, then de Tocqueville's habits, along with curriculum and pedagogy, must form its liturgy. ELA teachers are called upon not only to teach democracy, but teach democratically—enact the practice and use of the habits of the heart in classrooms so the way of acting, listening, thinking, reading and writing as the authentic self becomes acting democratically.

References

- Alikhani, B. (2017). Post-democracy or processes of de-democratization? United States case study. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 42(4), 189–206.
- Anagnostopoulos, D. (2005). Testing, tests, and classroom texts. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(1), 35–63.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (2007). *Habits of the heart, with a new preface: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Univ of California Press.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi.
- Brinkman, B. (2024, February 2). “Forced” out after drag drama, Shane Murnan rejects Western Heights’ confidentiality agreement. *NonDoc*. <https://nondoc.com/2024/02/02/shane-murnan-resignation-from-western-heights-drag-drama/>
- Craiutu, A., & Jennings, J. (2004). The third democracy: Tocqueville’s views of America after 1840. *American Political Science Review*, 98(3), 391–404. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055404001236>
- Crouch, C. (2000). *Coping with post-democracy* (Fabian Ideas No. 598). Fabian Society.
- Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Polity Press.
- Crouch, C. (2026). *Exclusion and the new politics of hatred*. Polity Press.
- de Tocqueville, A. (2003). *Democracy in America* (G. E. Bevan, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1835–1840)
- Dewey, J. (1986). Experience and education. *The Educational Forum*, 50(3), 241–252.
- Dougherty, C. N., Parker, M., Nickson, L., & Creggan, C. (2022). The impact of student choice on reading. *English in Texas*, 52(1), 20–24.
- Eun, B. (2019). The zone of proximal development as an overarching concept: A framework for synthesizing Vygotsky’s theories. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51(1), 18–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1421941>
- Gallagher, K. (2015). *In the best interest of students: Staying true to what works in the ELA classroom*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Jefferson, T. (1786, August 13). Letter to George Wythe. In J. P. Boyd (Ed.), *The papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Vol. 10, pp. 243–245). Princeton University Press.
- Jefferson, T. (1818). *Report of the commissioners for the University of Virginia*. Founders Online, National Archives.
- Joshi, S. V., Hartley, S. N., Kessler, M., & Barstead, M. (2015). School-based suicide prevention: Content, process, and the role of trusted adults and peers. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics*, 24(2), 353–370. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2014.12.003>
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2011). Exposing the technocratic perversion of education: The death of the democratic philosophy of schooling. In S. R. Steinberg & A. M. A. Freire (Eds.), *Key works in critical pedagogy* (pp. 1–19). SensePublishers.
- KOCO 5 News. (2024, February 24). *Owasso police release body camera video, surveillance footage and 911 calls in Nex Benedict case* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVcneU4IJT0>
- Lavy, S., & Naama-Ghanayim, E. (2020). Why care about caring? Linking teachers’ caring and sense of meaning at work with students’ self-esteem, well-being, and school engagement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 91, Article 103046. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103046>

- Mandler, C. (2024, March 15). What happened to Nex Benedict? *NPR*.
<https://www.npr.org/2024/03/15/1238780699/nex-benedict-nonbinary-oklahoma-death-bullying>
- National Education Association. (2026). *2024-2025 teacher salary benchmark report*.
<https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/2024-2025-teacher-salary-benchmark-report-final-new.pdf>
- Noddings, N. (2012). The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(6), 771–781. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745047>
- Office of Educational Quality and Accountability. (2026, March 4). Understanding Oklahoma's teacher workforce: Entry pathways and workforce trends. Oklahoma.gov.
<https://oklahoma.gov/oeqa/about-oeqa/newsroom/2026/2026-03-understanding-oklahomas-teacher-workforce.html>
- Ong, W. J. (1979). Literacy and orality in our times. *Profession*, 1–7.
- Ong, W. J. (2002). *Orality and literacy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Palmer, P. J. (2011). *Healing the heart of democracy: The courage to create a politics worthy of the human spirit*. Jossey-Bass.
- Scherer, J. (1985). Individualism and commitment in American life: An interview with Robert Bellah. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 30, 117–141.
- Sopko, K. M., & LaRocco, D. J. (2018). Leading and growing in a culture of reciprocal trust. *Young Exceptional Children*, 21(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250615621361>
- Styslinger, M. E. (2017). *Workshopping the canon*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, W. K. (2000). A multidisciplinary analysis of the nature, meaning, and measurement of trust. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(4), 547–593.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070004547>
- Wallis, B. (2024, August 23). Former Norman teacher's battle over banned books isn't over. KGOU. <https://www.kgou.org/education/2024-08-23/from-the-classroom-to-the-courtroom-former-norman-teachers-battle-over-banned-books-isnt-over>
- Warner, J. (2018). *Why they can't write: Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Zeithaml, V. A. (1985). The new demographics and market fragmentation. *Journal of Marketing*, 49(3), 64–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298504900306>

