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Patterns in the Initial Teaching Assignments of Secondary English Teachers: Implications for Teacher Agency and Retention

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}
This study examined the teaching assignments of English teachers in 13 Mid-Atlantic high schools across five states. Data on the experience levels of 175 English teachers teaching 246 classes and surveys from 85 teacher participants were collected. Findings reveal that major agency-thwarting challenges face new English teachers: They typically are assigned to teach the students who need the most assistance, do not have their own classrooms and believe that teacher tracking occurs in their schools. Results suggest that in order to increase teacher agency, retention, and student learning, we must shift the working conditions, rhetoric, and culture around new teachers.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}
Beginning teachers; English teachers; self efficacy; teacher retention; teacher tracking

Research has demonstrated that the experiences students have as ninth and tenth graders are pivotal in determining whether they stay in school and succeed (e.g., Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). It is unclear, however, whether a parallel phenomenon occurs among secondary-school teachers: Whether the experiences they have during their first few years as a teacher in a school affect \textit{their} retention paths. Research on urban ninth graders, for example, points to their frequent assignment to new and/or uncertified teachers as a factor in student dropout (Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008). It is important to determine whether it is also true that the assignment to teach ninth and tenth graders is a factor in the attrition of beginning secondary teachers. We know, for example, that 40–50% of teachers quit within their first 5 years in the profession (Ingersoll, 2003), that first-year teacher attrition surged by one third between 1990 and 2010 (Ingersoll, 2012), and that about 25–30% of students drop out of school annually (Swanson, 2010). Because members of these two dropout-prone populations meet regularly in the ninth and tenth grade classrooms they occupy before leaving, it is important to explore how new teachers experience this unique positionality in order to better understand the professional experiences of early-career teachers.

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Scholars of secondary English teachers (e.g., Burns, 2007; Hancock & Scherff, 2010) have argued that attrition patterns among secondary English teachers are particularly important to understand, given the responsibility of high-stakes tests and schoolwide indicators of achievement that this population typically shoulders. That secondary English teachers experience increased pressure and scrutiny due to their involuntary yet pivotal role in the accountability movement makes them a particularly important population to study at this historical moment. In addition, we now know that attrition among English teachers is significantly higher than attrition among the broader population of teachers (Scherff & Hahs-Vaughn, 2008). This article reports the results of a study designed to examine the working conditions experienced by new high school English teachers and concludes that, at least for this population of secondary teachers, a disturbing pattern of agency-thwarting professional experiences—including being assigned to ninth and tenth grade—is evident and may contribute to new teacher attrition.

**Theoretical framework**

We used the notion of teacher agency to frame our study because it is widely noted to be a factor in teacher-attrition scholarship, both in general and concerning secondary English teachers specifically, as we describe below. We also chose this frame because agency emerged as a focal concept in an earlier phase of this project in which Bieler (2011) examined the narratives performed by members of the action research New English Teachers for Social justice (NETS) Project. The NETS members wanted to learn whether their experiences were common among a broader population of English teachers and so to craft this study, we used a combination of their narrative-analysis themes and additional factors described in the literature that connects working conditions with attrition.

**Agency and teacher assignments**

We understand agency to be the natural, innate capacity that all people have to take goal-oriented action (Rymes, 2009) and then to “see the results of [their] decisions and choices” (Murray, 1997, p. 381). We see agency as socially situated; each sociohistorical context makes it more or less difficult for people to enact their agency. Because the enactment of agency is satisfying, it is logical to assume that a higher level of agency would be correlated with a higher likelihood of retention (Yost, 2006). In order to investigate this relationship, a number of studies that can be seen as inquiries related to teacher agency have built on Finley’s (1984) ethnographic work on teacher tracking, which is the consistent assignment of an
individual teacher either to low-track or high-track students. For example, tracking has similar negative consequences for not only the students but also the new teachers who have been assigned to the lower tracks (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Spiegelman, 2004). One of the effects of such tracking is that teachers with low status—that is, the teachers who are assigned to teach students in lower grades or ability levels—experience reduced levels of efficacy when compared to their peers (Talbert & Ennis, 1990). Because the way that teachers are assigned to teach classes profoundly shapes their daily experiences, teacher agency, particularly insofar as it pertains to teacher assignments, is a crucial aspect of working conditions to understand.

Agency, teacher working conditions, and attrition

Separate scholarship examines the relationship between attrition and other aspects of teachers’ working conditions. Though most of these studies do not explicitly use the lens of agency to interpret their results, many provide important illustrations of how teachers’ agency is routinely hindered in their work lives. In their survey, for example, Ingersoll and Smith (2003) found that, of the teachers who cited “job dissatisfaction” as their primary reason for quitting, 84% attributed their dissatisfaction to some aspect of their school’s working conditions. The top four unsatisfactory working conditions cited by teachers who quit after just 1 year of teaching were student discipline problems, poor administrative support, poor student motivation, and lack of faculty influence in decision making.

It is striking that all four of these conditions are examples of what teachers perceive to be obstacles to teaching children. That is, it seems telling that these teachers did not cite dissatisfaction with the amount of work or pay as the primary reason they left the profession; rather, they cited hindrances to their teaching. If context-specific features interfere with the job performance new teachers envision for themselves, then these new teachers can be seen as having experienced a thwarting of their agency.

Agency and attrition among secondary English teachers

Some scholars have argued compellingly that an examination of teachers’ working conditions is best accomplished with an understanding that it is the subject area subunits of schools, the departments, that are the most powerful shapers of schools’ organizational culture and, thus, teachers’ workplace experiences. Stodolsky and Grossman (1995), for example, found that departments’ unique contexts afford particular approaches to hierarchical organization. It follows, then, that much of the potential for agency building or agency thwarting resides at the departmental level.
Over the past decade, researchers have made significant progress in understanding how issues of agency specifically affect attrition among secondary English teachers. Agency-thwarting factors identified as contributing to English teacher attrition are a lack of support, both collegial (Freedman & Appleman, 2009) and material (Scherff, 2008), and increased responsibilities concerning differentiated instruction (Scherff, Ollis, & Rosencrans, 2006). Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn (2008) found that it is extremely rare (about 10%) for English teachers to receive a reduced number of teaching assignments in spite of the fact that reduced loads have been found to positively correlate with retention (McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). Little (1999) argues that how schools handle teacher assignments is highly suggestive of the kind of professional community beginning teachers experience; this phenomenon is thus extremely important to unpack as part of the effort to improve English teacher agency and retention.

**Methods**

We followed Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn’s (2008) call for research that examines English teachers’ working conditions by focusing on new teacher assignments and departmental positionality. Specifically, we explored what classes and students new English teachers are assigned to teach and where they are assigned to teach them, since these assignments represent two of the earliest, most significant administrative decisions affecting new teachers’ initial professional experience. Our primary goal in this study was to discover both what patterns are evident in secondary English teachers’ assignment to classes and classrooms and how teachers perceive these assignments in order to understand the degree to which they experience agency in their workplace. To accomplish this goal, we focused our analysis on the following questions:

1. What are the class-assignment patterns for new secondary English teachers? Are they disproportionately assigned to ninth- and tenth-grade English classes and/or lower tracks?
2. Who typically makes decisions about English-teacher assignments, and what factors are considered?
3. How do high school English teachers perceive their assignments? To what extent are they assigned to teach at their preferred grade or track level? Do they believe that teacher tracking occurs in their schools? That certain grade and/or track levels are more difficult to teach?
4. What are the relationships between English teachers’ experience level, having their own classroom, and their sense of agency?
Data collection

Sampling
Initial sampling for the survey occurred at the state, district, and school levels. First, the study was limited to the five-state (DE, MD, NJ, NY, PA) northern Mid-Atlantic area in which NETS members were teaching in order to achieve a geographical cluster sample. Next, a stratified random sampling was drawn from 50 school districts across those states to ensure urban-centric locale code diversity, as categorized by the 2005–2006 NCES Core of Common Data (Hoffman, 2007). School districts in each of the 12 locale code categories were contacted, and eight districts, representing a total of 13 high schools, elected to participate. These eight districts represented all five states and 5 of the 12 locales, including large urban and rural contexts. The participating school districts varied widely (52–100%) in their degree of promoting power—the ratio between the number of students in the senior class during any given year divided by the number of students in the freshman class 4 years previously (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004). The promoting power index is intended to be an estimation of graduation rate; thus, schools with high-promoting power experience less student dropout than schools with low-promoting power. We sought to achieve this range in order to include schools all along the promotion continuum.

Teacher assignment database
We collected two forms of data in this study: a database including teachers’ experience levels and class assignments compiled from English department chairs and a survey of the English teachers themselves. Department chairs in each of the 13 participating high schools provided data about which courses were taught by each English teacher in that school. Chairs listed each teacher’s total years of experience and the grade and track level of each class the teacher was currently teaching. From this information, we created a database of all 246 classes that were being taught by the 175 high school English teachers in our sample.

We also placed each teacher into one or more of eight subgroups for analysis: (a) a new teacher teaching an early grade, lower track class; (b) an experienced teacher teaching an early grade, upper track class; (c) a new teacher teaching a later grade, lower track class; (d) an experienced teacher teaching a later grade, upper track class; (e) a new teacher teaching an early grade, upper track class; (f) an experienced teacher teaching an early grade, upper track class; (g) a new teacher teaching a later grade, upper track class; and (h) an experienced teacher teaching a later grade, upper track class. We defined “early” high school grades as ninth and tenth grade and “later” high school grades as eleventh and twelfth grade; similarly, we considered “lower track” classes as regular or general classes and “upper track” classes to be Honors or AP classes.
**Survey participants**

All 175 English teachers in the 13 participating high schools were then surveyed. Approximately 35% of the teachers surveyed were new teachers, while 58% were experienced teachers. We categorized “new” teachers as those with 5 years of experience or less and “experienced” teachers as those with more than 5 years of experience (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The other 7% of teachers who participated in our survey were long-term substitutes or teachers who taught only English as a Second Language. We chose to retain these populations in our study because of their presence in most English departments.

**Survey instrument**

We conducted our survey by mail; department chairs distributed them to all English teachers, who then returned them anonymously by mail. To measure the construct of teacher agency, our survey design focused on variables reflecting teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs, which Bandura (2001) describes as “the foundation of human agency” (p. 10) because they indicate the extent to which people believe that they are able to exert some control over their circumstances and thus are predictive of workplace attrition or retention. The self-efficacy variables measured in the teacher survey instrument grew out of data collected during NETS meetings, which upheld variables correlated with teacher attrition: (a) teacher experience level (Cohen-Vogel & Osborne-Lampkin, 2007; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006), (b) teacher assignment patterns and decision making (Kelly, 2004; Rice & Schneider, 1994), and (c) teachers’ grade- and track-level preferences (Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1992). To these, we added a teacher assignment-to-classrooms variable, again based on NETS data. We grouped survey items into a construct matrix that represented three categories of self-efficacy variables: (a) teachers’ perceptions of high school English assignment decision making, (b) teacher’s perceptions of the ease or difficulty in teaching certain kinds of classes, and (c) teachers’ personal sense of agency in their job. Prior to administering our surveys, we conducted a pilot study of 44 English teachers in a separate urban district in order to refine our instrument, variables, and constructs for the survey study reported here.

**Survey responses**

The administration of the survey instrument resulted in responses from 49% of the 175 teachers ($n = 85$). Of the survey participants, 57% were experienced teachers, and 43% were new. All five states and all eight key subgroups were represented among the respondents, as well as all five NCES locale codes, as shown in Table 1.
Results

Results indicate that new English teachers are indeed disproportionately assigned to teach both lower grade and lower track levels. Also, new English teachers are less likely than experienced teachers to receive their assignment preferences, and they believe more strongly that teacher tracking occurs in their schools. Finally, only about half of English teachers have their own classroom, and waiting almost 10 years for one’s own classroom is typical.

Class assignment patterns

Analyses relating to Research Question 1 (Are new teachers disproportionately represented in assignments to ninth- and tenth-grade English classes and/or lower tracks?) focused on the proportion of classes at each grade-level track-level combination taught by new versus experienced teachers. Table 2 displays the percentages of classes at each grade and track level assigned to new and experienced teachers. We omitted elective courses from these results because they tend to span both early and later grade levels and upper and lower track levels. Collapsing across levels of class tracks, the relationship between teacher experience and grade-level assignment is statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 6.83$, $p = .01$ with eleventh and twelfth graders being more likely to be taught by experienced high school English teachers. The numbers indicate a tendency for new teachers to be assigned to lower track courses and experienced teachers to be assigned to upper track courses, though the results regarding tracking assignments were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 2.45$, $p = .12$.

Teacher assignment decision factors

With respect to Research Question 2 (Who typically makes decisions about English teacher assignments, and what factors are considered?), we examined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher respondents</th>
<th>Distant town</th>
<th>Fringe rural</th>
<th>Fringe town</th>
<th>Large city</th>
<th>Large suburb</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 (5%)</td>
<td>15 (18%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>35 (41.5%)</td>
<td>29 (34%)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Number of new and experienced teachers assigned to teach each class type (grade level and track level).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track level</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Total classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower (regular/general)</td>
<td>Upper (Honors/AP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New teachers</td>
<td>70 (77%)</td>
<td>21 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced teachers</td>
<td>95 (67%)</td>
<td>46 (33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These are the numbers of classes staffed by teachers in each group. Percentages (shown in parentheses) are conditioned on the type of teacher assigned to the class.
teacher responses to a set of survey items asking teachers to rate how much decision-making power they believe that various administrators and teachers (e.g., superintendent, principal, assistant principal, English department chair, English teachers, and “you”—the teacher completing the questionnaire) have when it comes to making teaching assignments. The average rating (on a scale from a low of 1 to a high of 4) for each potential decision maker is shown in the final column of Table 3. The mean differences across questions are statistically significant according to a repeated-measures regression analysis, with 22% of the observed variance being accounted for by between-question differences, \( F(5,355) = 15.41, p = .01, \eta^2 = .22 \).

English teachers overwhelmingly believe that their department chairs have the greatest amount of decision-making power with regard to making their teaching assignments (mean rating = 3.25). Teachers rated the building principals and assistant principals as those with the next highest level of decision-making power (mean ratings of 2.70 and 2.65, respectively), followed by the teachers themselves (mean rating of 2.47 for the teacher and 2.30 for teachers, in general), and then superintendents (mean rating of 1.76). It is noteworthy that only about half of these high school English teachers believe themselves to have the most decision-making power concerning the teaching assignment they receive—only 56% of the teachers assigned the highest rating to themselves. The middle two columns of Table 3 display the mean ratings by teacher experience. Both experience groups see the department chair as being the most influential individual and the superintendent as the least influential individual in determining teacher assignments. New teachers view themselves as having relatively more power while experienced teachers see the principal as having relatively more power; however, these differences were not large enough to be statistically significant, \( F(5,355) = 2.01, p = .06, \eta^2 = .03 \). It is possible that the new teachers responding to the survey may not have had enough experience on which to base this assertion. Regardless, the difference between new teachers’ and experienced teachers’ self-positioning on this issue is striking.

Table 4 displays the average rating that teachers provided regarding the importance of several factors in determining assignments. Overall, teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision maker</th>
<th>New teacher</th>
<th>Experienced teacher</th>
<th>Teachers (overall)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dept. chair</td>
<td>(1) 3.21</td>
<td>(1) 3.30</td>
<td>(1) 3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>(2) 2.72</td>
<td>(4) 2.17</td>
<td>(4) 2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>(3) 2.55</td>
<td>(2) 2.91</td>
<td>(2) 2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asst. principal</td>
<td>(4) 2.48</td>
<td>(3) 2.88</td>
<td>(3) 2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>(5) 2.40</td>
<td>(4) 2.17</td>
<td>(5) 2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>(6) 1.70</td>
<td>(6) 1.85</td>
<td>(6) 1.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Teachers assigned ratings on a scale ranging from 1 (least power) to 4 (most power) to each person. Ranks are shown in parentheses, and mean ratings are shown on the second line of each cell.
Table 4. New and experienced teachers’ decision-making factor rating.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>New Teacher</th>
<th>Decision Maker</th>
<th>Experienced Teacher</th>
<th>Decision Maker</th>
<th>Overall Teacher</th>
<th>Decision Maker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject matter expertise</td>
<td>(1) 3.67</td>
<td>(3) 3.19</td>
<td>(1) 3.62</td>
<td>(4) 3.07</td>
<td>(1) 3.64</td>
<td>(3) 3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional abilities</td>
<td>(2) 3.42</td>
<td>(5) 3.11</td>
<td>(2) 3.57</td>
<td>(4.5) 3.07</td>
<td>(2) 3.51</td>
<td>(4) 3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous success with grade/ability/subject</td>
<td>(5.5) 3.28</td>
<td>(2) 3.22</td>
<td>(4) 3.50</td>
<td>(2) 3.19</td>
<td>(3) 3.40</td>
<td>(1) 3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality toward students</td>
<td>(7) 3.19</td>
<td>(10) 2.69</td>
<td>(3) 3.52</td>
<td>(11) 2.74</td>
<td>(4.5) 3.38</td>
<td>(10) 2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management abilities</td>
<td>(3.5) 3.31</td>
<td>(7) 2.83</td>
<td>(5) 3.44</td>
<td>(6) 3.06</td>
<td>(4.5) 3.38</td>
<td>(7) 2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual abilities</td>
<td>(3.5) 3.31</td>
<td>(6) 2.92</td>
<td>(6) 3.34</td>
<td>(8) 2.78</td>
<td>(6) 3.33</td>
<td>(8) 2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stated preference for grade/ability/subject</td>
<td>(5.5) 3.28</td>
<td>(12) 2.61</td>
<td>(7) 3.25</td>
<td>(11) 2.74</td>
<td>(7) 3.26</td>
<td>(12) 2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to prepare for high-stakes tests</td>
<td>(8) 3.11</td>
<td>(4) 3.17</td>
<td>(8.5) 3.19</td>
<td>(3) 3.17</td>
<td>(8) 3.15</td>
<td>(2) 3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniority</td>
<td>(10) 2.89</td>
<td>(1) 3.28</td>
<td>(8.5) 3.19</td>
<td>(7) 2.91</td>
<td>(9) 3.06</td>
<td>(5) 3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>(9) 2.92</td>
<td>(8) 2.81</td>
<td>(10) 3.08</td>
<td>(9) 2.77</td>
<td>(10) 3.01</td>
<td>(9) 2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule constraints</td>
<td>(11) 2.81</td>
<td>(9) 2.74</td>
<td>(11) 2.79</td>
<td>(1) 3.23</td>
<td>(11) 2.80</td>
<td>(6) 3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality toward faculty</td>
<td>(12) 2.28</td>
<td>(11) 2.67</td>
<td>(12) 2.63</td>
<td>(11) 2.74</td>
<td>(12) 2.48</td>
<td>(11) 2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular responsibilities</td>
<td>(13) 2.19</td>
<td>(14) 2.28</td>
<td>(13) 2.15</td>
<td>(13) 2.36</td>
<td>(13) 2.17</td>
<td>(14) 2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>(14) 1.94</td>
<td>(15) 2.14</td>
<td>(14) 1.79</td>
<td>(15) 2.11</td>
<td>(14) 1.86</td>
<td>(15) 2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with decisionmaker</td>
<td>(15) 1.47</td>
<td>(13) 2.50</td>
<td>(15) 1.35</td>
<td>(14) 2.28</td>
<td>(15) 1.40</td>
<td>(13) 2.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Teachers assigned ratings on a scale ranging from 1 (least important) to 4 (most important) to each item. Ranks are shown in parentheses, and means are shown on the second line of each cell.

rated subject matter expertise, instructional abilities, previous success with students, the teacher’s personality toward students, and classroom-management abilities as being the most important factors for consideration when making course assignments. The teachers viewed intellectual abilities, a teacher’s preference, seniority, and education levels as being of moderate importance. Teachers also rated schedule constraints, personality toward other faculty, extracurricular responsibilities, age, and relationship with the decision maker as being the least important factors.

With a few exceptions, teachers believe that decision makers would rank these factors similarly in terms of importance. Teachers believed that decision makers consider personality toward students and a teacher’s stated preference as being less important factors to consider when making course assignments than do teachers. On the other hand, teachers believe that decision makers place more weight on a teacher’s ability to prepare students for high-stakes tests, teacher seniority, and schedule constraints than would teachers. Overall, the rankings assigned by new and experienced teachers were comparable with the following exceptions. First, experienced teachers were more likely than new teachers to believe that a teacher’s personality toward students should be an important factor in making course assignments. Second, new teachers believe that decision makers place more emphasis on seniority when making course assignments than experienced teachers believe them to do. Third, experienced teachers believe that decision makers place more emphasis on scheduling constraints than new teachers believe them to do.
**Teacher assignment choices**

Data analyses on the first part of Research Question 3 (To what extent are high school English teachers assigned to teach at their preferred grade or track level?) focus on the responses teachers provided concerning whether their instructional assignments match their instructional preferences. Overall, it seems that most teachers are given a choice concerning the grade and track level they teach. Specifically, 71% of the teachers surveyed reported that they chose to teach the grade level that they currently teach, and 63% indicated that they chose the track level that they currently teach. However, as shown in Table 5, examining these choices more closely reveals that experienced teachers reported being much more likely than new teachers to have chosen the grade level to which they were assigned (83% versus 56%) and the track level to which they were assigned (77% versus 44%). Both of these differences are statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 7.78$, $p = .001$ and $\chi^2(1) = 9.94$, $p = .001$, respectively.

**Teachers’ beliefs about teacher tracking**

Regarding the second part of Research Question 3 (Do English teachers believe that teacher tracking occurs in their schools?), we examined new and experienced teachers’ scores on our Teacher Career Path measure, an indicator of the degree to which they believe that English teachers “work their way up” over the years by teaching older and/or higher track students. Teacher career path measures were based on the average ratings teachers assigned to a series of statements suggesting that newer teachers are assigned early grade and lower track courses while experienced teachers are assigned older students and higher ability courses in the teacher’s school. These ratings ranged from 1 to 4, and items were coded so that high scores indicate that teachers perceive the existence of a career path at their schools while low scores indicate that teachers do not perceive the existence of a career path at their schools. There was a statistically significant difference between experienced teachers’ ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.42$) and new teachers’ ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.48$) Teacher

| Table 5. Teacher experience groups’ receipt of desired grade and track level. |
|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
|                                  | New teachers | Experienced teachers | Total count |
| **GRADE LEVEL:**                |              |                    |             |
| Chose to teach current grade level | 56%         | 83%               | 24          |
| Did NOT choose to teach current grade level | 44%         | 17%               | 60          |
| **TRACK LEVEL:**                |              |                    |             |
| Chose to teach current track level | 44%         | 77%               | 30          |
| Did NOT choose to teach current track level | 56%         | 23%               | 54          |
| Total count                     | 36           | 48                | 84$^1$      |

*Note: Percentages displayed are conditioned on teacher experience.

$^1$One teacher did not respond.
Career Path mean scores, \( t(68) = -2.53, p = .01, \delta = .12 \), although the effect size is small according to Cohen’s guidelines (1988). New teachers had higher average scores than experienced teachers, which indicates that new teachers are more likely than experienced teachers to believe that a form of teacher tracking is occurring in their schools. Incidentally, no significant differences were observed with regard to teacher grade level taught or track level taught with respect to teacher beliefs about teacher tracking.

**The challenge of teaching different levels**

With respect to the final part of Research Question 3 (Do high school English teachers believe that certain grade and/or track levels are more difficult to teach?), we examined teacher responses to a set of questions focusing on whether some types of classes are easier to teach than are others. Teachers responded to these questions using a rating scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Teachers’ responses were reverse coded so that high scores indicate beliefs that higher grades are easier to teach on all items. **Table 6** displays the average rating that teachers provided in response to these questions. The ratings of teachers, regardless of level of experience or track level taught, suggest that they view lower grade levels as being somewhat easier to teach (i.e., they believe that ninth and tenth graders are generally prepared for reading and writing and that upper grades are not necessarily less stressful or require less classroom management).

Another indicator of teachers’ perceptions of the relative difficulty involved in teaching different English classes is their beliefs about which classes should be taught by experienced teachers rather than new teachers. Teachers responded to these items on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Their responses to those items indicate that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Teachers (overall)</th>
<th>New teachers (5)</th>
<th>Experienced teachers (5)</th>
<th>Teachers of ninth &amp; tenth grade (4)</th>
<th>Teachers of eleventh &amp; twelfth grade (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper grades are less stressful for teachers</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper grades require less classroom management by teachers</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in lower grades are prepared for reading</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in lower grades are prepared for writing</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth graders should know how to read well</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Teachers assigned ratings on a scale ranging from 1 (indicating strong disagreement) to 4 (indicating strong agreement) to each item. Ranks are shown in parentheses, and means are shown on the second line of each cell.*
teachers, regardless of level of experience, believe that the most intellectually capable teachers should teach Honors and AP classes—means for experienced and new teachers equal 2.89 (SD = 0.80) and 3.05 (SD = 0.79), respectively, on that question. On the other hand, both teacher groups were likely to disagree with an item suggesting that more experienced teachers should teach older students. The means for experienced and new teachers were 1.89 (SD = 0.60) and 1.58 (SD = 0.55), respectively, on that question. None of the differences between the means of experienced and new teachers on these questions was statistically significant.

Teacher classroom assignments

Concerning Research Question 4 (What are the relationships between English teachers’ experience level, having their own classroom, and their sense of agency?), we examined teacher responses to questions about whether they had their own classroom and their responses to our Teacher Agency subscale. This subscale contained statements that teachers rated using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) with the items focusing on behaviors that are indicative of the degree to which teachers believe themselves to be valued decision makers at their school. First, we found a statistically significant relationship between teacher experience and teacher agency, $t(53.9) = 2.48, p = .02$, $\delta = .60$. Experienced teachers had higher teacher agency measures ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.40$) than did new teachers ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.60$). The effect size is large.

Overall, about 55% of the high school English teachers we surveyed had their own classrooms during the year of our study. Our analysis revealed that teachers with high perceived agency are twice as likely to have their own classroom (80% of those in the top quartile of teacher agency) than are teachers with low perceived agency (40% of those in the bottom quartile of teacher agency). This difference is statistically significant, according to a logistic regression analysis that included teacher agency and experience as predictors of whether the teacher had one’s own classroom, $\chi^2(1) = 5.33$, $p = .02$, $R^2 = .07$. The difference for teacher experience groups (62% of the experienced teachers had their own classroom versus 47% of the new teachers) was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 3.50$, $p = .06$. There was no statistically significant interaction between teacher agency and experience level with respect to having a classroom, $\chi^2(1) = 0.09$, $p = .76$.

We also asked the teachers who had a classroom at the time of the study to report how many years it took until they received their own space, and we found that most teachers had to wait many years for that space. Specifically, 46% of the teachers reported that it took them 9 years or longer to have their own classroom, 6% reported a wait of 5–8 years, 23% reported that it took 1–4 years, and only 20% reported that they received their own classroom right away (5% did not respond).
Discussion and implications

Taken together, the results of this study create a compelling portrait of the multiple factors that contribute to the agency thwarting of new high school English teachers, which, in turn, may affect their potential for retention. According to our study, new high school English teachers are typically assigned to teach ninth or tenth grade students in lower track classes and have no permanent classroom space; our study also suggests that it will likely be years before any of these conditions changes. What this means in practice is that new high school English teachers are implicitly tasked more often than their more experienced peers with helping students transition to the multiple expectations of the high school context. It also means that, because most students who drop out do so by tenth grade (Burris & Roberts, 2012), new high school English teachers teach a much larger percentage of students who will eventually drop out than more experienced high school English teachers do. Given the common characteristics of students who will go on to drop out, such as having low attendance and earning low grades, it follows that new high school English teachers therefore spend much more time than their experienced peers contacting students’ families/guardians, catching students up on missed work, creating and administering makeup quizzes and tests, and providing extra help on course content and skills. Not having a permanent classroom in which to do this additional work and to store materials is sure to create truly exasperating working conditions that prevent new teachers from enacting their agency. As Bandura (2001) notes, “Unless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or persevere in the face of difficulties” (p. 10). In other words, such conditions will cause new teachers to leave the profession.

While we certainly recommend that new English teachers’ agency be strengthened to meet these current realities, we argue that such an approach is not enough; we must also work to change the current cultures of secondary English departments and schools.

Strengthening new teachers’ agency

At least until we change these cultures, teacher educators and school administrators must intentionally develop new English teachers’ capacity to enact their agency and to improve their initial professional experiences, two key implications suggested by our findings.

Teacher educators

Teacher educators must ensure that their programs prepare teachers to work both with students in all grade and track levels but especially with students in lower grade and track levels, explicitly building instructional differentiation
skills and providing a full range of pedagogical content knowledge from young adult literature and spoken word poetry to essays and novels. We encourage teacher educators to stress the major shift students experience in the transition to high school (Langenkamp, 2009) so that teacher candidates can prepare to build on students’ existing knowledge and interests. It is most important, though, to give teacher candidates multiple opportunities to enact their agency at the pre-service level. Agency-building activities might include increasing the amount of choice pre-service teachers have in their coursework, projects, or field placements or requiring that student teachers lead some of their pre- or post-observation conferences. Methodical reflections on their choices and the consequences can strengthen beginning teachers’ sense of themselves as experienced professional decision makers.

**School administrators**

Our findings suggest that secondary administrators, particularly English department chairs, must place student and teacher retention at the center of assignment decisions. We reiterate Neild and Farley-Ripple’s (2008) recommendations that administrators not only create a culture in which assignment to teach students in danger of dropping out is reserved for distinguished instructors but also increase the amount of the “tangible benefits...[such as] time, ...materials, ... [and] space” that such teachers receive (p. 302). Additionally, we encourage administrators to collaborate with English faculty to create an equitable policy regarding teacher assignments, ensuring that the best interests of students—particularly those who are most vulnerable—are at the center of their discussion and decisions.

Because we found that teacher agency correlates with having their own classrooms, our study suggests that giving new teachers a place of their own may help increase their agency. At the very least, when providing all teachers with classrooms of their own is impossible, administrators should assign all teachers a home classroom and a teacher’s desk, even if that means that teachers share classrooms. Less-desirable options are for teams of teachers to be assigned to sets of classrooms in which the same kinds of classes are taught or for a collegiate system of classroom space in which all teachers travel but also have a permanent space in which to conduct meetings, store materials, plan, and grade.

**Changing cultures from the outside in**

To fully consider the implications and significance of this study, however, it must be understood within the context of a U.S. society that has somewhat recently become quite hostile to teachers and teacher educators. Teacher agency—like teacher recruitment and retention—is necessarily impacted by the larger society’s attitudes toward teachers and their work. When society demonizes teachers and the profession; holds teachers in low status; bashes
teacher education programs and allows, as an alternative, non-Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs) to award teacher certification; and deprofessionalizes teaching by supporting graduates from elite colleges without any professional education to populate the teaching force, for example, there seems to be little reason for anyone to enter the teaching profession, let alone choose to teach in a public school or remain in the profession for any length of time. If agency is the capacity to take goal-oriented action and to see the results of one’s decisions and choices, imagine how damaging it is to professionally prepared teachers’ sense of agency to witness school districts actively recruiting untrained teachers.

And yet, in such a society, people still choose to become professional teachers and teacher educators. Why? For the very best of reasons: They care about all students and want to make a difference in their lives, especially in the lives of students who are routinely disadvantaged by our educational system. It is in everyone’s best interest—particularly students’—for such qualified, committed, activist educators to remain in the classroom for many productive years, and we must work to reduce the constant need to replace the monumental loss of resources when teachers leave the classroom, such as knowledge of the local community, training costs, and momentum in instructional and curricular development. Part of this effort involves overturning current policies that allow for uncertified teachers to displace certified teachers, particularly in the highest need schools. Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, and Heilig (2005) found that uncertified teachers, including Teach for America (TFA) recruits, are less effective than certified teachers—controlling for teacher experience, degree, and student characteristics—and that, by the time their skills reach comparable levels, they leave the classroom. More recent research suggests that there is even further cause for alarm with regard to the costs of teacher turnover. In their study of how teacher turnover affected 850,000 New York City students over 8 years, Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2013) found that teacher turnover not only has a significant negative affect on student achievement in math and English but also disproportionately affects low-performing students and Black students. The study also notes the negative effect teacher turnover has on the teachers who remain in the classroom. We cannot continue to allow uncertified teachers the opportunity to learn to teach at the expense of student learning and teacher professionalism. Instead, we must shift the rhetoric and culture around teacher recruitment so that we explicitly privilege candidates who have invested significant time and money in securing professional preparation toward the education of children and that we explicitly reject candidates who have chosen not to make such an investment.

Research on teacher turnover suggests that making significant cultural and rhetorical shifts with regard to new teachers is not only practical in terms of boosting teacher and student retention but also ethical in terms of ensuring that the neediest, least resourced students should have experienced, skillful teachers—if not the most experienced, skillful teachers. If it is indeed harder to teach the least resourced students, as our participants attested, then it is important for us to
trouble our participants’ belief that the most intellectually gifted English teachers should teach students in the highest tracks. The long-held cultural association between teacher giftedness and higher tracks suggests a potential mismatch between supply and demand that does little to serve the students who stand to gain the most from our best teachers. What if we were to rethink this current association and instead created “flipped” English department cultures in which (a) new teachers were given more of what our participants considered to be easier assignments, such as ninth- and tenth-grade Honors or eleventh- and twelfth-grade regular tracks; (b) experienced teachers were given more of the challenging ninth- and tenth-grade general- and regular-track assignments; and (c) the typical career trajectory of secondary English teachers were reversed so that, as teachers gain experience, they “move down” in track level rather than “move up” in grade level?

**Limitations and further research**

Additional research is needed to confirm whether this study’s suggestion that the widespread practices of assigning new high school teachers to ninth and tenth graders and to lower track levels undermines teacher agency is generalizable to English teachers across the United States and to teachers in other subject areas. Because English is one of the most required subjects in schools, it may be that our results are generalizable to other subjects that tend to be taken by students throughout their high school years but not to other subjects in which many of the classes are electives. Our study was limited by its sample size ($n = 85$) and its 49% response rate, and we also regret not including measures of teachers’ age, social class, and race/ethnicity to investigate correlations between these characteristics, agency, and retention. Future research might investigate these as well as additional trends in teacher assignments: Can other scholars confirm the relationships we posit here between teacher experience level and type of class assignment? Are there relationships between the types of classes taught and teacher attrition? And what are the patterns for English teachers of color, whose retention should be prioritized to diversify the teaching workforce in all communities? We see mixed-methods research as particularly promising in examining the student and teacher outcomes of “flipped” department cultures and echo Ingersoll’s (2012) call for research to investigate the effectiveness of teacher induction practices—though in keeping with our findings, we argue that such research must privilege teachers’ perspectives when making such determinations.

The research presented here provides one example of how we can understand and work to meet the unique needs of new teachers and, ultimately, of their students. Our ultimate hopes in conducting this study are to increase teacher and student retention and to contribute to conversations that examine how retention of these populations may be related (e.g., Little & Bartlett, 2010). While we do not wish to unproblematically suggest that retention of all
teachers is a desirable outcome, we see teacher agency as a key issue among the population of teachers who have the greatest potential for successful work with students. Teachers who are among the highest achieving—by any number of measures—are likely to be highly agentive, accustomed to meeting their own goals, goals that they, themselves, deem most important. It is this population for whom the pattern of agency-thwarting experiences would be most unsettling, and it is this population whom we at both the secondary and postsecondary levels must work much harder to retain.

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**References**


