

“NAVIGATING THE NEW”: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF BELONGING AMONG
EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

by

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(Under the Direction of P. Gayle Andrews)

ABSTRACT

New to the profession, new to their workplace, and often new to the lifestyle of a working professional, early career teachers undergo several transitions as they step into their initial teaching. Compounded by feelings of underpreparedness, early career teachers often find themselves feeling overwhelmed and isolated, leading many to exit the teaching profession prematurely. Emergent research on the emotional aspects of early career teachers' experiences suggests that belonging may play an important role in supporting and sustaining early career teachers through their initial transition into the profession. This dissertation explored how early career teachers navigate a sense of belonging in the teaching profession and is guided by the following research questions: (1) What does belonging mean to an early career teacher? and, (2) How does belonging manifest in an early career teachers' initial experiences in the profession? Drawing from a series of phenomenological interviews with early career teachers about their experiences with belonging, implications and practical considerations for school leaders and teacher educators were developed as they seek to support the early career teachers within the profession. Because early career teachers are considered to be among the most vulnerable demographics within the teacher workforce, comprehensive examination into the experiences of

belonging among early career teachers may generate important understandings about early career teachers' emotional and professional needs. In addition, highlighting early career teachers' experiences with belonging can provide insights into the organizational support necessary as early career teachers "navigate the new" during their transition into the teaching profession.

INDEX WORDS: Early Career Teachers, Belonging, Phenomenology, Teacher Isolation, Education, Teacher Emotions, Teacher Identity, Professional Development

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DEDICATION

To my mom, my favorite teacher.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: BELONGING AND EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

Ninety Minutes in the Life of an Early Career Teacher

It's 6:00 AM and Taylor reaches over to silence the alarm on her phone. As she gets ready for school, she sings along to pop music, hyping herself up for a good day. At 6:45, Taylor walks out into the twilight, hops into her car, and, watching the sun rise through her windshield, she sips her coffee as she starts her commute to school.

Even though Taylor just completed her fourth week as a first-year teacher at Meadowview Elementary, her heart still races when she pulls into the parking lot. "Today's gonna be a good day," she whispers to herself. She's ready to tackle the day with her third graders.

As Taylor approaches the front door, she is warmly greeted by her schools' Math Coach, Marianne. "How was your weekend?" Marianne asks with a smile. Taylor shyly smiles back and says, "Great!" as she hurries into the school building. While Taylor appreciated Marianne's attempt to make conversation, Taylor was still embarrassed about her teaching observation with Marianne last week. In Taylor's mind, everything that could have gone wrong went wrong. Her computer was disconnected from the internet mid-lesson, two students were called to the office for early dismissals, and, because of the rainy weather, everyone was feeling stir-crazy. Embarrassed about her observation, Taylor felt confronted by Marianne's feedback, fueling Taylor's feelings of insecurity.

Taylor enters the front office to clock in for the day. She smiles as two fifth-grade teachers walk past her. Although Taylor knows who these teachers are, she has never formally met them. Now four weeks into the school year, Taylor has only met about half of the teachers on her school's staff.

Taylor approaches her classroom, takes a deep breath, and turns on the lights. She feels her body relax as she steps into her spacious classroom, decorated with brightly colored boards and meticulously organized supplies. Taylor had spent months planning the design and the layout of her classroom. She is proud of her space. It's hers, and it's exactly how she envisioned it would be. Taylor walks over to her desk, opens her email, and finds a message from an upset parent. Taylor's stomach drops.

Dear Miss Smith,

When I picked Jonah up from school on Friday, I noticed that the sleeve of his shirt was torn. When I asked him what happened, he told me that his shirt got caught on a chair leg while he was playing under his desk during indoor recess. I would like for you to explain why you did not immediately inform me that Jonah's shirt had torn. As his teacher, you are responsible to look after him, and I demand that you apologize for being careless with my child.

Dumbfounded by the words she was reading, Taylor thinks back to Friday's indoor recess. Jonah is a good student, but he is also particularly accident-prone, and it is not uncommon for him to leave school with rips and tears in his clothes and other belongings. Taylor takes the parent's comment about her being a "careless" teacher very personally. Feeling frustrated and angry, Taylor has no idea how to respond to this parent.

“Good morning, Taylor!” Dianne calls out in a sing-songy voice. Dianne serves as the lead teacher on the third-grade teaching team and is also assigned to serve as Taylor’s official peer mentor. Dianne is kind and experienced and is considered a veteran among the third-grade teachers. Given her veteran status, Dianne is expected to fulfill many teacher leadership roles across the school, giving Dianne very little time to offer any formal mentorship to Taylor. “I hate to tell you this, but I haven’t finished prepping the ELA slides yet,” Dianne says as she glances over at Taylor from the doorway. Clearly distracted by the email from an upset parent, Taylor mutters, “It’s okay, don’t worry about it.”

Dianne is responsible for planning the ELA lessons for the third-grade team, but often, all of the additional responsibilities placed on Dianne impede her ability to complete the ELA lessons plans on time. Because Taylor has come to expect that Dianne will not have enough time to finish the ELA slides, Taylor takes it upon herself to plan her own ELA lessons in addition to the math lessons that she plans for the third-grade team. Taylor spent much of the weekend doing her own research in preparation for today’s ELA block. Particularly insecure with her literacy instruction, Taylor really wanted to be prepared to introduce today’s new, tricky concept to her students.

As Dianne walks away, Taylor exchanges smiles and waves with two of her fellow third-grade teachers, who like Taylor, are also early career teachers. The 7:30 bell rings. Taylor walks back to her desk, and glances back at the email from an upset parent and feels her heart begin to race. Feeling completely overwhelmed, she wonders where she should turn for guidance on responding to this upset parent.

Navigating the New

This vignette offers a window into the life of an early career teacher. Taylor's story, though fictitious, mirrors the experiences of many early career teachers in K-12 schools. Her insecurities about her instructional skills, her awkwardness around certain colleagues, and her confusion about whom to consult for support serve as sources of stress for Taylor, posing threats to her well-being and leading her to feelings of uncertainty and helplessness.

Dianne, Taylor's mentor, is kind and knowledgeable, but—like many veteran teachers—Dianne is overburdened with responsibilities, preventing her from giving Taylor adequate emotional and professional support. The lack of mentorship and the scheduling conflicts that prevent Taylor from regularly interacting with other colleagues in her school leave Taylor feeling lonely and isolated; she is unable to “find her place” in her new school.

Recognizing the challenges that early career teachers face as they navigate the many “news” in their initial months of teaching has prompted researchers to consider the possible role that a sense of belonging may play in supporting and sustaining early career teachers through their transition into the profession (e.g., Bjorklund, 2021; Clandinin et al., 2015). The chapters in this dissertation highlight the experiences of belonging among early career teachers and explore the ways in which a sense of belonging may mitigate early career teachers' feelings of stress, overwhelm, and isolation during this critically formative phase in the teaching profession.

Early Career Teacher Isolation

For decades, education research has highlighted the issue of teacher isolation (e.g., Flinders, 1988; Gaikwad & Brantley, 1992; Schlichte et al., 2005). Often physically isolated in their classrooms for much of the day, teachers are given little time to interact with their adult colleagues. In addition, because teachers spend much of their day with students, teachers are

often offered limited opportunities to think and to process their experiences collaboratively with their adult colleagues, creating a sense of intellectual isolation (Dunn, 2022). Accompanying feelings of isolation, teachers are likely to experience feelings of stress, burnout, and a lowered sense of efficacy (Heider, 2021; Vargas Rubilar & Oros, 2021). Researchers have identified several mitigating strategies to reduce teacher isolation, including implementing formal mentoring programs, professional learning communities (PLCs), and collaborative teaching models (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Martin et al., 2016; Pesonen et al., 2021).

Although feelings of isolation can be experienced by teachers across all phases of their careers, certain demographics of teachers—including teachers of color and teachers who identify as underrepresented demographics on their schools' faculty—are especially vulnerable to feelings of isolation (Bristol, 2020; Cheruvu et al., 2015; Mawhinney & Baker-Doyle, 2021). In addition, teachers who serve in specialist positions, teachers who travel between multiple school sites, and teachers who facilitate online instruction are more likely to experience feelings of isolation (Cameron & Grant, 2017; Spicer & Robinson, 2021).

Research suggests that early career teachers are also particularly vulnerable to feelings of isolation (Farrell, 2016; Schuck et al., 2018). As they transition into their careers, early career teachers are often faced with many challenges. For example, early career teachers must orient themselves to their new schools' policies and procedures while learning how to effectively support their students with instruction (Clandinin et al., 2015). In addition, as early career teachers navigate this steep learning curve, they are likely to experience a sense of “reality shock,” realizing that their expectations for themselves and for their students may not align with their current circumstances (Santoro, 2018; Voss & Kunter, 2018). Often, as new employees on their schools' faculties, early career teachers have not yet developed trusting relationships with

their colleagues, preventing early career teachers from reaching out for help when needed and placing early career teachers at an increased risk for feelings of isolation (Kidd et al., 2015; Kutsyruba & Walker, 2015). Furthermore, these feelings of isolation are likely to influence early career teachers' professional identities, potentially causing early career teachers to feel ineffective and hopeless, leading some to reevaluate their intentions to remain in the profession (Kelly et al., 2019; Reitman & Karge, 2018).

In this dissertation research, I investigated the idea that promoting a sense of belonging among early career teachers may serve as a buffer against early career teachers' feelings of isolation, bolstering early career teachers' resilience and engagement in their schools.

Early Career Teachers' Sense of Belonging

By applying a phenomenological approach in this dissertation study, I was interested in understanding how belonging is navigated, established, and maintained in the lives of early career teachers. In addition, I sought to understand more fully the positive effects of belonging and the consequences of not belonging among early career teachers.

To this end, I recruited seven early career teachers, defined as teachers within their first three years in the profession, to participate in this study. Drawing on van Manen's (2016) approach to soliciting lived experience descriptions (LEDs), the early career teacher participants described their experiences with belonging as they transitioned into a career in teaching. These participants recounted their experiences *as lived*, attending specifically to the subjective nature of their experiences (van Manen, 2023). Through reflection on the participants' lived experience descriptions, phenomenological themes emerged, lending insight into the ways in which belonging is conceptualized and experienced in the lives of early career teachers. I developed

findings out of these phenomenological themes, generating implications for school leaders and teacher educators and illuminating avenues for future research.

Significance of the Study

Because the initial years in the profession are often considered to be the most formative years in a teacher's career, investigation into sense of belonging among early career teachers may uncover new understandings regarding the development of early career teachers' professional identities (Clandinin et al., 2015). An examination into early career teachers' experiences with belonging may also reveal valuable insights for school leaders and teacher educators as they seek to support and sustain the early career teachers in their schools. Inquiry into the phenomenon of belonging among early career teachers may provide additional perspectives on the affective needs of early career teachers, enabling school personnel to offer comprehensive support for early career teachers' emotional well-being. New insights regarding the socialization needs of early career teachers may also emerge from this inquiry. Efforts to support the social and emotional well-being of early career teachers could promote resilience during a phase that is traditionally characterized as a "survival period" in the teaching profession (Sydnor, 2017).

Furthermore, because teachers' sense of belonging is positively related to students' sense of belonging (Allen, 2020), deeper investigation into sense of belonging among early career teachers could generate new insights that improve the experiences of both early career teachers and their students, supporting a culture of belonging within schools.

Research Questions

In this phenomenological study, I sought to understand more deeply the experience of belonging among early career teachers by addressing the following two questions:

1. *What does belonging mean to an early career teacher?*
2. *How does belonging manifest in an early career teacher's initial experiences in the profession?*

Because belonging is a perception-oriented phenomenon, each individual is likely to interpret the meaning of belonging differently. The first research question investigates individual participants' interpretations and understandings of belonging (i.e., how belonging manifests, how belonging feels, and how belonging is navigated) in the participants' everyday experiences. Understanding how early career teachers interpret belonging may provide insight into the organizational, social, and personal conditions necessary to cultivate a sense of belonging among early career teachers.

The second question seeks to understand how belonging interacts with various aspects of an early career teacher's life, including their interpersonal relationships with colleagues and administrators, their organizational contexts, the accessibility of professional and emotional support, and their personal characteristics. Examining early career teachers' external and internal conditions holistically may indicate the extent to which early career teachers' sense of belonging influences their everyday experiences in the profession. In addition, exploring the ways in which belonging influences early career teachers' initial teaching experiences may expand current understandings of early career teachers' emotional needs, identity construction, sense of efficacy, and commitment to a career in teaching.

Literature Review

Early Career Teachers

Research has long examined the experiences of early career teachers as they transition into the teaching profession (e.g., Buchanen et al., 2013; McCormack et al., 2006; Redding &

Henry, 2019). New to their school environments, early career teachers are likely to experience feelings of overwhelm as they navigate their new schools' routines, new curricula, and new relationships with their students and colleagues (Stewart & Jansky, 2022; Whalen et al., 2019). Commonly accompanied by a sense of reality shock, early career teachers are likely to experience a sense of disillusionment, reduced self-efficacy, and feelings of isolation (Chen, 2022; Santoro, 2018).

During the initial years of teaching, early career teachers construct their professional identities, establishing their beliefs about themselves as teachers and about their students as learners (Clandinin et al., 2015). Heavily shaped by their perceived effectiveness and by copious personal and external factors, early career teachers must navigate various tensions throughout their initial teaching experiences that, if successfully navigated, lead early career teachers to establish stable and positive professional identities (Hong et al., 2018; Zembylas, 2003).

Numerous studies have identified critical areas for supporting early career teachers as they negotiate through these formative, initial years in the profession. A variety of studies find that pairing early career teachers with caring and attentive mentors can support early career teachers' professional and emotional development (e.g., Squires, 2019; Wilcoxon et al., 2020; Zepeda et al., 2022). Other studies have noted the effectiveness of professional learning communities in supporting early career teachers' socialization and professional development (e.g., Admiraal et al., 2021). Research has also pointed to the potential positive impact of teacher induction programs—defined as structured professional learning that supports teachers through their transition into the profession—that cater to the context-specific needs of early career teachers (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2019; Sikma, 2019). Comprehensive supports in teacher induction, including mentoring and peer collaboration, show positive effects for early career

teachers' sense of self-efficacy, their retention in the profession, and their students' academic achievement (Keese et al., 2022; Mansfield & Gu, 2019).

Access to quality teacher induction support often varies for early career teachers. Early career teachers are likely to experience higher rates of mobility, which may contribute to lowered persistence and motivation (Hanushek et al., 2016). Early career teachers are overrepresented in schools that have high percentages of students from marginalized backgrounds or from underresourced households, potentially limiting early career teachers' access to experienced mentors and posing threats to academic progress among vulnerable demographics of students (Auletto, 2021).

When early career teachers are unable to access the support that they need, they are more likely to exit the profession earlier than expected (Clandinin et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2011). Reports have found that as many as fifty percent of early career teachers exit the profession within their first five years of teaching (Miller et al., 2020). Attrition rates among early career teachers from underrepresented groups could be even higher (Ingersoll et al., 2019), presenting financial consequences for school districts and negatively influencing student academic achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). As researchers confront the issue of early career teacher attrition, some have raised questions regarding the role that belonging could play in sustaining early career teachers beyond their initial years in the profession.

Sense of Belonging

Research on workplace belonging has found that employees who experience a sense of belonging at work are more likely to demonstrate deeper engagement in work-related tasks, stronger organizational commitment, and resilience (e.g., Allen, 2020; McClure & Brown, 2008). Studies also indicate that workplaces that are grounded in cultures of mutual trust and respect

and are facilitated by leaders who model inclusivity are more likely to cultivate a sense of belonging among their staff (Waller, 2021; Zeng et al., 2020). In addition, research on organizational belonging has drawn connections between workplace belonging and workplace wellness. When employees feel like they belong in their workplace, they are likely to experience an improved sense of well-being, increased work enjoyment, and healthier professional relationships (Slavich, 2020; Waller, 2021).

Within education research, numerous studies have investigated belonging among students. Drawing on a variety of methodological approaches, researchers have found that students who experience a sense of belonging are more likely to maintain healthy peer relationships (Gowing, 2019); develop a positive sense of self-efficacy (Korpershoek et al., 2019); and demonstrate deep engagement in school activities (Keyes, 2019). Research on belonging among students in higher education has drawn connections between students' sense of belonging and student retention (O'Keefe, 2013); engagement and wellness (Gopalan & Brady, 2020); persistence (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015); and academic success (Liu et al., 2022).

While education research has long examined belonging among students, a growing number of studies are turning their attention toward teachers' sense of belonging. Research on teachers' sense of belonging suggests that when teachers feel like they belong in their schools, they may experience greater job satisfaction and a strong commitment to the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Other studies indicate that teachers who feel a sense of belonging develop resilience and experience an increased sense of self-efficacy (e.g., Allen, 2020). Teachers who experience a sense of belonging are also likely to feel a sense of psychological safety, enabling them to adopt healthy approaches to conflict management (Gerlach & Gockel, 2018).

Some studies suggest various organizational supports to cultivate teachers' sense of belonging. Value consonance—defined as an alignment of teachers' personal beliefs and values with the beliefs and values enacted by their school leaders—may enable teachers to feel connected to their peers, promoting a sense of belonging (Bjorklund, 2023; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Yang et al., 2022). A shared vision for teaching and learning can unify staff around common goals for improvement and promote teamwork (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021). Peer relationships may also play a critical role in supporting belonging among teachers. Research has identified that teachers who possess supportive, trusting relationships with colleagues and school leaders are more likely to demonstrate a strong commitment to their schools and establish a sense of belonging (Fiegener & Adams, 2023; Pesonen et al., 2021). Moreover, teachers' sense of belonging is likely influenced by the extent of their engagement in the school community. Research suggests that teachers may be more likely to experience a sense of belonging when they regularly engage in opportunities to make valuable contributions to their school and community (Belle et al., 2015).

While sense of belonging among teachers is a developing field within the education research literature, few studies have examined the unique experiences of belonging among early career teachers. For early career teachers, establishing a sense of belonging could play an integral role in the construction of their professional identities, their sense of well-being, and their engagement in their schools (Clandinin et al., 2015).

Conceptions of Belonging

In their seminal research on belonging, Baumeister and Leary (1995) state that all humans possess a fundamental need to belong. This innate need for belonging drives human behavior and heavily influences individuals' sense of well-being (Allen et al., 2021). According

to Maslow (1943), humans experience this need to feel a sense of belonging so deeply that their need for belonging comes second only to their needs for physical sustenance and security. Often through interpersonal attachments, this inherent need for belonging is satisfied in stable, caring environments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Belonging is multidimensional (Filstad et al., 2019); it is an active social process, co-created by institutions, material objects, relationships, and socio-cultural contexts (Allen, 2020). Belonging is also spatial. It is a sense of feeling “at home,” influenced by individuals’ histories, cultures, relationships, and beliefs (Antonsich, 2010; hooks, 2009). Emphasizing the multidimensional nature of belonging, Calhoun (2003) argues that belonging is an unavoidable human condition, experienced by all humans at various points in their lifetimes.

At its core, the human need for belonging is a deeply emotional need (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Seeking to fulfill this emotional need to belong, individuals engage in repeated displays of their values, beliefs, and attitudes, demonstrating both who they are and who they desire to become. These performative demonstrations are oriented towards individuals’ perceptions of what their desired group entails (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2011). In their seminal research on belonging, Hagerty et al., (1992) state that to establish a sense of belonging, individuals must feel a sense of personal congruence or alignment with a group. Also integral to belonging, individuals must experience a sense of valued involvement within a group, feeling that their contributions are affirmed and appreciated (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Waller, 2021).

Evidenced across the literature, belonging is a relational practice and emerges from an attachment to others (e.g., Halse, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000). As an active social process, belonging is fluid in nature (Allen, 2020). It is also situated, relational, and processual, requiring constant negotiation (Guyotte et al., 2019). Although all individuals experience belonging in

some capacity during their lifetimes, the ways in which individuals experience belonging vary (Goodenow, 1993; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). When unable to establish a sense of belonging, humans may experience feelings of isolation, rejection, and exclusion (McClure & Brown, 2008), which could lead to detrimental mental and physical health deficiencies over time (Hagerty, 1993; Slavich, 2020).

Within the teaching profession, teachers who experience a sense of belonging feel affirmed and valued as professionals, they feel connected to their peers, and they are professionally engaged (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2011, 2021; Pesonen et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). When teachers establish a sense of belonging, they are able to exercise their voice and agency, and they may be more likely to develop leadership skills (Zepeda et al., 2022). In the case of early career teachers, a sense of belonging may help promote resilience and a positive sense of self-efficacy, potentially sustaining early career teachers through this particularly formative phase in the profession (Bjorklund, 2023).

Misconceptions

Several assumptions have shaped the seminal literature on belonging. First, belonging has long been conceptualized as a fixed and achievable phenomenon (Guyotte et al., 2019). In other words, once individuals establish a sense of belonging to a certain group, those individuals will be able to passively maintain that sense of belonging in perpetuity. Emergent literature on belonging challenges these static notions of belonging, reconceptualizing belonging as a continuous process that shifts within, across, and beyond spaces and time (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Thomas, 2015).

Second, belonging is often assumed to be a uniform, linear encounter, experienced similarly by all individuals. While research acknowledges that all individuals experience

belonging at certain points in their lifetimes (e.g., Calhoun, 2003), notable critical scholars reject uniform conceptualizations of belonging, arguing that belonging is a gendered, racialized, and classed experience (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Read et al., 2003). To this end, some scholars argue that supporting individuals' sense of belonging requires sensitivity to individuals' personal backgrounds and circumstances (Cheruvu et al., 2015; Rainey et al., 2018).

Last, while most scholars position belonging as positive and aspirational, some critical scholars note that belonging is not inherently positive (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Guyotte et al., 2019). As acts of resistance, individuals may intentionally choose not to belong, unwilling to compromise their personal values or beliefs to gain access into a certain group (Mann, 2005; Thomas, 2015).

Definition of Terms

Preservice Teachers

Across the research literature, several terms are used to describe teachers' early experiences in the profession. Preservice teachers are defined as individuals who are pursuing their initial teaching certification (Miles & Knipe, 2018). Typically, preservice teachers are not hired members of a school's faculty; instead, preservice teachers engage in short-term field placements to fulfill the classroom teaching experience requirements necessary for obtaining initial teaching certification (Nislin & Pesonen, 2019).

Early Career Teachers

The terms "novice," "beginning," and "new" are often used interchangeably to describe teachers who possess one to three years of professional teaching experience (Admiraal et al., 2023; Voss & Kunter, 2019). At times, the term "early career teachers" has been applied to indicate a broader range of years of teaching experience. While some researchers have used the

term “early career teachers” to describe teachers in their first year of teaching (Marz & Kelchtermans, 2020), other studies have defined early career teachers as teachers within their initial three years (e.g., Schuck et al., 2018); four years (e.g., Perrone et al., 2019); or five years (e.g., Paniagua & Sanchez-Marti, 2018) in the profession. For the purposes of this research, early career teachers are defined as teachers within their first three years in the teaching profession.

Sense of Belonging

Across the literature, the topic of belonging has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. Often characterized as a “sense,” belonging is perception-oriented; belonging relies on individuals’ perceptions of their social interactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Some definitions of belonging emphasize its affective qualities, including feelings of being valued, accepted, and included (Goodenow, 1993). Other definitions highlight the interpersonal features of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), while other definitions of belonging focus on individuals’ needs to make contributions to the group with whom they seek to belong (Hagerty, 1992; Waller, 2021).

Within the context of teaching, belonging has been defined as “the degree to which [teachers] feel integrated with colleagues, administrators, and students at school” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, p. 372). For the purposes of this research, belonging is defined as early career teachers’ perceived involvement and acceptance in a group or social system (Allen et al., 2018).

Methodological Framework

Phenomenology

As a mode of qualitative inquiry, phenomenology explores the essence or meaning of a particular experience (Finlay, 2013; van Manen, 2023). Phenomenology examines the raw nature of everyday human experiences—removed from any theorizations or categorizations—by asking

what a phenomenon is and how a phenomenon is experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019). Through questioning, wondering, and careful interpretation, phenomenology seeks to uncover experiential meanings of a phenomenon (van Manen, 2017a).

Rather than seeking solutions or drawing determinate conclusions, phenomenology searches for the meaning of a phenomenon by experiencing insights, openings, and understandings. Phenomenology approaches lived experiences prereflectively, or as the experiences naturally appear to human consciousness (van Manen, 2023). Phenomenology's emphasis on the subjective nature of human experiences challenges researchers to consider their personal orientation to the phenomenon as they experience it in everyday life.

I draw on van Manen's (2023) phenomenology of practice for this dissertation research. Phenomenology of practice, one approach within phenomenological inquiry, places a special sensitivity on context, offering practical avenues for study among individuals interested in researching the taken-for-granted experiences found in professional tasks, social practices, or personal activities (van Manen, 2017b). Indicated in its name, phenomenology "of practice" focuses on engaging directly with ordinary and potentially mundane phenomena found within everyday experiences (van Manen, 2023). Hyde and Rouse (2023) state that phenomenology of practice is a "reflective process that attempts to recover and express the ways in which people experience their lives as they live them, with the aim of acting practically with greater thoughtfulness and tact" (p. 875).

Rationale for Taking a Phenomenological Approach

While some studies have examined the topic of belonging among teachers through large-scale, quantitative methods (e.g., Gerlach & Gockel, 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, 2021; Yang et al., 2022), few studies have applied qualitative approaches to research teachers' sense of

belonging. Related phenomenological studies on workplace belonging underscore the importance of phenomenological engagement with the topic of belonging. In their study of workplace belonging, McClure and Brown (2008) state, “Bringing a phenomenology approach to the understanding of work experiences might help us gain clarity about what is important to people and how human aspects of work can better be explored, adapted, and utilized in mutual interest” (p. 15). Phenomenological examination of belonging among early career teachers elevates individual teachers’ subjective experiences with belonging, providing greater insights into how belonging manifests within early career teachers’ daily experiences.

This dissertation serves as one of the first phenomenological studies of belonging among early career teachers. By closely examining the fundamental nature of belonging, this phenomenological analysis uncovered new understandings about the influences of belonging on early career teachers’ professional and emotional development as they transition into the teaching profession. Through its unique emphasis on rich, prereflective descriptions of lived experiences, this phenomenological examination of early career teachers’ experiences with belonging also generated important considerations for school leaders and teacher educators as they cultivate and sustain a sense of belonging among early career teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data featured in this study were collected from seven early career K-12 teachers who represented a variety of teaching experiences across the southeastern United States. Each early career teacher participated in two interviews to describe their experiences with belonging as they transitioned into the teaching profession. Data were collected during the summer of 2024. At the time of their interviews, all participating early career teachers possessed one year of professional teaching experience.

Lived Experience Descriptions

As an approach to human science research, phenomenology of practice often gathers lived experience descriptions (LEDs) to serve as a primary data source (van Manen, 2023). van Manen (2016) states that by gathering others' experiences, phenomenological researchers become more experienced themselves, enabling researchers to uncover deeper, more significant meanings related to the phenomenon (p. 63). Through LEDs, phenomenological researchers seek to maintain the centrality of the phenomenon while honoring the subjective experiences of each participant. For this study, the participating early career teachers provided prereflective LEDs—free of causal explanations or judgements—as they shared about their experiences with belonging throughout their initial months in the profession.

Photo-Elicitation Methods

As an approach to data collection, photo elicitation can be used to enable new dimensions of meaning within a particular topic (Richard & Lahman, 2015). Traditionally, photo-elicitation methods are employed as a reflexive approach to interviewing, in which the participants interpret their photos during an interview (Loeffler, 2004). Bringing visibility to participants' experiences, photo-elicitation methods may aid in “breaking the ice” in the initial minutes of an interview, offering alternative avenues for participants to disclose about their experience in ways that may not be articulable through words (Lauck et al., 2021).

In this dissertation research, each participant presented a photo that illustrated their sense of belonging during their first year of teaching. Through each participant's photo emerged rich descriptions of their subjective experiences with belonging. Descriptions of the participants' photos were then analyzed holistically to identify themes or patterns across each of the participants' experiences.

Reflective Writing as Analysis

To engage in phenomenological research is to engage in an ongoing process of reflective writing (van Manen, 2023). In this reflective process, I documented patterns and key insights that represented in the interview transcriptions, my research notes, the participants' photos, and related literature on belonging. Reflecting on my developing understanding of the phenomenon, I allowed myself adequate time to "dwell with the data" to allow themes and new understandings to emerge (Finlay, 2014). Sustained immersion in the phenomenological data also offered opportunities to pause and to re-evaluate any presuppositions that I may have taken for granted in earlier stages of the phenomenological process.

To enhance my analysis, I invited the participants to review my reflections on their lived experience descriptions. Collaboration with the participants during this reflective process ensured that I accurately represented their personal experiences with belonging. This collaboration also allowed the participants to share their perspectives on the most important or most critical aspects of their experiences; and it presented opportunities for the participants to disclose additional information about their experiences with belonging (van Manen, 2016). From this analysis emerged several implications that lend insight into the fundamental nature of belonging for early career teachers.

Overview of the Dissertation

In Chapter One, I introduced my dissertation by overviewing the research around early career teachers and sense of belonging. Framed within the issue of early career teacher isolation, I argued for the importance of research on early career teachers' sense of belonging, and I described the methodological framework and research design for this dissertation study.

Chapters Two through Five of this dissertation are constructed as independently publishable manuscripts that present the issue of early career teachers' sense of belonging to multiple audiences. Aimed at reaching education researchers, Chapter Two presents a comprehensive literature review on belonging among teachers across various stages in their careers, including preservice, early career, and in-service teachers. Speaking to an audience of qualitative researchers, in Chapter Three, I discuss my dissertation research design in the form of a methodological reflection, describing my approach to applying photo elicitation to phenomenology of practice.

Addressing teacher educators, Chapter Four presents my phenomenological examination of belonging among early career teachers by exploring the fundamental nature of the experience of belonging and identifying implications for teacher educators. Then, in Chapter Five, I summarize my phenomenological study, highlighting practical considerations for school leaders as they seek to support a sense of belonging among early career teachers. Chapter Six concludes my dissertation by discussing key takeaways, personal reflections, and future directions for my own research.

Throughout the dissertation, I present short "scenes from the data" between each chapter, connecting major themes across each of the chapters/manuscripts. These scenes include anecdotes from the participants' LEDs that point to specific school practices, social interactions, or approaches to professional support that influenced these early career teachers' sense of belonging. While every scene was drawn from the personal experiences of the participants, each scene speaks to issues that many early career teachers will confront as they transition into the profession, lending deeper insight into the belonging needs of early career teachers.

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Scenes from the Data

In Chapter One, I introduced the dissertation by describing many of the challenges faced by early career teachers, including the common experience of feeling underprepared to lead a class. The following scene from the data highlights how early career teachers' negative experiences in preservice teacher education may influence their feelings of preparedness and consequently, their feelings of belonging as they step into their first teaching assignments. This scene features the experience of one participant, Lauren, whose encounters with isolation and underpreparedness as a preservice teacher shaped her perspectives on belonging as an early career teacher. This scene from the data connects to themes in Chapter Two, where I examine the literature on teachers' sense of belonging and emphasize the critical roles of mentorship, peer relationships, and professional support in fostering early career teachers' confidence and sense of belonging.

Preparation Predicaments: Lauren's Story

From a very young age, Lauren loved to play sports. A gifted athlete, Lauren earned a scholarship to play on a Division I sports team in college and pursued a degree in criminal justice. An unexpected injury during her final year of college, however, caused Lauren to reconsider her career goals, ultimately leading her to a career in teaching.

While I was recovering from my injury, I took a job as a paraprofessional for an EBD classroom, which serves students with emotional and behavioral disorders. I found that I really liked working with kids with special needs. It was recommended that I look into a master's degree program to become trained as a special education teacher, so I found an online graduate program that was supposed to take around two years to complete, but I ended up finishing the coursework in just one year.

To fulfill her state's requirement for teacher certification, Lauren needed to complete several hours of field experiences. Instead of participating in a traditional student teaching experience—in which a preservice teacher works under the tutelage of a cooperating teacher for several weeks—Lauren worked as a lead resource teacher in a local elementary school. Because special education is considered an under-resourced area, Lauren's state granted her a temporary provisional teaching license. Essentially, Lauren was expected to lead a special education class without ever having received any on-the-job training.

I led my own class because I was the head teacher for the resource room, but I had no clue what I was doing. Looking back, I feel bad about that. I did have a paraprofessional who helped me the best she could. The grade level teachers didn't really talk to me, and they didn't include me in the grade level planning or anything. I don't think they saw me as a peer.

During her year on a provisional teaching license, Lauren was not paired with a mentor in her building. Lauren's feelings of underpreparedness and her lack of support caused her to consider resigning mid-year. Instead, Lauren began looking for different special education positions in other neighboring school districts. Ultimately, after completing a very difficult year of "field experiences," Lauren moved to a new school district to begin her official first year of teaching. During her first year, she worked in a co-taught classroom, and she participated in her district's peer mentoring and teacher induction programs. In her words, the support that Lauren received in her new school was "night and day" compared to her experience as a student teacher.

Recent data on alternative teacher certification suggests that alternatively certified teachers represent approximately 20 percent of the teacher workforce (National Education Association, 2020). Teachers who are alternatively certified are more likely to exit the profession

prematurely (Redding & Smith, 2016). Moreover, depending on the state, alternatively certified teachers may not be expected to complete traditional student teaching experiences during their training, potentially creating deficits in alternatively certified teachers' confidence and pedagogical skills.

Stories like Lauren's raise questions regarding the importance of mentorship and peer support in supporting and sustaining early career teachers through their initial teaching experiences. In the next chapter, I review the literature on belonging in the teaching profession, examining what is known about how belonging is experienced among preservice, early career, and veteran teachers.

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CHAPTER 2

“LONGING FOR BELONGING”: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON EARLY CAREER TEACHERS’ SENSE OF BELONGING¹

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Abstract

Early career teachers are likely to encounter several challenges as they transition into the teaching profession. Emergent studies suggest that a strong sense of belonging—defined as teachers’ perceived involvement in a group or social system—may support and sustain early career teachers as they navigate these challenges. This article reviews the literature on a sense of belonging in the PK-12 teaching profession. With a special emphasis on early career teachers’ sense of belonging, this review of the literature addresses the consequent effects of belonging on early career teachers’ sense of self-efficacy, psychological well-being, professional development, and commitment to the teaching profession. Unanswered questions and apparent gaps in the literature are also considered, proposing possible implications for practice and future directions for research on early career teachers’ sense of belonging.

Introduction

As evidenced across the literature, the initial years of teaching can be difficult. Early career teachers, or teachers who possess three or fewer years of professional experience, often find themselves feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and underprepared to fulfil their teaching responsibilities (Farrell, 2016; Kwok, 2018). Studies that examine the experiences of early career teachers have highlighted some of the common issues that early career teachers face in their initial teaching assignments, including a lack of administrative support regarding student behavior (Shank & Santiago, 2021); a lack of relevant professional learning support (Goldrick, 2016); and a lack of social and emotional support (Sikma, 2019; Wilcoxen et al., 2020). This lack of support can result in feelings of stress, loneliness, and ineffectiveness among early career teachers, causing many early career teachers to exit the profession earlier than expected (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Research has identified several potential ways to alleviate the pressures that early career teachers face. Teacher induction programs—traditionally defined as formal and structured professional learning to support teachers during their initial months in the profession—can provide them with additional assistance in instructional planning and delivery, offering ongoing professional learning opportunities and connecting early career teachers with more experienced teachers in their school (Kang & Berliner 2012). Peer mentoring, in which early career teachers are paired with a more experienced teacher for support and guidance, is one induction strategy that may improve early career teachers’ pedagogical skills (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017); their sense of self-efficacy (Fox & Peters, 2013); their sense of well-being (Kutsyuruba et al, 2019; Squires, 2019); and their overall job satisfaction (Auletto, 2021; Renbarger & Davis, 2019). Teacher induction programs can also provide differentiated support and feedback that meets the unique needs of early career teachers, offering opportunities for reflection and for relationship development (Zepeda et al., 2022).

The initial years of teaching are often considered to be the most formative years in the teaching profession, and as a result, education researchers have taken a growing interest in both the professional and the emotional development of early career teachers. Several studies illustrate the disillusionment that early career teachers encounter when their personal beliefs about teaching do not align with the policies, curriculum, and expectations prioritized in their schools (e.g., Gallant & Riley, 2014; Santoro, 2021). At times, early career teachers’ expectations of professional autonomy, professional support and care, and working conditions do not match the reality of their school contexts. Without adequate emotional support, these professional conflicts could contribute to a sense of burnout and helplessness, potentially driving some early career teachers to leave the profession altogether (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Reports of early career teacher attrition have found that nearly 50 percent of early career teachers exit teaching within their first five years of the profession and that the attrition rate of early career teachers from underrepresented groups could be even higher (Ingersoll et al., 2019). The high rate of early career teacher turnover contributes to the teacher shortage crisis in the United States, financially burdening school districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019) and threatening student achievement (Young, 2018).

Because studies have shown that teachers who feel a sense of attachment to their schools are less likely to leave the profession (e.g., Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011a), education researchers are now asking what it means for teachers to feel attached—to belong—to a school community. Investigating the topic of early career teachers' sense of belonging may provide greater insight into the personal and professional support that early career teachers require to sustain them in the profession (Martin, 2024). The goal of this paper was to examine existing literature around PK-12 teachers' sense of belonging. With an emphasis on early career teachers, this paper references literature that was published between 2010 and 2024 to explore the ways in which teachers navigate, establish, and maintain a sense of belonging in the teaching profession.

A Sense of Belonging

Belonging has been conceptualized in a variety of ways across the fields of psychology, sociology, geography, political science, and more recently, education (e.g., Calhoun, 2003; Halse, 2018; Wright, 2015). In their seminal research on belonging, Baumeister and Leary (1995) stated that humans are “fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong” (p. 297). Individuals possess an innate need to form and maintain relationships with others. According to Maslow (1962), the need to belong comes second only to individuals' needs for food, water, and safety. Maslow found that individuals rely on their social environment to satisfy

their needs for belonging and claims that belonging, love, safety, and respect must be met by others. He argues that individuals must search outside of themselves to satisfy their needs to belong.

While the satisfaction of belonging requires reliance on others for acceptance and inclusion, belonging also demands an individual's personal involvement within a group (Allen, 2020; Waller, 2021). Often characterized as a "sense," belonging is perception-oriented, meaning that belonging relies heavily on individuals' perceptions of their social interactions (Allen et al., 2018). Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) argued that belonging is a dynamic process that should be viewed as situated, relational, and processual. They also assert that belonging is a practice that shifts within, across, and beyond temporal and spatial entities. Belonging is a unique, continuous process, shaped by individuals' identities and experiences (Guyotte et al., 2019).

Teachers' Sense of Belonging

Applying theories of belonging from disciplines beyond education to the experiences of teachers in schools may provide better insight into how teachers navigate and maintain a sense of belonging in their schools. Experiences with belonging can shape teachers' subjectivities, self-concepts, identities, and social locations within their schools, requiring teachers to engage in a continual process of defining their interpersonal relationships (Halse, 2018). A sense of belonging can have a formative influence on early career teachers' personal and professional identities, enabling early career teachers to develop confidence and a positive sense of efficacy as they navigate their initial teaching experiences (Bjorklund, 2023; Martin, 2024).

In their research on teachers' sense of belonging, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011b) defined belonging as the extent to which teachers feel connected to school leaders, peers, and students at

their schools. When teachers feel like they belong in their schools, they may feel empowered to exercise their voice and agency and to act on their professional expertise (Zepeda et al., 2022). Because teachers' sense of belonging is positively related to students' sense of belonging, deeper investigation into teachers' sense of belonging may provide additional insights into the roles that teachers play in cultivating belonging among their students (Allen, 2020). Teachers' sense of belonging can act as a buffer against emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011a) and job-related conflicts (Gerlach & Gockel, 2018), enabling teachers to develop resilience and thrive at work (Clandinin et al., 2015).

Methodology:

This article explores the existing literature on teachers' sense of belonging to develop an understanding of what is currently known about how belonging is experienced within the teaching profession. Drawing from a wide body of research, this article reviews the extant literature on teachers' sense of belonging to address the following questions:

1. *Who has been studied in the literature on belonging in the teaching profession?*
2. *What has been reported in the literature about how teachers experience a sense of belonging?*
3. *How can school leaders support teachers' sense of belonging, particularly among early career teachers?*

This review analyzed 29 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters primarily related to teachers' sense of belonging. Five inclusion criteria were developed to inform the selection of publications for this study, as landscaped in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1.

General Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Elaboration of Criteria
Time Frame	Articles published between 2010 and February 2024
Language	English-language journals and books
Type of Research	Empirical studies and literature reviews that examined PK-12 teachers' and students' sense of belonging
Type of Publications	Peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters
Focus	Studies that explicitly examined individuals' sense of belonging in schools, primarily limited to teachers in PK-12 settings

The review process involved the following iterative stages:

Step 1: Selecting research questions, databases, websites, and appropriate search terms.

Relevant literature for this review was identified through major databases and repositories, including Scopus, EBSCO-host, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar. Terms used to locate relevant literature included “teacher” OR “preservice teacher” OR “early career teacher” OR “beginning teacher” OR “first-year teacher” AND “belonging,” OR “belongingness” OR “connection” OR “connectedness.”

Step 2: Applying practical screening criteria

Research was screened based on its quality and relevance. To ensure quality, only peer-reviewed literature was considered for review. In addition, selected research needed an explicit focus on teachers' or students' sense of belonging in PK-12 environments. In most cases, all relevant literature addressed the experiences of belonging among PK-12 teachers. To illustrate the wide body of literature on PK-12 students' sense of belonging at school, eight studies on students' sense of belonging were also included in this literature review. Studies of belonging

among teachers and students outside of PK-12 settings (e.g., higher education) were omitted from this literature review. To ensure relevance of research, only research published between 2010-2024 were considered. Ultimately, 29 publications met the inclusion criteria, quality standards, and relevance regarding early career teachers and a sense of belonging and were selected for this review.

The selected research for this literature review is organized by topic, capturing the perspectives of belonging a) as a PK-12 student, b) as a preservice teacher, c) as an in-service teacher, and, d) as an early career teacher. Major themes and ideas are synthesized across the literature and are discussed in the concluding sections of this review.

Research on Belonging

This section overviews relevant literature related to sense of belonging at school and sense of belonging among teachers at varying stages in their careers.

Belonging as a PK-12 Student

Within the field of education, much of the literature on belonging highlights the experiences of students at school. Empirical studies have investigated PK-12 students' sense of belonging at school, highlighting the influences of teachers, classmates, and family members on students' sense of belonging (e.g., Allen & Bowles, 2012; Demanet & Houtte, 2012). Many studies link students' sense of belonging to positive outcomes, suggesting that students who feel a sense of belonging at school are more likely to develop healthy relationships with their peers (Gowing, 2019) and participate in classroom activities (Kiefer et al., 2015). Studies also suggest links between K-12 students' sense of belonging and academic motivation (Korpershoek et al., 2019; Won et al., 2018); increased self-efficacy (King-Sears & Strogilos, 2015); and an overall positive sense of well-being (Arslan 2021).

While a large body of literature explores students' sense of belonging, recent research has begun to examine teachers' experiences of belonging in the teaching profession (e.g., Bjorklund, 2023; Pesonen et al., 2021). The following sections review much of the literature on belonging among preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and early career teachers.

Belonging as a Preservice Teacher

A few studies have addressed the experience of belonging among preservice teachers as they participate in field placements. Because field placements are temporary in nature, research has acknowledged that preservice teachers often struggle to establish a sense of belonging in the schools in which they are placed (e.g., Cheruvu et al., 2015). One study found that preservice teachers' sense of belonging plays a critical role in their well-being, cognition, and ability to learn in their field placements, illuminating the need for teacher educators to prioritize belonging as a fundamental component of professional development (Dewhurst et al., 2020). When preservice teachers experience a sense of belonging, they are more likely to demonstrate relational trust with their colleagues and develop a positive sense of self-efficacy (Bjorklund et al., 2021).

Other studies draw connections between preservice teachers' sense of belonging and their sense of agency. Surrounding preservice teachers with a "village" of support—consisting of cooperating teachers, university professors, and students—may contribute to preservice teachers' sense of agency and sense of belonging in their field placements (Ussher, 2010). Moreover, cooperating teachers can bolster preservice teachers' sense of belonging by presenting opportunities for preservice teachers to contribute proactively to classroom activities (Johnston & Dewhurst, 2021).

A few studies highlight the need for teacher educators to consider how preservice teachers' identities may present barriers to establishing a sense of belonging in their field placements. In their study of the experiences of preservice teachers of color, Cheruvu et al. (2015) found that the preservice teachers faced isolation and exclusion as they navigated "socially-imposed [sic] and self-internalized deficit conceptions" of their developing personal and professional identities (p. 237). Other similar studies that examine the racialized experiences of preservice teachers of color highlight that feelings of hypervisibility, disrespect, and stereotyping may prevent preservice teachers of color from establishing a sense of belonging in their field placements (Plachowski, 2019; Rodriguez-Mojica et al., 2020).

Belonging as an In-Service Teacher

Research has long examined issues related to teachers' social interactions, connecting teachers' experiences with isolation to feelings of loneliness (Gaikwad & Brantley, 1992; Tahir et al., 2017); stress and burnout (Russell, 1987; Schlichte et al., 2005); and a greater risk of attrition (Sleppin, 2009). Other studies have focused on the role of social support in bolstering teachers' resilience (Dempsey et al., 2021); social and emotional competence (Schonert-Reichl, 2017); and motivation for professional growth (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2023). Moreover, research on the social interactions of teachers finds that feelings of isolation are especially prevalent among teachers of color and teachers in the early phases of their careers (e.g., Bristol, 2020; Stewart & Jansky, 2022).

The issue of teacher isolation has prompted researchers to take a growing interest in the issue of belonging among teachers. Education researchers Skaalvik and Skaalvik conducted a series of large-scale studies that link teachers' feelings of belonging to other personal and contextual characteristics, including supportive social relations, emotional exhaustion, job

satisfaction, and intent to leave the profession. One study by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011a) found that teachers whose personal goals and values align with the goals and values of their school (i.e., *value consonance*) and teachers who experience positive social relations with colleagues are more likely to experience a strong sense of belonging. In addition, a strong sense of belonging is likely to contribute to teachers' overall job satisfaction and may also serve as a mitigator against emotional exhaustion. Highlighting value consonance as a critical component of teachers' sense of belonging, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011b) advocated for leaders to facilitate authentic conversations with teachers to ensure that teachers' personal goals and values align with the values and goals of their schools. Additional studies by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2021, 2023) identified that collective teacher cultures—consisting of shared values, collective efficacy, and supportive relationships—are strongly and positively associated with teachers' perceived sense of belonging, job satisfaction, and autonomy.

Other scholars highlight value consonance as a critical component to belonging for teachers, suggesting that various organizational factors—including leadership, shared goals and values, communication, and physical and psychological safety—may strongly predict teachers' sense of belonging (Kachchhap and Horo, 2021; Yang et al., 2022). Several studies examine the role of interpersonal relationships in supporting a sense of belonging among teachers. For example, a study by Pesonen et al. (2021) concluded that belonging is constructed through a combination of teachers' work practices, mutual relationships, and individual characteristics. Emphasizing the importance of leadership in cultivating positive, collaborative work environments, Pesonen et al. suggested that leaders facilitate opportunities for teachers to share their pedagogical thinking and best teaching practices, promoting collective capacity and bolstering teachers' sense of belonging. In a study that compared the experiences of belonging,

well-being, and self-perceived competence among preservice and in-service teachers, Nislin and Pesonen (2019) found that while in-service teachers expressed fewer occurrences of burnout and higher rates of school engagement, preservice teachers demonstrated a stronger sense of belonging. Nislin and Pesonen did not identify a significant relationship between teachers' sense of belonging, well-being, and self-perceived competence; however, their data indicated general feelings of "togetherness" among preservice and in-service teachers, suggesting the need for further research.

Research has also highlighted the experiences of belonging among specific demographics of teachers. In their study of teacher leaders, Struyve et al. (2014) reported that when teacher leaders assume leadership positions, their advancement in their schools' power hierarchy threatened their relationships with their fellow teachers, potentially impeding their personal sense of belonging. A study by Heider (2021) examined belonging among a cohort of teachers who experienced the immediate shift to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Heider suggested that school leaders can support teachers' sense of belonging in virtual learning environments by demonstrating empathic listening, being present, showing flexibility and understanding, and developing bonds of trust with teachers.

Gerlach and Gockel (2018) investigated the effects of principal-teacher relationships on teachers' sense of psychological safety. Stating that teachers' psychological safety was equally shaped by school principals and their peers, Gerlach and Gockel identified that while work-related task conflicts did not impact the psychological safety of teachers who were considered to belong to their principals' "in-group," work-related task conflicts negatively impacted the psychological safety of teachers who belonged to their principals' "out-group." Gerlach and Gockel also found that relationship conflicts negatively impacted the psychological safety of

teachers regardless of their perceived closeness to their principal. Research that identifies the conditions that teachers consider to be psychologically safe may offer greater insights into what it means for teachers to establish a sense of belonging in their schools.

Studies have examined a variety of personal and contextual factors in relation to teachers' sense of belonging. In their study of kindergarten teachers in China, Luo and Ran (2021) reported that teachers' sense of belonging is strongly predicted by their financial compensation, sense of self-efficacy, and school leadership. Luo and Ran also found that, to a lesser extent, teachers' sense of belonging may be predicted by their level of experience, gender, and age. In another study of early childhood teachers, Jones et al. (2019) concluded that teachers' sense of belonging to their school was the strongest predictor of teacher well-being. Arguing that teachers' sense of belonging emerges from strong, collegial relationships with colleagues, Jones et al. suggested that school leaders adopt a strengths-based approach to leadership, appreciating and affirming the contributions of teachers to support teachers' sense of belonging.

Belonging as an Early Career Teacher

Within the literature on in-service teachers' sense of belonging, little attention has been given to the experiences of belonging among early career teachers, presenting many opportunities for future study. In a study of early career teachers in Canada, Clandinin et al. (2015) identified a sense of belonging as a primary determining factor in early career teachers' decisions to stay or to leave the teaching profession. Other factors that contribute to early career teachers' decisions to leave include inadequate instructional support, unsustainable workloads, tensions around contracts, and difficulties maintaining a work-life balance. As the only study located for this review that links early career teachers' sense of belonging to early career teacher

retention, Clandinin et al., advocated for the creation of “relational spaces,” aimed at sustaining early career teachers through opportunities for professional identity exploration (p. 13).

Another study by Bjorklund (2023) explored the experiences of nine first-year teachers as they transitioned into careers in teaching. Initially, the first-year teachers appeared ambivalent about their sense of belonging. Throughout the study the participants noted that they experience belonging within supportive relationships built on shared values with colleagues within the school and from opportunities to make meaningful contributions to the school community. Bjorklund emphasized the important role of school leaders in fostering school cultures that prioritize belonging, especially among early career teachers, calling for additional research on organizational supports and their consequent outcomes for sense of belonging among early career teachers.

Results

The following section outlines key findings from this review of the literature on sense of belonging within the PK-12 teaching profession. organized around the three guiding research questions for this review, this section presents a synthesis of emergent themes and considerations for future research.

Who has been studied in the literature on belonging in the teaching profession?

The literature on teachers’ sense of belonging highlights the experience of preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and to a lesser extent, early career teachers. While a few studies examine preservice teachers’ experiences with belonging in their teacher preparation courses (e.g., Bjorklund et al., 2021), much of the research on preservice teachers’ sense of belonging highlights preservice teachers’ experiences of belonging during their field experiences (e.g., Pendergast et al., 2015).

Much of the literature on a sense of belonging among early career and in-service teachers examines teachers' sense of belonging in traditional PK-12 teaching contexts. While some studies focus on the experiences of belonging among teachers in specific grade bands (e.g., elementary/secondary teachers), most studies examine belonging among teachers across a diverse range of teaching assignments.

Research that explores the experiences of belonging among underrepresented demographics of teachers is needed to inform best practices in inclusive school leadership. Illuminating the unique experiences of underrepresented teachers as they navigate belonging in their schools could uncover critical insights into school culture, enabling school leaders to identify discriminatory practices in their schools and exposing professional learning deficits related to inclusive workplaces. In addition, many existing studies on teachers' sense of belonging examine teachers' experiences in traditional learning contexts. As online learning platforms continue to grow in popularity, exploration of teachers' sense of belonging in virtual spaces may expand current understandings of how belonging can be established and navigated among teachers.

Comprehensive examinations of the experiences of belonging among early career teachers could generate new insights into how school leaders can support early career teachers' professional identity development. Exploration of belonging may also illuminate ways in which school leaders can address the specific emotional and professional learning needs of early career teachers, bolstering early career teachers' resilience and commitment to teaching. Deeper investigations into early career teachers' sense of belonging may uncover new avenues for sustaining teachers in the profession, offering insights for school leaders as they seek to support early career teachers in their schools.

What has been reported in the literature about how teachers experience a sense of belonging?

Research suggests that a positive sense of belonging may protect teachers against feelings of isolation, promoting their sense of self-efficacy (Allen, 2020; Clandinin et al., 2015); encouraging deep engagement in their professional growth (Dewhurst et al., 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2023); and cultivating a positive sense of well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021). In addition, teachers who experience a strong sense of belonging are more likely to find satisfaction in their work and demonstrate a strong commitment to the teaching profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011a).

Much of the current literature on teachers' sense of belonging includes large-scale quantitative studies that measured teachers' sense of belonging through surveys and questionnaires. Additional qualitative studies that explore the nuanced experiences of belonging among individual teachers may advance understanding of how teachers navigate and maintain a sense of belonging throughout their initial teaching experiences.

Furthermore, because much of the research on a sense of belonging among teachers has been conducted outside of the United States, additional research that highlights the experiences of belonging among teachers within the United States could provide relevant considerations for school leaders in schools across the United States. Comparative research that investigates teachers' sense of belonging across various cultural contexts could also generate new understandings about the nature of belonging as a teacher.

How can school leaders support teachers' sense of belonging, particularly among early career teachers?

The research on teachers' sense of belonging presents several considerations for school leaders as they seek to cultivate a sense of belonging among early career teachers. First, belonging emerges from inclusive environments that are psychologically safe (Edmondson et al., 2016). Psychologically safe work environments—characterized by open-mindedness, curiosity, humility, and vulnerability—are grounded in a respect for diverse knowledge, opinions, and experiences. Fostering inclusive school environments begins with the work of school leaders. By modelling inclusive leadership practices, school leaders may relinquish some of their power to teachers within their schools, empowering teachers to voice concerns when needed, boosting teacher engagement, and motivating teachers to perform at their highest professional potential (Waller, 2021). Teachers who feel psychologically safe are better equipped to confront conflict in their schools, and they are more likely to take responsible risks in their practice (Edmondson et al., 2016; Gerlach & Gockel, 2018).

Second, value consonance, or the perception of shared values and goals, is a critical component of teachers' sense of belonging (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011a; Yang et al., 2022). When hiring early career teachers, school leaders can be transparent about their school's mission and vision, explicitly stating their expectations for teachers in their schools. In addition, school leaders can present opportunities for early career teachers to express their personal attitudes, beliefs, and goals regarding teaching and learning to assess the alignment of early career teachers' personal values and the school's mission and vision (Waller, 2021). To support a sense of belonging among the early career teachers, school leaders can ensure that their staff is united

by a shared vision for school improvement and shared goals for teaching and learning (Pesonen et al., 2021).

Third, to establish a sense of belonging, early career teachers must feel that they are able to add value to their group or community (Bjorklund, 2023; Hagerty et al., 1992). New to the profession and new to their schools, early career teachers' knowledge, ideas, and perspectives are often overlooked or disregarded (Kelchtermans, 2019). While considering early career teachers' workloads and increased potential for stress and burnout, school leaders can present early career teachers with opportunities to contribute to their schools in positive ways. By leveraging early career teachers' strengths, school leaders may provide opportunities for early career teachers to make meaningful contributions to their school, supporting a sense of teamwork and connection within the school community (Bjorklund, 2023).

Finally, respect for an individual's autonomy can contribute to a sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993). Employees who feel respected as professionals are more likely to seek opportunities for meaningful engagement and to develop confidence in their abilities to perform various work-related tasks (Waller, 2021). Sydnor (2017) proposes that school leaders adopt an attitude of "supportive autonomy" in which early career teachers feel trusted to enact their vision of good teaching while receiving guidance through consistent communication with experienced, caring colleagues. The practice of supportive autonomy may help teachers develop confidence as they navigate competing discourses and tensions, both inside and outside of their schools. By honoring early career teachers' professional autonomy, school leaders may empower teachers to take ownership of their practice, improving job satisfaction and sustaining teachers in the profession (Fiegener & Adams, 2023; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021).

School leaders should attend to teachers' fundamental need to belong by intentionally searching for signs of not belonging, especially among early career teachers (Bjorklund, 2023). By facilitating ongoing, authentic discussions about belonging, school leaders may assess early career teachers' personal perceptions of belonging and identify potential barriers to belonging in their schools (Clandinin et al., 2015). Moreover, school leaders can facilitate opportunities for early career teachers to develop interpersonal relationships with colleagues (Zepeda et al., 2022). Pairing early career teachers with a peer mentor can provide early career teachers with professional and emotional support, and it may offer a point of access to other teachers within their schools, further bolstering early career teachers' sense of belonging (Pogodzinski, 2012; Thomas-Reynolds, 2022).

Conclusion

Given the many transitions and adjustments that early career teachers experience in the initial years of their careers, navigating a sense of belonging can be particularly difficult (Bjorklund, 2023; Clandinin et al., 2015). School leaders must attend to both the professional and the emotional needs of early career teachers. By facilitating regular check-ins with early career teachers, school leaders may understand what belonging means and what it looks like to the early career teachers in their schools. In addition, school leaders and early career teachers may continually assess value consonance, ensuring the alignment of goals and values, further bolstering early career teachers' sense of belonging.

Furthermore, school leaders can address both the professional and the emotional needs of early career teachers by facilitating communities of support and surrounding early career teachers with caring and competent peers. Within and beyond these communities of support, school leaders can honor early career teachers' strengths by creating opportunities for early

career teachers to make meaningful contributions to their school and the larger community. By fostering conditions that promote early career teachers' sense of belonging, school leaders may more effectively support and sustain early career teachers through this particularly formative phase of their careers.

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Scenes from the Data

In Chapter Two, I presented a review of the literature on PK-12 teachers' sense of belonging, identifying common themes across the research on belonging among preservice, early career, and more experienced teachers. The following scene from data illustrates Victoria's search for belonging as she navigated a teaching role in a content area and with a student population that was relatively unfamiliar to her. In addition to addressing the important topic of early career teacher preparedness and support, this scene from data highlights Victoria's vulnerability as she described feeling insecure and isolated during her first year of teaching. Then, in Chapter Three, I reflect on the ways in which my approach to interviewing the participants in this dissertation influenced their confidence and their comfort in describing their deeply personal experiences with belonging.

Circuitous Routes to Certification: Victoria's Story

Victoria's journey to becoming a high school math special education teacher was anything but conventional.

For as long as she could remember, Victoria loved art. She also loved children, so a career in art education seemed like an obvious choice for her. Upon her high school graduation, Victoria pursued a degree in Art Education with the intention of becoming a middle school art teacher. As a preservice teacher, Victoria enjoyed her field experience in a middle school art classroom. However, it was her positive interactions with students with disabilities during this time that ultimately reshaped her professional aspirations.

Victoria completed her degree in Art Education and became certified to teach art in grades PK-12. Instead of applying for art education positions, however, Victoria decided to

pursue teaching positions in special education, working on a provisional teaching license with the intention of becoming certified to teach special education.

Victoria was hired to work as a math inclusion special education teacher at a rural high school, providing individualized support to students during their algebra and geometry classes. In Victoria's words, her role is nothing like she expected.

In my mind, I naturally thought that I would be teaching in a self-contained classroom.

From my student teaching experiences, it seemed that the self-contained special education teachers had more flexibility with their curriculum, and I thought my art skills could be easily transferable in that environment. I don't know if it was because of my lack of research, but all summer, I expected to be an adapted special education teacher, so I wasn't concerned with preparing for math instruction. When I received my teaching schedule and saw that I was going to be teaching algebra and geometry, I panicked a little. My degree is in art! I now had strict standards that I needed to teach. I definitely felt like my head was on fire, but I got through it.

Victoria had received very little training in teaching math or working with students with disabilities prior to her first year of teaching, fueling feelings of overwhelm and insecurity as she navigated an unfamiliar content area with a student population that she felt underprepared to serve.

Recent data suggests that approximately 37% of all teachers in the South are inexperienced, teaching out-of-field, or uncertified (Southern Regional Education Board, 2024). Filling classrooms with teachers who are insufficiently prepared to facilitate learning poses threats to student achievement and likely contributes to the perpetuation of high rates of teacher turnover (Garcia et al., 2022). When teachers feel underprepared to meet the needs of their

students, they may experience feelings of ineffectiveness and helplessness, potentially leading to feelings of isolation (Hogan & White, 2021).

In the next chapter, I reflect on the research design of this dissertation, considering the ways in which my methodological decisions influenced Victoria's—and the other early career teacher participants'---abilities to disclose about their experiences with belonging during their transition into the teaching profession.

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CHAPTER 3

VISUALIZING BELONGING: A REFLECTION ON APPLYING PHOTO ELICIATION TO A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BELONGING²

² Polley, K. G. To be submitted to *Qualitative Research*.

Abstract

This methodological reflection explores how photo-elicitation methods enhanced participants' disclosure in a phenomenological study of belonging among early career teachers. In this study, each participant presented a photo that illustrated their sense of belonging during their transition into the teaching profession. Photo elicitation offered a disarming approach to the participants' descriptions of their deeply personal experiences with belonging. The participants' photos offered vivid insights into their experiences with belonging and unearthed new dimensions of meaning regarding the material, spatial, and social aspects of belonging. This methodological reflection considers ethical implications and possible recommendations for researchers interested in applying photo-elicitation methods to phenomenology of practice.

Introduction

For decades, researchers have employed images during qualitative interviews to enhance participant disclosure (e.g., Harper, 2002; Bates et al., 2017). As an approach to data collection, photo-elicitation methods are often employed to gain additional insight into participants' experiences by uncovering deeper meanings within a particular topic (Richard & Lahman, 2015). By relating an image to a participant's experiences, photo-elicitation methods open new pathways for participants to share their experiences—many times, in ways that participants may not be able to express through words alone (Lauck et al., 2021).

In this paper, I reflect on my application of photo-elicitation methods in a phenomenological study of belonging among early career teachers, i.e., teachers with three or fewer years of professional teaching experience. For the purposes of this research, belonging is defined as individuals' perceived involvement in a group or system (Allen et al., 2018). My study drew on van Manen's (2023) phenomenology of practice to explore the experience of

belonging in the lives of early career teachers. Consistent with phenomenological methods, each participant in my study provided a prereflective description of their experiences with belonging as an early career teacher. Disclosing about an experience prereflectively requires participants to describe an experience *as lived*, avoiding any causal interpretations or judgements (van Manen, 2016). In addition to providing prereflective, verbal descriptions of their experiences with belonging, the participating early career teachers presented images that illustrated their sense of belonging as they navigated their initial months of teaching. From the participants' photos emerged insights into the participants' perceptions of belonging, uncovering valuable information regarding their workplace contexts, school cultures, and relationships with their students and colleagues.

Throughout this methodological reflection, I discuss the ways in which photo-elicitation methods enhanced the participants' disclosure by providing visual insight into abstract ideas or concepts that could have been difficult for participants to express verbally. While numerous phenomenological studies have applied photo-elicitation methods in the past (e.g., Bennett, 2014; Filstad et al., 2019), few studies have examined the application of photo-elicitation methods specifically to van Manen's (2023) phenomenology of practice. As I reflect on my research process, I consider ethical implications and practical considerations for researchers who are interested in applying photo-elicitation methods to phenomenology of practice.

Phenomenological Research

As a mode of qualitative inquiry, phenomenology seeks to understand the fundamental nature of an experience (Finlay, 2013; van Manen, 2023). By abstracting the phenomenon out of any taken-for-granted classifications or categorizations, phenomenology investigates the essence of human experiences by asking what a phenomenon is and how a phenomenon is experienced

(Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology does not seek to draw conclusions or assess the value of an experience. Instead, phenomenology searches for the meaning of a phenomenon through wondering, interpreting, and questioning (van Manen, 2017a). One distinguishing characteristic of the phenomenological approach is that phenomenology investigates lived experiences “prereflectively,” requiring participants to describe their experiences as they naturally appear to their consciousness—without interpretations or judgements (van Manen, 2023).

Within phenomenology exists many methodological approaches. One approach, phenomenology of practice, places special attention on context and studies individuals’ everyday encounters with a phenomenon found in professional tasks or personal activities (van Manen, 2017b). Phenomenology of practice engages directly with phenomena found in everyday life, enabling researchers to investigate the practical aspects of ordinary experiences that are often taken for granted (van Manen, 2023). Hyde and Rouse (2023) describe phenomenology of practice as a “reflective process that attempts to recover and express the ways in which people experience their lives as they live them, with the aim of acting practically with greater thoughtfulness and tact” (p. 875). My study drew on van Manen’s (2023) phenomenology of practice to address the following research questions:

1. *What does belonging mean to an early career teacher?*
2. *How does belonging manifest in an early career teacher’s initial teaching experiences?*

Employing photo-elicitation methods to phenomenology of practice, I sought to gain insight into the fundamental nature of the experience of belonging among early career teachers as they transition into the teaching profession. To this end, I examined the experiences of seven early career teachers who represent a diverse array of teaching contexts and experiences to gain

insight into how early career teachers conceptualize and experience belonging during their initial months of teaching.

Photo-Elicitation Methods

Photo-elicitation methods have long been applied to qualitative research to enhance participants' disclosure during interviews (e.g., Loeffler, 2004; Leonard & McKnight, 2014). Through the use of images, photo-elicitation methods do not only prompt participants toward more detailed disclosure; photo-elicitation methods can prompt participants toward a completely different kind of disclosure (Glaw et al., 2017). In his description of photo-elicitation methods, Harper (2002) states,

Images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. These may be some of the reasons the photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more information but rather one that evokes a different kind of information. (p. 13)

Introducing photos into the interview process can empower participants by minimizing researcher-participant power differences, giving participants a sense of control during their interviews (Fawns, 2020). Centering participants as the primary drivers of an interview, photo-elicitation methods allow researchers to step outside of their personal frames of reference to understand better the participants' perspectives on an experience. (Harper, 2002). Bates et al. (2017) identify the following distinct approaches to photo elicitation:

- Participant-Driven (Open): Participants are asked to provide any photo they feel is relevant to the phenomenon of interest.

- Participant-Driven (Semi-Structured): The researcher makes participants aware of a set of questions and asks participants to seek relevant photos to align with those questions.
- Researcher-Driven (Structured): The researcher provides the photos for the interview and uses the photos as stimuli to promote discussion.

Various approaches to photo elicitation have been applied to qualitative research studies, including photovoice (Sutton-Brown, 2015); photostories (Gomez, 2024); autophotography (Glaw et al., 2017); and snaplogs (Ray & Smith, 2010). Within phenomenological research, photo-elicitation methods have been employed to enable participants to describe more vividly their experiences with the phenomenon of interest. Generating both visual and narrative data, photo-elicitation methods can provide an enriching understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by individual participants (Papaloukas et al., 2017; Plunkett et al., 2013).

A few phenomenological studies have applied photo-elicitation methods to their examinations of belonging. In one study, Bennett (2014) solicited participants' written and photo diary entries to understand how belonging is accomplished in the everyday lives of individuals. Studying multi-generational families about their practices of belonging in their small town in the United Kingdom, Bennett asked her participants to submit photos that described how and where they experienced belonging. The participants' photos were then used to encourage rich disclosure during the participants' interviews, facilitating detailed discussions about the participants' perceptions of and connections to their hometown. As she reflected on her methodological decisions, Bennett noted that her application of a participant-driven method of photo elicitation revealed new dimensions of verbal description in her interviews. Through the use of photos, the participants were able to illustrate various locations around their hometown in terms that demonstrated their feelings about belonging.

Another phenomenological study on belonging by Filstad et al. (2019) employed photo-elicitation methods to examine the experience of belonging in the workplace. Focused specifically on the material and spatial dimensions of the phenomenon of belonging, Filstad et al. implemented “snaplogs” to understand how belonging is performed in the workplace. Through snaplogs, participants submit photos along with brief written descriptions to provide a holistic illustration of their subjective experiences (Ray & Smith, 2010). Using the snaplog method, Filstad et al. asked participants to submit a photo that describes belonging at work. Along with each photo, the participants provided a brief written description that states why their photo represented belonging in the workplace. According to Filstad et al. (2019), the use of snaplogs nurtured the multiplicity of meanings within the phenomenon and illustrated

...an immediate feeling of what social, material, physical, and practice spaces affect belonging. The images and texts captured a wide variety of accounts that enabled us to explore the complexity and variety of belonging at work, including multiple representations and interpretations of belonging across individuals. (p. 128)

Given that an individual’s experiences with belonging can be difficult to describe, employing photo-elicitation methods to these phenomenological studies of belonging aided the participants in verbally expressing the ways in which they conceptualized and experienced a sense of belonging. Moreover, asking participants to present photos that represented their sense of belonging unearthed new dimensions of meaning, providing important insights into the participants’ experiences that may not have been uncovered otherwise.

Lived Experience Descriptions

Researchers interested in phenomenology of practice often rely on lived experience descriptions (LEDs) as a method of obtaining meanings or the significance of experiences with a

phenomenon (van Manen, 2023). By learning from the experiences of others, phenomenological researchers then become more experienced themselves, enabling a deeper understanding of the meaning or nature of a phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). LEDs can be obtained through a variety of sources of lived experience, but they are most commonly gathered through participant interviews and observations. At times, researchers may consider biographies and accounts in literature, diaries, music, and pieces of art as sources of LEDs (van Manen, 2016).

Through soliciting LEDs, phenomenological researchers honor the subjective nature of each individual participant's experiences while centering the phenomenon in the research. Gathering individual perspectives can be informative; however, researchers are primarily interested in understanding the fundamental nature of an experience with the phenomenon. In an interview setting, the researchers may ask their participants to think of a specific event or interaction. Then, the researchers will probe into that experience, exploring it to the fullest.

Noting that some participants may generalize their thoughts in LEDs, van Manen (2016) suggests that researchers must continuously turn the participant back to concrete experience. In a LED, little concern is placed on factual accuracy. Instead, the researchers seek to understand the plausibility of an account—"whether it is true to our living sense of it" (p. 65). Throughout my study, each participating early career teacher provided a rich and detailed LED, in which they shared prereflective descriptions of their experiences with belonging as they transitioned into the profession. Through deep reflection on the participants' LEDs emerged discovery into the fundamental nature of belonging.

Context

Seven early career teachers were recruited for this study to share about their experiences with belonging. The participants represented a wide range of K-12 teaching assignments and

public-school contexts across the southeastern United States. At the time of their interviews, all the participants possessed one year of professional teaching experience.

Research Design

I conducted two rounds of sixty-minute, virtual interviews with the participants during the summer of 2024. Questions asked during these interviews targeted the subjective nature of the participants' experiences with belonging. Giving particular attention to the ways in which the participants conceptualized their sense of belonging, I sought to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experience of belonging among early career teachers.

Using an open, participant-driven approach to photo elicitation (Bates et al., 2017), I asked each participant to present one photo that illustrated their sense of belonging as they transitioned into the teaching profession. This flexible photo prompt gave the participants liberty to select any photo—from their personal photo collections, from friends, from the internet, etc.—that illustrated their sense of belonging.

At the beginning of each initial interview, I asked the participants to present their photos as a way of generating discussion about their experiences with belonging (Lauck et al., 2021). As the participants described how their photos connected to their sense of belonging, I asked probing questions that encouraged the participants to respond with descriptions of their experiences with belonging. I encouraged participants to avoid causal interpretations or explanations as they shared (van Manen, 2023). Through this process, I found that the participants' photos evoked detailed descriptions of their experiences. In the subsequent interviews, I referred to the participants' photos for deeper probing into how belonging is experienced among early career teachers. The descriptions of the participants' photos were then analyzed holistically to identify themes or patterns across the participants' experiences.

As I listened to the participants provide their LEDs, I paid close attention to the participants' nonverbal expressions, allowing for a clearer understanding of the implicit meanings communicated in the participants' descriptions. During the initial round of interviews, I took thorough notes, identifying key words or phrases that surfaced in the participants' responses. From these notes and from my review of the interview transcripts, I developed follow-up interview protocols for the second round of interviews with each participant, tailoring my follow-up questions to each participant's LED. In the second round of interviews, I sought to clarify any information in the participants' LEDs, and I probed further into any notable statements or ideas that the participants shared in their initial interviews to gain a more holistic understanding of what belonging means and how belonging is experienced in the lives of the participating early career teachers.

Illustrating A Sense of Belonging

After agreeing to participate in the study, the participants were asked to bring an image to their first interview that illustrates their sense of belonging as an early career teacher. The participants' photos ranged from candid snapshots of the participants with their students or colleagues to photos of abstract art. Because I anticipated that the participants' photos may include the faces of individuals who did not consent to be a part of my study—including the faces of young students—I decided against storing any of the participants' photos with my research data and materials. Instead, I opted for an approach taken by Bennett (2014) and Bates et al. (2019), in which the participants provided detailed descriptions of their photos during their interviews. To avoid potential compromises in participant confidentiality, the aforementioned studies included only the participants' verbal descriptions of their photos in the written research.

In my study, as they displayed their photos during their interviews, I asked them to describe, in detail, the contents of their photos. As each participant described their photo, I took notes to document key elements of the photo (e.g., who was included in the photo, the location of the photo, how the early career teacher was positioned in the photo, etc.). Once each interview was transcribed, I reviewed the participants' verbal descriptions of their photos to identify themes across each of the interviews.

Through this analysis, it became clear that the participants held many different conceptualizations of belonging. While some participants' photos focused on social aspects of belonging (e.g., through photos of the early career teachers with their colleagues or students), other participants' photos highlighted spatial aspects (e.g., through photos of their classrooms or office spaces) or material aspects (e.g., through school supplies or instructional manipulatives) of belonging. Participant demographic information and a description of the participants' photos are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1.

Classifications of Belonging (Elicited by the Participants' Photos)

Participant Name*	Description of Each Participant's Photo	Classification of Belonging	Corresponding Quote from Interview
Sarah	Taken from the perspective of a student desk, Sarah's photo highlights the organization and layout of her math classroom. Students and colleagues are noticeably absent in this photo.	Spatial	<i>"My classroom was my home base. It felt like my home away from home. It was where I felt most relaxed and most myself."</i>
Kyle	Kyle is surrounded by students from one of his class periods. Everyone	Social (with students)	<i>"These kids were just great. With them, I felt like I could really be myself. I</i>

	is making silly faces at the camera.		<i>could switch up my teaching without fear of disaster...</i>
Lauren	Lauren presents an abstract photo of dozens of rainbow-colored human figures encompassed by two large hands.	Material/Spatial/Social	<i>“The hands represent the collective. It’s all of us—our backgrounds, who we are as people, our experiences... Our diversity is honored here...that’s why I feel like I belong.”</i>
Jesse	Jesse poses with her fourth-grade class as they proudly display their trophy from winning the school-wide STEAM competition. The fourth graders clearly struggle to contain their excitement as they pose for the photo.	Social (with students)	<i>“We were all so happy in this picture. This was in October, and I felt like I was finally building a bond with my students.”</i>
Victoria	Victoria’s desk is colorful and organized, decorated with notes from her family and friends, artwork from her students, and inspirational quotes from podcasts and books on teaching students in special education.	Spatial	<i>“My desk is a consistent place that won’t change. I don’t have my own classroom, and unlike relationships, my comfort here isn’t dependent on what I do or say, which is so freeing.”</i>
Joyce	Joyce and four of her fellow teachers smile at lunch during their school’s professional learning day.	Social (with colleagues)	<i>“In the interactions that I had with just about anyone in my school, I never felt like a burden.”</i>
Kimmy	Kimmy’s Pre-K students are scattered around her music classroom, gleefully tossing scarves into the air during a dance lesson.	Material	<i>“I get so much satisfaction from taking part in my students’ joy in class. The scarves, the instruments that we play. . . They</i>

			<i>create joy and give me a sense of belonging.”</i>
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*All names are pseudonyms

Reflective Examination of the Phenomenon

Critical to the phenomenological process is the assumption of a phenomenological attitude (van Manen, 2016). As I engaged with my phenomenological data, I intended to “see with fresh eyes” the phenomenon of belonging through others’ experiential accounts (Finlay, 2013). By holding in abeyance my personal beliefs about belonging, I engaged in what phenomenological researchers call the phenomenological reduction—described as the suspension and/or interrogation of an individual’s natural assumptions to focus on the experience itself (Zahavi, 2003). To engage in phenomenological reduction, I employed the practices of bridling and reflexivity, enabling me to examine the fundamental nature of the experience of belonging.

Bridling and Reflexivity

Acknowledging my own subjectivities—my understanding of belonging informed by personal experiences and my ontological assumptions regarding belonging at school—enabled me to employ in the practice of bridling (Dahlberg, 2006). Bridling, one accessible approach to the phenomenological reduction, allows researchers to focus their attention on careful, considered examination of data (Vagle et al., 2009). Continuing throughout the entire research process, bridling takes an attentive, meditative approach to fighting personally held beliefs and presuppositions regarding the phenomenon (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

My Approach to Bridling

Given my personal experiences—as both an early career teacher and as a mentor to early career teachers—I understood that my background would influence my understanding of the phenomenon. Recognizing that I could not attain a truly objective perspective of the

phenomenon, I bridled my understanding by reflexively examining the ways in which my personal experiences shaped my perceptions and beliefs regarding the phenomenon of belonging. Finlay (2014) states, “Reflexivity can be understood as involving a process of continually reflecting upon interpretations of both our own experience and the phenomenon being studied, in order to move beyond the partiality of previous understandings and investments in particular outcomes” (p. 131).

While acknowledging that my personal experiences undoubtedly shaped my perceptions of the phenomenon, I assumed a stance of openness by endeavoring to suspend judgment and approach the phenomenon with humility, flexibility, and sensitivity (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The process of bridling requires time and patience. Through sustained reflection, researchers wait for meanings to reveal themselves (Dahlberg, 2006). To this end, I dedicated several months of my study to immersion in the data, allowing meanings to emerge more fully and to avoid potentially careless interpretations of the phenomenon (Vagle et al., 2009). Maintaining a healthy level of skepticism by transparently interrogating potential inconsistencies in my data (Freeman et al., 2007), I thoughtfully and carefully considered my own relationship with the phenomenon throughout this reflective analytical process.

Reflection as Analysis

To engage in phenomenological research is to engage in a continual process of reflective writing (van Manen, 2023). As I reviewed the transcriptions of my participants’ lived experiences, the relevant literature on belonging, and the related theories of belonging, I centered the phenomenon by continually returning to questions about the nature of belonging. Framed within the context of early career teachers, I adapted van Manen’s (2016) questions to engage in phenomenological reflection.

- What are the key aspects of belonging?
- How does belonging manifest itself?
- What does belonging “do” or “produce”?
- How does belonging do what it does?
- What distinguishes belonging from other related experiences?
- What is the significance of belonging?

In this reflective process, I maintained a clear focus on the phenomenon of belonging, allowing the phenomenon to lead the analytical process (Freeman, 2021). As I reflected on the phenomenon of belonging, I applied van Manen’s (2023) three stages of descriptive reading to locate meanings within each text. First, I reviewed each LED in its entirety, generating a holistic understanding of the phenomenon within each text. Then, I selected specific statements or phrases that reveal insights related to the nature of belonging. Relevant phrases included details about the affective features of belonging (i.e., how belonging feels); manifestations of belonging in various work contexts; and the influence of belonging on participants’ personal and professional identities. Finally, I engaged in a detailed reading of each text by attending to individual sentences or sentence clusters that contribute additional perspectives into the phenomenon of belonging. Any relevant text was pulled from the data to create anecdotes that clarify or illustrate a possible experience of belonging among early career teachers (van Manen, 2016).

By writing through this reflective process, I documented patterns that emerged, generating phenomenological themes that point to the fundamental experience of belonging among early career teachers. Reflecting on both my prior and my developing understandings of the phenomenon, I allowed myself adequate time to “dwell with the data” (Finlay, 2014).

Sustained immersion in the data challenged me to interrogate any presuppositions or assumptions about belonging or about early career teachers that I had previously taken for granted. To gain additional clarity, I solicited the perspectives of peer qualitative research scholars to challenge my personal preconceived beliefs about belonging, allowing the phenomenon to reveal itself more fully. Furthermore, I invited my participants into the reflective phase of the research by seeking their feedback on my written reflections of their LEDs. Collaborating with participants throughout this reflective process ensured that my writing accurately represented their personal experiences; it allowed the participants to share their perspectives on the most important or most critical aspects of their experiences; and it presented additional opportunities for the participants to describe in more detail about their experiences (van Manen, 2016).

From these reflections, I developed a phenomenological description of belonging as an early career teacher. Recognizing that any interpretation of a phenomenon will be imperfect and incomplete and that human experience is always more complex than any single interpretation can articulate, I developed an animating description of the experience of belonging as an early career teacher (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

Results

As I immersed myself in the participants' LEDs, I reflected on my methodological decisions and their consequent influences on the participants' disclosure. Throughout this reflection, I considered the benefits and the potential disadvantages of applying photo-elicitation methods in phenomenological studies of belonging. The paragraphs below outline the insights that I gleaned from conducting this study as well as several ethical and methodological considerations for researchers who are interested in applying photo-elicitation methods to phenomenology of practice.

Photo elicitation offered a disarming approach to interviewing by diverting attention away from the participants and onto a photo.

For many of the participants, describing their personal experiences with belonging was, at times, uncomfortable and emotional. As they described their transition into the teaching profession, each participant described feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and insecurity—all difficult emotions to express, particularly in a virtual interview. Given the sensitive nature of participants' experiences with belonging, the participants' disclosure required both courage and significant vulnerability.

Virtual interviews can be intimidating, especially when the participant and the researcher have not previously met. While I had preexisting relationships with three of the participants, I had not met four of the participants prior to their initial interviews, and as a result, some of the participants were noticeably nervous at the beginning of their interviews. My primary responsibility became to quell the participants' nerves by ensuring their comfort, reassuring them of their confidentiality, and carefully listening to their experiences.

Using the participants' photos as a starting point in the interviews enabled me to assume the role of an empathetic listener, allowing the participants to feel a sense of power and control over their own disclosure (Fawns, 2020). Guided by their photos, the participants described the successes that they encountered during their first year of teaching and how they navigated a sense of belonging through their transition into a teaching career.

Beginning each interview with the participants' photos offered a low-stakes opportunity to “break the ice” with each participant, enabling us to begin the interview with material that the participants had personally selected. As they described their photos, I assumed a posture of

openness, enabling the participants to feel a sense of control and confidence as they shared about their experiences with belonging.

Photo elicitation provided relevance by lending insight into participants' work contexts.

Each participant's photo presented a window into their world that I would not have otherwise seen. Because I was interviewing participants across a sizable geographic area, traveling to participants' schools to conduct on-site interviews was not feasible. In addition, given the very personal nature of the topic of belonging, conducting interviews in the participants' workplaces may have inhibited the participants' ability to disclose as fully about their experiences. In most cases, the participants' photos either directly or indirectly pointed to their work environments, lending visual insight into how the participants conceptualized and experienced belonging during their transition into the teaching profession.

While some of the participants' photos focused exclusively on their physical work environments—portraying their thoroughly decorated classrooms or office spaces covered in notes from students and colleagues—other photos uncovered important insights into the participants' school cultures. The ways in which the participants were positioned in their photos, the ways in which they were dressed, and their facial expressions gave insight into interpersonal dynamics among the participants and their colleagues. The contextual information presented in the participants' photos added new understanding into how, where, and with whom the participants felt a sense of belonging. Through their photos, the participants were able to disclose both verbally and nonverbally about their experiences with belonging, resulting in vivid, evocative LEDs.

Photo elicitation unearthed multiple dimensions of belonging.

As the participants described their experiences with belonging, it became evident that each participant held different conceptions of belonging. The flexible photo prompt enabled the participants to represent visually their perspectives regarding their sense of belonging, pointing to the multidimensional and complex nature of belonging. While some participants experienced a sense of belonging relationally through their connections with students or colleagues, other participants found their strongest sense of belonging in physical spaces or with material items in their schools. For example, sharing a photo of her meticulously organized classroom, one participant described her sense of belonging as having a place to call a “home away from home” within her school building. For this participant, her classroom offered a safe place in which she could be easily located by her students and colleagues, supporting her sense of belonging.

Another participant, an elementary music teacher, related her sense of belonging to her classroom materials. Displaying a photo of her students dancing with scarves, this participant noted that her classroom dance materials engaged her students in learning. When this participant’s students were engaged, she felt her greatest sense of purpose, bolstering her sense of belonging. The participants’ diverse photos pointed to social, spatial, and material aspects of belonging, adding insight that would have likely remained unexplored through traditional interview approaches.

Photo elicitation explained belonging in ways that superseded language.

The photos offered participants opportunities to describe their experiences with belonging in ways that words simply could not express. For example, in one participant’s photo, the participant was surrounded by her fourth-grade students, posing for a picture after her class won a school competition. When I asked her why she selected this specific photo to illustrate her

sense of belonging, she could not articulate her reasoning. Instead, she said, “I can’t explain it. It was just a really good day.” The students’ tight hugs and the beaming smiles on the faces of the participant and her students spoke volumes about the bond that this participant shared with her class. This participant’s photo revealed *the extent to which* she felt connected to her students, visually representing her sense of belonging. Removed from any verbal description, this participant’s photo offered an important perspective on her experience of belonging during her first year of teaching—a perspective that could not have been captured as powerfully through words alone.

Discussion

Photo-elicitation methods can enhance the quality of a phenomenological interview. Through the use of images, participants may be able to express otherwise inarticulable thoughts or feelings associated with a topic of interest (Harper, 2002). Adopting photo-elicitation methods to research on abstract or sensitive topics can offer a disarming approach to interviewing, enabling participants to disclose about their experiences more comfortably. In this study of belonging among early career teachers, the participants’ photos offered vivid illustrations of how early career teachers may conceptualize belonging. Inviting participants to represent their experiences with a phenomenon through photo-elicitation methods may enable participants opportunities to feel a sense of ownership and control during interviews, potentially opening new avenues for participants’ disclosure.

In this particular study, employing photo-elicitation methods also offered important information into the participants’ work environments. Because I was unable to conduct on-site interviews with participants at their schools, the participants whose images were taken at their school sites offered new and interesting insights into their schools’ culture, their relationships

with peers and students, and/or the physical organization of their school or classroom. Reviewing the participants' photos provided a more holistic understanding of their experiences with belonging, and in many cases, the photos illustrated the ways in which their sense of belonging shaped their first year in the teaching profession.

Ethical Concerns

When employing photo-elicitation methods, special attention must be given to the ethical consequences that accompany including participants' personal photos in research. In this study, many participants shared photos that displayed their faces, and often, the faces of their colleagues or students. Some of these photos held a host of identifying information—both for the participant and for other individuals in the photos who did not consent to be a part of this study. While including the participants' actual photos may have enhanced my study, incorporating the participants' photos into my written study would have compromised participants' anonymity. To ensure participants' confidentiality, I decided against taking any of the participants' photos into my possession for this research. Instead, the participants verbally described, in detail, their photos as they provided their LEDs. I then transcribed their verbal descriptions, and along with my interview notes, I developed comprehensive, written descriptions of each participant's photo. These written descriptions of the participants' photos offered adequate detail for analysis and reflection without compromising the confidentiality of the participants or any other individuals represented in each photo.

Prereflection and Photo Elicitation

Prereflection, one distinguishing characteristic of phenomenological interviewing, requires that participants describe a particular experience *as lived*—free of causal explanations, interpretations, or judgements (van Manen, 2023). Phenomenological researchers may argue that

asking a participant to present photos that illustrate their experience with the phenomenon requires the participant to reflect on their experience. In other words, as the participants determine which photos to present in their interviews, they must consider how their selected photos relate to the phenomenon.

In this study, prior to their initial interview, each participant shared that they took great care in deciding which photo best illustrated their sense of belonging. When they presented their photos during their interviews, each participant provided a clear rationale for their selected photo, justifying the ways in which they believed that their photo represented their sense of belonging. While each participant's rationale gave insight into their conceptualizations of belonging, I wondered if their reflection on the phenomenon would inhibit their ability to describe their experiences *as lived* (van Manen, 2016) in subsequent sections of their interviews.

Unlike reflective descriptions of an experience, where participants have the freedom to sensor both the content they describe and how they present that content, prereflective descriptions involve participants to engage in uninhibited disclosure, requiring a great deal of trust within researcher-participant relationship (van Manen, 2016). To develop trust, I found that beginning each interview with the participants' photos offered a disarming approach to interviewing, enabling the participants to disclose prereflectively about specific details of their experiences *as lived* in all subsequent sections of their interviews. Moreover, using photo-elicitation methods as an opening activity in the interviews minimized researcher-participant power differences, making it possible for the participants to disclose comfortably about their experiences.

Conclusion

In this methodological reflection, I describe my application of photo-elicitation methods to a study that draws on van Manen's (2023) phenomenology of practice to explore the experience of belonging among early career teachers. I conclude that photo-elicitation methods can be of particular benefit to phenomenological researchers who study abstract or sensitive topics that participants may find difficult to articulate verbally. In my study, the early career teacher participants' photos lent insight into their conceptualizations of belonging and their experiences with belonging during their transition into the teaching profession. Their images pointed to spatial, social, and material aspects of belonging, uncovering understandings regarding the fundamental nature of belonging for early career teachers and suggesting possible implications for supporting early career teachers' sense of belonging. While acknowledging the ethical limitations that accompany the application of photo-elicitation methods in qualitative research, researchers interested in phenomenology of practice may consider employing photo-elicitation methods as a means of discovering new and potentially deeper dimensions of meaning within a phenomenon.

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Scenes from the Data

In Chapter Three, I reflected on my methodological decisions for this dissertation research, describing the ways in which photo-elicitation methods facilitated deep disclosure from the participants as they shared about their experiences with belonging. The following scene from the data highlights Joyce's description of her teaching experiences in a school that was inundated with new teachers. Given the high volume of new teachers at Joyce's school, at times, Joyce received interruptions in professional support, compromising her sense of belonging. Further amplifying the experiences of the participating early career teachers, in Chapter Four, I present the phenomenological study that was conducted for this dissertation, addressing practical implications for teacher educators who seek to support a sense of belonging among early career teachers.

Novice is the New Norm: Joyce's Story

Joyce's sub-urban elementary school is quite large, serving just under 1,100 students in grades K-5. About 75 full-time, certified teachers serve on the faculty at Joyce's school, but given multiple changes in school leadership in recent years, Joyce's school has experienced an unusually high rate of teacher turnover. As a result, Joyce is among many early career teachers in her school. In fact, over one third of the teachers in her school possess three or fewer years of professional teaching experience.

Joyce serves on a team of six fourth grade teachers. This year, of these six teachers, five were new to the fourth-grade team, four were new to the school district, and two were considered early career teachers. This high rate of new teachers—many of whom were “novice” teachers—at Joyce's school contributed to general feelings of insecurity and confusion across the faculty.

Being a new teacher is already overwhelming enough, but being a new teacher in Mountain View School District, with all of its unique procedures and resources can get very overwhelming. Knowing when and how to meet the districts' expectations based on the "Mountain View Way" can get confusing. With so many of us in the building trying to figure out the "Mountain View Way" all at once, we sometimes feel unsure of ourselves.

Joyce's circumstances, while unfortunate, are not unique to her school. Given the high rates of teacher turnover in the United States, approximately one in four public school teachers currently possesses five or fewer years of teaching experience (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). The overrepresentation of new or new-to-district teachers in schools can present barriers to accessing critical support needs, especially among early career teachers. When early career teachers are unable to access sufficient support, they become vulnerable to feelings of isolation and can reduced job satisfaction and persistence in the profession (Auletto, 2021).

In the next chapter, I present a phenomenological description of belonging as an early career teacher. Highlighting the first-hand accounts of seven early career teachers, including Joyce, I explore the experience of belonging by examining what belonging means to early career teachers and how belonging manifests as early career teachers transition into the teaching profession.

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CHAPTER 4

“FINDING THEIR PLACE”: EXPLORING A SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG EARLY
CAREER TEACHERS³

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examines early career teachers' experiences with belonging as they navigate their initial months of teaching. New to the profession, new to their workplace, and often new to the lifestyle of a working professional, early career teachers encounter several transitions as they step into their first teaching assignments. Often compounded by feelings of underpreparedness, early career teachers may find themselves overwhelmed and isolated, causing many to exit the profession earlier than anticipated. This phenomenological study explores the ways in which seven early career teachers conceptualized and experienced belonging during their initial teaching experiences. An analysis of the participating early career teachers' experiences with belonging revealed practical implications for supporting early career teachers in "finding their place" as they transition into the teaching profession.

Introduction

Early career teachers—defined as teachers within their first three years in the teaching profession—experience several transitions as they embark on their careers. New to the profession, early career teachers must orient themselves to the responsibilities and expectations associated with a career in teaching. New to their workplace, early career teachers must also navigate relationships with their new colleagues and students, learning about the various personalities represented within their school communities. Moreover, because early career teachers are often relatively young, many are also adjusting to the lifestyle of a working professional and navigating the responsibilities that come with adulthood.

Given these many adjustments, early career teachers are likely to experience a sense of "reality shock" as they step into their first teaching assignments (Voss & Kunter, 2020). As early career teachers enter the classroom, they may find that their visions for themselves as teachers

and for their students as learners do not align with their current realities, causing many early career teachers to feel overwhelmed (Sydnor, 2017). Further complicating their transition into the profession, as new employees, early career teachers may not have formed trusting relationships with their colleagues and school leaders, potentially preventing early career teachers from reaching out for help when needed (e.g., Kelly et al., 2018).

For early career teachers, threats of isolation can take multiple forms. Often assigned to work in a single classroom for much of the day, early career teachers are likely to feel physically isolated (Schuck et al., 2018). In addition to feeling physically isolated, early career teachers may be offered limited opportunities to think and to process their experiences with their adult colleagues throughout the workday, creating a sense of intellectual isolation (Dunn, 2022). While all early career teachers may be vulnerable to feelings of isolation, particular demographics of early career teachers—including teachers of color and teachers who identify as underrepresented demographics on their schools' faculty—may be especially vulnerable to feelings of isolation, placing them at increased risk for exiting the profession earlier than expected (e.g., Bristol, 2020; Mawhinney & Baker-Doyle, 2021).

Emergent literature suggests that by promoting a sense of belonging, teacher educators within districts and schools may mitigate early career teachers' feelings of isolation (Bjorklund, 2023; Clandinin et al., 2015). By taking intentional steps to support early career teachers' sense of belonging, teacher educators may also bolster early career teachers' confidence, self-efficacy, and sense of well-being, potentially sustaining early career teachers within and beyond their initial years in the teaching profession (e.g., Pesonen et al., 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2023).

This study explores the experiences of belonging among seven early career teachers by addressing the following research questions:

1. *What does belonging mean to an early career teacher?*
2. *How does belonging manifest in an early career teacher's initial teaching experiences?*

Taking a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to understand more fully the nature of belonging among early career teachers by investigating the ways in which early career teachers conceptualize and experience belonging throughout their transition into the teaching profession (van Manen, 2016).

The next section introduces a review of extant research on the experiences of early career teachers and the positive effects of belonging among preservice, early career, and more experienced teachers. Following the literature review, the theoretical framework explores seminal research on belonging that shaped this study. The research design is then outlined, followed by key findings and considerations for teacher educators who seek to support a sense of belonging among early career teachers.

Literature Review

Early Career Teachers

For decades, researchers have explored the experiences of early career teachers as they transition into the teaching profession (e.g., Buchanen et al., 2013; McCormack et al., 2006; Redding & Henry, 2019). As new employees, early career teachers are often confronted with many challenges. For example, early career teachers must orient themselves to their new schools' norms and policies while simultaneously delivering effective instruction that supports the learning needs of every student. In addition, early career teachers must navigate various interpersonal dynamics, building positive relationships with both their students and their

colleagues. These complex experiences often lead early career teachers to feel overwhelmed and underprepared, causing some early career teachers to question the sustainability of a career in teaching (Voss & Kunter, 2019).

Various approaches have been taken to support early career teachers as they negotiate their initial experiences in the profession. Research suggests that pairing early career teachers with experienced mentors may support early career teachers' emotional and professional development (Squires, 2019; Wilcoxon et al., 2020). Providing early career teachers with opportunities for socialization and collaboration through professional learning communities may also support early career teachers' professional growth while mitigating threats of isolation (Admiraal et al., 2021). Furthermore, teacher induction programs—aimed at supporting early career teachers by delivering targeted professional development—can address the context-specific professional learning needs of early career teachers and may aid in expanding early career teachers' social networks within their schools and districts (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; Wilcoxon et al., 2020). When early career teachers feel supported in their social, emotional, and professional growth, they may be more likely to experience feelings of self-efficacy, resilience, and persistence as they navigate their initial teaching experiences (Keese et al., 2022; Mansfield & Gu, 2019).

Often considered the most formative phase within the teaching profession, the initial years of teaching present critical opportunities for early career teachers to explore and develop their professional identities (Hobson & Maxwell, 2017; Wenzel et al., 2023). As they step into the profession, early career teachers seek to enact their sense of purpose, establishing beliefs about themselves as teachers, about their students, and about the significance of their roles as educators (Clandinin et al. 2015). When early career teachers feel confident and effective in their

roles, they are more likely to establish positive and stable professional identities (Marschall, 2022; Zembylas, 2003).

Many early career teachers, however, encounter barriers to sufficient professional, social, and emotional support. Because early career teachers are likely to experience higher rates of mobility than their more experienced teacher colleagues, early career teachers may encounter interruptions to professional support as they transition from school to school (Hanushek et al., 2016). Early career teachers also are overrepresented in schools that serve students from marginalized backgrounds and under-resourced households (Bettini & Park, 2021). In schools with high numbers of early career teachers, early career teachers may struggle to access experienced mentors, potentially compromising their own professional growth as well as the academic growth of the students whom they serve (Auletto 2021).

If early career teachers are unable to access sufficient professional, social, and emotional support, they may be more likely to exit the profession prematurely (i.e., earlier than expected). Research suggests that nearly fifty percent of all teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (e.g., Miller et al., 2020). Attrition rates among early career teachers from underrepresented populations are likely much higher (Ingersoll et al., 2019), threatening student achievement and financially burdening school districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammand, 2019). Research on early career teacher retention suggests the need to examine the potential role of belonging in supporting and sustaining early career teachers as they navigate their initial teaching experiences (e.g. Clandinin et al., 2015).

Belonging in the Teaching Profession

While many studies have examined the experiences of belonging among K-12 students (e.g., Gowing, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015), fewer studies have examined the experiences of

belonging among teachers (e.g., Bjorklund, 2023; Pesonen et al., 2021). Research on in-service teachers' sense of belonging suggests that when teachers experience belonging, they may also experience feelings of self-efficacy, potentially bolstering their confidence and commitment to the profession (Nislin & Pesonen, 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Teachers' sense of belonging can contribute to a positive sense of well-being, promoting resilience as teachers navigate various tensions and challenges that accompany a career in teaching (e.g., Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021).

Several studies have examined the experiences of belonging among preservice teachers as they participate in field experiences. Given the temporary nature of their field experiences and because preservice teachers are not typically considered employees of the schools in which they work, preservice teachers may find it challenging to establish a sense of belonging in their field experiences. Research indicates that as preservice teachers navigate their field experiences, a sense of belonging may support preservice teachers' feelings of agency and ownership over their practice (Sydnor, 2017; Ussher, 2010). Other studies of preservice teachers' experiences with belonging highlight barriers to belonging experienced by preservice teachers of color, including feelings of hypervisibility, stereotyping, and deficit conceptions (e.g., Cheruvu et al., 2015; Rodriguez-Mojica et al., 2020). When preservice teachers are unable to establish a sense of belonging, they are likely to face threats to their well-being, sense of efficacy, and ability to learn in their field experiences (Bjorklund et al., 2021; Dewhurst et al., 2020).

To date, a few studies have examined the unique experiences of belonging among early career teachers. One study by Bjorklund (2023) suggests that school leaders can prioritize early career teachers' sense of belonging by facilitating explicit opportunities to foster relationships among school staff. In another study of early career teachers' sense of belonging, Clandinin et al.

(2015) link early career teachers' sense of belonging to early career teacher retention, highlighting the powerful influence of belonging on early career teachers' professional identity development. Further exploration of early career teachers' experiences with belonging may provide insight into the emotional and professional support needs of early career teachers, promoting early career teachers' resilience, well-being, and commitment to the teaching profession.

Theoretical Framework

Across the seminal theoretical literature, belonging is often characterized as a fundamental human need (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943) suggests that the need for belonging comes second only to a human's physical needs for sustenance and safety. Describing the need for belonging as a vital mental health concept Hagerty et al. (1992) state that when humans cannot satisfy their need for belonging, they may be more likely to experience feelings of isolation or rejection. Over time, humans that are unable to satisfy their need for belonging could experience serious mental and physical health issues (e.g., Slavich, 2020).

Calhoun (2003) considers belonging to be unavoidable, experienced by all humans at some point during their lifetimes. While all humans experience a sense of belonging, the ways in which they experience belonging will vary. Belonging is largely perception-oriented (Allen et al., 2018). In other words, humans must experience a "sense" that they belong to their desired group. Belonging is complex, shaped by relationships, systems, materials, spaces, and socio-cultural contexts (Allen, 2020). Belonging is also a dynamic social process (Allen, 2020), situated within systems that require constant negotiation (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Guyotte et al., 2019). Typically, belonging emerges from stable environments in which humans feel personal

congruence in beliefs or values with the group to which they seek to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992).

In the teaching profession, belonging has been described as the extent to which teachers feel connected to their colleagues, administrators, and students (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). For this study, belonging is defined as early career teachers' perceived involvement in a group or system (Allen et al., 2018). Research suggests that teachers who feel a sense of belonging may be more likely to experience job satisfaction and strong engagement in their professional growth, potentially empowering them to exercise their voice and agency within their schools (Clandinin et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Zepeda et al., 2022).

Methods

Through a series of interviews, this study inquired into seven early career teachers' experiences with belonging during their transition into the teaching profession. As they shared about their experiences, the participating early career teachers described their conceptualizations of belonging and the ways in which belonging manifested—and ultimately shaped—their initial months of teaching.

Phenomenology

This study draws on phenomenological research methods to explore the fundamental nature of belonging among early career teachers. Rather than attempting to solve a particular issue or draw determinate conclusions, phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of an experience (van Manen, 2016). To this end, phenomenological researchers examine the subjective nature of individuals' experiences with the phenomenon of interest to understand more deeply what the phenomenon is and how the phenomenon is experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Taking a phenomenological approach to examining early career teachers' experiences with belonging elevates the voices of the early career teachers themselves—voices that are often underrepresented in education research (Larsen et al., 2024). Learning from the unique experiences of individual early career teachers generates insights into the organizational, social, and material factors that could support or present barriers to early career teachers' sense of belonging.

Participants

Seven early career teachers from across the southeastern United States were recruited for this study. The participating early career teachers represented a variety of content area expertise, grade levels taught, and student demographics served. Four participants self-identified as White, one participant self-identified as Black, one participant self-identified as Asian, and one participant self-identified as Multi-Racial. The participants also represent several pathways into the teaching profession. Some participants completed traditional, four-year teacher preparation programs, while other participants earned certification through graduate programs or alternative certification programs. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' confidentiality. Table 4.1 illustrates the participants' basic demographic information and training pathways into the profession.

Table 4.1.*Participant Demographics and Training Pathways*

Name*	Ethno-Racial Self-Identification	Pathway to Teaching Certification	Current Teaching Assignment	Years of Experience	School Context
Sarah	White	Traditional, 4-Year Program	9th Grade Algebra (Part-Time Position)	1	Rural
Kyle	White	Alternative	6th Grade English	1	Rural
Lauren	Multi-Racial	Alternative	2nd Grade Special Education	1	Urban
Jesse	Black	Traditional, 4-Year Program	4th Grade	1	Urban
Victoria	White	Traditional, 4-Year Program (Certified in PK-12 Art Education)	9th and 10th Grade Special Education Algebra and Geometry	1	Rural
Joyce	Asian	Traditional, 4-Year Program	4th Grade	1	Suburban
Kimmy	White	Traditional, 4-Year Program	Elementary General Music (Grades PK-5)	1	Suburban

*All names are pseudonyms

As part of this study, the early career teachers participated in two rounds of interviews during the summer of 2024. At the time of their interviews, every early career teacher possessed one year of professional teaching experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

Phenomenological interviewing and photo-elicitation methods served as the primary sources of data collection for this study. The following paragraphs outline this study's approach to data collection and analysis.

Lived Experience Descriptions

As an approach to phenomenological interviewing, researchers often solicit lived experience descriptions (LEDs) to obtain detailed accounts of participants' experiences with the phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). LEDs prioritize participants' *prereflective* descriptions of their experiences—defined as descriptions that are free of interpretations or categorizations—requiring that participants share their experiences as they naturally appear to human consciousness (van Manen, 2017). Because of its emphasis on pre-reflective descriptions of experiences, LEDs enable participants to describe their experiences *as lived*, avoiding causal interpretations and providing insight into the subjective nature of the participants' experiences.

Through two rounds of sixty-minute, semi-structured interviews, each participant provided vivid LEDs, detailing their experiences with belonging during their transition into the teaching profession. Given that the participants were located across a large geographic region, the interviews were conducted virtually, and each interview was audio recorded to generate written transcriptions of the dialogue that occurred.

Some of the questions posed included: “Can you describe a time when you felt a sense of belonging in your new school?” “If you could choose one or two words to represent belonging, what would they be and why?” and “Where or with whom do you feel the strongest sense of belonging in your school?” Probing questions were developed according to each participants' responses to gain a deeper understanding of their unique experiences with belonging.

Photo-Elicitation Methods

Photo-elicitation methods have been widely applied in qualitative research to prompt participants toward deeper disclosure about their experiences (e.g., Harper, 2002). In this study, the participants were asked to present a photo that illustrated their sense of belonging throughout

their transition into the teaching profession. During their initial interviews, each participant presented photos from their personal photo collections and described how their photos related to their experiences with belonging. The participants' photos varied in content and style, pointing to the multidimensional nature of belonging. For example, some of the participants' photos pointed to social aspects of belonging by portraying their relationships with their students or colleagues, and other participants' photos pointed to spatial aspects of belonging by highlighting their classroom design and organization. The participants' photos provided rich contextual details that illustrated their experiences in ways that could not be expressed through words (Lauck et al., 2021).

To protect the participants' confidentiality, the participants' photos are not included in this study. Instead, written descriptions of each photo—which were composed collaboratively between the participants and the researcher during each interview—are landscaped in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2.

Participants' Descriptions of Belonging

Name*	Description of Each Participant's Photo	Classification of Belonging	Corresponding Quote from Interview
Sarah	Taken from the perspective of a student desk, Sarah's photo highlights the organization and layout of her math classroom. Students and colleagues are noticeably absent in this photo.	Spatial	<i>"My classroom was my home base. It felt like my home away from home. It was where I felt most relaxed and most myself."</i>
Kyle	Kyle is surrounded by students from one of his class periods. Everyone is making silly faces at the camera.	Social (with students)	<i>"These kids were just great. With them, I felt like I could really be myself. I could switch up my teaching without fear of disaster..."</i>

Lauren	Lauren presents an abstract photo of dozens of rainbow-colored human figures encompassed by two large hands.	Material/Spatial/Social	<i>“The hands represent the collective. It’s all of us—our backgrounds, who we are as people, our experiences... Our diversity is honored here...that’s why I feel like I belong.”</i>
Jesse	Jesse poses with her fourth-grade class as they proudly display their trophy from winning the school-wide STEAM competition. The fourth graders clearly struggle to contain their excitement as they pose for the photo.	Social (with students)	<i>“We were all so happy in this picture. This was in October, and I felt like I was finally building a bond with my students.”</i>
Victoria	Victoria’s desk is colorful and organized, decorated with notes from her family and friends, artwork from her students, and inspirational quotes from podcasts and books on teaching students in special education.	Spatial	<i>“My desk is a consistent place that won’t change. I don’t have my own classroom, and unlike relationships, my comfort here isn’t dependent on what I do or say, which is so freeing.”</i>
Joyce	Joyce and four of her fellow teachers smile at lunch during their school’s professional learning day.	Social (with colleagues)	<i>“In the interactions that I had with just about anyone in my school, I never felt like a burden.”</i>
Kimmy	Kimmy’s Pre-K students are scattered around her music classroom, gleefully tossing scarves into the air during a dance lesson.	Material	<i>“I get so much satisfaction from taking part in my students’ joy in class. The scarves, the instruments that we play. . . They create joy and give me a sense of belonging.”</i>

*All names are pseudonyms

Data Analysis through Reflective Writing

Reflective writing often serves as a primary method of data analysis in phenomenological research (van Manen, 2023). This reflective process involved iterative reviews of transcriptions from each interview, notable literature on belonging and on early career teachers, and notes that were recorded during the research process. Throughout this reflective process, any patterns or themes that pointed to the fundamental nature of belonging were documented.

Three stages of descriptive reading were completed to identify meanings within and across each text. To obtain a holistic understanding of each text, each LED was reviewed in its entirety. Then, the focus was narrowed by identifying notable statements within each text that point to the fundamental nature of belonging. Finally, a detailed, line-by-line reading of each text was completed to identify individual sentences or sentence clusters that added insights on the experience of belonging. During this detailed reading, relevant text was developed into anecdotes to illustrate the experience of belonging among early career teachers (van Manen, 2016).

Five months of the study were dedicated to “dwelling with the data” (Finlay, 2014), reflecting on evolving understandings of belonging. Deep immersion in the data also afforded space for the researcher to question her personal assumptions about belonging—much of which was drawn from her personal experiences as a teacher and teacher educator. The process of bridling (Dahlberg, 2006) was employed to examine reflexively the ways in which any personal subjectivities could influence data interpretation (Finlay, 2014). The bridling process also included reflexive discussions with colleagues to examine the ways in which any preconceived beliefs about belonging could influence the author’s perceptions of the participants’ experiences with belonging.

The participants were then invited to collaborate in this reflective process by providing their feedback on the written descriptions of their LEDs. Involving the participants in this reflective process presented opportunities for the participants to clarify or elaborate on their experiences, and it ensured that their experiences were accurately represented (van Manen, 2016). From this reflective process emerged a detailed phenomenological description of the experience of belonging as an early career teacher.

Findings

As they shared about their experiences, every participating early career teacher described instances in which they felt a sense of belonging and instances in which they lacked belonging throughout their first year of teaching. Each participant's feelings of belonging fluctuated, heavily influenced by the relationships that they formed with their colleagues and students, the routines that they developed over time, and the physical spaces that they occupied throughout each school day.

This section outlines five major phenomenological themes that emerged in the participants' LEDs, lending insight into what belonging means and how belonging is experienced in the lives of early career teachers.

Belonging as Feeling Safe

Each of the participating early career teachers emphasized the importance of feeling psychologically safe as they navigated their new school environments. As new employees at their schools, the participants were expected to orient themselves to their new schools' schedules and expectations, the curriculum and the pedagogical expectations of their school and district leaders, and the academic and behavioral needs of their students. Moreover, some of the participants noted that learning interpersonal dynamics among their students and members of

their staff proved to be a challenge. Navigating all of the “news” that accompanied their transitions into teaching was, at times, overwhelming.

For all the participants, psychological safety—defined as feeling comfortable asking questions, admitting mistakes and voicing concerns—served as a prerequisite to belonging (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023). When the participants felt psychologically safe, they felt empowered to seek support without fear of negative consequences. Lauren, a second-grade special education teacher, described her sense of psychological safety as feeling confident to ask for assistance when needed.

I’m not scared to ask a question here . . . I don’t feel like I will be judged for not knowing something. They [Lauren’s colleagues] understand that I’m trying to figure things out, and they give me a lot of grace.

While the early career teacher participants did not appear to be concerned with punitive consequences when seeking help, several participants voiced concerns that their questions may “burden” their colleagues and leaders. One of the participants, Sarah, spoke about her colleague’s efforts to ensure Sarah’s psychological safety.

I never felt like a burden. I never felt unwelcomed or that I was a bother when I needed help. She [Sarah’s colleague] was always there for me to answer my questions, and I truly felt like I could ask her anything without feeling embarrassed.

Another participant, Kyle, noted how the relaxed nature of his interactions with his school leaders fostered a sense of psychological safety.

The administrative team was super supportive at my school. They would regularly chat with me—not about work but about sports and my life outside of school. They made it

clear that they really cared about me, so when I needed help with something, reaching out didn't feel awkward.

For these participants, feeling psychologically safe meant that they had clear access to lifelines of support through colleagues and school leaders, reducing threats of overwhelm and isolation.

Belonging as Feeling Freedom

Many of the early career teacher participants connected their feelings of belonging to their needs for acceptance and freedom. For these early career teachers, to establish a sense of belonging, they first needed to feel affirmed in their authenticity. When the early career teachers felt accepted—as their authentic selves—by their school communities, they were more likely to explore their developing professional identities, supporting their sense of belonging.

In some cases, when the participants felt free to be themselves, they experienced feelings of autonomy, embracing the freedom to explore who they wanted to become—as teachers and as learners. Kyle related his relationship with his mentor to the freedom he felt to explore his professional identity.

She [Kyle's mentor] was helpful because she would share resources with me, but she would only offer them as suggestions. We would bounce ideas off of each other, but she never told me what to do. She let me find my identity as a teacher, because I wouldn't say that I fit into traditional teacher molds.

Recognizing that he had a lifeline of support through his mentor, Kyle felt a sense of autonomy and freedom to explore his pedagogical skills and interests. As she shared about her initial experiences as a fourth-grade teacher, Joyce related her feelings of belonging to the freedom she felt to honor her “inner child.”

Belonging feels like being able to be myself and showing my inner child. I can be crazy and silly, and I can also be sad and show emotions, knowing that others will respect my authenticity.

Another participant, Jesse, stated that her feelings of freedom developed out of transparent conversations with her administrators.

Transparency with my administration really helped me gain a sense of what was expected of me. When I was clear with my administrators about who I was, and when they were clear about what they needed from me, I felt a lot more secure about my ability to teach.

Through explicit conversations with her administrators, Jesse clearly understood what was expected of her, enabling Jesse the freedom to take ownership of her work. When Jesse felt free to take ownership of her work, she was able to enact her sense of purpose—the convictions and motivations that initially drove her to a career teaching (Turner & Thielking, 2019).

Belonging as Feeling Visible

As they shared about their experiences with belonging, many of the participants noted the importance of feeling visible—both as a member of their schools’ faculty and as competent, trained professionals. Because early career teachers are often relatively young in age, they can be mistaken for students or preservice teachers in their schools. Feeling disregarded by colleagues can threaten early career teachers’ confidence and self-efficacy (Brown, 2023).

Victoria, a high school special education teacher, was regularly confused for a high school student, which contributed to feelings of invisibility within her school.

People confuse me for a student all the time. Every time my principal sees me, she jokes that I look like a student. I know she means this as a joke, but I try to dress more maturely

because of it. On school picture day, as I stood in line to get my picture taken, a staff member asked me to hand over my student ID. I had to tell her that I work at this school.

Another participant, Joyce, was also commonly confused for one of her students.

Sometimes I walk into the cafeteria and a staff member will ask me whose class I am in.

They'll say, 'Who's your teacher?' and I respond, 'Look at my badge! I AM the teacher!'

In addition to seeking recognition as a member of their schools' staff, some of the early career teacher participants emphasized the importance of feeling recognized beyond their status as a "novice" teacher. New to the profession, early career teachers are often looked upon by their colleagues with deficit perspectives, potentially compromising early career teachers' feelings of professionalism (Kelchtermens, 2019). Recognizing early career teachers "beyond their novice-ness" (Clandinin et al., 2015) honors early career teachers' knowledge and experiences and encourages early career teachers to contribute to their schools in meaningful ways—a critical component to establishing a sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Although Lauren was a first-year special education teacher, the experience she gained documenting students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) on a new digital platform as a preservice teacher proved helpful to her colleagues. Lauren's ability to share her expertise with other special education teachers in her school enabled her to feel more like a respected colleague and less like a "novice."

A lot of the special education teachers saw that I could navigate the IEP system quickly, so I have been able to guide them through the system. It makes me feel good to be able to help them through the documenting process.

For Lauren, being recognized—not only as a teacher in her school but as a professional who could contribute to the quality of her colleagues’ work—allowed Lauren to feel visible, valued, and needed, supporting her sense of belonging.

Belonging as Being “Findable”

While describing their experiences with belonging, many of the participants attributed feelings of belonging to the physical spaces that they occupied in their school buildings. For many of the participants, having their own designated physical space offered a place for retreat—to take mental breaks and to accomplish administrative tasks (e.g., answering emails, making phone calls, grading student work, etc.). In addition, several of the early career teacher participants noted that having their own designated physical space allowed them to be “findable” by their colleagues and students. According to these participants, knowing that they could be easily accessible enabled them to feel more connected to others in their buildings, positively influencing their sense of belonging.

Sarah, who takes great pride in her meticulously organized high school math classroom, spoke about the significance of having a “home base” within her school building.

I can catch my breath when I’m in my classroom. My classroom is my home away from home. You know, it’s my space. It’s where my students and the other teachers can always find me.

Kimmy, an elementary music teacher, noted that the location of her classroom near a common area within the school enables her to have multiple informal interactions with students and colleagues throughout the school day, allowing Kimmy to feel connected to her school community.

My classroom is located right off of the atrium in the front of our building. I see students and teachers walk past my classroom all day long, and when I open my door between classes, I get excited when someone pops in to say hello.

Because Kimmy's classroom is centrally located in her school building, she encounters multiple opportunities for informal interactions with colleagues and students throughout the day, increasing her feelings of belonging.

Unlike many of the participants, Victoria does not have her own classroom and instead shares an office with three of her colleagues. While Victoria takes pride in her office space and attributes feelings of belonging to having a designated space to call her own, Victoria's office serves as a busy passageway to the teachers' restrooms and kitchen area, often preventing Victoria from feeling relaxed and focused.

I have an office, but I often spend my planning time in the media center because our office is connected to the teacher bathrooms and a kitchen. We get a lot of foot traffic, which can be distracting. Also, sometimes, questionable items are cooked in the microwave in the kitchen, so even when I'm alone in our office, I sometimes have to leave because of the smell.

Because Victoria lacked a consistently comfortable space to call her own, she often found herself having to search her school building for quiet places to work, at times, compromising her sense of belonging.

Belonging as Knowing Their "People"

For most of the participating early career teachers, feelings of belonging emerged from social connections that they felt with their colleagues. To varying extents, the participating early career teachers emphasized the importance of identifying their "people" as they navigated their

initial experiences in the profession. Often formed through shared teaching experiences (e.g., having similar content area expertise or teaching similar grade levels), the early career teacher participants' connections with those whom they identified as their "people" in the profession offered feelings of solidarity, opportunities for professional and emotional support, and, in many cases, outlets for socialization. Jesse, a fourth-grade teacher, identified her "people" as those whom she worked with most closely—her fellow fourth-grade teachers. The members of Jesse's fourth-grade teaching team offered critical opportunities for professional support and social connection.

My teammates made sure that I never felt left out of anything. We went on walks together every morning at 6:30 before school. We had some great conversations during those walks. We really bonded.

Other early career teachers found their "people" outside of their teaching teams. Joyce, another fourth-grade teacher, found her greatest sense of belonging in her relationships with like-minded colleagues who shared her commitment to equity-focused teaching practices.

I align more closely with the fifth-grade teachers philosophically, and I guess that's why I find myself spending more time with them than with my fourth-grade team. I think that because we [the fifth-grade team and Joyce] share similar beliefs about teaching, we can connect more closely on a social level, too.

As the only music teacher in her elementary school, Kimmy often felt misunderstood by her colleagues, at times, leading Kimmy to feel isolated within her school community. Through regular training with other elementary music teachers across her district, Kimmy found a sense of camaraderie. Learning alongside others who share similar content expertise and teaching experiences allowed Kimmy to feel less alone as she navigated her first year of teaching.

It was helpful to connect with other teachers who teach the same content as me. I felt like they understood me in a way that the teachers in my building can't.

Another participant, Victoria, noted the powerful support she received from fellow early career teachers as they collectively navigated their initial months in the profession. Each month, Victoria attended training sessions for early career special education teachers. Participating in this training alongside fellow early career special education teachers offered Victoria opportunities for socialization, emotional support, and professional growth.

The trainings felt like a break. I got to hang out with other first-year teachers and with my mentor, who was so experienced and fun! It felt like a teacher support group, basically. We talked about what we're learning. Those training sessions were productive and a really good form of professional learning.

Through their relationships with colleagues, several of the participants experienced significant feelings of belonging—in many cases, critically influencing their confidence and abilities to persist during their initial months of teaching.

Discussion

Each of the early career teacher participants noted that their feelings of belonging fluctuated as they navigated various physical spaces and relationships throughout their initial months of teaching. While all the participants experienced feelings of belonging during their initial year of teaching, the extent and the frequency to which they experienced feelings of belonging varied. In many cases, their feelings of belonging increased as they deepened relationships with their colleagues and became more comfortable in their school environments. In addition, all the participants also described experiences in which they felt a lack of belonging. Negative interactions with colleagues, insufficient mentorship or administrative support, or

unclear work expectations compromised their sense of belonging. The participants' experiences emphasize that belonging is not a uniform, linear experience; instead, belonging is situational, influenced by time, relationships, materials, and spaces (Guyotte et al., 2019).

Most of the participants found sharing about their experiences with belonging to be a challenge. Because belonging is an abstract concept, experiences and feelings surrounding one's sense of belonging can be difficult to articulate. For this study, the employment of photo-elicitation methods enabled participants to illustrate visually their experiences with belonging during their initial teaching experiences. By illustrating their experiences with belonging through photos, the participants were provided with an alternative modality to describe their sense of belonging, ultimately leading to a more detailed understanding of their experiences.

Given the very personal nature of one's sense of belonging, many participants found verbally describing their experiences with belonging to be emotionally challenging. For some of the participants, feelings of not belonging led to feelings of isolation, ineffectiveness, and insecurity—all vulnerable topics to discuss in a research interview. The participants courageously shared about both their positive and their negative experiences with belonging as they navigated their first year of teaching, providing a realistic picture of the difficulties that early career teachers may confront as they transition into the profession.

Across every participant's experience, their shifting feelings of belonging influenced their sense of professional identity. When the participants felt accepted among their colleagues—that they could be their authentic selves—they felt empowered to explore their pedagogical interests and strengths. When the participants felt affirmed as professionals, they were more likely to take ownership over their teaching practice and invest more deeply in their own professional growth. In work environments in which the early career teachers felt accepted and

affirmed, the participants seemed more likely to enact their sense of purpose, which appeared to be a key component to sustaining the early career teachers through their first year of teaching.

Implications

Because early career teachers' feelings of belonging are likely to fluctuate over time, teacher educators may consider engaging early career teachers in ongoing discussions about their belonging needs. Moreover, because each early career teacher is likely to define belonging differently, teacher educators may consider explicitly asking early career teachers to describe what belonging looks like and feels like for them personally. As a result, teacher educators may understand more clearly the unique belonging needs of each early career teacher whom they serve. Facilitating authentic, explicit conversations with early career teachers about their belonging needs can help them feel psychologically safe and supported (Bjorklund, 2023).

Each of the early career teacher participants in this study emphasized the importance of peer relationships in establishing their sense of belonging. When hiring early career teachers, teacher educators may collaborate with leaders to strategically place early career teachers on teaching teams, considering each team member's personality, level of teaching experience, and capacity to support early career teachers (Krammer et al., 2018). Given that early career teachers are likely to interact most regularly with members of their teaching teams, assigning early career teachers to compatible teaching teams may offer lifelines of support through which early career teachers can ask questions, voice concerns, and seek help when needed.

In addition to surrounding early career teachers with supportive teachers within their schools, teacher educators may also consider connecting early career teachers to professional networks beyond their schools (Thomas et al., 2019). By facilitating opportunities for collaboration with other teachers who serve similar demographics of students, who teach similar

content, or who possess similar levels of teaching experience, teacher educators may support early career teachers in establishing a sense of belonging—not only to their schools but to the teaching profession as a whole (e.g., Martin, 2024).

Physical spaces also played an important role in many early career teachers' sense of belonging. Teacher educators may consider advocating for early career teachers to be provided with a designated space within their school buildings. Having a consistent and comfortable space to call their own (e.g., a classroom or an office) provides early career teachers with a place of retreat, and it may also offer early career teachers a reliable location in which they can be found by their students and colleagues. Teacher educators and leaders may also consider strategically positioning early career teachers' designated space in a central location within the school building, ensuring that early career teachers are easily accessible by their colleagues and students.

Given the many transitions that early career teachers face at the outset of their careers, navigating a sense of belonging can be challenging. During this particularly formative phase in the teaching profession, early career teachers' experiences with belonging can play an important role in the construction of their professional identities (Clandinin et al., 2015). Examining early career teachers' experiences with belonging can provide valuable insights for teacher educators as they seek to support early career teachers in “finding their place” within and beyond the initial years of teaching.

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Scenes from the Data

In Chapter Four, I presented the study that was conducted for this dissertation and identified practical considerations for teacher educators as they seek to support the early career teachers in their schools. The following scene from the data addresses a commonly underrepresented demographic on school faculties, male teachers. Illustrated by the experience of Kyle, this scene from the data highlights male teachers—more specifically, early career male teachers’—vulnerabilities to feeling isolated in their schools. Then, in Chapter Five, I draw on the data from this dissertation research to identify potential implications for school leaders to protect early career teachers from feelings of isolation, fostering a sense of belonging.

Marooned Males: Kyle’s Story

As one of the few male teachers on his middle school’s faculty, Kyle was consistently outnumbered by his female coworkers. Kyle had grown accustomed to working in a female-dominated field, and for the most part, he enjoyed his coworkers and collaborated well with them. When some of his male students began causing trouble between classes, however, because he was a male teacher, Kyle was tasked with additional responsibilities.

At my school, we had a major problem with male students urinating on the floor in the restrooms. As a male teacher, it was my job to stand outside of the boys’ restroom during class changes to monitor its use. Once the class change was over, I had to check the restroom to make sure that everything was clean. It was awful. While the other teachers were in their classrooms preparing for the next block of classes, I was monitoring a bathroom. I routinely lost 5-10 minutes of class time because of my restroom monitoring duty.

Given the small number of male teachers in Kyle's school, most of the male teachers were tasked with serving as restroom monitors between class periods. Spending nearly every transition period outside of the boys' restrooms throughout the school day often left Kyle feeling rushed and disheveled at the beginning of most class periods. Because he was expected to stand outside the boys' restroom during class changes, Kyle lost valuable time to check emails, to prepare for his next class period, and to catch his breath before the next group of students entered his classroom, creating significant stress.

Currently, about 23 percent of K-12 teachers in the United States identify as male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Often underrepresented on their schools' faculty, male teachers are especially vulnerable to feelings of social isolation (Bristol, 2020). In addition, male teachers can be subjected to gendered expectations throughout their schools, often considered the "heavy lifter", handyman, or in Kyle's case, sports coach (McDowell, 2023). Along with reinforcing gender stereotypes, the expectations placed on male teachers—particularly male early career teachers—threaten burnout and exhaustion, raising concerns regarding male early career teacher retention (Cruickshank et al., 2020; Johannesson et al., 2022).

The next chapter of this dissertation examines the conditions in which early career teachers' sense of belonging flourished during their transition into the teaching profession. Drawing on the experiences of early career teachers like Kyle, I present promising approaches and potential considerations for school leaders in supporting and sustaining early career teachers' sense of belonging throughout their initial teaching experiences.

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CHAPTER 5

SEARCHING FOR CONNECTION: SUPPORTING A SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG
EARLY CAREER TEACHERS⁴

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Abstract

Given the multiple transitions that early career teachers experience in the initial years of their careers, navigating a sense of belonging can be particularly challenging. Using data from a series of interviews with seven early career teachers, this paper investigates the role that school leaders play in shaping and supporting early career teachers' sense of belonging. By prioritizing early career teachers' sense of belonging, school leaders may nurture early career teachers' confidence and effectiveness, potentially sustaining early career teachers beyond their initial years in the profession.

Introduction

Commonly considered a “survival period,” the initial years of teaching pose many challenges to early career teachers (Sydnor, 2017). Early career teachers—defined as teachers who possess three or fewer years of professional experience—are likely to feel overwhelmed and underprepared to fulfill their teaching responsibilities, placing them at an increased risk for stress, burnout, and feelings of isolation (Farrell, 2016). Negative early experiences may cause early career teachers to feel alienated and ineffective, leading many to exit the profession prematurely (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Research on the emotional aspects of teaching suggests that the unsettledness many early career teachers experience may emerge from an absence of belonging within their school communities (Bjorklund, 2023).

As early career teachers experience multiple adjustments—to new colleagues, new curriculum, and new students—during their transition into teaching, navigating a sense of belonging can be particularly difficult. This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study that examined seven early career teachers' sense of belonging as they transitioned into the teaching profession. Highlighting the influence of school leaders on early career teachers' sense

of belonging, discussed throughout the paper are major considerations and implications for school leaders as they seek to support early career teachers.

Literature Review

The following section provides an overview of extant research on the experiences of early career teachers. Special attention is given to the role of school leaders in supporting early career teachers through their transition into the teaching profession.

Early Career Teachers

For many years, scholarly literature has examined early career teachers' transition into a career in teaching (e.g., Gaikwad & Brantley, 1992; Redding & Henry, 2019). New to the profession, early career teachers may feel overwhelmed as they orient themselves to the responsibilities that accompany leading a classroom (Stewart & Jansky, 2022). Often, early career teachers experience a sense of reality shock during their initial years in the profession, expressing feelings of underpreparedness to instruct every student effectively, address off-task student behaviors appropriately, and work collaboratively with other teachers and school personnel (McIntush & Garza, 2023). This common experience of reality shock may leave early career teachers feeling isolated, ineffective, and disillusioned (Santoro, 2018).

During their initial years of teaching, early career teachers will encounter a series of professional milestones, creating formative experiences that influence their professional identity development (Wenzel et al., 2023). As they navigate these milestones, early career teachers may confront barriers to formal professional support. For example, traditionally, early career teachers experience higher rates of mobility than their more experienced colleagues, potentially compromising their access to consistent professional learning support (Hanushek et al., 2016). In addition, early career teachers are often overrepresented in schools with high percentages of

students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a result, early career teachers may experience challenges in accessing experienced mentors, threatening their professional growth and the academic success of their students (Auletto, 2021).

Early career teachers can be particularly vulnerable to feelings of isolation (e.g., Farrell, 2016). As they navigate their initial months in the profession, early career teachers must acclimate themselves to their new schools while simultaneously ensuring that their students' learning needs are met (Clandinin et al., 2015). Many times, because early career teachers are new to their schools, they have not yet developed relationships with their colleagues that would empower them to seek support when needed (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2015). Without lifelines of support, early career teachers are likely to feel isolated and ineffective, causing some early career teachers to leave the profession altogether (Kelly et al., 2019).

Access to sufficient professional support plays a critical role in sustaining early career teachers through their initial teaching experiences (Clandinin et al., 2015). Research finds that nearly fifty percent of early career teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (e.g., Miller et al., 2020). The attrition rates of early career teachers from underrepresented groups are likely much higher (Ingersoll et al., 2019), posing serious threats to students' academic achievement and presenting costly consequences to schools and districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

School Leader Support and Early Career Teachers

Research has identified several potential ways for school leaders to minimize the pressures that early career teachers face. Teacher induction programs—which have traditionally focused on formal and structured professional support during teachers' initial months in the profession—can offer early career teachers guidance in topics including lesson planning and

instructional delivery. Through teacher induction programs, school leaders often facilitate opportunities to connect early career teachers with peers in their schools or districts and may provide targeted professional learning that addresses challenges common to early career teachers, including navigating new curricula, developing positive rapport with students, and time management (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017; Marz & Kelchtermans, 2020).

As one form of formal induction support, school leaders often pair early career teachers with a more experienced peer mentor to provide the most immediate and relevant instructional assistance. Research finds that effective peer mentoring supports early career teachers' confidence, resilience, and sense of well-being (Fox & Peters, 2013; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). Moreover, by enabling early career teachers to learn from a more experienced colleague, effective peer mentorship may support the development of early career teachers' pedagogical skills (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017) and sense of efficacy, resulting in job satisfaction (Auletto, 2021; Renbarger & Davis, 2019). With an explicit focus on the unique needs of early career teachers, teacher induction programs may provide school leaders with opportunities to provide early career teachers with targeted support, offering opportunities for relationship-building and professional growth (Thomas et al., 2019).

While many studies examine the role of school leaders in supporting early career teachers' professional development (e.g. Krammer et al., 2018; Renbarger & Davis, 2019), few studies have highlighted the role of school leaders in supporting the emotional support needs of early career teachers (Martin, 2024). As the primary drivers of school culture, school leaders set the tone for professional learning as well as staff relationships and wellness, placing school leaders in a critical position to support both the professional and the emotional well-being of teachers (Zepeda et al., 2022).

Early Career Teachers' Sense of Belonging

Educational research has long examined the experiences of belonging among K-12 students (e.g., Gowing, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2015), and now, a growing number of studies are turning their attention toward teachers' sense of belonging. Within the literature on teachers' sense of belonging, belonging has been defined as "the degree to which [teachers] feel integrated with colleagues, administrators, and students at school" (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, p. 372). Extant research on teachers' sense of belonging finds that when teachers experience belonging, they may also experience feelings of self-efficacy, promoting resilience and bolstering their commitment to the teaching profession (Nislin & Pesonen, 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). In addition, research has connected teachers' sense of belonging to a positive sense of well-being and job satisfaction, potentially sustaining teachers in the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2021).

To date, very few studies have examined the role of school leadership in supporting a sense of belonging among early career teachers specifically. Research suggests that for early career teachers, establishing a sense of belonging is essential to the construction of their professional identities (Bjorklund, 2023; Clandinin et al., 2015). Examination of early career teachers' experiences with belonging can illuminate ways in which school leaders address the specific emotional and professional learning needs of early career teachers, potentially bolstering early career teachers' resilience and engagement in the profession.

Methods

This paper draws on data that was collected as part of a larger phenomenological study that explored early career teachers' sense of belonging during their transition into the teaching profession. Informed by the personal experiences of seven early career teachers, the aim of the

research highlighted in this paper was to gain insight into the influence of school leadership on early career teachers' sense of belonging. From the analysis of the participants' interviews emerged several practical considerations and implications for school leaders as they seek to support and sustain the early career teachers in their schools.

Participant Selection

The data for this paper were collected during a series of interviews with seven early career teachers in the southeastern United States. The participating early career teachers represent a diverse range of K-12 teaching assignments, including elementary, middle, and high school teachers in rural, urban, and suburban school contexts. All seven of the participating teachers possessed one year of professional teaching experience in public schools at the time of their interviews. The seven participating early career teachers included three teachers who teach grades at the middle or high school levels and four elementary teachers. Four participants identified as White, one identified as Asian, one identified as Black, and one identified as Multi-Racial. The participants also represented a variety of pathways into the teaching profession. While some of the participants graduated from four-year teacher preparation programs, other participants completed alternative teacher certification programs before entering the classroom. Participant demographic information is landscaped in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1.*Participant Demographic Information*

Participant Name	Ethno-Racial Self Identification	Current Teaching Assignment	Years of Experience	School Context
Sarah	White	9th Grade Algebra (Part-Time Position)	1	Rural
Kyle	White	6th Grade English	1	Rural
Lauren	Multi-Racial	2nd Grade Special Education	1	Urban
Jesse	Black	4th Grade	1	Urban
Victoria	White	9th and 10th Grade Special Education	1	Rural
Joyce	Asian	4th Grade	1	Suburban
Kimmy	White	Elementary General Music (Grades PK-5)	1	Suburban

*All names are pseudonyms

Data Collection and Analysis

Using an open-ended, phenomenological approach, the early career teachers participated in two rounds of sixty-minute interviews, in which they provided vivid and detailed accounts of their experiences with belonging during their transition into the teaching profession. Interview questions were framed through Allen et al.'s (2018) definition of belonging, described as an individual's perceived involvement in a group or a system [p. 191].

This study sought to understand more fully the role that school leaders play in supporting or inhibiting early career teachers' abilities to establish a sense of belonging in their schools by asking the following research questions:

1. *How does belonging manifest in the lives of early career teachers?*
2. *How can leaders support a sense of belonging among early career teachers?*

Consistent with phenomenological methods, the process of data analysis involved deep, sustained reflection on the participants' interview data. Across three months of reflective writing through the data (van Manen, 2023), several themes emerged, lending insight into the nature of belonging for early career teachers. The participants were then invited to review the written data reflections as a way of a) ensuring that the participants' experiences were represented accurately, and b) opening the door for additional disclosure from the participants about their experiences with belonging. Following this round of member checking, the participants were satisfied with the ways that their experiences were represented in this research.

Throughout the analysis process, the influence of school leadership on the early career teachers' abilities to establish a sense of belonging emerged as a prevailing theme. The participating early career teachers' experiences with belonging point to several critical implications for school leaders, generating new understandings regarding the role of school leadership in supporting and sustaining early career teachers. The following section presents these findings, followed by a discussion of several practical considerations for school leaders.

Findings

Five major findings relevant to school leaders emerged from the participants' interviews. Those findings point to the ways in which school leadership influenced the participating early career teachers' sense of belonging. During their interviews, the participants discussed issues related to school culture, school engagement, and professional collaboration. Accompanying each finding are quotes from the early career teacher participants' interviews as they described their experiences with belonging. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of each participant.

1. Psychological safety was a prerequisite to establishing a sense of belonging.

Throughout the participants' accounts of their experiences, they noted how their feelings of belonging flourished in psychologically safe environments. For these participants, feeling psychologically safe meant that they could approach their colleagues with questions, voice concerns, or admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). In describing her feelings of psychological safety, one participating early career teacher, Sarah, underscored the importance of feeling comfortable asking questions of her colleagues and school leaders—without embarrassment or feeling like a burden.

I never felt like a burden. I never felt unwelcomed or that I was a bother when I needed help. This was a big part of me feeling like I belonged.

Another participant, Lauren, contrasted her current feelings of psychological safety with the psychological chaos she experienced during her student teaching placement the year prior to her first year of teaching.

They [Lauren's current colleagues] are so much more supportive. If I don't know something, I'm not scared to ask a question here. When I was student teaching, the other teachers would just look at me and say, "You really don't know that answer?" I needed them to understand that I didn't have a background in teaching. I needed their help. The school I work in now actually teaches us how to communicate with each other. They also talk about honoring diversity and respect, and that has really helped the staff communicate well.

Echoed throughout their interviews, the early career teachers connected the importance of psychologically safe work environments to the ongoing construction of their professional identities. The participating early career teachers who worked in psychologically safe school

cultures often felt confident experimenting with unfamiliar instructional techniques and were empowered to introduce new resources and activities into their lessons. Feeling psychologically safe gave the participants the freedom to explore their craft, enabling them to hone their pedagogical skills and pursue their interests. Kyle experienced this kind of psychological safety through his relationship with his peer mentor.

She was helpful because she would share resources with me, but she would only offer them as suggestions. We would bounce ideas off of each other, but she would let me find my identity as a teacher because I wouldn't say that I fit into traditional teacher molds.

For these early career teachers, working within psychologically safe cultures empowered them to ask for help when needed, to explore their pedagogical interests, and to assume ownership of their practice as new teachers, allowing them to establish a sense of belonging.

2. Feeling visible and recognized throughout the school increased the participants' sense of belonging.

As they described their experiences with belonging, the participants noted the importance of feeling noticed by their students, colleagues, and school leaders. When the participants felt visible, they felt included, thereby bolstering their sense of belonging. During their interviews, the participants were asked if they believed that their principal knew them by name. Of the seven participants, six participants said with confidence that their principals were very involved in the participants' first year of teaching and that their principals regularly called them by their names. One of the participants mentioned feeling disconnected from her school principal, stating that she was unsure if her principal could refer to her by name. Another participant, Joyce, expressed that although she feels noticed by her principal, Joyce feels that her principal may be too busy to engage with her regularly.

My principal calls me by name, and sometimes we'll chat, but I also keep a professional distance from her. She has a lot on her plate and a lot of people to manage. I don't report directly to her, so I don't interact with her very much.

Often relatively young in age, early career teachers can sometimes be mistaken to be students or preservice teachers in their schools. For some of the participating early career teachers, being accidentally referred to as a student or as a preservice teacher by their colleagues created feelings of invisibility and embarrassment. Victoria, a 22-year-old high school special education teacher, was often confused for a high school student during her first year of teaching.

People confuse me for a student all the time. Every time my principal sees me, she jokes that I look like a student. I know she means this as a joke, but I try to dress more maturely because of it. On school picture day, as I stood in line to get my picture taken, a staff member asked me to hand over my student ID. I had to tell her that I work at this school.

An early career teacher's physical location in the school building may also influence their visibility and feelings of belonging. One of the participating early career teachers, Sarah, attributed her feelings of visibility to her classroom, stating that having her own classroom allowed her to be easily located by her students and colleagues. For this participant, her ability to "be found" in her school building significantly influenced her sense of belonging.

My classroom is my "home away from home." It's my space. It's where my students and the other teachers can always find me.

Feeling visible—being recognized and knowing that they could be easily located by their students and colleagues—enabled the participating early career teachers to experience feelings of belonging.

3. Serving on teaching teams offered participants a sense of camaraderie and an outlet for socialization and professional support.

Several of the participating early career teachers noted that their strongest feelings of belonging emerged from their interactions with their colleagues on their teaching teams. Often organized by teachers who teach the same grade level or content areas, teaching teams work closely together to plan lessons and participate in professional learning (Krammer et al., 2018). Typically, early career teachers work most closely with their fellow teachers on their teaching teams, potentially presenting new teachers with critical opportunities for instructional support and socialization (Thomas et al., 2019).

As she described her experience as an early career teacher, Jesse attributed her feelings of belonging to the relationships she developed with her fellow fourth-grade teachers.

My teammates made sure that I never felt left out of anything. Our school started a new staff health challenge, and we [Jesse and her teammates] decided to walk together every morning at 6:30. Everyone thought we were crazy, but we ended up doing it anyway, and we did it until the end of the school year. It was fun. We had some great conversations during those walks. We really bonded.

Lauren, another participating early career teacher, noted that the relationship with her teammates was strengthened by their shared goal of supporting their students.

We all work really well together. Our collective goal is to help kids learn, so to meet this goal, we make sure to help out each other, too.

Unlike most of the participating early career teachers in this study, Kimmy was not assigned to a traditional teaching team at her school. As the only music teacher in her elementary school, Kimmy was formally assigned to a related arts teaching team, but because her teammates

taught different content areas, the related arts team rarely collaborated. Although she was formally assigned to a teaching team, Kimmy did not regularly plan lessons, learn collaboratively, or interact socially with any of her teammates, compromising her sense of belonging and ultimately leading her to feel incredibly isolated.

I would get really nervous for staff meetings. Each team of teachers had a table except for the related arts teachers. I felt like I couldn't sit at the table with all the first-grade teachers, you know. The related arts teachers got along with each other, but we weren't really a team. I would try to find an empty seat near my mentor teacher, or I would just sit off to the side. It was stressful.

For the participating early career teachers, feeling accepted as a member of their teaching team significantly influenced their sense of belonging. Unified around a shared cause—supporting student growth—teaching teams offered the early career teachers a lifeline for immediate support and an outlet for socialization, enabling the early career teachers to feel connected to peers in their school community.

4. Opportunities to make meaningful contributions to the school community increased the participants' investment in their schools.

Throughout the interviews, many early career teachers discussed how their engagement in school events—more specifically, their contributions to their school community—bolstered their sense of belonging. For some of the participating early career teachers, active involvement in school events enabled them to develop relationships with others in their schools, fostering feelings of connection.

Outside of his regular responsibilities as a sixth-grade English teacher, Kyle also served as his school's baseball coach. His role as a coach enabled him to foster relationships with many members of his school community.

During my planning period, I would walk through the seventh- and eighth-grade hallways to check on my players. As I walked, I got to chat with a lot more of the faculty and staff than I would typically see throughout my day. So, I definitely think that I was more familiar with everybody than I would have otherwise been. As a coach, I interacted with parents a lot more as well. There were some great parents who would just come in and check on me throughout the season. I got to create some cool relationships that way.

Another participating early career teacher, Joyce, experienced a sense of belonging when she was offered an opportunity to contribute to the professional learning of her fellow teachers. Sharing her developing knowledge with her colleagues gave Joyce a sense of contribution and strong feelings of affirmation. In this instance, Joyce was recognized by her peers beyond her status as a “novice” teacher.

My mentor teacher recommended me to the principal to lead a staff development session at our school! I had been learning a lot about our district's new science resources, and I was honored to share what I had learned with my fellow teachers.

The participants noted that opportunities to make valuable contributions to their school positively influenced their sense of belonging. Through their contributions, the participants felt needed, affirmed, and appreciated, instilling a sense of purpose and belonging as they navigated their initial teaching experiences.

5. Peer interactions beyond the school building offered critical opportunities for support and understanding for participants who felt isolated in their schools.

As they described their experiences with belonging, a few of the early career teacher participants expressed that feelings of belonging emerged from their engagement in professional learning outside of their school buildings. For these early career teachers, structured spaces to interact with teachers outside of their immediate contexts offered opportunities to find similarities in the experiences of other teachers, enabling the early career teacher participants to feel understood and less isolated.

Victoria, a high school special educator, regularly attended trainings outside of her district that were specifically tailored to support first-year special educators. Having the opportunity to share experiences, to learn alongside, and at times, to commiserate with other first-year special educators—removed from her regular school environment—offered Victoria opportunities for professional learning, socialization, and rejuvenation.

The trainings felt like a break. I got to hang out with other first-year teachers and with my mentor, who was so experienced and fun! It felt like a teacher support group, basically. We talked about what we're learning during our first year of teaching. Those training sessions were productive and a really good form of professional learning.

As the only music teacher in her elementary school, Kimmy often struggled to connect with her colleagues in her building. Attending district-wide elementary music teacher training sessions enabled Kimmy to find a support system through colleagues who share the same content expertise and who teach the same curriculum.

During the first meeting of the school year, I learned so much! It was also helpful to connect with other teachers who teach the same content as me. I felt like they understood me in a way that the teachers in my building can't.

In the case of these two early career teachers, having opportunities to engage with teachers who work outside of their buildings offered critical opportunities for professional growth and socialization, allowing the early career teachers to feel that they were not alone as they navigated the challenges of their initial year of teaching.

Discussion

Each of the participant's experiences provided insight into the belonging needs of early career teachers and pointed to promising approaches for school leaders to consider as they support the early career teachers in their schools. While all the participating early career teachers worked in school districts that provided teacher induction support to new teachers, none of the early career teachers were directly asked about their belonging needs by their school leaders. The experiences of the participants yield several considerations for school leaders as they take intentional steps to support early career teachers' sense of belonging.

Ensure that early career teachers feel psychologically safe with their students, colleagues, and school leaders.

Defined as a "felt permission for candor" (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023), psychologically safe work environments prioritize open-mindedness, sensitivity, and curiosity and are grounded in respect for diverse knowledge and experiences. Teachers who feel psychologically safe may be more likely to ask questions or raise concerns about their practices to colleagues or school leaders without fear of judgment (Waller, 2021). As a result, teachers who feel psychologically safe may be motivated to take ownership of their practices,

experimenting with instructional strategies, resources, and materials that enrich their students' learning experiences and offer opportunities for teachers to explore their professional identities.

In addition, teachers who work in psychologically safe environments may be better equipped to enact healthy approaches to conflict management and resolution (Gerlach & Gockel, 2018). Because of their emphasis on open-mindedness and tolerance, psychologically safe school cultures enable school staff to work productively through tensions or issues. This can be of particular importance to early career teachers as they learn to navigate various personalities and relational dynamics among their colleagues. When early career teachers experience a sense of psychological safety, they may feel more empowered to develop relationships with their colleagues, supporting their sense of belonging.

Bring visibility to early career teachers by recognizing them beyond their status as a new teacher.

Research suggests that employees who feel respected as professionals are more likely to demonstrate meaningful engagement in their work, developing self-confidence and strengthening collective capacity (Waller, 2021). As early as possible, school leaders should make intentional efforts to introduce early career teachers to their colleagues and to other members of the school community; successful school communities know their members. In addition, as early career teachers achieve various “firsts” and milestones throughout their initial months of teaching, school leaders' acknowledgment of these accomplishments can help early career teachers feel valued and accepted as part of the school community (Wilcoxen et al., 2020).

To promote early career teachers' visibility, school leaders should ensure that early career teachers are given a location to establish a “home base” within the school building that is easily accessible by their students and colleagues. When possible, school leaders may also consider

strategically positioning early career teachers' "home base" (e.g., a classroom or an office) in a central location in the school building to encourage informal interactions between the early career teachers and their colleagues. When early teachers feel visible in their schools, they are more likely to search for additional ways to connect with their colleagues and students, further bolstering their sense of belonging (Zepeda et al., 2022).

Strategically assign early career teachers to teaching teams by considering team members' personalities, levels of expertise, and capacity to support early career teachers.

Early career teachers need to feel supported by all members of their schools' faculty, but it is especially important that early career teachers feel a sense of connection to those with whom they work most closely. Typically grouped by content area or grade level, teachers are placed on teaching teams, in which they collaborate on lesson planning and participate in professional learning communities (Smith et al., 2020). Because teams often work very closely with each other, teaching teams may offer early career teachers a first point of contact with questions and concerns, as well as opportunities for socialization and relationship-building.

School leaders should strategically place early career teachers on teaching teams, considering team members' personalities, levels of teaching experience, and capacity to support new teachers (Krammer et al., 2018). Within these teaching teams, school leaders should provide explicit opportunities for team-building experiences, enabling early career teachers to develop positive relationships with their colleagues and creating the potential for teachers to engage in mutual exchanges of professional and emotional support. In the case of many early career teachers, teaching team dynamics play a critical role in early career teachers' feelings of efficacy and support during the first year of teaching (Thomas et al., 2019).

Facilitate opportunities that encourage early career teachers' active involvement in the school community.

As new members of their schools' faculty, early career teachers may feel as though their perspectives and ideas are disregarded or overlooked (Kelchtermans, 2019). Honoring the diverse knowledge and experiences that early career teachers bring to their work, school leaders should encourage early career teachers to contribute to their school and community. While acknowledging and demonstrating sensitivity toward early career teachers' potential for stress and burnout, school leaders can leverage early career teachers' strengths by facilitating opportunities for early career teachers to contribute meaningfully to school programs or initiatives.

While early career teachers may be new to the profession, their experiences in teacher preparation programs and the intensive instructional support that they may receive through teacher induction likely expose them to innovative instructional techniques and updated curriculum. Often equipped with the latest information, early career teachers can serve as critical assets in their school community, sharing their up-to-date knowledge with their colleagues who may be further removed from current best practices in teaching and learning. Encouraging early career teachers' active involvement may bolster their confidence and promote capacity among teachers (Peercy et al., 2020).

Decades of research suggest that to establish a sense of belonging, individuals must feel that they can make meaningful contributions to the group with which they seek to belong (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Haggerty et al., 1992). School leaders can foster early career teachers' sense of belonging by presenting early career teachers with low-stakes opportunities to add value to the school community. Strategies—including seeking early career teachers' perspectives on school

decisions or asking early career teachers to share a successful teaching practice with their colleagues—may enable early career teachers to make meaningful contributions that could support their sense of purpose, their sense of efficacy, and their investment in their school community.

Provide opportunities for early career teachers to expand their professional networks beyond the school building.

Two of the early career teacher participants in this study attributed feelings of belonging, in part, to the relationships that they developed with colleagues in professional learning settings that took place outside of their school buildings. Both of these teachers taught in content areas that did not allow them to participate in traditional teaching teams in their schools. Opportunities for early career teachers to interact with peers outside of their schools—who teach the same content or who work with students in similar grade or developmental levels—can offer early career teachers opportunities to feel understood in ways that they may not experience with colleagues in their building.

In addition to expanding their professional networks, offering opportunities for early career teachers to collaborate with peers outside of their buildings may enable early career teachers to ask questions and voice concerns in a neutral space. Removed from their immediate school contexts, early career teachers may be more likely to receive objective, impartial guidance as they navigate interpersonal and pedagogical challenges during their initial months of teaching. Moreover, a change of environment may stimulate professional growth and offer early career teachers a space to recharge mentally, removed from their daily routines (Martin, 2024).

Engage early career teachers in ongoing conversations about their belonging needs.

Each of the participants noted that their feelings of belonging shifted over time; for these participants, establishing a sense of belonging was a continuous process. Accounting for the dynamic nature of belonging, school leaders may facilitate authentic, ongoing discussions with early career teachers about belonging to assess early career teachers' personal perceptions of belonging and to identify potential barriers to belonging in their schools. Making explicit attempts to understand the belonging needs of early career teachers fosters supportive school cultures (Thomas-Reynolds, 2022).

Through these ongoing discussions, school leaders should get to know early career teachers "beyond their novice-ness" (Clandinin et al., 2015), learning about early career teachers' interests, experiences, and aspirations both within the teaching profession and outside of teaching. Viewing early career teachers as whole people contributes to cultures of professionalism and respect, supporting early career teachers as they construct their professional identities (Kelchtermans, 2019).

School leaders play a critical role in shaping early career teachers' initial experiences in the teaching profession. Taking intentional steps to address early career teachers' sense of belonging may aid in supporting and sustaining early career teachers during a particularly formative phase of their careers. When early career teachers experience a sense of belonging, they are more likely to demonstrate strong engagement and investment in their schools, contributing to positive and effective school cultures and potentially sustaining early career teachers beyond their initial years of teaching.

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Scenes from the Data

In Chapter Five, I explored the role of school leadership in supporting and sustaining early career teachers' sense of belonging. The following scene from the data explores what can happen when school leaders do not take intentional steps to support early career teachers' sense of belonging. This scene presents the story of Jesse, whose fellow fourth-grade teachers took great lengths to ensure that Jesse experienced belonging, support, and success during her tumultuous first year of teaching. Then, in Chapter Six, I summarize this dissertation and identify potential implications and practical considerations for various stakeholders who seek to foster a sense of belonging among early career teachers.

Teaching, Teamwork, and Transformation: Jesse's Story

Jesse teaches at an elementary school in a large, urban school district. Much of the student population at Jesse's school has experienced significant trauma and given the varied needs of her schools' student population, class sizes were relatively small. While Jesse's class consisted of just twelve fourth-grade students, the diverse emotional and behavioral needs represented within her class presented a notable challenge.

I wasn't fully prepared for what I would see on a day-to-day basis. Our students come from many different families and living situations, and many have been traumatized. Students break into fights all of the time. I would spend hours preparing lessons and activities, but because I could not get my kids to sit down and focus, none of the lessons really worked. It was so difficult for me. I didn't feel like the administration understood what I was going through. I didn't feel safe. My kids didn't feel safe. I cried nearly every day, but my fourth-grade team was so sweet and helpful. They have been the highlight of my job for this entire school year.

Jesse felt overwhelmed by her students' needs, and because she spent more of her day addressing student behaviors than teaching formal lessons, Jesse began to feel ineffective as a teacher. Most importantly, Jesse was scared for the safety of her students and of herself. Jesse believed that her administrators did not understand the severity of her situation, leaving her feeling helpless and causing her to consider resigning from her position in the middle of the school year.

Out of concern for Jesse's well-being, Jesse's fellow fourth-grade teachers proposed a plan: Jesse and another fourth-grade teacher whose class consisted of twelve students would merge their classes into one co-taught classroom of twenty-four students. With this co-teaching model, Jesse and her co-teacher would work collaboratively to teach lessons and to monitor students, ensuring that everyone felt safe and that each student's needs were met. According to Jesse, her colleagues' investment in her success transformed her perspective on teaching in her school.

When I moved in with my co-teacher's class, we had twenty-four students total. My co-teacher has been teaching for twenty-nine years, and he's very authoritative. I have learned so much from him, but I also consider him a friend. We really do work as a team. We still had our challenges with student behaviors, but it was much easier knowing that someone else was experiencing those challenges with me.

Jesse's caring and attentive colleagues noticed that Jesse was struggling and worked with her to create an alternative pathway for Jesse to find success as an early career teacher. Jesse's teammates exercised flexibility by restructuring their instructional model several weeks into the school year, demonstrating their investment in Jesse's success and the success of her students.

Because of Jesse's caring and supportive colleagues, she was able to find a sense of belonging during her first year of teaching.

The next chapter presents a conclusion to my dissertation research. Drawing on the experiences of Jesse and the other participating early career teachers, I summarize the study, I reflect on insights that I gleaned throughout the research process, and I discuss implications for early career teachers; teacher educators; school leaders; and researchers.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: BELONGING AND BECOMING A TEACHER

Review of Dissertation Chapters

In Chapter One, I introduced my dissertation by stating its purpose and significance and by describing my research approaches. In Chapter Two, I used a manuscript style to present a comprehensive review of the literature on belonging, examining research that highlights belonging among preservice, in-service, and early career teachers. From this review of the literature, I discussed several themes that emerged for supporting early career teachers' sense of belonging.

In Chapter Three, I also used a manuscript style to reflect on my use of photo-elicitation methods in my study, which—grounded in phenomenology of practice—explores the experience of belonging among early career teachers. Through this reflection, I identified the ways in which photo-elicitation methods facilitated vivid and detailed disclosure from the participants regarding their experiences with belonging.

In Chapter Four, I presented a comprehensive description of my dissertation study in a manuscript format, identifying major phenomenological themes that emerged across the participants' experiences with belonging and lending insight into the fundamental nature of belonging among early career teachers. I also addressed practical considerations for teacher educators who seek to support early career teachers as they transition into the profession.

In Chapter Five, I used a manuscript style to examine the role of school leadership in supporting early career teachers' sense of belonging. Drawing from the experiences of the

participating early career teachers, I identified promising school leadership practices that may cultivate early career teachers' sense of belonging. Finally, in Chapter Six, I conclude my dissertation by summarizing my study, discussing key takeaways, and addressing future directions for research.

Sifting Through Junk in Search of Belonging

Two weeks prior to her first day of teaching, Kimmy was given access to her music classroom. Having spent months—and a considerable amount of money—preparing the design and decor of her first classroom, Kimmy was thrilled to create a colorful, engaging learning environment for her students. As she approached her classroom door, however, she quickly realized that rather than decorating her classroom, much of her pre-planning time would be spent sorting and cleaning “junk” that had been left behind by the previous music teacher.

The music teacher that was at the school before me had been there for 30 years, and she retired there. She didn't clean out the room before leaving. She left 24 boxes of costumes from the last 30 years that were pretty gross. There were also over 500 CDs and hundreds of music textbooks from the 90s that I didn't need to keep. I initially couldn't find my classroom instruments because of all of the clutter. Once I finally found the instruments, I discovered that many were broken, dusty, and clearly hadn't been used for years. I had no idea that I would have to spend so much time cleaning out my classroom before I could even start preparing for the school year.

Ultimately, Kimmy had to dedicate hours to cleaning her new classroom—hours that she could have spent planning curriculum, creating resources, and getting to know her new colleagues. Walking into a cluttered, dirty classroom space did not make Kimmy feel welcomed

or valued, creating a very negative early experience for Kimmy as she navigated her first days in the profession.

Summary of the Study

For this dissertation research, seven early career teachers shared their experiences with belonging as they transitioned into the teaching profession. Given the many adjustments that early career teachers face at the outset of their careers (e.g., to new curriculum, new school environments, new relationships, etc.), many early career teachers find the initial months of teaching to be particularly challenging. As they navigate these many “news” during their transition into the profession, early career teachers are likely to feel overwhelmed and isolated, causing some to question the sustainability of a career in teaching (Schuck et al., 2018; Stewart & Jansky, 2022). Research suggests that a sense of belonging may serve as a buffer against early career teachers’ feelings of isolation, encouraging early career teachers’ resilience, engagement, and commitment to the profession (e.g., Bjorklund et al., 2023; Martin, 2024; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

By inquiring into the role of belonging in supporting and sustaining early career teachers, this dissertation investigated the ways in which early career teachers conceptualize and experience a sense of belonging by addressing the following research questions:

1. *What does belonging mean to an early career teacher?*
2. *How does belonging manifest in an early career teacher’s initial experiences in the profession?*

The participants came from diverse teaching contexts, grade levels, and areas of content expertise. They also represented various pathways into the teaching profession. At the time of their interviews, all participants possessed one year of professional teaching experience.

Through two rounds of one-on-one virtual interviews during the summer of 2024, the participants described the ways in which they experienced feelings of belonging—and feelings of not belonging—during their initial months of teaching. In addition to describing verbally their experiences with belonging during their interviews, each participant presented a photo that illustrated their experiences with belonging. These photos ranged from candid snapshots of the participants with their colleagues to images that featured participants’ classroom layouts or instructional materials. Often, the participants’ selected photos provided important insight into their work environments, their relationships with colleagues, and the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging. In addition, the participants’ photos pointed to the multi-dimensional and complex nature of belonging, ultimately shedding light on what belonging means to an early career teacher.

Following the participants’ interviews, I dedicated five months of the study to “dwelling with the data” through an ongoing process of reflective writing (Finlay, 2014). Deeply immersing myself in interview transcriptions, field notes, and detailed descriptions of the participant’s photos, I engaged van Manen’s (2016) approach to descriptive reading as a means of data analysis by first reflecting on the data holistically, then by identifying notable statements, and finally, through a line-by-line analysis. From these reflective writings emerged phenomenological themes that give insight into the fundamental nature of belonging as an early career teacher.

Through the process of bridling (Dahlberg, 2006), I continually reflected on my personal subjectivities and my evolving understanding of belonging. To this end, I engaged in ongoing conversations with peer scholars as a form of member checking to assess the ways in which my personal background and experiences informed my interpretation of the participants’

experiences. Near the end of the study, I invited the participants to provide feedback on their LEDs, ensuring that their experiences were represented accurately in the research (van Manen, 2016).

Summary of Findings from Research Question #1:

The theoretical literature on belonging suggests that belonging is not a uniform process. While all humans possess a fundamental need for belonging, the ways in which humans experience belonging vary (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). Moreover, belonging is situational, influenced by time, spaces, and personal identities (Guyotte et al., 2019), and as a result, each individual is likely to hold a different perspective on belonging. Often referred to as a “sense,” belonging is perception-oriented (Allen et al., 2018). To establish belonging, individuals must first *believe* that they belong to a group.

As an abstract concept, belonging can be difficult to describe. To understand each participant’s personal conceptualizations of belonging, I asked the participants to describe how belonging felt during their experiences as early career teachers. These descriptions are presented in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1.*Participants' Descriptions of How Belonging Feels*

Participant Name*	Question: How does belonging feel in your experience as an early career teacher?
Sarah	<i>Belonging meant that I never felt like a burden.</i>
Kyle	<i>Belonging felt like a classroom full of crazy, energetic students. In many ways, they taught me how to be a teacher.</i>
Lauren	<i>Belonging meant that I wouldn't feel judged for not knowing how to do something. They [Lauren's colleagues] understood that I was just figuring stuff out.</i>
Jesse	<i>Belonging meant that I felt like a teammate. My team would always speak to me, and I never felt left out of anything.</i>
Victoria	<i>It wasn't always through coworkers that I really felt like I belonged. My students made [school] a place where I felt useful, and I felt like I had a place.</i>
Joyce	<i>Belonging meant that I could feel free to be myself. I felt accepted and welcomed in other teachers' classrooms, and when I needed help, they'd do anything to support me.</i>
Kimmy	<i>Belonging felt like the joy I would get when I'd see my kids learn. I'm living out my purpose.</i>

*Pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.

To prompt participants toward deeper disclosure about their experiences, I asked each participant to present a photo that demonstrates how their sense of belonging looked during their initial months of teaching. The participants' photos provided vivid detail by illustrating their encounters with belonging. While the participants' photos varied in content and style, each photo pointed to the multi-dimensional nature of belonging. For some participants, belonging was deeply rooted in social relationships—illustrated by the participants' photos of themselves with their colleagues or their students—and other participants attached their sense of belonging to physical spaces (e.g., their classrooms or offices) or material items (e.g., classroom

manipulatives) within their school environments. The descriptions of the participants' photos are presented in Table 6.2, providing insight into their perspectives on belonging in their particular school contexts.

Table 6.2.

Participants' Descriptions of How Belonging Looks

Participant Name*	Question: How does belonging look in your experience as an early career teacher?
Sarah	<i>My classroom was my home base. It felt like my home away from home. It was where I felt most relaxed and most myself.</i>
Kyle	<i>The kids were just great. With them, I felt like I could really be myself. I could switch up my teaching without fear of disaster...</i>
Lauren	<i>The hands in this photo represent the collective. It's all of us—our backgrounds, who we are as people, our experiences ... Our diversity is honored here...that's why I feel like I belong.</i>
Jesse	<i>We were all so happy in this picture. This was in October, and I felt like I was finally building a bond with my students.</i>
Victoria	<i>My desk is a consistent place that won't change. I don't have my own classroom, and unlike relationships, my comfort here isn't dependent on what I do or say, which is so freeing.</i>
Joyce	<i>In the interactions that I had with just about anyone in my school, I never felt like a burden.</i>
Kimmy	<i>I get so much satisfaction from taking part in my students' joy in class. The scarves, the instruments that we play. . . They create joy and give me a sense of belonging.</i>

*Pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.

Across the participants' responses related to Research Question #1, it became evident that every participant held slightly different conceptualizations of belonging. Each participant's perspectives on belonging appeared to be grounded in their personal experiences. Given that

every early career teacher is likely to define and experience belonging differently—influenced by their individual contexts and circumstances—those who support early career teachers may consider inquiring into early career teachers’ personal perspectives on belonging to provide the most relevant and meaningful support.

Summary of Findings from Research Question #2:

As the participants described their experiences with belonging, they each spoke about the ways in which their feelings of belonging fluctuated throughout their initial months of teaching. Every participant expressed instances in which they felt a strong sense of belonging and instances in which they felt that they did not belong. They attributed their positive and negative experiences of belonging to their relationships with peers; the accessibility of professional and emotional support; their feelings of recognition by leaders and colleagues; and their abilities to contribute meaningfully to their school communities.

As they described their experiences, the early career teachers stressed the importance of feeling visible—recognized as a member of their school’s faculty and recognized beyond their status as a “novice” teacher. Some of the participating early career teachers who were relatively young in age noted instances in which they were mistaken by their colleagues for students or preservice teachers. In Victoria’s case, frequent comments by her administrator about her youthful appearance created a sense of insecurity, causing Victoria to modify her wardrobe to make her appear more mature in age. For these early career teachers, moments of feeling invisible to their peers led them to believe they were not valued members of the school community, which negatively influenced their sense of belonging.

In addition to their need to feel visible among their peers, the participants described their need to feel respected by their colleagues as trained professionals. In some cases, the

participating early career teachers felt valued as professionals when they engaged in opportunities to act on their strengths, contributing to their colleagues and schools in meaningful ways. For these participants, feeling recognized beyond their status as a “novice” teacher promoted feelings of confidence and efficacy. Moreover, when the participants felt recognized and respected by their colleagues and their leaders, they were often more likely to invest in relationships with their peers. For example, when Lauren guided her colleagues through her school district’s new digital platform and when Joyce led a professional learning session on her school district’s new science curriculum, they each contributed to the success of their colleagues, making these early career teachers feel valued and needed.

To engage meaningfully with their colleagues, the early career teachers needed to feel psychologically safe. When they felt psychologically safe, they felt comfortable approaching their colleagues or school leaders with questions, voicing concerns, and admitting mistakes without hesitation (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). For these early career teachers, feeling psychologically safe meant that they had identified at least one person within their school with whom they could be vulnerable and seek support. In Lauren’s case, feeling psychologically safe meant that she could ask questions without feeling judged, and in Sarah’s case, feeling psychologically safe meant that she could ask questions without feeling like a burden to her busy colleagues.

When the early career teachers felt psychologically safe, they often felt affirmed in their authenticity. In other words, when the early career teachers felt that they could be vulnerable with their colleagues, they felt empowered to take ownership of their practice by exploring their interests and identifying their strengths—ultimately enabling them to enact their sense of purpose. For example, Kyle felt affirmed in his authenticity by his mentor, who encouraged Kyle

to experiment with different teaching strategies to discover his preferred style of teaching. In a similar way, the affirmation that Joyce felt from her colleagues enabled her to act on her “inner child,” allowing her to honor her exuberant and playful personality in her approach to teaching.

Peer relationships also played a critical role in the participants’ sense of belonging. Some of the participants experienced their greatest sense of belonging in the relationships that they developed with fellow members of their teaching teams. Given that teachers often collaborate most closely with members of their teaching teams (Krammer et al., 2018), teaching teams may serve as a primary source of support for early career teachers. For Jessie, the bond that she formed with her fellow fourth-grade teachers enabled her to persist through her initial teaching experiences. Jesse’s teammates looked after her professional and emotional needs, ensuring that Jesse felt supported as she confronted a challenging first year of teaching.

While some of the participating early career teachers found their greatest sense of belonging in relationships with their teammates, others found belonging with colleagues outside of traditional teaching teams. Whether through shared teaching experiences (e.g., similar content or grade levels taught) or similar philosophical convictions regarding teaching, some of the participants found that peer relationships beyond traditional teaching teams presented critical opportunities for socialization, professional learning, and emotional support. As the only music teacher in her school, Kimmy craved opportunities to connect with music teachers in other schools across her district through district-wide professional learning sessions. Collaborating with her music teacher colleagues enabled Kimmy to feel understood and valued, bolstering her sense of belonging. For Victoria, meeting regularly with other early career special education teachers offered her opportunities to make sense of her teaching experiences collectively with her peers. These regular meetings fostered a sense of community in which Victoria found

opportunities to both give and receive professional and emotional support, promoting her sense of belonging in the teaching profession.

Finally, some of the early career teacher participants related their sense of belonging to physical locations (e.g., office spaces or classrooms) in their schools. For example, Sarah noted that her classroom offered her an established location in which she could be “findable” by her students and colleagues, enabling her to feel a sense of belonging in her school. In Kimmy’s case, the central location of her music classroom presented multiple opportunities for informal interactions with students and colleagues throughout the day, increasing Kimmy’s visibility and her feelings of belonging. For early career teachers, having a designated space may offer a place for retreat and a “home base,” enabling early career teachers to be easily accessible to their students and colleagues.

Implications

Throughout this dissertation, I discuss potential implications and practical considerations for stakeholders interested in addressing the issue of belonging among early career teachers. Drawing on the implications presented in the previous chapters of this dissertation, the following paragraphs summarize the key takeaways for early career teachers; teacher educators, school leaders; and education researchers.

For Early Career Teachers

As early career teachers transition into the profession, they can take intentional steps to support their own sense of belonging. First, when interviewing for potential teaching positions, early career teachers may consider reflecting on the extent to which their personal values and goals align with the values and goals of their potential school leaders. A clear alignment of values and goals (i.e., value consonance) can unify early career teachers with their colleagues

around a shared purpose, consequently supporting early career teachers' sense of belonging (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

Second, as they transition into the profession, early career teachers should seek opportunities to participate in their school and community. The theoretical literature on belonging suggests that belonging often requires an individual's active involvement in the group to which they seek to belong (e.g., Hagerty et al., 1992). As a result, early career teachers may consider searching for opportunities to interact with their colleagues outside of the school day; participating in school activities (e.g., attending school sporting events or school performances); or volunteering on initiatives that promote school improvement. Active involvement in their schools may promote early career teachers' relationship-building and visibility among their colleagues and students, further bolstering early career teachers' sense of belonging (Bjorklund, 2023).

Third, early career teachers may consider participating in professional networks beyond their school buildings. While early career teachers may identify their "people" within their schools or districts, early career teachers who are unable to identify like-minded teachers within their local contexts may find communities through social media platforms, professional learning organizations, or education advocacy groups (Martin, 2024). By finding community through professional networks beyond their school buildings, early career teachers may find a sense of belonging—not only to their schools but to the teaching profession as a whole.

For Teacher Educators and School Leaders

Both teacher educators and school leaders play critical roles in shaping the experiences of belonging among early career teachers (e.g., Clandinin et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2022). As they seek to support early career teachers' sense of belonging, teacher educators and school leaders

may consider facilitating explicit conversations with early career teachers regarding early career teachers' belonging needs. Given that every early career teacher is likely to hold a different definition of belonging, teacher educators and school leaders may consider asking early career teachers to describe their personal belonging needs. In addition, because early career teachers' belonging needs are likely to evolve over time, teacher educators and school leaders may return to these explicit conversations with early career teachers periodically to ensure that early career teachers' belonging needs are continuously met.

Teacher educators and school leaders must also ensure that early career teachers feel psychologically safe within their schools. To this end, teacher educators and school leaders may provide early career teachers with access to people who serve as direct lifelines of support—whether through a member of their teaching team, a peer mentor, or other colleagues within their schools—someone whom early career teachers can easily and comfortably access for assistance (Keese et al., 2022). Fostering early career teachers' psychological safety also requires teacher educators and school leaders to understand the communication styles of early career teachers. As a result, teacher educators and school leaders may consider familiarizing themselves with the communication styles of the various generations (e.g., “Gen Z” and “millennial” teachers) of the teachers represented in their schools to promote clarity in conversations about belonging (Abrams, 2018; Breiburd, 2021).

To encourage relationship-building between early career teachers and their colleagues, teacher educators and school leaders may consider strategically placing early career teachers on teaching teams, carefully considering each team member's personality, level of experience, and capacity to support early career teachers. Teacher educators and school leaders may also consider

strategically assigning early career teachers to classrooms or office spaces in areas within the school that may promote social interactions throughout the day.

Given that interpersonal relationships play a significant role in shaping early career teachers' sense of belonging, teacher educators and school leaders may seek opportunities for early career teachers to expand their professional networks. Connecting early career teachers with other early career teachers may provide valuable opportunities for professional learning and emotional support as they collaboratively navigate and make sense of their transition into the profession. In addition, teacher educators and school leaders may connect early career teachers to professional networks beyond the school building that enable early career teachers to learn alongside peers who teach the same content area or serve similar demographics of students, providing early career teachers with opportunities to learn alongside colleagues who share similar interests and teaching experiences. Connecting early career teachers to professional networks beyond their school buildings may offer early career teachers a neutral space—removed from their immediate school contexts—to ask questions, voice concerns, and receive objective guidance (Martin, 2024).

Contributing to school cultures of belonging, teacher educators and school leaders should approach early career teachers with an asset-oriented mindset, honoring early career teachers' personal experiences, knowledge, and interests (Kelchtermans, 2019). Respecting early career teachers beyond their status as “novices,” teacher educators and school leaders may leverage early career teachers' strengths, presenting opportunities for early career teachers to make valuable contributions to their schools and communities. When early career teachers know that they can contribute to the success of their school and community, they may be more likely to feel a sense of belonging (Bjorklund, 2023). When presenting early career teachers with opportunities

to contribute to their schools, teacher educators and school leaders must remain sensitive to early career teachers' workloads and vulnerability to stress and burnout (Perrone et al., 2019).

Finally, given that early career teachers are likely to encounter many challenges as they transition into the profession, teacher educators and school leaders should acknowledge early career teachers' often turbulent experiences, reassuring early career teachers that they are not alone as they navigate their initial months of teaching. Moreover, during their transition into the profession, early career teachers are likely to encounter several milestones. Teacher educators and school leaders may consider celebrating early career teachers as they encounter several "firsts" in their teaching careers, bringing visibility and affirmation to early career teachers.

For Future Research

While the topic of belonging among K-12 students has been addressed at length in education research (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Gowing, 2019; Liu et al., 2022), fewer studies have examined the experiences of belonging among teachers, presenting many opportunities for future study (e.g., Bjorkland, 2023). First, qualitative research that honors the unique, subjective experiences of belonging among individual teachers is needed to understand more fully the ways in which teachers conceptualize and navigate belonging within the profession. To this end, future research on belonging may solicit first-hand accounts from teachers, hearing directly from teachers about their experiences and needs (Larsen et al., 2024). Given that belonging can be difficult to describe verbally, researchers may employ research approaches—like photo-elicitation methods—to provide participants with alternative modalities to disclose their experiences with belonging.

Second, additional research that highlights the unique experiences of belonging among teachers from underrepresented groups within the profession, including teachers of color, is

needed. Given that individuals' personal backgrounds and experiences play a significant role in their sense of belonging (e.g., Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022), research that honors the unique experiences of teachers from underrepresented groups may lend insight into their specific belonging needs, providing guidance for teacher educators, school leaders, and researchers as they seek to support this particularly vulnerable population within the teaching profession (Ingersoll et al., 2019).

Third, further examination into the relationship between early career teachers' sense of belonging and their pathways to teacher certification (i.e., traditional, four-year bachelor's programs, MAT programs, or alternative certification programs) may unearth new perspectives regarding the potential roles that teacher preparation programs play in supporting or inhibiting early career teachers' sense of belonging during their transition into the profession.

Finally, longitudinal studies that examine the experiences of belonging among teachers across a multi-year period are needed to understand better the ways in which teachers' experiences with belonging evolve over time. Taking a longitudinal approach to examining teachers' sense of belonging may reveal new understandings regarding the organizational, spatial, social, and personal factors that sustain teachers within the profession. In addition, longitudinal studies of teachers' sense of belonging could potentially clarify the relationship between teachers' sense of belonging and teacher retention.

Conclusion

Often considered the most formative phase in the teaching profession, early career teachers' initial experiences provide critical opportunities for the development of their professional identities (Sydnor, 2017). Given the challenges that early career teachers encounter as they navigate their transition into the teaching profession, inquiry into early career teachers'

sense of belonging may provide important insight regarding the professional and emotional support needs of early career teachers. When early career teachers feel a sense of belonging, they may be more likely to invest in relationships with their colleagues and students, engage deeply in their professional growth, and find satisfaction in the profession, potentially sustaining early career teachers both within and beyond their initial years of teaching.

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