

PREPARING ALTERNATIVELY LICENSED TEACHERS TO LEAD IN RESTART SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Across North Carolina, Restart schools, public schools granted increased autonomy to improve outcomes for historically underserved students, often rely heavily on alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs) to fill persistent staffing gaps. State pipeline data reveal a shortfall of traditionally trained educators, exacerbating staffing challenges in high-need schools. While ALTs bring diverse experiences and valuable perspectives to the classroom, research shows they are more likely than traditionally trained teachers to experience professional isolation, limited instructional confidence, and higher rates of attrition. Addressing these challenges is essential for creating sustainable systems of teacher development and retention.

This Dissertation in Practice investigates how a Comprehensive Mentoring Program (CMP) can directly address the need for improved development and retention of ALTs in a Restart elementary school. Guided by Allen et al.'s (2022) *Framework for Belonging*, the study focuses on how structured and relational mentoring strengthens both instructional leadership and a sense of belonging among ALTs, levers identified as essential for retention and school improvement in high-need contexts. The CMP's theory of action asserts that intentional mentoring, through regular feedback and relationship-building, enhances competence,

connectedness, and teacher efficacy, targeting the critical issues undermining ALT success and sustainability.

Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the study collected data from the ALT Belonging Survey, North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES) ratings, field notes, focus group interviews, and observational reflections to directly measure the CMP's impact on ALT development and retention. Quantitative results showed all six ALTs met or exceeded proficiency on leadership standards, while qualitative data reinforced that structured mentoring built trust and emerging leadership. The small sample and single-site context limit generalizability, but the evidence indicates that targeted mentoring is a promising strategy for the key challenge of strengthening ALT retention and school improvement.

The CMP's influence extended beyond individual growth to shape the school's culture and leadership practices. Ongoing discussions about belonging and well-being led Rise Elementary School to adopt belonging as a core value, formalized in its vision statement: *"Creating a culture of well-being and belonging for our students, our staff, and our families."* This institutionalization of belonging, paired with new systems for mentoring and orientation, illustrates how research-based mentoring can drive systemic improvement.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that comprehensive, relationship-centered mentorship can be a pivotal intervention for Restart schools grappling with staff retention and systemic inequity. The CMP serves as a replicable model for harnessing belonging and instructional leadership as integrated strategies for educational equity.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family: my husband, Derrick; my daughter, Camille; and my son, DJ. Your unwavering love, encouragement, and belief in me have been my foundation throughout this journey. As Alstons, we hold ourselves to a standard of excellence in all that we do and continually strive to be our best. This accomplishment reflects our shared commitment to faith, perseverance, and excellence.

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To my husband, Derrick, thank you for your patience, understanding, and love throughout this entire journey. You created the quiet space I needed to think, write, and persist, even when the process was demanding. Your belief in me gave me the strength to keep going.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Focus of Practice	5
Context of the Inquiry	7
Statement of the Focus of Practice.....	12
Inquiry Guiding Questions	13
Overview of Inquiry.....	14
Inquiry Partners	14
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Definition of Key Terms	18
Assumptions.....	21
Scope and Delimitations	21
Significance of Inquiry.....	23
Advancing Equity and Social Justice.....	24
Advances in Practice	25
AI Acknowledgment	27
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	29
Theoretical Framework.....	30
Teacher Shortage	36
Teacher Attrition in North Carolina	37
Declining Enrollment in Teacher Preparation Programs	38
History of Alternative Licensure Programs	39
Restart School Model.....	40
Meeting a Need Through Alternative Licensure.....	42
Alternative Pathways to Licensure	43
NC Residency License.....	45
State and District Requirements.....	47
Teacher Quality	49
Teacher Effectiveness	53
NC Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES).....	59
North Carolina Beginning Teacher Support Program	61
Mentoring Programs or Model	63
Mentoring as Professional Development	67

Summary	69
CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY.....	70
Inquiry Guiding Questions	70
Inquiry Design and Rationale	70
Context of the Inquiry	73
Inquiry Partners	74
Ethical Considerations.....	75
Inquiry Procedures.....	76
Phase I.....	78
Phase III.....	97
Phase IV.....	101
Inquiry Design Rigor	103
Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions	105
Role of the Scholarly Practitioner	107
Summary	108
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	108
Data Collection.....	110
Phase I (Summer 2024-Winter 2024).....	112
Phase II (November 2024- February 2025)	116
Phase III (March 2025-May 2025).....	118
ALT Belonging Survey.....	125
NCEES: Observation and Evaluation of ALTs through the Lens of Instructional Leadership	126
Phase IV (May 2025- September 2025)	129
Data Analysis.....	129
Quantitative Analysis	130
Qualitative Analysis.....	131
Mixed-Methods Integration.....	132
Demographics	135
Results.....	135
Analysis of Inquiry Question 1	137
Analysis of Inquiry Question 2	139
Analysis of Inquiry Question 3	142
Triangulation of Findings	144

Summary of Results	147
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS	147
Summary of the Findings	148
Interpretation of the Findings.....	152
Limitations of the Study.....	158
Implications of the Findings for Practice	160
Implications of the Findings for Equity	163
Recommendations for Practice.....	164
Recommendations for Future Study.....	166
Conclusions	168
Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership	169
REFERENCES.....	172
APPENDIX.....	191
APPENCIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL	191
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM	193
APPENDIX C: BELONGING SURVEY FOR ALTERNATIVELY LICENSED	195
APPENDIX D: NCEES TEACHER RUBRIC	197
APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL.....	198
APPENDIX F: FIELD NOTES TEMPLATE	202
APPENDIX G: BEGINNING TEACHER SUPPORT PROGRAM INSTRUCTIONAL	205
APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT FOR FOCUS GROUPS.....	210
APPENDIX I: CODEBOOK	211

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

According to a report from the N.C. School Superintendents' Association, public schools in North Carolina had fewer vacant teaching positions to open the 2024 school year. There were 3,142 vacancies, 12% less than the prior year and 30% less than two years earlier. However, the number of residency-licensed teachers hired had increased to 5,242, a 45% increase from two years earlier.

Problems with teacher shortages predated the 2020 pandemic; during the economic recession of 2008 and the subsequent years, numerous K-12 teachers in NC were laid off, which resulted in reduced new hires, larger class sizes and decreased support staff (Evans & Myers, 2017; Griffith, 2020). As the economy improved, districts began to hire again, which resulted in a rapid increase in demand for teachers. Simultaneously, teacher attrition increased and enrollment in teacher preparation programs declined by 35% nationwide, a decrease of nearly 240,000 teachers (Sutcher et al., 2016).

During the 1990s, there was an increasing demand for highly qualified teachers in the United States. Many states created alternative licensure programs to attract high-quality candidates and provide on-the-job training in response to this need. These programs were designed to address the growing need for qualified teachers, which had been predicted to increase (Hussar, 1999; Ludlow, 2013). Alternative licensure programs were developed to assist school systems in filling the teacher shortage gap (Devier, 2019; Ludlow, 2013). Strategies included creating alternative programs and allowing exceptions to licensure requirements for hard-to-staff subjects and schools. In 2017, at least 12 states passed legislation that offered alternative pathways to traditional teacher preparation and licensure (Ocampo & Aragon, 2018). Enrollment and completion in alternative preparation programs increased by 20% and 16%,

respectively, between the academic years of 2018–19 and 2020–21. In the same period, enrollment and completion in traditional preparation programs increased by only 4% and 5%, respectively (Saenz-Armstrong, 2023). Alternative certification programs offered individuals with a bachelor's degree a way to become certified teachers without obtaining another degree. These programs allowed candidates to become teachers of record and lead a classroom, often without direct supervision, before completing all certification requirements (King & Yin, 2022). Teachers who underwent this certification or licensure process were called alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs). However, concerns had been raised regarding alternatively licensed teachers' quality and effectiveness. Research suggested that teachers significantly impacted non-test student outcomes in the long term. Students with high value-added teachers were more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, find employment and earn higher wages (Friedman et al., 2014). Replacing a teacher with a low value-added score with an average teacher could increase students' lifetime income by more than \$250,000 (Goldhaber, 2016). A teacher's value-added was the average increase in test scores that their students achieved, considering differences in prior scores or other classroom characteristics. When a teacher with a high value-added score, in the top 5%, joined a school, the students in that class tended to achieve higher scores on end-of-year tests immediately (Chetty et al., 2011). Furthermore, teacher attrition and turnover increased as a school's performance grade decreased.

Research indicated that alternatively licensed teachers might have struggled due to a lack of specialized training in the subjects or grade levels they were assigned to teach (Brown, 2024). Effective instructional leadership was essential for improving student outcomes, particularly in schools with high needs (Mertler, 2022). Therefore, enhancing the instructional leadership of

these teachers was crucial for addressing systemic issues that impacted student achievement and for creating a more equitable learning environment (Grooms et al., 2023).

The law (§ 115C-105.37B), Reform of Recurring Low-Performing Schools, established that schools that struggled academically and were identified as continually low performing qualified to use the Restart Reform Model. Restart schools were granted the same flexibility with statutes and rules as the state's charter schools. Restart schools received a school performance grade of D or F and had not exceeded growth targets under the state's accountability system in at least two of the past three years (G.S. 115C-105.37B). The academic performance of students who attended these recurring low-performing schools had been a matter of concern. The standardized test scores of most such students consistently ranked in the bottom 5% (Nordstrom, 2023).

Restart schools often allowed alternatively licensed teachers to teach outside their licensure area, which meant they could instruct any subject or grade level as long as they had a bachelor's degree. According to EdNC (2023), 36% of Restart schools utilized flexible teacher employment requirements, including hiring non-certified or out-of-field teachers. This trend was compounded by a high attrition rate among new teachers, with 15% leaving the profession within their first three years, particularly those from alternative preparation programs (Brown, 2024). While intended to address teacher shortages, this flexibility could lead to instructional effectiveness challenges (EdNC, 2023).

State Superintendent Catherine Truitt highlighted the urgent need for enhanced support for these early-career educators to improve retention and effectiveness (Brown, 2024). By focusing on ALTs, who were crucial in Restart schools, this inquiry aligned with the WCSS

district's strategy to provide robust support for early-career educators, thereby improving retention and overall teaching quality.

As of July 2025, North Carolina named 144 Restart schools, which gave them more flexibility to operate like charter schools. Restart schools used this flexibility in various ways, such as adjusting how they spent funds, the calendar or hiring practices. Budgeting flexibility was utilized by 95% of the schools, mainly for hiring additional staff. Furthermore, 36% of Restart schools used this flexibility to adjust teacher employment requirements. This included hiring non-certified teachers or teachers for positions outside their certification (EdNC, 2023). Of these schools, 91 had 50% or more of their students who belonged to demographic subgroups, African American, Hispanic or economically disadvantaged, who met or exceeded academic growth expectations. However, meeting growth expectations did not necessarily imply academic excellence. Data from the Restart schools showed that more intensive interventions were required to help enhance achievement levels among demographic subgroups (Childress, 2020).

Moreover, low-performing schools often struggled to retain teachers and principals, which resulted in frequent turnover. These educators reported feeling dissatisfied and unsupported and tended to seek employment elsewhere. They reported experiencing high levels of dissatisfaction and a desire to work at schools where they felt better supported (Bowen, 2022). Consequently, local school districts faced similar challenges and struggled to retain and find qualified teachers to fill open positions (Nordstrom, 2023).

According to NCDPI's annual state of the teaching profession report (2022), the attrition rate for new teachers in their first three years in North Carolina was higher than the overall rate, at roughly 15%. State Superintendent Catherine Truitt emphasized the need to provide enhanced support for early-career educators, especially those who entered the profession through the

residency license pipeline. She also pointed out that with nearly half of new teachers coming from alternative teacher preparation programs, there was a need to better tailor support for these educators (Brown, 2024). This inquiry investigated the effectiveness of a comprehensive mentoring program that supported the instructional leadership of alternatively licensed teachers in Restart schools. Chapter 1 comprised essential elements such as background, statement of practice, context, guiding questions, overview, definitions, limitations, assumptions, advances and equity. These elements provided a comprehensive overview of the inquiry, including its relevance, scope, direction, constraints, current knowledge and fairness.

Background of the Focus of Practice

The teacher shortage had been a significant concern for decades (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Gailes & Guthery, 2020), partly in response to A Nation at Risk's recommendation to bring in subject matter experts and retired scientists as teachers (Husbands, 2008). Recognizing the pending crisis, teacher education programs struggled to address teacher shortage issues while maintaining high standards to prepare highly qualified teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Ingersoll, 2011). Over the last decade, teacher attrition rates in the United States remained high, at one point reaching 8%. The rates were even higher for new teachers and those working in high-poverty schools and districts (Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019).

Nationally, as of the 2019–20 school year, 7% of K–12 teachers in the country were not fully licensed with a regular, standard state certificate or advanced professional license. Furthermore, 31.5% of teachers did not have an educational background in their subject of primary assignment, and 18.9% of teachers in high-poverty, low-performing schools like Restart schools entered teaching through an alternative route to certification programs (Garcia & Weiss,

2019). To obtain the appropriate certification, teachers sought alternative pathways, which included lateral entry-now residency pathway and emergency licensure (NCDPI, 2019).

Alternative certification programs offered individuals with a bachelor's degree a way to become certified teachers without obtaining another degree. These programs allowed candidates to become a teacher of record and take responsibility for leading a class, often without direct supervision, before completing all certification requirements. Additionally, many alternatively licensed teachers worked in hard-to-staff schools to address teacher shortages (King & Yin, 2022). The rise in alternative teacher certification programs led to varied recruitment and training methods. The number of unfilled teaching positions created a need for alternative routes to teacher certification. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that approximately 25% of new teachers obtained their certification through alternative routes (NCES, 2023).

However, obtaining certification did not significantly impact teacher retention; preparation and support were critical to retaining teachers. Teachers who were better prepared to teach tended to remain in the profession longer, and coursework that focused on teaching methods contributed to a sense of preparedness. Research further suggested that enhancing support, such as mentoring and induction programs, for alternatively certified teachers improved retention and instruction quality (McDowel & Francies, 2022).

New teachers who lacked support or preparation were likely to leave the profession within the first five years. With the increasing number of new teachers, students were more likely than ever to be placed in classrooms with inexperienced teachers. About one in five teachers in U.S. classrooms were in their first three years in the profession, and many teachers entered through an alternative certification program (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance [NCEE], 2022). Studies conducted by Ingersoll and Smith (2004)

examined induction programs' impact on teacher outcomes, particularly mentoring. These outcome measures typically fell into two categories: teacher attitudes such as job satisfaction, efficacy and commitment, and teacher retention or turnover. The evidence supported the hypothesis that well-designed and well-executed teacher induction programs effectively increased new teachers' job satisfaction, efficacy and retention. Woods (2016) stated that comprehensive mentor programs could improve teacher retention, accelerate new teachers' professional growth and improve student learning.

Context of the Inquiry

The Whitakers County School System (WCSS) was the largest school district in North Carolina and the 15th largest in the United States. The student population had almost tripled since 1980 and was expected to increase by 20,000 in the next four years. There were 191 schools in WCSS, with 134 operating on a traditional calendar, 47 on a year-round calendar, 42 Restart schools and ten following a modified or alternative schedule that coincided with the community college, college or university schedule. WCSS had 58 magnet and early college schools that served pre-K to high school students, which accounted for over 30% of the county's public schools. Since 1999, WCPSS magnet and early college schools had been awarded 17 Top Ranking Magnet Schools of America National Awards.

WCSS had a majority-minority enrollment, with 56% of the student body being Black or Hispanic, which was higher than the North Carolina statewide average of 55%, where the majority population was also Black. WCSS Public Schools had an average math proficiency score of 52%, higher than the statewide average of 42%. Additionally, the WCSS reading proficiency score was 60%, compared to the statewide average of 47%. The district's proficiency rate on standardized tests had steadily improved since the pandemic, with a rate of 63.4% in

2022–23 compared to 65.2% in 2018–19. Over 69% of students who attended WCPSS went on to pursue postsecondary education.

Within the WCSS Progress Report, the Rise Elementary School (RES) performance composite was 33.5% below the district average. RES was 1 of 42 Restart model schools. The reading and math proficiency rates for grades 3–5 were 30% below the district average. Science proficiency for grade 5 was 50.4%, 20.1% below the district average. In Table 1 the percentage of K–2 students who reached reading benchmarks was 55.2%, 21% below the district average. The teacher turnover rate was 26.2%, only 1.1% below the district average. Sixty-eight percent of staff agreed that RES was a good place to work and learn and only 25% stated that they spent minimal time addressing discipline.

The NC School Report Card for 2022–2023 revealed that RES had a high poverty level, with 53.6% of its students being economically disadvantaged. In the teachers and qualifications section, 17.1% of teachers needed improvement, 74.3% were effective and 8.6% were highly effective. Additionally, RES had a chronic absenteeism rate of 30.37%. All students received no-cost breakfast and lunch through the Community Eligibility Grant that the school's social worker applied for.

In the prior three years, RES had principal turnover. Year one included a full-time principal, whereas the following year an interim and a new principal began in January 2023. The principal was a first-year principal with eight years of experience as an assistant principal within the district. RES had two assistant principals, a district-provided mentor and an Executive Leadership Coach.

Within WCSS, 97% of teachers possessed a standard teaching license, while 3% held an alternative license. However, in RES, a Restart school, 87.8% of teachers held a standard license

while 12.2% held an alternative license. Furthermore, RES had a higher percentage of beginning teachers at 29.9%, compared to the state average of 16.7% and the district average of 14.6%. The increased number of teachers who entered the profession through alternative pathways brought a range of experiences to the classroom, which presented new challenges for districts committed to recruiting and retaining quality educators (Gailes & Guthery, 2020).

Table 1*2023–2024 Rise Elementary School Performance Comparison to WCPSS and North Carolina*

School Performance Indicator	Rise Elementary	WCPSS Average	North Carolina Average
2023–2024 Performance Composite	20.0%	65.5%	54.6%
Reading Percent Proficient (Grades 3–5)	26.4%	61.3%	50.1%
Math Percent Proficient (Grades 3–5)	26.6%	67.5%	54.6%
Science Percent Proficient (Grade 5)	43.0%	71.7%	66.0%
Percent Reaching Reading Benchmarks (Grades K–2)	47.6%	77.3%	N/A (Not Available)
Percent of Kindergarten Students Read to Daily at Home	22.0%	54.5%	N/A (Not Available)

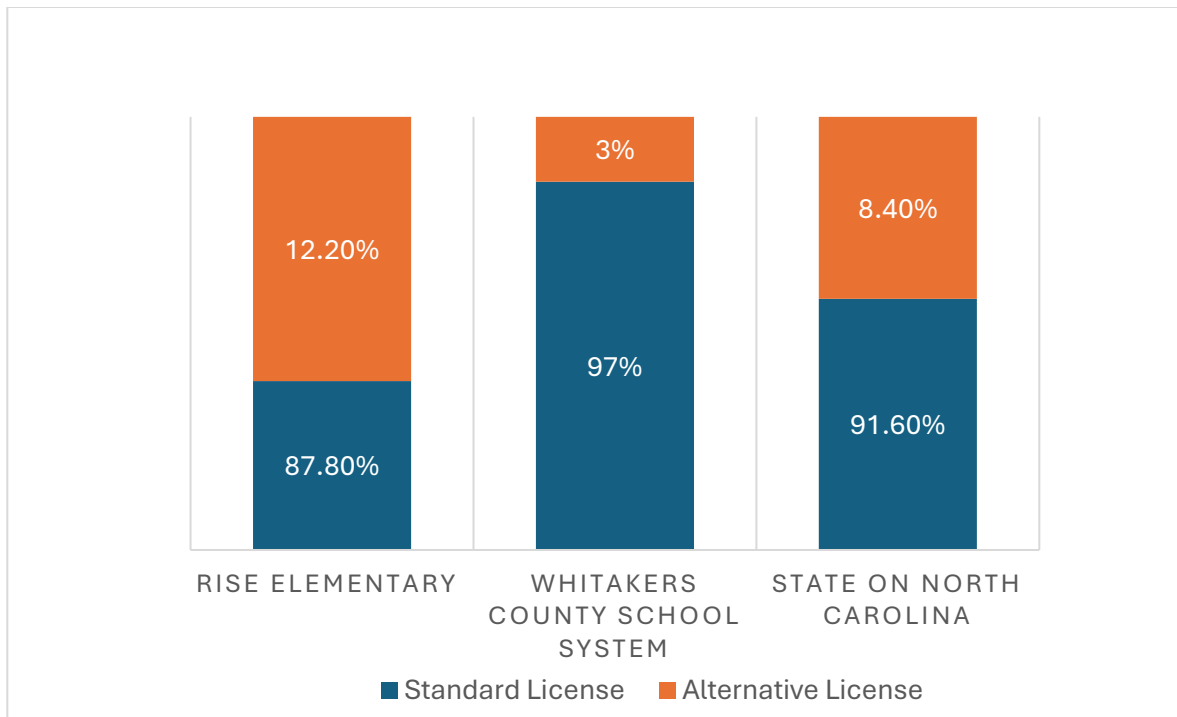


Figure 1. Standard vs. alternative licenses at Rise Elementary School in comparison to WCSS and NC

Statement of the Focus of Practice

The problem this inquiry attempted to address was the impact of a mentoring program designed to support the instructional leadership of alternatively licensed teachers. High teacher turnover rates and inexperienced teachers could both negatively impact student learning (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021; Redding & Smith, 2016; Ryan et al., 2017; Singer, 2021; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020; Sutcher, 2016). Baumert et al. (2011) conducted research over a decade that suggested classroom teachers significantly impacted their students' learning. However, ALTs, who often commenced their careers with little or no classroom experience, were particularly vulnerable to the challenges of teaching. Many ALTs reported feeling unprepared for their first year of teaching due to personal reasons, lack of support from their educator preparation program, insufficient administrative support and difficulties with student discipline. Consequently, these reasons were frequently cited by ALTs for leaving the profession (Carroll, 2007; Diliberti et al., 2021; Gailes & Guthery, 2020; García & Weiss, 2020; NCDPI, n.d.-f). Many new, alternatively prepared teachers were placed in high-need settings, which made it difficult to establish a sustainable teaching workforce in schools and among students who needed it most. This placement pattern could negatively impact the quality of education and students' academic success (Atteberry et al., 2017; Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Kamenetz, 2014; Kini & Podolsky, 2016).

Conversely, mentoring programs in schools proved successful in providing valuable support to teaching staff. Specifically, teachers who received mentorship and other forms of support showed a reduced likelihood of leaving the profession (Gailes & Guthery, 2020). Among the teacher cohort, those with alternative certification were noted as significant beneficiaries of mentorship (Boswell et al., 2017; Carroll, 2007; Gailes & Guthery, 2020). The comprehensive mentoring program designed for ALTs differed from existing beginning teacher support

programs in that it incorporated an orientation that familiarized them with school policies, procedures and the local education system. For this inquiry, ALTs were matched with experienced, highly effective mentor teachers who guided them in developing effective teaching strategies and assisted them in understanding, implementing and reflecting on the school's curriculum and assessment practices. The mentors provided professional learning opportunities tailored to ALTs' needs. Using Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework for Belonging, the mentors fostered a sense of belonging and support.

This inquiry aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a comprehensive mentoring program in supporting the development of ALTs' instructional leadership. Consequently, the findings contributed to developing evidence-based practices that supported ALTs' professional learning.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

The following questions guide this inquiry:

1. How does a comprehensive mentoring program support alternative licensed teachers in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart school?
2. How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternative licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school?
3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership growth and development be impacted as a result of conducting this inquiry?

Reflecting on how the inquiry process impacted me as a scholarly practitioner, developer and facilitator of professional learning helped me continuously enhance my work. As I continued to learn and gain experience with the Integrative Framework for Belonging, analyzing my

perceptions and actions throughout the process provided valuable insights into my personal and professional growth.

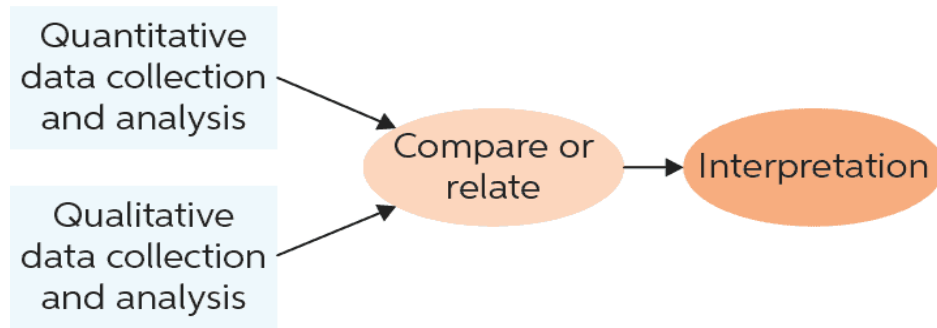
Overview of Inquiry

I employed improvement science methodology with a convergent mixed methods design to answer the questions that guided this inquiry. See Figure 2. I planned to collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously using the convergent design approach. Both data collection methods were given equal priority. The qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed independently, but the results were combined to achieve an overall interpretation. This was similar to triangulating data, where the researcher hoped that analysis of both data sets led to similar conclusions that supported the research questions under investigation (Mertler, 2022).

The research project underwent data collection through three distinct phases. The Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle was utilized throughout all phases. The rationale behind conducting the first and second phases in close succession was the early spring deadline for beginning teacher paperwork. Additionally, district transfer requests to move to other schools commenced in February and concluded in May, and alternatively licensed teachers were eligible to participate in the transfer process. The allowance for transfer from a Restart school to a non-Restart school was subject to the school and the teachers' licensure process.

Inquiry Partners

Successful teamwork required collaborative thinking, which involved bringing together a team of individuals with the right skills, knowledge and interests to inform, guide and develop the inquiry. The inquiry involved collaborative partners from the district level, principals, mentor coordinators, instructional facilitators and mentors. These partners played a critical role in analyzing and discussing data to better understand the problem. Additionally, the collaborative



Note. (Mertler, 2022).

Figure 2. Convergent parallel mixed-methods research design.

inquiry partners assisted with identifying gaps, developing change ideas, aligning with inquiry questions, maintaining integrity in processes and identifying themes and ideas to explore as the inquiry progressed.

Inquiry partners played a crucial role in supporting the inquiry by fostering collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving. They helped create an inclusive work environment by fostering active listening and promoting collaborative learning. They encouraged critical thinking by asking thought-provoking questions and offering constructive feedback. Inquiry partners helped set clear goals, guided structured problem-solving sessions and engaged in regular reflection to foster continuous improvement. In working with the inquiry partners, I built trust, identified and provided necessary resources, acknowledged achievements and valued diverse perspectives. By adopting these practices, inquiry partners created a positive and collaborative team culture, which contributed to the team's success.

By engaging with the school staff for an extended period, I served as a scholarly practitioner who was invested in the professional growth of alternatively licensed teachers. My inquiry log documented ongoing engagement with inquiry partners.

Theoretical Framework

Establishing a stable and experienced teaching workforce in high-need schools could be difficult, where many alternatively licensed teachers began their careers without prior classroom experience. This often led to a high turnover rate, with many ALTs leaving within two years, which negatively impacted the quality of education and student success (Atteberry et al., 2017; Gailes & Guthery, 2020; Kamenetz, 2014; Kini & Podolsky, 2016).

Numerous ALTs reported feeling unprepared for their first year of teaching. They cited personal reasons, lack of support from their educator preparation program, lack of administrative

support and difficulties with student discipline as primary reasons for leaving the profession (García & Weiss, 2020; Carroll, 2007; Bailes & Guthery, 2020). In search of a theoretical framework to assist the researcher in making sense of how a supportive relationship-based mentoring program would help ALTs lead and stay in the classroom, the integrative framework for belonging was selected.

The integrative framework for belonging provided a comprehensive approach to understanding and enhancing individuals' sense of belonging within educational and organizational contexts. This framework combined insights from psychological, sociological and organizational perspectives to offer a holistic view of how belonging was fostered and sustained. It identified four key components: competencies, opportunities, motivations and perceptions, each of which contributed to an individual's overall sense of inclusion and engagement.

Competencies referred to individuals' skills and abilities to feel effective and confident in their roles. For ALTs, this component emphasized the importance of tailored professional development and mentoring programs. These programs focused on building ALTs' instructional skills and classroom management techniques to enhance their sense of competency and integration into the school environment (Allen et al., 2021). By addressing specific developmental needs, ALTs became more capable and confident in their teaching roles.

Opportunities involved providing individuals with meaningful chances to engage in activities and roles within their environment. For ALTs, this meant creating opportunities for involvement in school committees, professional learning communities and decision-making processes. Engaging ALTs in these activities helped them feel valued and included, which fostered a stronger sense of belonging and connection to the school community (Kelly et al., 2021). Such opportunities also facilitated their integration into the broader school culture.

Motivations encompassed internal and external factors that drove individuals to engage with their roles and the organization. Enhancing motivation for ALTs involved recognizing and celebrating their achievements, aligning their work with personal and professional goals and providing support from school leaders and peers. Positive reinforcement and clear pathways for professional growth could significantly boost ALTs' motivation and commitment, which contributed to their overall sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021).

Perceptions involved how individuals viewed their value and acceptance within their environment. For ALTs, improving perceptions of belonging required creating a supportive and inclusive school culture. This included providing regular feedback, acknowledging contributions and fostering strong relationships with colleagues. By addressing these aspects, schools helped ALTs feel more accepted and valued, which enhanced their sense of belonging and effectiveness as educators (Kelly et al., 2021).

By applying the integrative framework for belonging, schools effectively addressed the unique needs of ALTs and created an environment that supported their professional and personal growth. This approach helped ALTs feel more connected and engaged and contributed to their effectiveness in the classroom.

Definition of Key Terms

Several key terms were used throughout this inquiry. For a shared understanding, the following definitions shall be used for these terms:

Alternative Licensed Teachers - Qualified individuals who obtain a teaching position and begin teaching immediately as a Resident while obtaining a clear professional educator's license (NCDPI, n.d.-e).

Alternative Route Program—Alternative route programs refer to programs that lead to a state-recognized certification document but differ from a traditional, university-based student-teaching approach to teacher preparation (NCDPI, n.d.-a).

Attrition- a reduction in the number of employees that occurs when employees leave an employing unit. Attrition can be measured at the state or LEA level (NCDPI, n.d.-f).

Educator Preparation Program (EPP)-EPPs are state-approved educational programs at the bachelor's and master's degree levels that satisfy licensure and accreditation requirements (NCDPI, n.d.-e).

Induction - support, guidance, and orientation for beginning teachers during the transition into their first teaching job (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Licensed/Certified Teachers – Teachers who have met all applicable state teacher certification requirements for a standard certificate for a beginning teacher or have completed the state-required probationary period. Teachers working towards their certification through alternative routes or holding an emergency, temporary, or provisional credential are not deemed to have fulfilled state requirements (NCDPI, n.d.-a)

Mentor Programs—A mentor program is a relationship-based professional development strategy that connects effective teachers with alternatively licensed teachers to guide and support their personal and professional growth (Woods, 2016).

Restart Schools - Continuously low-performing schools that have received a school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of "met expected growth" or "not met expected growth." These schools operate with the same exemptions or flexibilities from statutes and rules as charter schools (NCDPI, n.d.-e).

Residency Pathway Program—This program enables qualified individuals to start teaching while they complete their North Carolina licensure requirements. It is designed for candidates who meet the content requirements of licensure but may still need to fulfill the pedagogy requirements. The Residency License is valid for one year and can be renewed twice. It has replaced the Lateral Entry License and is currently the only alternative pathway to obtain a teaching license in North Carolina (NCDPI, n.d.-d).

Teacher Effectiveness - Qualities such as the ability to manage and organize a classroom, implement instruction, and monitor student progress, including attributes of socio-cultural awareness, contextual interpersonal skills, self-understanding, risk-taking, and perceived efficacy, which impact the progress and attitudes of the student (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013).

Teacher Instructional Leadership- leadership practices of teachers that influence instruction and support their school communities (NCEES).

Teacher of Record - An educator (or educators in co-teaching assignments) assigned the lead responsibility for a student's learning in a subject/course section with aligned performance measures (Chapter 115C Article 20, NC Stat. § 115C-311).

Teacher Quality - Strong instruction that enables a wide range of students to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2009).

Traditional Certified Teacher (TC) - Teachers that took the traditional route to certification, which requires candidates to complete all requirements for certification, including education coursework and supervised student teaching, before beginning their first teaching job (NCDPI, n.d.-b).

Assumptions

This inquiry was based on certain assumptions. One key assumption was that ALTs in their first or second year of teaching might not be as effective as traditionally licensed beginning teachers and might require assistance to lead their classrooms effectively. To help them improve their teaching skills, all ALTs who participated in this inquiry were assigned a mentor. This inquiry assumed that since ALTs lacked formal teacher training, they might need support in pedagogical content knowledge, classroom management and organization, instruction implementation and monitoring student progress.

It was assumed that all participants aspired to be effective teachers. Using the NCEES tool, the observer tracked the teacher's progress across multiple observations. This assumption was crucial to the inquiry because the mentoring program, professional learning and a mentor's understanding of the ALT's requirements and individual needs would help them develop self-efficacy and improve outcomes. For the teacher to experience growth and change, students had to respond to the strategy.

It was assumed that mentors were willing to offer comprehensive and sustained support to ALTs to facilitate their learning and promote their professional growth. ALTs participated fully in the change. In addition, mentors were presumed to be motivated by a sense of altruism and a desire to help ALTs succeed rather than by the monetary compensation that WCSS provided through a monthly stipend.

Scope and Delimitations

The comprehensive mentoring program for ALTs in their first and second years of teaching focused on providing targeted support to enhance instructional leadership. The program included one-on-one mentoring sessions, professional development workshops, instructional

coaching and peer collaboration. Designed to address the specific needs of early-career educators, the program aimed to build ALTs' skills, confidence and knowledge throughout the academic year. Regular observations and feedback sessions were incorporated, with mentoring activities scheduled weekly or biweekly, supplemented by additional training sessions.

The program's delimitations included focusing solely on first and second-year ALTs, which excluded more experienced or traditionally licensed teachers. Content was centered on instructional and classroom management topics, which omitted noninstructional areas such as administrative tasks. The initiative was confined to one school, which might have limited broader applicability. Resource constraints, including the availability of trained mentors and funding, might have affected the program's intensity and reach. Additionally, evaluation metrics primarily assessed immediate instructional improvements and teacher retention without fully exploring long-term or broader educational impacts.

Limitations

Possible limitations were the locality and my knowledge of the inquiry's subjects. Participants in the mentoring program also had to fulfill district mentoring requirements. A further limitation was identifying enough effective teacher mentors so that each mentor had only one to two mentees and identifying mentors who also had the soft skills necessary to build connectivity and empathetic rapport with participants. In addition, standardized tests did not measure all outcomes for which teachers were responsible, so measures based on these scores provided incomplete information about teacher effectiveness. To maximize their effect on student achievement, mentor programs might have needed to provide multiple years of new teacher support, and this study lasted less than one year.

As the Assistant Principal at RES, I also served as the scholarly practitioner in this inquiry, which was a limitation. However, I remained impartial throughout the inquiry and engaged my CIPs to assist with implementation and analysis to eliminate potential bias. All participants were informed beforehand that their responses to surveys and interviews would remain anonymous to the best of our ability. As the school AP and NCEES evaluator, I conducted three of the ALTs' formal observation using the NC Teacher Evaluation tool, which was used as a prescreen. All participants were informed about this aspect and were not required in any way to participate in research if they chose not to do so. Their decision did not affect their evaluations, both formal and informal.

The research conducted in this inquiry was limited to one school. This meant that the results and conclusions drawn from the research might not be applicable to other schools with different characteristics or environments. While some district data were taken into account, the research primarily focused on a single school site. This limitation could have impacted the generalizability of the inquiry's findings.

Moreover, implementing the year-long mentoring program in other schools might have required adjustments to meet the unique needs of each school. Schools have different characteristics, cultures and student populations, which might impact program effectiveness. It was essential to consider these factors when replicating the program to ensure success.

Significance of Inquiry

The attrition rate of teachers exhibited an upward trend, and a decline of 35% nationwide in enrollment of teacher preparation programs was noted in the prior five years. This decline resulted in a reduction of nearly 240,000 teachers in total (Title II - Welcome, 2023). This presented a significant challenge to the education sector and warranted further attention from

policymakers and stakeholders. In the face of teacher shortages, schools and districts were confronted with limited options. These options included hiring unprepared candidates, increasing class sizes, canceling classes, engaging short-term substitutes and assigning teachers from unrelated fields to fill vacancies. Regrettably, each of these interim solutions undermined the quality of education, particularly for students most in need of effective schools (Sutcher et al., 2016). Therefore, school and district leaders sought and implemented innovative and sustainable measures to address this challenge. Teacher shortages often disproportionately affected the most disadvantaged students (Sutcher et al., 2016). In the educational landscape at that time, the scarcity of quality educators was a significant financial burden for academic institutions. The cost of recruiting a new teacher to fill a vacancy ranged between \$10,000 and \$20,000, which was financially challenging for schools already grappling with identifying and hiring high-quality teachers (Francis & McDole, 2022). This inquiry investigated the impact of a comprehensive mentoring program designed to support the instructional leadership of alternatively licensed teachers in Restart schools. Understanding the unique needs of alternatively licensed teachers might have uncovered strategies that helped school districts design a balanced and supportive program to retain alternatively licensed teachers.

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

High-poverty, low-performing schools were more likely to hire teachers without credentials than schools in more affluent areas (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Oakes et al., 2002). Ill-prepared or underqualified teachers were able to enter the teaching profession through alternative routes. Many of these teachers required additional training in content knowledge, content pedagogy, curriculum, multiple modes of assessment in the service of learning or how cultures and social contexts shaped and interacted with learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Oakes et al., 2002; Wolf et al., 2002). Alternatively licensed teachers were

more likely to be hired in urban areas and regions with many poor and minority students, which worsened existing educational inequities. These areas usually had more inexperienced teachers, who tended to leave their jobs more often than other teachers. This constant turnover negatively affected student achievement because of inexperience, lack of preparation and the resulting instability (Sutcher et al., 2016). Instability contributed to the extensive distribution in achievement and social and ethnic disparities in the United States (Baumert et al., 2010). Teacher education had to improve to ensure every student had access to a well-prepared and qualified teacher. President Obama commented that the single most important factor in the classroom was the quality of the person standing at the front of the classroom (Barnum, 2016). Studies confirmed the assertion that teacher quality had a significant impact on student achievement (Rice, 2003). According to research, teachers were estimated to have two to three times more effect on student performance in reading and math tests than any other school factor, including services, facilities and leadership (Hanushek et al., 2005; Oppen, 2019).

Advances in Practice

This inquiry focused on addressing an issue within Restart schools. Specifically, it investigated the impact of a comprehensive mentoring program for ALTs at a Restart school and aimed to provide additional information on the effectiveness of a mentoring program in enhancing teacher leadership in challenging educational environments.

Supporting ALTs was crucial for advancing educational practice, especially in Restart schools (Brown, 2024), which often faced significant challenges and high needs. Restart schools, typically low performing and serving many low socioeconomic minority students, frequently hired ALTs due to an urgent need for educators (NCDPI, n.d.-e). Implementing robust support systems for ALTs could positively impact these schools.

Targeted mentoring programs that included instructional support and curriculum assistance could lead to improved teaching practices and student performance. This support was crucial in Restart schools, where effective teaching helped bridge achievement gaps and ensured equitable educational opportunities for disadvantaged students (Woods, 2016). Effective mentoring and professional development helped ALTs integrate into the school community, build strong relationships with colleagues and improve teacher retention and job satisfaction (Mosley & McCarthy, 2023). A supportive work environment enhanced efforts to address students' unique needs and created a more inclusive and effective learning atmosphere. Tailored support helped ALTs navigate the complexities of their roles and contributed to overall school improvement.

Investing in the development and support of ALTs enabled Restart schools to advance educational practice and drive improvements in teaching and learning (Brown, 2024). Comprehensive mentoring and professional development enhanced ALTs' skills and supported a culture of continuous improvement, which aligned with Restart schools' goals of boosting performance and providing high-quality education for all students (NCDPI, n.d.-e).

The results of this inquiry were expected to contribute to the literature on beginning teacher retention and help inform policy decisions regarding teacher training and support programs for alternatively licensed teachers. Furthermore, the interventions studied in this inquiry helped the school system establish a framework for a comprehensive mentoring program, which can lead to more effective teachers in low-performing schools.

The methods explored in this inquiry also helped create a guide for a more robust mentoring program that could be provided to other Restart schools within the district. If the interventions and processes studied were proven effective, they could be shared through

professional learning networks within the state. Additionally, this inquiry could guide mentoring programs for ALTs within and beyond the Whitakers County School System.

AI Acknowledgment

This inquiry includes the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to support certain phases of the research and writing process. Specifically, AI was used in the following ways [list the ways you utilized AI and which tool(s)]:

- To explore and refine potential inquiry questions using prompt iteration (ChatGPT-4, OpenAI).
- To generate summaries of scholarly literature during the early stages of the literature review; all final summaries were verified and rewritten by the author.
- To assist with formatting tasks and to provide editorial feedback on grammar and clarity in early drafts.
- To assist with verifying the results from the data that my inquiry partners and I collected and analyzed

All AI-generated content was critically reviewed, edited, and integrated to ensure scholarly integrity and alignment with academic standards. No generative AI tools were used for data analysis or for the interpretation of results. The ethical use of AI in this dissertation aligns with recommendations from Everson (2025) regarding transparency, academic integrity, and methodological rigor in EdD research projects. Additionally, AI tools were used in compliance with APA guidelines for crediting non-human authorship.

The AI tools used in this dissertation do not meet the criteria for authorship, as they cannot take responsibility for the content or claims made herein (APA, 2023). Full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and scholarly integrity of the content remains with the author.

Summary

Due to teacher shortages, the number of alternatively licensed teachers have increased. Furthermore, higher percentages of alternatively licensed teachers were hired at Restart schools and low-performing schools that historically had issues recruiting and retaining teachers. The literature suggested that valuing and investing in professional growth improved employee retention (Wixom & Workman, 2016), and mentoring programs had been shown to improve classroom instructional practices and student achievement as measured by test scores (Woods, 2016). The aim of this inquiry was to investigate how a mentoring program designed to support the instructional leadership of alternatively licensed teachers in Restart schools impacted teachers. Chapter 2 reviewed the literature that addressed the need for alternatively licensed teachers, alternative pathways, instructional leadership, mentoring programs and the Integrative Framework for Belonging. Chapter 3 focused on the methods of inquiry, including each phase of the action research. The results of the action research were discussed in Chapter 4. Lastly, Chapter 5 summarized my findings and my reflections as a scholarly practitioner.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The teacher shortage has been a significant concern for decades (Gailes & Guthery, 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2019), partly due to *A Nation at Risk*'s recommendation to bring in subject matter experts and retired scientists as teachers (Husbands, 2008). Recognizing the pending crisis, teacher education programs struggled to address teacher shortage issues while maintaining high standards to prepare highly qualified teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Ingersoll, 2011).

During the 1990s, there was an increasing demand for highly qualified teachers in the United States. Many states created alternative licensure programs to attract high-quality candidates and provide on-the-job training in response to this need. These programs were designed to address the growing need for qualified teachers, which was predicted to increase (Hussar, 1999; Ludlow, 2013). Many states offered alternative teacher certification routes. At that time, 30% of teachers entered the profession through alternative pathways (Wilcox & Samaras, 2009). However, concerns were raised regarding the quality and effectiveness of alternatively licensed teachers (Education Commission, 2016).

This inquiry aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a comprehensive mentoring program that supported the instructional leadership of alternatively licensed teachers in Restart Schools. This literature review was divided into four main sections: the need for alternatively licensed teachers, concerns related to ALTs, mentoring programs, and Allen et al.'s Integrative Framework for Belonging. It highlighted the significance of open communication to reinforce support structures while addressing the emotional aspects of belonging, ultimately contributing to teachers' well-being.

Theoretical Framework

ALTs encounter specific challenges when integrating into the school environment. They often struggle with unfamiliarity with the school's culture and norms, which can impede their ability to navigate school practices and build rapport (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Many also come with limited classroom management experience, impacting their effectiveness in managing student behavior (Darling-Hammond, 2000). They may also need more mentoring and support, which is crucial for professional development and integration (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Professional development programs may not always be tailored to their unique needs, leading to gaps in pedagogical skills (Wang et al., 2010). Integration into established teacher teams can be complex, with potential barriers to building supportive relationships (Britton et al., 2003). Differences in training backgrounds between alternative and traditional pathways can create gaps in knowledge and practices (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Moreover, preconceived biases and perceptions about alternative licensing may affect their acceptance and support within the school (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Finally, they might face challenges accessing the same resources and support as traditionally licensed teachers, impacting their teaching effectiveness (Wong & Wong, 2009). Addressing these challenges through targeted support and development is essential for successful integration.

In the changing world of education, ALTs play a crucial role in bringing diverse perspectives and experiences into the classroom. However, these educators often encounter unique challenges in feeling like they belong within their schools and communities. To tackle this issue, Allen et al. (2021) have developed an integrative framework to comprehensively understand how belonging is fostered and sustained. This framework combines insights from various theoretical perspectives—psychological, sociological, and organizational theories—to

provide a complete view of belonging. By focusing on individual needs, social support, group dynamics, and the overall educational context, Kelly et al.'s framework offers valuable strategies for supporting ALTs.

Belonging is a dynamic feeling and experience that arises from four interrelated components, as described by Allen et al. (2021). These components are supported by the systems individuals reside in, as illustrated in Figure 3. Understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging involves four interconnected components: Competencies, Opportunities, Motivations, and Perceptions. These components work together and affect each other as individuals move through different social, environmental, and temporal contexts and experiences. As a dynamic social system, these components influence each other over time. They interact with and impact relevant social environments. According to Allen et al. (2021), consistently high levels of belonging, resulting from the interconnection of these components, lead to positive life outcomes.

For the purpose of this study, I extended these constructs into five belonging lenses to better reflect the anticipated experiences of ALTs in a Restart school. This extension maintains alignment with the original framework while capturing distinctions that are especially relevant in high-need contexts. Competence includes skill development and meaningful engagement. Opportunities include autonomy. Motivations include connectedness. Perceptions include institutional support. These five lenses guided the study's design and provided a more precise structure for examining the belonging conditions that influence ALT development.

The framework addresses how belonging can be fostered through supportive practices, policies, and cultural shifts. The four components focus on specific intervention areas, identifying enablers and barriers for each component. Allen et al. state that individuals should

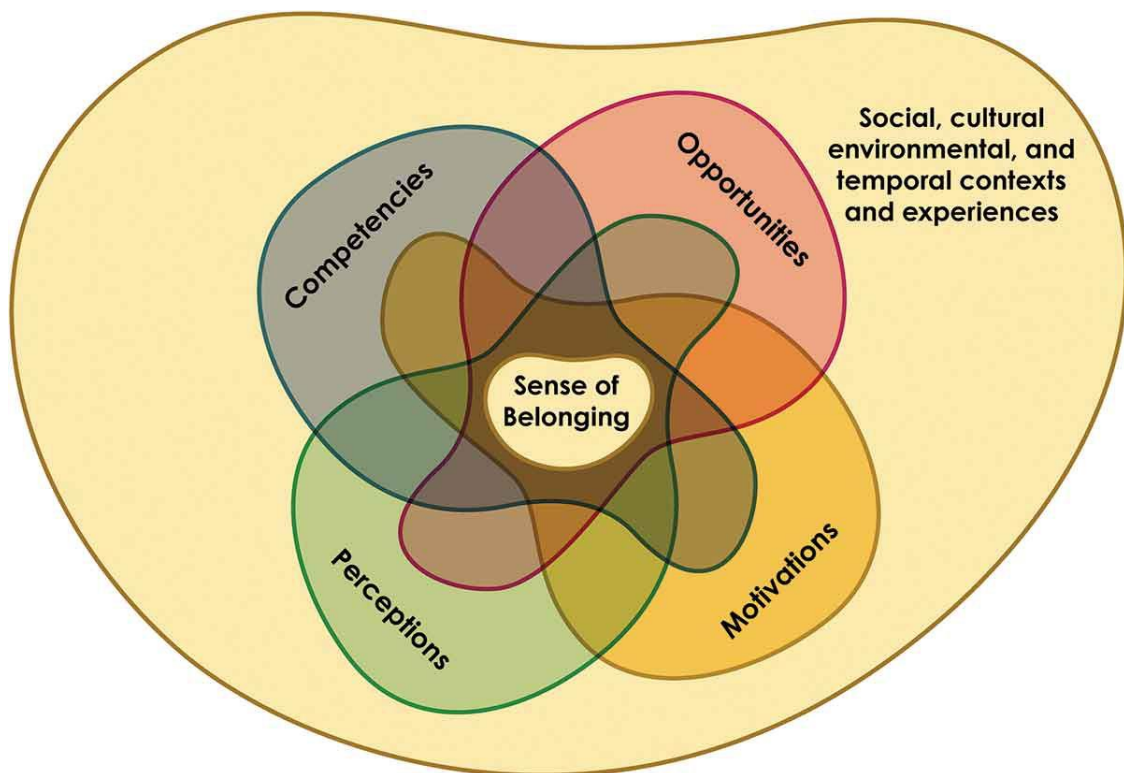


Figure 3. An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging.

be able to use and improve their skills, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions to enhance their sense of belonging. Hence, the framework seeks to identify the components and mechanisms that contribute to or hinder belonging, aiding in the design of interventions to enhance individual and collective well-being.

The integrative framework involves understanding complex organizational issues more deeply by combining insights from various theoretical perspectives. The framework includes Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains how individuals derive part of

their identity from group membership, affecting their behavior and attitudes. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) focuses on fulfilling basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—to enhance motivation and belonging. Leadership Theories, such as transformational and servant leadership, are integrated to examine how leadership styles influence employees' feelings of inclusion. Organizational Culture Theory explores how shared values and norms within an organization impact individuals' sense of belonging. Social Exchange Theory addressed how reciprocal interactions and perceived fairness affected belonging. The framework also incorporated psychological theories emphasizing fundamental human needs, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954) and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000). It explored how fulfilling needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness influenced an individual's sense of belonging. The framework acknowledged the influence of emotions and cognitive evaluations on feelings of belonging, recognizing that individuals assessed their social inclusion based on personal experiences and perceptions. By integrating these theories, the framework offered a comprehensive view of how personal needs, social dynamics, leadership practices, and organizational culture interacted to shape individuals' sense of inclusion and belonging.

Additionally, the framework applied concepts from social identity theory to understand how group membership and identity influenced belonging. It considered how belonging to various social groups affected an individual's self-concept and social integration. Furthermore, it

integrated insights from relational-cultural theory, emphasizing the importance of mutually empowering relationships and their contribution to a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021).

The framework also included aspects of organizational behavior, such as examining how workplace culture and climate affected employees' sense of belonging. It examined how organizational practices, values, and norms influenced inclusivity and support. It considered group dynamics and how team cohesion, collaboration, and communication impacted belonging within organizational settings. Moreover, it emphasized the importance of supportive relationships and networks, showing how they could enhance or hinder belonging. The framework also explored how belonging was affected by group interactions, inclusivity, and group cohesion and how various contexts, such as organizational culture and community norms, influenced experiences of belonging (Allen et al., 2021).

Studies that utilized concepts similar to the integrative framework by Allen et al. (2021) showed that effective mentoring, onboarding, and team-building programs could significantly enhance individuals' sense of belonging and overall integration. Evans and Myers (2017) revealed that comprehensive induction programs improved new teachers' sense of belonging and teaching effectiveness. New York City's comprehensive induction program combined structured onboarding, mentorship, and targeted professional development, resulting in improved integration and reduced turnover (National Council on Teacher Quality, n.d.). In Lincoln County, Oregon, a rural district's program that emphasized professional learning communities and informal social interactions enhanced job satisfaction and retention (Rural Teacher Education Pathway Project, n.d.). Chicago Public Schools employed a multifaceted approach with onboarding, mentorship, and decision-making involvement, leading to better classroom performance and teacher engagement (Chicago Public Schools, 2021). Houston Independent

School District's collaborative mentoring and professional development approach increased teacher satisfaction and retention (HISD, 2011). Los Angeles Unified School District's innovative induction practices, including culturally responsive training and active participation in school initiatives, fostered a strong sense of belonging and improved instructional skills (LAUSD, n.d.). These examples highlighted how tailored support programs effectively enhanced the integration and success of ALTs.

This study implemented a comprehensive mentoring program to support ALTs based on the integrative framework to enhance their sense of belonging. The program included a detailed orientation to school culture, policies, and resources. It tailored professional development to address specific instructional needs and provided continuous learning opportunities. ALTs were paired with experienced mentors, and regular coaching sessions were scheduled to provide personalized feedback. School leaders were involved in the mentoring and decision-making processes to ensure supportive leadership. Specific barriers were identified and addressed through targeted interventions, and equitable access to resources and support services were provided. Lastly, regular feedback was collected, and support strategies were adjusted to ensure their effectiveness in meeting the needs of the ALTs.

These interconnected components created a feedback loop in which each element supported and reinforced the others. Effective mentoring led to better professional development, which enhanced participation in professional communities. Supportive leadership and equitable access to resources further reinforced these positive outcomes. The cumulative effect of these interconnected components helped ALTs build a strong foundation. By continuously nurturing these interrelated components, educational settings created supportive environments that maximized positive outcomes for ALTs.

Teacher Shortage

In recent years, education researchers and journalists who covered the subject highlighted a growing teacher shortage in K–12 schools nationwide. This shortage was indicated by statewide subject-area vacancies, personal accounts and data from state and district officials, and declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs. These indicators helped identify the absence of qualified teachers needed to meet staffing demands in a labor market that operated differently from others (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

The teacher shortage has serious consequences. A lack of sufficient, qualified teachers threatened students' ability to learn (Ladd & Sorensen, 2016). U.S. school districts face severe teacher shortages, particularly in mathematics, science, special education, bilingual education, and career and technical education. The shortages are more pronounced in urban and rural areas and in schools serving high-poverty or high-minority populations, as well as in low-achieving schools (Education Commission, 2018). The shortage was expected to increase due to declining enrollment in teacher education programs, growing student populations, efforts to reduce student–teacher ratios, and high attrition rates (Sutcher et al., 2016).

Teacher shortages harm education quality, student outcomes, and school climate. High turnover disproportionately affects disadvantaged students. This issue persisted before and after the pandemic, with similar attrition patterns in the same regions (Castro, 2022; Viadero, 2018; Education Commission, 2018). These shortages were believed to be related to falling enrollments in teacher preparation programs (Will, 2022); however, the Education Commission (2016) reported that most vacancies stemmed from high turnover within the profession.

Schools struggle to find quality teachers, leading to the hiring of inexperienced instructors and creating financial strain. Recruiting a single teacher could cost between \$10,000

and \$20,000 (Francies & McDole, 2022). Hillard (2022) estimated that the total annual cost of teacher turnover in the U.S. was approximately \$8.5 billion. Nearly one in ten teaching positions nationwide remained unfilled or were filled by teachers who were not fully licensed. Across 21 states, there were 27,844 unfilled positions and an estimated 286,290 teachers without full certification across 47 states and the District of Columbia (Franco & Patrick, 2023). In North Carolina, on the fortieth day of the 2022–2023 school year, about one in every eighteen classrooms, roughly 5,095 classrooms, were without a licensed teacher (Nordstrom, 2023).

Teacher quality remains vital to student academic success. A shortage of qualified teachers widened the racial gap in academic performance. Schools serving low-income students or students of color face greater challenges in hiring and retaining teachers. District-level vacancies on the fortieth day of school strongly correlated with student race and income. For every 10% increase in a district’s share of low-income students, teacher vacancies rose by 1.1 per 1,000 students (Hoffman, 2022; Nordstrom, 2023).

Teacher Attrition in North Carolina

North Carolina reported an 9.9% attrition rate for teachers during the 2023–2024 academic year. Attrition referred to teachers leaving the profession entirely. Approximately two-thirds of this attrition occurred for pre-retirement reasons, including school staffing decisions, life changes, or dissatisfaction with teaching, accounting for roughly 66% of the total new demand (Carver-Thomas et al., 2019). Of the 90,638 teachers employed in the state, 10,376 left their positions. Beginning Teachers (BTs) experienced a higher attrition rate of 15.10% (4.73% increase since 2021). The most common reason cited by teachers who left North Carolina public schools was “personal reasons.” Core subject teaching positions in elementary schools and

mathematics positions in middle schools had the highest vacancy totals, while Career and Technical Education (CTE) had the highest vacancy rate in high schools (2022–2023 *State of the Teaching Profession in North Carolina*, 2023).

During the 2020-2021 school year, 6,207 teachers in North Carolina were not fully licensed for their assignments, and 3,218 teaching positions went unfilled (Franco & Patrick, 2023). By 2025, the national teacher shortage was projected to exceed 200,000 as increasing numbers of teachers left the profession (Balow, 2023).

Declining Enrollment in Teacher Preparation Programs

According to a report by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education in 2022, the number of students who completed traditional teacher education programs in the U.S. decreased by more than a third between 2008 and 2019. The report revealed that the most significant drops were observed in degree programs in areas that require more educators, such as bilingual education, science, math, and special education. According to the report, in the last ten years, there has been a substantial reduction in the number of degrees and certificates awarded in high-need specialties, with a 4% decrease in special education, a 27% decrease in science and mathematics education, and a 44% decrease in foreign language education.

In 2018-19, only 68 institutions awarded 250 or more education bachelor's degrees, which account for one-third of all such degrees. More than 1,100 institutions confer fewer than 100 education bachelor's degrees. Among these institutions, 357 award ten or fewer degrees in education (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2022). In some states, there has been a significant decline in enrollment in traditional teacher programs. The enrollment drop has been much more severe than the national average of 35 percent. In Illinois, enrollment

in education programs fell by 60 percent, in Michigan it fell by almost 70 percent, and in Oklahoma it fell by 80 percent. (Knox, 2022).

The number of prospective teachers opting for alternate routes surpassed those going through traditional university courses in North Carolina in 2022, with 2,438 candidates taking alternate routes compared to 2,283 taking traditional routes. Enrollments for traditional routes saw a decline of 44%, while enrollments for alternate routes rose by 14% (Granados, 2023).

History of Alternative Licensure Programs

In 1983, several states, including California, New Jersey, Texas, and Connecticut, established alternate route programs to attract recent graduates, retired scientists, and other subject matter experts to teach in response to *A Nation at Risk* (Husband, 2008). *A Nation at Risk* is a United States National Commission on Excellence in Education report. The report aimed to identify the issues with American education. The report pointed out several risks American society faced, including a loss of global competitiveness, declining literacy, eroding standards, and a lack of necessary workforce skills (Mugg, 2023). Over the years, policies and programs were developed to address teacher shortages, improve teacher quality, and increase teacher diversity.

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) introduced the Teacher Trainee Program in 1984, the state's first district-based intern program. In 1985, New Jersey started a Provisional Teacher Program to encourage liberal arts graduates to teach in elementary and secondary schools. The Houston Independent School District launched Texas's first school district-based alternate route program in 1985, followed by Connecticut in 1986. In 1997, California passed the Class Size Reduction Initiative, which created an urgent need for approximately 18,000 elementary school teachers.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 increased the pressure on public schools, including charters, to fulfill certification requirements for teacher quality. According to the NCLB, a "highly qualified teacher" must hold a bachelor's degree, obtain full state certification (through traditional or alternative routes), and demonstrate knowledge in the core academic subjects they teach.

Restart School Model

In 2010, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the *Reform of Continually Low-Performing Schools* law, which introduced the Restart School Model. Under G.S. 115C-83.15, schools that received a performance grade of D or F and a growth score of “met expected growth” or “not met expected growth” were classified as low-performing. Under §115C-105.37B, the State Board of Education could permit a local education agency (LEA) to operate such schools with the same exemptions and flexibilities as a charter school (NCDPI, n.d.-e).

Restart schools were encouraged to utilize their charter-like flexibility to creatively address research-based barriers to improvement, including teacher turnover, teacher capacity, student mobility, and culture. Each school identified smaller, incremental goals aligned to an overall improvement target. This approach emphasized effective adult practices as the key to sustained student success (NCDPI, 2022).

The Restart program operated on the premise that schools best understood their students’ needs and therefore required flexibility to make necessary adjustments. Flexibilities included control over hiring, scheduling, budgeting, class size, curriculum, and assessment practices (Childress, 2020; Granados, 2018).

As of July 2025, there are 174 State Board of Education (SBE) approved Restart Schools in North Carolina, including 46 in Whitakers County. In these schools, no more than 50% of

teachers could hold an alternative license, and hiring outside certification areas was permitted (NCDPI, n.d.-e). Restart schools hired more alternatively licensed teachers than non-Restart schools (Pham et al., 2023).

The Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) Strategic Reform Team provided leadership development, networking, and professional learning for all Restart leaders statewide. Progress was monitored through a five-year cycle to determine continued authorization. The team also included four Comprehensive Support Specialists who prioritized schools not on track for renewal, offering targeted professional development and technical assistance (NCDPI, 2020).

Within the district, the Division of District and Regional Support (DRS) helped low-performing schools through coaching, diagnostic services, and reform planning. DRS partnered with schools to ensure equitable access to high-quality education and to establish systems that promoted sustainable change (NCDPI, 2020).

Whitakers County School System became a pioneer in implementing Restart flexibilities. In May 2016, the State Board approved its first two Restart Schools, and the number grew annually. Area superintendents and senior administrators ensured compliance with Restart plans, while the Chief of Schools served as the DPI liaison. The district limited some flexibilities, maintaining a uniform calendar, curriculum, and assessment schedule (Overman, 2023).

All 46 Restart schools in Whitakers County shared similar demographics: student populations of at least 50% students of color, a free and reduced lunch rate of 45% or higher, high teacher turnover, a large proportion of beginning teachers, and more than 12% alternatively licensed teachers (N.C. School Report Cards). As of June 2023, fifteen schools were no longer low-performing, and five were no longer recurrently low-performing (Overman, 2023).

Meeting a Need Through Alternative Licensure

Licensing and certifying teachers had been a practice since the colonial era, but with the advent of compulsory schooling and the rise of schools of education, teaching became a licensed profession in the twentieth century (Bailes & Guthery, 2023). Licensure aimed both to ensure teacher quality and to safeguard the profession from underqualified competition.

Alternative certification became an important pathway into teaching. Among teachers entering the profession through alternative routes, 30% previously worked outside education, 24% were college students, and 23% held non-teaching educational roles. Initially, these pathways addressed shortages in hard-to-staff schools, but they evolved to fill high-demand subject areas as well (Husbands, 2008; Redding & Smith, 2016).

The proportion of alternative-route teachers exceeded the national average (18%) in several subjects: 37% in career and technical education, 28% in natural sciences, 26% in foreign languages, 24% in English as a second language, 22% in mathematics and computer science, and 20% in special education. Such teachers were also more prevalent in charter schools (25%) than in traditional public schools (17%) and more common in high schools (25%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Despite persistent concerns about preparation and retention, alternative routes produced many teachers for districts with chronic shortages (Redding & Smith, 2016). Alternative licensure also increased diversity in the profession by attracting more educators from historically underrepresented groups (Peterson & Nadler, 2009). The rise of ALTs of color had positive impacts on students, particularly those from similar backgrounds (Grissom & Redding, 2015).

Although male participation in the teaching workforce declined overall (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), most male teacher candidates entered the field through alternative

pathways. Men represented 22% of ALTs, compared to 16% of traditionally prepared teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

ALTs were more likely to teach in low-performing, high-poverty, urban schools serving majority-minority populations (Boyd et al., 2009; Lankford et al., 2002). Researchers continued to debate whether higher turnover among ALTs resulted from the difficult environments in which they worked or from selection effects related to their credentialing pathway (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Guthery & Bailes, 2022; Redding & Smith, 2016).

Alternative Pathways to Licensure

States are exploring alternative routes to certification to tackle teacher shortages, attract diverse candidates, provide a fast track for teacher candidates, support and develop current unlicensed educators, and promote diversity in the teaching workforce. Alternative programs focus on providing the most efficient path to a career change by offering practical training and allowing candidates to earn a teacher's salary while completing the program. However, the required coursework and program length may be the same as traditional programs. (NEA, 2009; Woods, 2016). In this inquiry, we refer to programs or licensing routes allowing individuals to become licensed teachers without completing a traditional university-based program as alternative certification.

Different states have varying approaches toward alternative certification routes for prospective teachers. Alaska, Oregon, and Wyoming have no approved alternative programs for teacher preparation. On the other hand, Texas has the highest number of approved programs, with almost 100 options. The remaining states have a varying number of approved programs, ranging from a few to several dozen (Devier, 2019).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCEI) produces an annual report titled "Alternative Teacher Certification: A State-by-State Analysis". The report highlights the diversity in program types, certification policies, entry requirements, and time to completion among the 31 states that offer alternative route programs. Each state outlines its requirements for alternative certification programs, some being highly prescriptive while others being more flexible. Program requirements can vary considerably from state to state and from program to program in terms of course requirements, prerequisites, experience in the classroom, supervision of program participants, requirements for licensure assessments, and type of certification. While some states only consider and support programs offered by higher education institutions, others also approve programs from independent non-profit and for-profit organizations such as community colleges, regional service agencies, school districts, and charter schools. In some states, accelerated post-baccalaureate programs are also recognized as a pathway to alternative certification. Despite the diversity of alternative certification providers, most states set specific program parameters to reduce program variation (NEA, 2020).

NEA's Professional Standards and Practice Committee established a set of criteria in 2008 that applies to all state licensure requirements. The criteria entail the following:

1. A bachelor's degree with a liberal arts curriculum to ensure fundamental skills in reading, writing, and computation.
2. Knowledge in core teaching area and an academic major in the same area.
3. Professional and pedagogical skills required for teaching.
4. Participation in supervised clinical practice.
5. Completion of a new teacher induction program.

6. A full professional license is given after effective classroom practice as a teacher of record.

However, in many states, alternative certification requirements closely resemble traditional ones, with typical programs mimicking pre-service college of education programs (Nadler & Peterson, 2009). Nadler and Peterson (2009) agree that the design of alternative certification programs varies significantly between states. While 26 of the 47 states that allow alternative certification have programs similar to traditional certification programs, in the remaining 21 states, most of the coursework required for traditional certification can be skipped. However, the state may require additional coursework after securing a classroom position.

To ensure clarity, it is essential to specify the meaning of an alternative licensed pathway in this inquiry, considering the various definitions available. The dataset used for this study identifies North Carolina's Residency License as the alternative licensed pathway.

NC Residency License

The Residency License is a North Carolina–specific pathway to becoming a teacher. Residency licensing allows qualified individuals to begin teaching while completing state licensure requirements. The license lasts one year and could be renewed twice. It replaced the former Lateral Entry License and remained the only alternative pathway to obtain licensure in the state.

According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), candidates were required to hold a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution, have a 2.7 GPA or higher, complete at least 24 semester hours of coursework related to their content area or pass

approved content exams (Praxis II or Pearson), and be enrolled in an approved Educator Preparation Program (EPP).

NCDPI approved 74 EPPs statewide, including 71 higher education institutions, two alternative programs (TEACH and Teachers of Tomorrow), and one online provider (University of Phoenix).

The State Board of Education (SBE) requires aspiring educators to take both a content exam and a performance/pedagogy assessment. This assessment can be done through edTPA, which evaluates student learning and provides feedback to improve teaching, or through PPAT, an educator preparation program approval requirement. Both assessments cost \$300, with additional fees for retakes and resubmissions (Educational Testing Service (ETS)). These assessments are mandatory for all applicants who complete approved educator licensure programs or are awarded educator preparation program degrees on or after September 1, 2019, regardless of whether they are in-state or out-of-state applicants. After successfully completing coursework and passing all SBE-approved licensure exams, residency license holders can apply for an Initial Professional Educator's License (NCDPI, n.d.-b).

Most IHEs advertise the residency pathway as an option for ALTs who want to earn a salary while they learn. These IHE offer classes that can be scheduled around candidates' work hours and will allow them to complete licensure coursework in less than three years; in contrast, traditional teaching programs often require teacher candidates to complete the program coursework first, followed by an “unpaid” student teaching experience (TEACH.org, n.d).

According to a survey from the N.C. School Superintendents' Association, school districts in North Carolina opened the 22-23 school year with 3,584 teaching vacancies, a nearly 20 percent drop from the previous year. However, the association's executive director, Jack

Hoke, said the drop occurred because schools hired 1,400 more “residency license teachers” than the prior year. The superintendent’s survey found that districts hired 5,041 new residency license teachers in 2023. That is a 160 percent increase over the past two years and a 39 percent increase over last year (Hui, 2023).

State and District Requirements

To qualify for alternative certification in North Carolina, candidates were required to hold a relevant degree or have completed 24 semester hours of coursework in the desired licensure area with a minimum GPA of 2.7. They also had to pass the appropriate exams approved by the North Carolina State Board of Education (NCSBE). Based on transcript reviews, additional coursework could be required to meet teaching standards. The Residency Pathway served as the primary alternative licensure route in the state.

Residency candidates have to qualify for a provisional license by meeting all preliminary requirements and enrolling in an Educator Preparation Program (EPP) at an approved college or university. They were also required to be employed as teachers in North Carolina public schools as defined by NCDPI. The scope and rigor of coursework, number of field experiences, and duration of student teaching varied by institution (NCDPI, 2019).

Within the Whitakers County School System (WCSS), alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs) were required to attend the Alternative Licensure Institute (ALI). The ALI offered an orientation program designed to introduce ALTs to the profession and prepare them for their initial weeks in the classroom. The program addressed topics such as relationship building, equity, diversity and inclusion, engagement strategies, de-escalation, classroom management, time and material organization, and establishing routines. It also covered lesson planning and

unpacking standards for elementary teachers. Special Education (SPED) and Career and Technical Education (CTE) teachers participated in additional mini-clinics focused on policy and instructional resources.

To obtain licensure, ALTs had to complete 80 hours of orientation mandated by NCDPI. Forty-four of these hours were completed during the ALI before teachers began leading their own classrooms. Notably, participation in the ALI was unpaid. Additionally, ALTs were required to complete 36 hours of interviews with SPED teachers, counselors, and ESL specialists within their first 30 days of teaching, as well as reflection assignments, all district requirements. Completion of these tasks was necessary for license renewal, along with meeting testing requirements for Praxis or Pearson assessments.

Elementary and special education teachers were required to pass the Pearson exams, while middle and secondary educators took the Praxis II exams specific to their subject areas (Teachers of Tomorrow, n.d.). Furthermore, ALTs were required to attend monthly Beginning Teacher (BT) meetings to support their professional growth.

The stringent requirements for alternative certification in North Carolina and the structured supports provided by WCSS demonstrated a clear commitment to preparing ALTs for success. The ALI's comprehensive orientation, coupled with ongoing coursework and assessment, equipped teachers with the knowledge and skills needed for effective instruction. By ensuring that ALTs met rigorous standards and engaged in sustained professional development, the district fostered an environment that prioritized teacher growth and instructional quality. These measures reflected a broader statewide effort to enhance educational outcomes and professionalize alternative pathways into teaching.

Teacher Quality

Today, teachers are asked to achieve significant academic growth for all students while instructing students with ever-more diverse needs. Teaching has never been more difficult or more important, and the desperate need for more student success has never been so urgent. Are we adequately preparing future teachers to win this critical battle?” – Arne Duncan, 2009, U.S. Secretary of Education

No Child Left Behind was first introduced in March 2001 and signed into law in January 2002. The No Child Left Behind Act aimed to ensure that all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, would have the opportunity for a sound education. The No Child Left Behind law mandates that all teachers be "highly qualified." According to the law, "highly qualified" means that a teacher must meet the license and certification requirements of the state in which they teach. A teacher must also hold at least a bachelor's degree and must pass state testing criteria to be eligible to teach (Chen, 2007).

There is a common belief among people, including policymakers that teaching is a simple profession that demands little prior knowledge. They think anyone with basic knowledge of a subject can teach, and the rest can be learned on the job. However, this perception is far from the truth. Good teaching involves extensive work behind the scenes and requires high expertise. Unfortunately, this misconception leads to the promotion of uncommon routes into teaching, which denies teachers access to the knowledge base for teaching and supervised clinical practice. These routes fail to provide them with models of what good teachers do and how they understand their work (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Teachers are the most important determinant of educational quality (Banks, 2014; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Noell et al., 2014). Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) define teacher quality as

teachers' deep knowledge of children's learning, complex classroom skills, and professional judgment. Students deserve competent, caring, and certified teachers. Becoming a teacher educator is not a straightforward process of transitioning from a teacher (occupation) to a teacher educator (vocation). A teacher primarily imparts knowledge to learners in various fields. On the other hand, teacher educators are committed to improving their teaching methods, incorporating new research, and engaging in continuous learning and reflective practice. For them, education is not just a job but a calling, something that they feel passionate about and that defines who they are (Edmentum, 2023).

Governments worldwide are constantly grappling with how to improve the quality of their teaching staff. One solution to enhance teacher quality is implementing a teacher certification program that ensures teachers possess the required competencies for effective teaching (Kusumawardhani, 2017). Educators can only teach what they know.

There are differing views on the process of learning to teach. Some people believe teaching is a simple matter of learning on the job and that teachers can effectively teach by imitating what others do. However, others argue that teaching is a complex process that requires specialized knowledge and professional methods that can only be acquired through formal study and apprenticeship (Cochran-Smith 2004; Darling-Hammond & Bransford 2005). Literature suggests that while practical strategies are essential, teaching is more than just a technical skill. It involves constant decision-making and adapting to changing contexts and diverse learners. (Banks, 2014; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013).

The US Department of Education has shown a keen interest in teacher preparation, which is evident in the Race to the Top initiative and the negotiated rulemaking relating to teacher preparation as part of the Higher Education Act reauthorization. In both cases, the department

emphasized the need to strengthen teacher preparation programs and to establish accountability based on student learning outcomes (Noell et al., 2014). The Teaching Commission believes that improving the skills and preparation of teachers will require two significant changes: college and university presidents must align their teacher education programs with the rigor, quality, and accountability of our 21st-century world, and states must overhaul their certification and licensing processes (The Teaching Commission, 2004.).

The Association of Teacher Educators (n.d.) has developed a set of standards to help all teacher candidates and school personnel improve student learning. These standards describe how teacher educators can impact the education of teachers and are intended for all individuals responsible for teacher education, from pre-service teacher preparation to programs that support the continued education of teachers throughout their careers. These standards were first developed in 1992 and have recently been revised after an extensive review of research on teacher education, input from teacher educators, and public feedback (Association of Teacher Educators, n.d.).

The North Carolina State Board of Education assigned the task of aligning the Core Standards for the Teaching Profession (1997) with the newly adopted mission of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission. Commission members, consisting of 16 practicing educators from across the state, deliberated on what skills and knowledge teachers need to possess to be effective in 21st-century schools. The North Carolina State Board of Education adopted the aligned standards in June 2007 and July 2011, now known as the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. These standards serve as the foundation for teacher preparation, evaluation, and professional development, encompassing the competencies required for 21st-century teaching and learning. (*North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards*, 2013).

The North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission outlines several crucial expectations for teachers to meet the demands of 21st-century education. Teachers are expected to engage in shared leadership with staff and administration, fostering a unified vision for the school while valuing each teacher's contributions (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013). They must ensure their lessons are engaging and relevant, making content meaningful to students' lives (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Rather than just covering material, teachers should collaborate with students to uncover solutions, integrating core content with essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and literacy (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

Classrooms should facilitate the use of 21st-century skills, encouraging students to learn, innovate, collaborate, and communicate (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Essential content areas, including global awareness, civic literacy, financial literacy, and health awareness, should be incorporated into core subjects (Potemski & Montalch, 2014). Teachers should also promote interdisciplinary learning and engage with students' homes and communities (Wang et al., 2010). Reflective practice and authentic, structured assessments are vital for demonstrating student understanding (Britton et al., 2003). Additionally, teachers are expected to model lifelong learning and inspire their students to pursue continuous growth (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Although these standards are essential, their implementation can be inconsistent, and they are often more applicable to experienced educators rather than beginners (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013).

Traditional teacher preparation programs prepare candidates to complete coursework on psychological principles, subject matter, and teaching methods before beginning student teaching, providing few connections to the course content. Mentor teachers are typically selected as needed, not based on quality. Teacher candidate field placements vary greatly and tend to be

idiosyncratic rather than well-crafted experiences that foster skill development and mastery. As a result, prospective teacher candidates learn theory in isolation from practice and typically have brief encounters with classroom practice divorced from theory. This further contributes to the gap between research and practice, producing teacher candidates who feel unprepared to meet the diverse educational needs of students (Banks, 2014).

Alternative certification pathways are often criticized as academic shortcuts. Teachers who are certified through alternative pathways are usually perceived as "less prepared" or, at the very least, inconsistently prepared compared to those who follow traditional certification routes. However, it is difficult to conclusively assert that traditional pathways to certification are superior since there is limited research and mixed results on the correlation between a teacher's professional preparation and their impact on student learning (Bowling & Ball, 2018). It has been found by researchers that many candidates who enter through emergency or alternative routes to teaching, fail to meet the minimum standards required at the start of their teaching careers. The pressure to get these candidates certified, in states where thousands are hired annually, can have a negative impact on the quality of preparation they receive ultimately (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Teacher quality is vital in improving students' academic performance (Guerriero, 2014). Initiatives to improve teaching quality require developing contexts that enable teachers to practice well and identify, reward, and utilize their skills and abilities (Darling-Hammond, 2009).

Teacher Effectiveness

About 150,000 new teachers are hired annually, representing about 4.6% of the teacher workforce (Feistritz, 2011). Many new teachers gain exposure to trends in how to teach without mastering the content knowledge required to be effective in the classroom, and often

without receiving significant practical opportunities to explore effective ways to help students achieve (*Teaching at Risk: A Call to Action*, n.d.).

Teaching is in the service of students, which creates the expectation that teachers will be able to come to understand how students learn and what various students need if they are to learn more effectively—and that they will incorporate this into their teaching and curriculum construction (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Over the last decade, teacher qualifications have become a stronger predictor of teacher effectiveness due to integrating standards into licensing and preparation requirements (Darling-Hammond, 2009).

Educational experts are discussing the qualities and abilities that make a teacher effective in the classroom. According to Goodwin and Kosnik (2013), practical teacher qualities should include classroom management, lesson planning, instruction, goal setting, monitoring student progress through assessments, and helping students further their comprehension of new knowledge. Furthermore, Stronge et al. (2004) identified personal qualities that teachers must possess, such as caring, fairness, respect, and the ability to reflect on their practice. In addition, Sachs (2004) identified five specific characteristics of effective urban teachers: socio-cultural awareness, contextual interpersonal skills, self-understanding, risk-taking, and perceived efficacy. By possessing these qualities and attributes, teachers can create a productive classroom environment, evidenced by student progress and attitudes (Gupta, 2013).

Studies of K-12 teacher evaluation have suggested that value-added scores based on student achievement measures, tools for observing classroom practice, and principal evaluations can be used to identify effective teachers (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013). Jacob and Lefgren (2008) studied principals' ability to distinguish between more and less effective teachers based on their success in raising student math and reading achievement. The study found that

principals could accurately identify the teachers who produced the most significant and smallest standardized achievement gains in their schools.

Baumert et al. (2010) discovered that when it comes to explaining student progress, pedagogical content knowledge plays an essential role. Pedagogical knowledge refers to the knowledge that teachers need, which involves effectively communicating subject matter to their students. According to Voss et al. (2011), general pedagogical/psychological knowledge (PPK) refers to teachers' knowledge to create and optimize teaching-learning situations across different subjects. This includes declarative and procedural knowledge of classroom management, teaching methods, classroom assessment, and student diversity.

Guerriero (2014) concludes that teachers' knowledge plays a significant role in improving educational quality. He notes that although the connection is still being explored, initial results suggest that strong general pedagogical knowledge is crucial for understanding quality teaching and can positively influence student learning outcomes as referenced in Table 2.

In 2014, Noell et al. conducted a comprehensive analysis of research on teacher preparation and effectiveness. They focused on three key domains: student-learning outcomes, classroom practice, and educator effectiveness ratings by supervisors. These areas were selected because they are widely used and applicable to various teaching disciplines. The validity of data collected through these assessment approaches has been reported. Therefore, assessments in these areas have some potential for identifying effective versus ineffective teacher candidates. About 50% of these participants from alternative licensed programs left their initial school after completing two years of training. This frequent turnover could make it difficult for them to build lasting relationships with students and colleagues, which may impact their overall effectiveness in the school (Hramiak, 2017).

Baurmet et al. (2011) found that research spanning over a decade consistently demonstrates that a classroom teacher significantly impacts their students' learning. Schools have evaluation systems in place, and numerous large-scale studies provide evidence. Effective teachers are successful across all achievement levels, regardless of heterogeneity in their classes. One study found that the difference in achievement gains between a 25th percentile teacher (not so effective) and a 75th percentile teacher (effective) is over one-third of a standard deviation (0.35) in reading and almost half a standard deviation (0.48) in mathematics. Another study aimed to determine the persistence of teacher effects in elementary grades and the extent to which these effects remain over multiple years.

Evaluations should be designed to determine which teachers are effective and support effectiveness and retention (Clement, 2016). According to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2012), there is a general agreement that the current teacher evaluation system in the United States is flawed. Marzano and Toft (2013) suggest an alternative approach to teacher evaluation. They offer six recommendations: multiple measures should be used to determine student growth, and these measures should be aggregated; data about teachers' classroom practices should come from various sources at different points in time; teacher observation and pedagogical skills measurement should be expanded to provide a comprehensive view; evaluating teachers based only on their planning and preparation might not be effective in improving their classroom skills; districts and schools should use the teacher evaluation process to enhance their pedagogical skills; finally, teacher, school leader, and district leader evaluation systems should be hierarchical, recognizing that teachers' actions are embedded in those of school leaders, and school leaders' actions are embedded in those of district leaders. This implies that school and

district leaders should be evaluated on how their actions support teacher development and school improvement.

Table 2*Teachers' Pedagogical Knowledge and Student Achievement*

Knowledge Type	Implication for Student Achievement	Study Context
Content Knowledge	Higher student achievement	Mathematics teachers
Pedagogical Content Knowledge	Higher student achievement	Not specified
Pedagogical Content Knowledge	Greater impact on student achievement than content knowledge	Not specified
Pedagogical Content Knowledge	Impacts quality of instruction	Not specified
General Pedagogical/Psychological Knowledge	Higher quality of instruction (e.g., higher cognitive activation, improved instructional practices, stronger student–teacher relationships)	Only one study on mathematics teachers

Note. Based on Hill, Rowan, and Ball (2005), Baumert et al. (2010), and Voss, Kunter, and Baumert (2011).

NC Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES)

In recent years, classroom observation instruments have the potential to provide a reliable and valid measure of teaching quality, which can help make teacher supervision and evaluation more evidence-based (White, 2018). An effective educator evaluation system supports teacher development and emphasizes growth over accountability. According to Goe et al. (2009), successful evaluation systems use measures such as classroom observations, student assessments, and teacher self-reflections to provide a comprehensive view of teacher performance. These systems are most effective when they assess and improve teaching practices by offering constructive feedback linked to professional development opportunities. Similarly, Darling-Hammond (2013) emphasizes that high-quality evaluations are crucial for improving teaching and learning. She highlights the importance of using well-trained observers and clear rubrics to ensure reliable and constructive evaluations. Additionally, Darling-Hammond stresses the need to avoid relying too heavily on standardized test scores, which provide limited insights into teaching quality, and to instead focus on ongoing support and coaching to address specific areas for improvement. Both Goe et al. and Darling-Hammond advocate for evaluation systems that promote teacher growth through actionable feedback and continuous development, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes and improved student achievement.

NCEES is the official Home Base application used by public and charter schools in North Carolina to store, track, and manage educator effectiveness (NCDPI, n.d-h.). The evaluation tool is based on the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards and includes components that support the ongoing professional growth of K-12 educational leaders and teachers (NCDPI, n.d-h.).

In 2008, North Carolina approved a policy for evaluating teachers, updated in 2011 to include abbreviated evaluations for Career-Status Teachers. The evaluation process is based on the Framework for 21st Century Learning and the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. The standards are the foundation for evaluation instruments and processes used to measure educator performance against established standards and help staff members enhance their skills and knowledge (NCESS, n.d.). The expectation is that all professionals in North Carolina's schools should be rated as proficient based on the evaluation instrument's standards. The evaluation process to promote effective leadership, quality teaching, and student learning while enhancing professional practice and improving instruction. The process encourages professional growth and serves as a foundation for professional goals and identifying development needs. The evaluation is conducted by the principal or designated evaluator, with the teacher actively participating through self-assessment, reflection, presentation of artifacts, and classroom demonstrations. Teacher evaluations measure performance, guide improvement, focus schools' goals and objectives, inform professional development, and enhance curriculum implementation (*North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards*, 2013).

At the end of the year during the Summary Evaluation Conference, a teacher's overall ratings for standards 1-5 are determined. The overall ratings for standards 1-5 are as follows:

- Developing: The teacher demonstrated adequate growth towards achieving the standard(s) during the performance period but did not demonstrate competence on the standard(s) of performance.
- Proficient: The teacher demonstrated basic competence on the standard(s) of performance.

- Accomplished: The teacher exceeded basic competence on the standard(s) of performance most of the time.
- Distinguished: The teacher consistently and significantly exceeded basic competence on the standard(s) of performance

Teachers with a Standard Professional 1 (SP1) license must achieve a rating of proficient or higher on all five NCEES standards by the end of their third year to obtain a Standard Professional 2 (SP2) license. Experienced teachers with an SP2 license who fail to meet the expected growth for a standard are put on a monitored growth plan, and if they don't achieve proficiency by the end of the second year, they are placed on a directed growth plan for up to one year, after which they are dismissed if they still fail to meet the standards. Principals have the authority to put teachers on growth plans and require more rapid improvement on standards. School administrators must maintain data and documentation of performance issues to support their decisions (*NCDPI, n.d.-h*).

Ensuring teacher evaluations are based on valid and reliable data is crucial in providing all students access to effective teachers. The high-stakes decisions related to teacher performance measures necessitate a careful examination of the reliability of ratings provided by evaluators. When more precise measurements were applied, raters produced greater score variability (Bottoms et al., 2022).

North Carolina Beginning Teacher Support Program

State Board policy established the Beginning Teacher Support Standards for Traditional and Lateral Entry Teachers. Per the policy, every Public School Unit (PSU) must maintain an approved Beginning Teacher Support Plan. This plan encompasses the induction period of three

years and the evaluation requirements. A template is available to assist coordinators in creating and approving the Beginning Teacher Support Program (BTSP) plan (NCDPI, n.d-b.).

Teachers with fewer than three years of public school teaching experience are issued initial licenses and must participate in the BTSP. New teachers often face challenging assignments that may hinder their learning and growth. To facilitate their development into proficient teachers, the following working conditions are recommended: assignments in the licensure area, early mentoring in the licensure area, an orientation that outlines expectations, limited course preparations, minimal non-instructional duties, a manageable number of exceptional or challenging students, and no extracurricular activities unless requested in writing. "Non-instructional duties" refer to tasks not directly related to teaching, while "extracurricular activities" denote events or activities outside regular school hours (*Chapter 9 -the Beginning Teacher Support Program*, 2008).

The Beginning Teacher Support Program (BTSP) primarily aims to provide new teachers with the necessary assistance to improve their skills and build confidence. This, in turn, helps them become successful educators. The BTSP recognizes that new teachers can only reach their full potential with support from the state, school district, local schools, and quality mentors. Furthermore, the BTSP aims to ensure that beginning teachers meet the state's professional teaching standards, positively impacting the learning of all students. It also encourages them to remain in the profession and become future master teachers, teacher leaders, skilled administrators, and superintendents (NCDPI, n.d.).

To effectively serve beginning teachers, mentors should possess the following attributes: optimism, strong listening skills, reflective dialogue, commitment to professional development, equity, flexibility, collaboration, and utilization of multiple assessment types. They should also

have a successful track record, school leadership, peer support, and work in a conducive environment (NCDPI)]. (*n.d.-g*).

As part of their teaching journey, new teachers are required to create a Professional Development Plan in partnership with their principal (or someone designated by the principal) and mentor teacher. This plan should outline their goals, strategies, and methods for assessing their progress towards improving their professional skills. To keep track of their progress, they should have regular formative assessment conferences throughout the year to reflect on their achievements and identify areas for further development (NCDPI)]. (*n.d.-g*).

Mentoring Programs or Model

While elementary and secondary school teachers work closely with children, they often work in isolation from their colleagues (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). This is particularly difficult for new teachers who are frequently left to succeed or fail on their own within the confines of their classrooms. Some argue that new teachers are often placed in the most complex and challenging classroom and school assignments, which can feel like a "trial by fire" (2011). Beginning teachers have been found to stay in teaching at higher rates because of the mentoring they receive, and those who leave (generally under 5%) are usually those the district has chosen not to continue rather than those who have resigned (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Effective mentorship is crucial for the success of teachers. It can make a significant difference in a teacher's performance and ultimately contribute to the success of the students they teach (West, 2002).

ALTs, often from non-traditional backgrounds, benefit significantly from mentoring that addresses their specific needs. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), these teachers face

challenges adapting to various teaching environments. They may require more familiarity with local educational standards, curricula, and the unique needs of their student population. Effective mentoring programs provide critical support in these areas, helping teachers navigate and integrate into the established school culture. This includes guidance on understanding school norms and expectations and building relationships with colleagues, students, and parents. Additionally, targeted mentoring addresses classroom management, a significant challenge for alternatively licensed teachers. Darling-Hammond (2010) notes that mentors offer practical strategies and modeling for managing diverse student behaviors, creating a conducive learning environment, and effectively using available school resources.

Formal mentoring for new teachers has become increasingly prevalent in the United States. While nearly all new teachers benefit from informal mentoring, formal programs are now widespread. As of recent data, 23 states provide funding for induction or mentoring programs and mandate that all new teachers participate in these initiatives. Additionally, 19 states require prospective principals to engage in similar mentoring programs (Bullough, 2012). This shift reflects a growing recognition of the importance of structured support in fostering effective teaching and leadership in education. Because many of these teachers leave within their first five years of employment, attention needs to be paid to making sure the lack of initial preparation in curriculum development, co-teaching special education students in the regular education classroom, and general behavior management does not become a barrier to retention (Gifford et al., 2013).

Research suggests that mentoring helps teachers reflect on their practice and develop their skills by articulating expectations and practices and providing the mentee diverse perspectives on teaching (Boswell et al., 2017; Hudson, 2013). Mentoring bridges the gap

between ALTs' training and the classroom's practical demands. Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) state that these teachers often possess theoretical knowledge but may lack practical classroom experience. Mentoring helps turn theoretical concepts into actionable classroom strategies by providing hands-on guidance and feedback that support effective teaching. Customized professional development within mentoring programs ensures that ALTs receive targeted training in areas where they need additional support, such as instructional techniques and student engagement strategies. Furthermore, mentoring supports a smooth transition into teaching roles, which is particularly important for teachers entering the profession mid-career or from unrelated fields (Hammerness et al., 2005). By offering practical advice, emotional support, and encouragement, mentors help to build teachers' confidence and competence, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing their ability to succeed in their new roles.

Mentoring programs differ in how they choose, train, assign, and compensate the mentors. Selecting mentors is a crucial issue for schools, as it can determine whether the selection is voluntary or a semi-mandatory assignment. Some programs offer training to mentors, while others do not. The programs also differ in whether and how mentors are paid for their services. Some programs focus on matching the mentor's background and experience with the mentee's needs, while others do not. Investments that enhance the effectiveness of new teachers can make the job more attractive, improve teacher retention, and lead to better outcomes (Ingroll & Strong, 2011). Mentors can be paid mentors by the organizations, or they can be co-teachers or instructional specialists. Usually, these mentors will be those with experience with the program area and those who can offer support and guidance. Also, the mentors are not judgmental or critical; instead, they develop relationships that create a trusting environment for instructional improvement (Boswell et al., 2017). Organizing mentoring around clear standards

of practice tied to teacher effectiveness focuses the mentor's and novice's efforts on what matters most for teaching success. This strategy also requires highly skilled mentors who are effective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2009).

According to Johnson (2016), mentoring relationships should not be viewed as a distinct category but as a continuum. He proposed that the definition of mentoring should be based on the quality of the relationship and the specific functions provided by the mentor rather than just a formal role assignment. Johnson emphasized the importance of shifting our thinking about mentoring to better understand its character and purpose.

A comprehensive mentoring program provides essential support to alternatively licensed teachers, helping them transition into teaching. The program starts with an orientation to the district and school culture, led by effective principal leadership and clear communication (Potemski & Matalch, 2014). This phase helps teachers understand school policies, procedures, and the educational environment (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

Instructional support is crucial, with experienced mentors guiding teachers in developing effective teaching strategies, classroom management, and differentiation techniques (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Instructional support is further enhanced through data-driven conversations between mentors and peer-based professional learning communities, aligning with school, district, or state standards (Potemski & Matalch, 2014).

The program also focuses on curriculum and assessment support, helping teachers understand and implement school curricula and develop effective lesson plans (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Tailored professional development opportunities address individual growth areas, offering workshops and seminars to enhance teaching skills (Wang et al., 2010). Regular release time for mentors and alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs) supports this ongoing

professional development and fosters a strong mentor-mentee relationship (Potemski & Matalch, 2014).

Mentors encourage reflective practices, promoting regular self-assessment and structured discussions to address challenges and successes (Britton et al., 2003). Classroom observations and feedback are integral, providing constructive advice and creating an environment of openness and trust (Goe et al., 2009). Networking and peer support are also promoted, helping teachers build professional relationships and a sense of community (Evans & Myers, 2017).

Additional support includes guidance on legal and ethical considerations, technology integration, and assistance with licensure requirements to ensure teachers are well-prepared for all aspects of their roles. Cultural competence and diversity training help teachers meet the needs of diverse student populations (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Overall, a well-designed mentoring program addresses the unique needs of ALTs, supporting their professional growth and effectiveness in the classroom.

Mentoring as Professional Development

Mentoring is a cost-effective way to provide professional development opportunities to teachers and is an effective way to promote professional growth. It empowers teachers to broaden their horizons and engage innovatively with curricula and pedagogy (Hudson, 2013; West, 2002). Guskey (2002) stated that professional development should result in changes to classroom practices, teacher attitudes and beliefs, and student learning outcomes. Additionally, professional development must be valued by teachers and meet their development needs (West, 2002).

Professional development is crucial for teachers to stay informed about the latest pedagogical practices and changes in the curriculum (Hudson, 2013). Additionally, mentors benefit professionally by modeling and articulating pedagogical knowledge and implementing education system requirements like curricula, aims, and policies (Hudson, 2010). Mentoring can have several positive outcomes for schools, such as retaining teachers, improving their productivity and performance, increasing their commitment, and effectively integrating new teachers into the program (Boswell et al., 2017). However, teachers often have limited time during class hours to participate in professional development, and their time outside of class is consumed by planning, grading, and other professional work. Furthermore, one-time professional development events have a limited impact. High-quality professional development must also be available in a way that allows it to be customized to meet the specific needs of individual teachers and schools (Hudson, 2013).

Teachers' professional development is a critical aspect of their growth. It should be designed to help them build their expertise, including content knowledge and effective teaching methods. For this, mentors should be open to learning from their mentees, creating a reciprocal relationship where both parties benefit from each other's feedback. There should be a willingness to provide and receive constructive feedback. (Hudson, 2013).

Alexander & Alexander (2010) describe the working and personal relationships developed through mentorship. They suggest that effective relationship building between mentor and mentee will assist with retaining and preparing novice teachers in all fields and that the mentoring process should benefit both parties. Although it does not promote immediate teacher autonomy, it does assist in building teacher competency via collegiality in a supportive environment (West, 2002).

Summary

The U.S.'s shortage of teachers has led to alternative licensure programs to attract high-quality candidates. However, concerns persist about the effectiveness of ALTs and the challenges they face. The broader context of the teacher shortage reveals unfilled positions and high turnover rates, particularly affecting schools serving low-income and minority students. North Carolina has faced an 8.20% teacher attrition rate, and enrollment in traditional teacher education programs has declined significantly. Alternative certification routes have become more prevalent in North Carolina. Alternative certification has become a pathway for addressing teacher shortages, with concerns about preparation quality and retention remaining. States are exploring diverse alternative certification routes to attract a varied teacher workforce. The Residency License in North Carolina offers a pathway for individuals to start teaching while completing licensure requirements. Chapter 3 includes Inquiry Procedures and Design Rigor.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

This inquiry's primary objective was to comprehensively analyze the impact of a mentoring program specifically designed to offer instructional leadership support to alternatively licensed teachers. The research involved a detailed evaluation of the mentoring program's key features and components. It also incorporate the perceptions and experiences of the alternatively licensed teachers and their mentors in the program.

Moreover, the research explored how the mentoring program facilitated the professional development of alternatively licensed teachers and helped them enhance their instructional leadership skills.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

The following questions guide this inquiry:

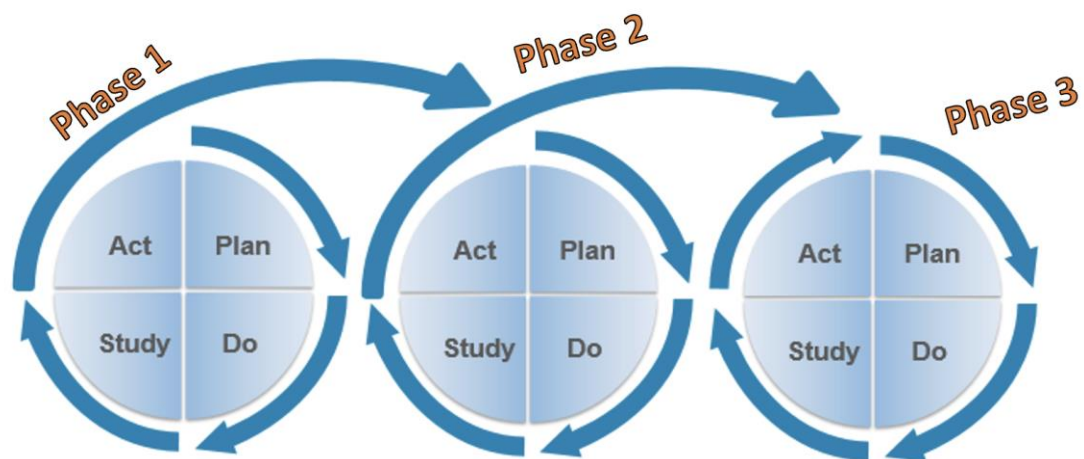
1. How does a comprehensive mentoring program support alternative licensed teachers in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart school?
2. How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternative licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school?
3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership growth and development be impacted as a result of conducting this inquiry?

Inquiry Design and Rationale

This inquiry employed the improvement science framework with a convergent parallel, mixed methods design. The inquiry focused on working directly with alternatively licensed teachers in their first or second year of teaching. As the scholarly practitioner leading this inquiry, this methodology allowed me to seek practical solutions to support the classroom leadership of the growing number of alternatively licensed teachers at Rise Elementary School. Improvement science is a problem-solving approach that entails continuous inquiry and learning.

Rather than individual efforts, the system's design and operation determine its performance (Langley et al., 2009). Improvement science facilitates the development of a shared understanding of the system, identifies breakdowns, and suggests actions to improve performance. The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle is a primary tool of improvement science. Practitioners test changes, document results, and refine their theories about achieving objectives. Repeated small-scale testing and research cycles help identify ways to achieve positive results reliably and at scale. Improvement science fosters an organizational culture of continuous learning and improvement based on evidence-based decision-making, continuous performance monitoring, and iterative testing and refinement.

For this inquiry, I utilized the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) framework, designed to facilitate the improvement cycle. The PDSA model consists of four stages that aim to promote the continuous enhancement of a product or process. Initially, in the 'plan' stage, we identified a change intended to improve the program. In the 'do' stage, we tested this alteration. The 'study' stage evaluated the success of the change, while the 'act' stage identified adaptations and next steps to inform a new cycle (Langley et al., 2009). This occurred over three phases or more if necessary. To implement a change in practice, three phases are involved. Phase one involves collecting and analyzing secondary data to identify the focus of practice and gather relevant research literature. In phase two, the proposed change is implemented with careful planning and execution. Phase three evaluates the effectiveness of the implemented change through data collection and analysis. By employing the PDSA cycle (see Figure 4), my collaborative inquiry partners and I can thoroughly evaluate the comprehensive mentoring program as it is



Note. (Langley et al., 2009)

Figure 4. PDSA Model for Improvement.

implemented, receive feedback from inquiry partners, reflected on our findings, and made any necessary adjustments to ensure maximum success for alternatively licensed teachers at Rise Elementary School.

Context of the Inquiry

Rise Elementary School (RES) is a Title 1 and low-performing Targeted Support school with 772 students and 55 classroom teachers. According to the Whitakers County School System Progress Report, RES has a chronic absenteeism rate of 30.37% and 53.6% of its students are economically disadvantaged. To support teachers, RES has a range of resources including coaches, facilitators, counselors, and teachers. Beginning teachers at RES, also known as ALTs, are provided with a site-based mentor and attend monthly mentor meetings. The school also offers Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to help new teachers with their professional development.

At RES, 12.2% of teachers hold an alternative license, compared to the district's 3% average. RES also has a higher percentage of beginning teachers at 29.9% compared to the state and district averages. To improve the teaching practices of alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs), a comprehensive mentoring program was designed with the help of school and district partners. This program can be replicated in other high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools.

Rise Elementary School is one of the 46 Restart Schools in Whitakers County. According to Drake et al. (2023), Restart schools have more alternatively licensed teachers than non-restart schools. These teachers have different needs than those who took the traditional path to licensure. To address the needs of these alternatively licensed teachers, my team of collaborative inquiry partners and I worked on creating an intervention that would support the ALTs

instructional leadership without adding to their already long list of requirements from the district and the state. Our vision was to prepare these teachers to be effective instructional leaders in our Restart School.

To achieve our vision of organizational improvement, we believe a comprehensive mentoring program will strengthen and enhance our efforts. This plan is rooted in the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) inquiry cycle, with each phase meticulously developed in collaboration with our team of inquiry partners.

Inquiry Partners

Successful teamwork requires collaborative thinking, which involves bringing together a team of individuals with the right skills and knowledge. The inquiry involved collaborative partners from the district level, principals, mentor coordinators, instructional facilitators, and mentors. These partners played a critical role in analyzing and discussing data to better understand the problem, identify gaps, develop change ideas, align with inquiry questions, maintain integrity in processes, and assist in identifying themes and ideas to explore as the inquiry progresses.

Inquiry partners played a crucial role in supporting the inquiry by fostering collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving. They helped create an inclusive work environment by fostering active listening and promoting collaborative learning. They encouraged critical thinking by asking thought-provoking questions and offering constructive feedback. Inquiry partners helped set clear goals, guide structured problem-solving sessions, and engaged in regular reflection to foster continuous improvement. In working with the inquiry partners, I built trust, identified and provided necessary resources, acknowledged achievements, and valued

diverse perspectives. By adopting these practices, inquiry partners create a positive and collaborative team culture, ultimately contributing to the team's success.

By engaging with the school staff for an extended period, I served as a scholarly practitioner invested in the professional growth of alternatively licensed teachers. My inquiry log documented my ongoing engagement with inquiry partners, mentors, and ALTS.

Ethical Considerations

East Carolina University is committed to following the best practices when conducting research that involves human subjects. To fulfill the requirements of my dissertation in practice, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training. This training includes online modules and quizzes to ensure my understanding of ethical topics related to human subjects. According to the university's guidelines, I completed the CITI modules before submitting my inquiry application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Institutional Review Board of East Carolina University and Medical Center made this a mandatory requirement.

As this inquiry took place at Whitakers Public School System (WPSS), I requested approval from the school district board to conduct my inquiry. The completion of an Application to Conduct Research in WPSS and approval from the DRA Research Review Committee was required. Once I received approval from the district, I completed the process by filing for IRB through UMCIRB at East Carolina University. See Appendix A. Following approval, I sent an introductory recruitment letter via email to year one and year two ALTs requesting their voluntary participation in the inquiry. Once they confirmed their willingness to participate, they completed an informed consent document to indicate their decision to participate or decline involvement in the inquiry. See Appendix B.

The informed consent process required me to provide accurate and relevant information about the inquiry, potential risks and benefits, alternatives, and procedures and answer any questions the participants may have. I ensured that participants understood the inquiry's purpose, thus allowing them to make an informed decision about their participation.

To ensure confidentiality, participant information and any private, identifiable information was removed according to the research guidelines provided by WPSS. Qualtrics software was used to distribute and collect surveys, and participant names will be replaced with identifier numbers to keep their information confidential. Before participation, all individuals were briefed on the procedures and provided with an informed consent document. This document allowed them to decline participation in the inquiry. I used existing data and school structures to minimize potential participant harm. I used a pseudonym throughout all written materials to keep the district anonymous. To secure the data, I stored it in password-protected, cloud-based storage through Microsoft 365 for storage and archiving purposes, and I will destroy it after five years.

Inquiry Procedures

This inquiry examined how a mentoring program can influence the instructional leadership of ALTs in Restart Schools. I used a mixed-methods research approach to address three specific questions. The inquiry was divided into four phases, all following the plan-do-study-act improvement cycle. Phase I is from March to June 2024, Phase II is from July to September 2024, Phase III is from October to April 2025, and Phase IV is from May to June 2025. See Figure 5.

Phase I involved planning, including meeting with partners, piloting survey questions, and providing mentor training. Phase II focused on implementing the inquiry,

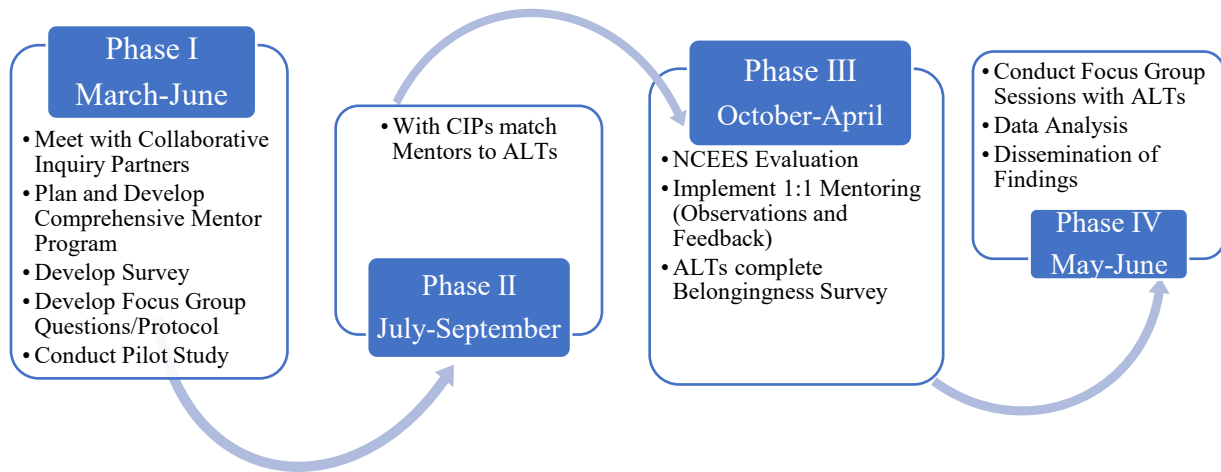


Figure 5. Overview of Inquiry by Phases I-IV

including pairing mentors with ALTs and conducting initial observations by the school principal and assistant principal. In Phase III, I collected data through NCEES observations, mentor feedback, and professional learning. Finally, my collaborative inquiry partners and I analyzed the collected data in Phase IV.

Phase I

Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies

The inquiry employed purposeful sampling to select participants. Purposeful sampling is a method of intentionally selecting individuals and sites that enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation (Mertler, 2022). The inquiry used direct recruitment to find participants. Maintaining ethical standards, including informing potential subjects of the inquiry's purpose, risks, benefits, and the right to refuse participation, is crucial.

I identified new or second-year ALTs at Rise Elementary School to participate in the inquiry. I explained the purpose and advantages clearly and emphasize the value of their participation, showing how it can enhance their professional development, student achievement, or teaching innovation. I ensured that the teachers have the necessary support, resources, and time to participate effectively, and I presented the inquiry as an opportunity for professional growth. Additionally, I addressed any concerns or obstacles teachers may have, such as workload, time constraints, or unfamiliarity with the inquiry process.

Mentors for the comprehensive mentoring program are teachers who build positive relationships with students and colleagues, communicate effectively, and foster an inclusive, equitable classroom environment. Such teachers receive consistently high evaluations, are role models for students and staff, and adhere to professional standards and ethics. Their adaptability, problem-solving skills, and dedication to the school's mission make them well-suited to guide and support other educators.

The criteria for selecting a mentor in the comprehensive mentoring program required the teacher to be a highly effective educator. The teacher needed to demonstrate strong instructional practices, leadership qualities, and a commitment to professional growth. These mentors consistently supported high student achievement through the use of differentiated instruction and effective classroom management.

They possess deep content expertise and are committed to continuous improvement. They regularly seek feedback and participate in professional development. They excel in collaboration with colleagues, take on leadership roles within the school, and actively support the development of their peers.

They also build positive relationships with students and colleagues, communicate effectively, and foster an inclusive and equitable classroom environment. These teachers receive consistently high evaluations, serve as role models for students and staff, and adhere to professional standards and ethics. Their adaptability, problem-solving skills, and dedication to the school's mission make them well-suited to guide and support other educators. Their deep content expertise is paired with a commitment to continuous improvement, seeking feedback, and participating in professional development. They collaborate well with colleagues, take on leadership roles within the school, and actively support the growth of peers.

Instrumentation

Data collection is critical for answering questions, analyzing performance, and predicting trends. Accurate data is vital for valid research results. Instruments used for data collection ensure inquiry validity, reliability, accuracy, efficiency, and ethics. Selecting the appropriate instruments to guarantee reliable and valid outcomes is crucial. Instruments must measure variables accurately, efficiently, ethically, and with minimal error. The scholarly practitioner will use various methods such as surveys, focus group sessions, observation tools, and journaling to

collect data and answer the inquiry questions. To address how a comprehensive mentoring program can support ALTs in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart School, the NCEES Evaluation Tool, Mentor Observations, and ALTs reflections (journaling) was used. To determine the impact of participating in a mentoring program on a teacher's sense of belonging, the instruments used were the Focus Group and ALT Survey. Finally, data from field notes and journaling was used to answer the inquiry question of how this inquiry will change my leadership style. See Table 3.

The ALTs Survey was designed to assess teachers' sense of belonging, support, communication, and professional development within the comprehensive mentoring program. Likert scale is a measurement method used in research to evaluate attitudes, opinions, and perceptions. Participants are presented with a range of answer options from strongly agree to disagree with each question or statement. The survey also included several dichotomous questions, with options of "yes" and "no". In partnership with my collaborative inquiry partners, we transcribed and formatted the survey using Qualtrics, a software management tool. This was done to ensure that responses were kept confidential during the data collection process (See

Table 3*Inquiry Matrix by Question, Methodology, Instrument, and Analysis*

Inquiry Question	Methodology	Instrument	Analysis
How does a comprehensive mentoring program support ALTs to improve their instructional leadership in a Restart School?	Quantitative	NCEES Evaluation Tool	Descriptive Statistics
How does a comprehensive mentoring program support ALTs to improve their instructional leadership in a Restart School?	Qualitative	Mentor Observations	Coding
How does a comprehensive mentoring program support ALTs to improve their instructional leadership in a Restart School?	Qualitative	Beginning Teacher Support Program Instructional Glimpse Note Catcher	Coding
How does a comprehensive mentoring program support ALTs to improve their instructional leadership in a Restart School?	Qualitative	ALTs Reflections (Journaling)	Coding
How does participation in a mentoring program impact a teacher's feeling of belonging?	Quantitative	Focus Group	Descriptive Statistics
How does participation in a mentoring program impact a teacher's feeling of belonging?	Qualitative	ALT Survey	Inductive Analysis
As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership style change due to this inquiry?	Qualitative	Field Notes	Inductive Analysis

Appendix B). To ensure the validity of the survey, a pilot test was conducted with participants before administering them to sample participants in this inquiry. This provided the scholarly practitioner with data to answer the inquiry question, “To what extent does a comprehensive mentoring program support ALTs to improve their instructional leadership in a Restart School?”

In alignment with the Integrative Framework for Belonging described in Chapter 2, the analysis in this inquiry used five belonging lenses derived from Allen et al.’s four original constructs. Meaningful engagement and competence were treated as separate but related elements; autonomy aligned with opportunities; connectedness aligned with motivations; and institutional support aligned with perceptions. These five lenses informed the construction of the belonging survey items and focus group questions and served as the initial coding structure for qualitative analysis. Using these lenses ensured that the data collection instruments and analytic approach remained theoretically grounded and consistent with the framework guiding this inquiry.

The North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES) (Appendix C) is an application used by schools in North Carolina to manage educator effectiveness for K-12 educational leaders and teachers. This instrument provided data to answer the question, "To what extent does a comprehensive mentoring program support ALTs in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart School?" The focus was on Standard 1: Teacher Demonstrates Leadership. The principal and second assistant principal conducted formal observations to inform teacher growth and facilitate conversations between principals, teachers, and mentors regarding instructional practice. Teachers' performance was rated on one of four levels: Developing, Proficient, Accomplished, or Distinguished. These levels are cumulative across the rows of the NCEES evaluation rubric. The first observation, which will serve as the baseline for

this inquiry, which took place from September to October 2024. This data was secondary because the scholarly practitioner had not gained IRB approval at that time.

ALTs will maintained reflection journals to gain valuable insights into their teaching practices. These journals would allow teachers to record their professional reflections and insights on their teaching methods. ALTs were strongly encouraged to document their thoughts, ideas, perceptions, and feedback to support their growth as educators. It was recommended that they make at least one entry per week to ensure a consistent and comprehensive record of their professional development. By keeping journals, ALTs could better understand what works in their teaching, allowing them to adjust their strategies accordingly. This self-awareness would help them meet student needs, improve effectiveness, and stay motivated. Reflection enables teachers to evolve, becoming more adaptable and responsive, which benefits both their students and their own professional growth. It also helps educators examine their motivations and guiding principles, allowing them to handle challenges with greater confidence (Machost & Stains, 2023).

To provide the scholarly practitioner with data to guide answering the inquiry question, “How does a mentoring program for alternative licensed teachers impact a teacher’s feelings of belonging?” the scholarly practitioner used focus groups. A focus group is a qualitative research method involving a small group interview of approximately six to twelve individuals with similar characteristics or interests. The facilitator guides the discussion using predetermined topics to encourage the sharing of perspectives. Focus groups provide in-depth information on subjective views and help interpret quantitative data. The focus group session is expected to last one hour. In the initial phase, collaborative inquiry partners and I used a focus group protocol from Peru State College (Appendix D). The focus group questions and script required IRB

approval. An assigned note-taker recorded what was being said and observed. During the focus group session, the facilitator comprehensively explained the group's objectives and goals (Mertler, 2022). Furthermore, the scholarly practitioner will ascertain that all participants were provided consent forms, emphasizing their voluntary nature and right to withdraw from the session at any point. It was reiterated that participants' privacy and confidentiality will be respected throughout the focus group discussion.

The final inquiry question, “As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership style change due to this inquiry? data will be gathered from field notes. Field notes are important to record observations and activities during research. They serve three purposes: description, interpretation, and reflection. The description helps researchers keep track of observations during interviews and document findings. Interpretation allows researchers to theorize and explain relevant observations. Reflection includes an introspective commentary on what is observed and experienced. I used The Field Notes Template derived from *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*- 4th edition (Appendix F).

Data and evidence must be utilized continuously and regularly to inform program improvement decisions to ensure the quality of the mentoring program. Ideally, the data should be directly correlated with the targeted, evidence-based instructional reform effort. This approach to program improvement is considered best practice and leads to more effective inductive (mentoring) programs (LINCS, 2012). Collaborating with my inquiry partners, we created a survey to gather data on how the mentoring program enhanced their sense of belonging. Fifteen likert item questions were selected, followed by several demographic checklist items. Likert items begin with a statement and then ask individuals to respond on an agree-disagree continuum. To ensure the validity of the surveys, I conducted a pilot test with non-participants

before administering them to voluntary participants. After approval, the Qualtrics survey through East Carolina University was launched in late April of 2025. Qualtrics is a secure online survey design tool and a data collection tool used to ensure confidentiality and accuracy.

As a part of the research methodology, we conducted a focus group. These groups will consist of simultaneous interviews of no more than eight ALTs. The focus group session was expected to last forty-five minutes and an hour. The scholarly practitioner and the collaborative inquiry partners devise the questions for the focus group. We aimed to formulate at most five questions. Additionally, submitted a focus group protocol for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before the session. The focus group aimed to determine whether a comprehensive mentoring program impacts the ALTs' sense of belonging.

The survey was conducted via email using Qualtrics, with participants receiving follow-up communication to remind them to complete the survey. It was active for three weeks and concluded in April 2025. The data collected through the survey was stored securely in a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive cloud service located at East Carolina University. The survey included a cover letter explaining its purpose, potential benefits, reminding participants of the confidentiality measures in place, and providing clear instructions for completing it.

Pilot Study

The primary goals of the pilot study were to estimate the time required to complete the instrument and to solicit feedback on specific questions that may require revision before the actual data collection (Mertler, 2020). By validating the survey questions, we aimed to enhance the quality of the data collected and improve the overall research outcomes. This process helped ensure that the survey instrument was clear, concise, and error-free.

A pilot study utilizing a cognitive lab approach validated the ALT survey and focus group questions. Cognitive laboratories provide direct feedback from participants through a

think-aloud procedure in which respondents provide detailed responses of how they arrived at an answer (Jobe & Mingay, 1990). Analysis of participants' think-aloud protocols and responses to prompts helped identify issues with survey questions and helped suggest improved question wording for more valid and reliable results. This interviewing technique takes about three times as long as a standard interview for the same number of items, making it longer than the standard interview process.

Four female educators from RES participated in the cognitive laboratory. The Literacy Coach, who also serves as mentor coordinator, has twenty years of educational experience; the instructional facilitator (IF) has twenty years of classroom experience and one year as an instructional facilitator; the math coach has experience as a classroom teacher, school administrator, and math coach; and a thirty-year veteran teacher who serves as an instructional coach provided direct feedback on the instrumentation used for this inquiry. Each pilot study participant met with the scholarly practitioner virtually to understand the inquiry and review the tools used for the inquiry. The pilot study participants were asked to think aloud as they answered the questions orally, indicating the thought processes they used in arriving at an answer. The scholarly practitioner dictated the participant's responses. The pilot study took place in June and took one and a half hours to complete.

This inquiry's first inquiry question aims to assess the extent to which a comprehensive mentoring program supports ALTs in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart School. I, as the scholarly practitioner will collect data from the NCEES Evaluation Tool, mentor observations, and ALTs reflections. As the participants for the pilot study are veteran teachers, they were familiar with Standard 1 of the NCEES evaluation tool and discussed how mentors would help ALT improve their instructional leadership and the notes that will need to be

documented in the evaluation tool to provide the data for growth. In instances where an ALT displays proficiency in Standard 1, the recorded notes may fail to capture their ongoing development. Consequently, it is imperative for evaluators to furnish thorough observation notes, thereby aiding mentors and scholarly practitioners in providing the necessary support and illustrating the individual's growth trajectory. The mentor coordinator also suggested reviewing the NCEES evaluation tool in more depth with the ALTs to help them deepen their understanding of the tool and how the tool is used for formative feedback, reflection, and growth.

I did not have a formal tool for mentor observations and ALT reflections. To avoid having the mentors complete two documents, as a suggestion from the mentor coordinator I will use the mentor documents provided by the district for the mentors and the ALTs- Beginning Teacher Support Program Instructional Glimpse Note Catcher. The scholarly practitioner included this document in the Appendix as Appendix G.

The second question in this inquiry was to ascertain the extent to which participation in a mentoring program impacts teachers' feelings of belonging. During the pilot study, participants suggested clarifying the definition of belonging in the focus group questions and adding "at RES" to specify belonging to the school. The pilot group suggested asking ALTs what belonging means might be interpreted differently. They agreed that the questions were suitable for the research question. The scholarly practitioner explained the theory underlying this research and discussed how a sense of belonging helps ALTs feel confident enough to be vulnerable and trust their mentor and colleagues to support their professional development. The scholarly practitioner added a definition of belonging to the list of key terms in Chapter 1. The pilot participants also suggested that the ALT survey could be used to partially answer the first inquiry question. I used Google Meet to conduct the pilot study.

Baseline Data Collection

Plan

Upon conducting a thorough review of the research on the needs of alternatively licensed teachers and analyzing performance evaluation data, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) agenda notes, and teacher feedback, our team has determined that implementing a comprehensive mentoring program was a necessary step. The first phase of this inquiry commenced in the Spring of 2024, during which my collaborative inquiry partners and I developed this comprehensive mentoring program. We compared the traditional beginning teacher mentoring program with a comprehensive mentoring program model to better understand the differences and benefits of a comprehensive mentoring program as pictured in the Table 4. Collaborative inquiry partners include the principal, assistant principal, instructional facilitator, math coach, literacy coach, executive leadership coach, academic coach, and mentors.

Based on our discussion, the CIPs and I agreed that the comprehensive mentoring program would have specific eligibility requirements for mentors, with the district requirements being the baseline.

To become a mentor in the WCSS, the teacher must complete the Mentor Application. This process begins with the Administrator and Mentor Coordinator discussing potential candidates for mentoring and notifying the teacher or listing the candidate on the recruitment tool. The teacher completes the Mentor Application, while the Administrator submits an Administrative Reference. TSP (Teacher Support Program) reviews the teacher's summative evaluation, and once approved, the teacher receives a Mentor Training registration from a TSP

Table 4*BT Support Mentoring Program vs. Comprehensive Mentoring Program*

Program Component	BT Support Mentoring Program	Comprehensive Mentoring Program
Target Teachers	First three years of teaching	Alternatively Licensed Teachers (ALTs) in first two years of teaching
Mentor Assignment	Assigned a trained mentor who is an experienced teacher in the school	Assigned a trained, highly effective mentor (based on EVAAS data) who understands school and beginning teacher needs and delivers evidence-based instructional practices
Professional Learning	Access to staff development opportunities to enhance classroom instruction	Professional learning tailored to specific teacher needs to enhance classroom instruction
District Support	Beginning Teacher Support Program Coordinating Teachers provide district-level support	Beginning Teacher Support Program Coordinating Teachers provide district-level support
Classroom Support	Mentor observes lessons throughout the year and provides feedback for growth	Mentor works in the classroom at least one hour per week, provides demonstration lessons, observes teaching, gives feedback, supports curriculum development, and assists with classroom management
Observation Frequency	Quarterly observational glimpses	Monthly observational glimpses
Collaboration	Professional Learning Teams support collaboration with peers on teaching and learning	Professional Learning Teams support collaboration with peers on teaching and learning
Mentor Meetings	Monthly school-based meetings facilitated by Mentor Coordinators	Dedicated and structured professional development time (release time) and resources
Mentor Caseload	No limit on number of mentees per mentor	Maximum of two mentees per mentor (one preferred)
Program Focus	Not specified	Focus on creating a positive and supportive school culture
Additional Supports	Not specified	Monthly Beginning Teacher, ALT, and new staff gatherings
Mentor Training	North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process,	North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process, CMAPP, NC Standard Course of Study, and Integrative Framework for Belonging

Program Component	BT Support Mentoring Program	Comprehensive Mentoring Program
	CMAPP, and NC Standard Course of Study	

member. After the training, the teacher, mentor coordinator, and Administrator are notified of the completion. Before applying, the teacher must also complete the Mentoring Skills Self-Assessment. To be eligible, the teacher must have been in at least their 4th year of teaching during the 2023-2024 school year, have taught in Wake County during that year, and received a rating of proficient or higher on all standards in their latest evaluation. Additionally, the principal must confirm that the teacher has never been on a Monitored or Directed PDP in the last 3 years and that the recommendation was discussed with the Mentor Coordinator at the school.

Mentors for the comprehensive mentoring program are teachers who build positive relationships with students and colleagues, communicate effectively, and foster an inclusive, equitable classroom environment. Such teachers receive consistently high evaluations, are role models for students and staff, and adhere to professional standards and ethics. Their adaptability, problem-solving skills, and dedication to the school's mission make them well-suited to guide and support other educators.

The criteria for a teacher to be considered for a mentor in the comprehensive mentoring program include a highly effective teacher who demonstrates strong instructional practices, leadership qualities, and a commitment to professional growth. They consistently show high student achievement through differentiated instruction and effective classroom management. Criteria for a teacher to be considered for a mentor in the comprehensive mentoring program include being a highly effective educator who demonstrates strong instructional practices, leadership qualities, and a commitment to professional growth. Such teachers consistently achieve high student performance through differentiated instruction and effective classroom management.

They possess deep content expertise and are committed to continuous improvement. They regularly seek feedback and participate in professional development. They excel in collaboration with colleagues, take on leadership roles within the school, and actively support the development of their peers.

They also build positive relationships with students and colleagues, communicate effectively, and foster an inclusive and equitable classroom environment. These teachers receive consistently high evaluations, serve as role models for students and staff, and adhere to professional standards and ethics. Their adaptability, problem-solving skills, and dedication to the school's mission make them well-suited to guide and support other educators. Their deep content expertise is paired with a commitment to continuous improvement, seeking feedback, and participating in professional development. They collaborate well with colleagues, take on leadership roles within the school, and actively support the growth of peers.

In addition to mentor qualifications, the inquiry partners discussed professional development for mentors, including important information about the program, an introduction to the Integrative Framework for Belonging, and professional development that will enhance their coaching skills and pedagogical expertise. Mentors bring a diverse range of strengths to their roles, and to maximize their impact, my CIPs and I will customize their professional learning support to meet the specific needs of each ALT. The Mentor Coordinator surveyed the mentors to identify their strengths, and this information will be used to tailor support, leveraging multiple mentors to address each ALT's unique challenges. By taking this personalized approach, we ensure that all ALTs receive the focused guidance needed to enhance their instructional leadership and drive success.

Collaborating with my CIPs, a mentoring training program was designed to ensure they had the appropriate qualifications to support BT-ALTs. The team reached a consensus to devise a detailed plan that ensured a regular meeting schedule between mentors and mentees. One of the proposed solutions was to leverage the Teacher Support Program (TSP) provided by the district, which offers funding for full-day substitutes to support professional growth. As Beginning Teachers are exempt from School Improvement Team Committees, this committee time can be another opportunity for mentors to connect with their mentees. Additionally, the team discussed allocating time during collaboration days and teacher workdays to facilitate meetings between mentors and ALTs or provide continued professional development for mentors.

Do

The scholarly practitioner completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) module training. CITI is a comprehensive online program covering ethical considerations related to human subject research. ECU mandates that all researchers complete and pass an appropriate collection of CITI modules, with a minimum score of 80% on the quizzes, before commencing any research.

CIPs were provided with a completed comparative table juxtaposing a conventional beginner teacher mentor program with a comprehensive mentoring program. The aim was to solicit feedback from mentors regarding the two programs. The table presented a side-by-side comparison of the components of both programs, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. The objective was to identify areas where the mentoring program could be improved to better support ALTs. The comparative table was distributed to the collaborative inquiry partners, who were requested to provide feedback. The partners were motivated to share their thoughts on the

strengths and weaknesses of both programs and suggest ways to improve the mentoring program. The feedback was obtained during the CIPs meeting.

Study

The pilot study ensured that the final survey instrument was reliable, efficient, and effective in measuring the intended variables (Metler, 2022). By validating the survey questions, we aimed to enhance the quality of the data collected and improve the overall research outcomes. The pilot study took place virtually via Google Meet and lasted one and a half hours.

Participants, including a Literacy Coach, an Instructional Facilitator, a Math Coach, and a veteran teacher, reviewed the tools and provided feedback on how mentors could support ALTs in enhancing their instructional leadership. They suggested clarifying the definition of "belonging" and adding specificity to focus group questions. The mentor coordinator recommended integrating district-provided observation documents to streamline data collection. Additionally, participants proposed using the ALT survey to address the first research question partially, and they also advised to review the NCEES evaluation tool with ALTs to deepen their understanding.

Act

Upon completion of Phase 1, I shall thoroughly evaluate the feedback received to determine whether any modifications to the comprehensive mentoring program are necessary. Our team, which includes the principal, assistant principal, instructional coaches, IF, and mentors, will perform an anonymous and confidential review of the data from Phase I. As a scholarly practitioner, I shall explicate the review process and the evaluation's purpose, underscoring the significance of anonymity and confidentiality.

Summary of Phase I

Overall, the pilot study and feedback received were essential in enhancing the survey instrument and developing a comprehensive mentoring program. We believe that the quality of the data collected will be reliable and that the mentoring program will effectively meet the participants' needs.

Phase II

Working with my CIPs during phase II, we developed a plan for mentor induction. Phase II focused on preparing mentors to provide a comprehensive mentoring program to mentees. The final step of phase II included matching mentors to their ALTs.

Plan

The second phase of the research is slated to commence in July 2024. In late August, the mentor coordinator and I collaborated to assign mentors to ALTs. First-year ALTs received mentors whose qualifications reflected the requirements for mentors in the comprehensive program. Following the IRB's approval, mentors who opted out of the comprehensive program could switch mentees.

Do

To be eligible to be a mentor, a candidate must meet the following criteria: they should have a proficient or higher rating on all NC Professional Teaching Standards in their latest NCEES summative evaluation, have been assigned an Individual Professional Development Plan for the last three years, possess a completed reference from their most recent administrator, and have at least four years of teaching experience, having taught in WCSS during the 2023-24 school year. The program covered essential topics, including Learning-Focused Relationships with Mentees, Mentor Professional Growth and Ethics, Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, Systems, and Learning Communities, and Equitable Practices for mentors and mentees.

Additionally, district mentors received training on the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process, Curriculum Management Application (CMAPP), and the NC Standard Course of Study.

Study

Upon completing the first district-mandated meeting between mentors and mentees, I convened with my inquiry partners to analyze the mentor training implementation process. Although the district requirements, which the mentors had to participate in as part of their training, are not included in this inquiry, we examined them during this phase. In particular, we assessed how effectively the mentees met the district's requirements and fulfilled the expectations that they were given as participants in the mentor induction program.

According to Mertler (2022), descriptive analysis summarizes and interprets data to provide a clear and concise understanding of its main characteristics. This analysis involves calculating measures such as means, medians, and standard deviations and creating visual representations like charts and graphs to identify patterns, trends, and relationships within the data. Making sense of quantitative information and guiding further analysis or decision-making is essential.

Act

ALTs received their mentor-mentee pairing and participate in an orientation that introduces mentors and mentees, assesses needs, and sets goals. During this initial assessment, resources created by the mentor coordinator or provided by the district were utilized, including an orientation agenda, initial assessment report, and goal-setting documentation.

Summary of Phase II

The training experience for mentors was a valuable opportunity for professional development and growth. The comprehensive curriculum gave participants the knowledge and skills to effectively mentor and guide their mentees while promoting equitable practices and

fostering a positive learning environment. The program was designed to help mentors enhance their teaching skills and provide the tools to support their mentees' growth and development. Mentors were matched with mentees during this phase with an opt-out if they chose not to participate in the inquiry.

Phase III

IRB approval was granted during Phase III. Mentor-mentee pairings were created based on the experienced teachers' strong interpersonal skills, including relationship-building and communication skills, the ability to model and articulate successful and reflective teaching, to deliver constructive, nonjudgmental feedback to others, and to be reflective and committed to continuing to strengthen their practice (LINCS, 2015). The process of pairing mentors and mentees considered various factors such as career aspirations, interests, personality traits, and areas for development. The matching of mentors was based on their performance on the Mentor Skills Self-Assessment, which evaluated their willingness to champion their colleagues, communication skills, professional competence and experience, and interpersonal abilities. Furthermore, we prioritized diversity and inclusion to create an all-encompassing mentoring environment.

The comprehensive mentoring program aimed to provide ALTs with experienced and highly effective mentors who deeply understand their respective schools' unique needs. These mentors are selected based on their instructional effectiveness and expertise in delivering evidence-based instructional practices.

The mentors were trained on the Integrative Framework for Belonging during this phase. Training mentors on the Integrative Framework for Belonging helped create a growth-oriented, supportive environment that nurtures the success and well-being of ALTs, benefiting both teachers and their students.

To effectively train mentors on the Integrative Framework for Belonging, I introduced the core components of the framework, such as emotional support, inclusion, equity, and cultural responsiveness. During these session, real-life case studies, research, and videos were used to demonstrate how belonging impacted teacher well-being, retention, and performance, emphasizing the unique challenges faced by ALTs. To ensure the ALTs' success, professional learning opportunities tailored to their specific needs was provided as needed. Additionally, the Beginning Teacher Support Program Coordinating Teachers was available to provide assistance and support at the district level.

Mentors dedicated at least one hour each week (roughly 12 minutes a day) to observing and providing feedback on ALTs' classroom instruction. This included performing demonstration lessons and providing additional support with classroom management. To facilitate this, dedicated and structured professional development time and resources were provided.

Throughout the comprehensive mentoring program, ALTs used new instructional practices and techniques and engaged in a reflective process (including their mentor) to understand their strengths and weaknesses and refined and improved their instructional practices. During this phase, NCEES Evaluation began, and ALTs completed the ALT Survey.

Plan

The comprehensive mentoring program aimed to provide ALTs with experienced and highly effective mentors who possess a deep understanding of their respective schools' unique needs. These mentors were selected based on their EVAAS data and expertise in delivering evidence-based instructional practices.

Observation 1 of the NCESS evaluation will be completed by late October. The CIPs and mentors analyzed the data from Standard 1, Instructional Leadership, of the NCEES evaluation.

Observation one will serve as a baseline for the inquiry. The scholarly practitioner lead the CIPs by discussing the look-for for Standard 1. Mentors and mentees had the opportunity to convene and strategize around Standard 1 - Teacher Demonstrates Leadership. They engaged in collaborative discourse concerning taking responsibility for the learning of all students, effectively communicating the vision to students, leveraging data to organize, plan, and establish objectives, utilizing a diverse set of assessment metrics throughout the year to evaluate progress, creating a safe and orderly environment, and empowering students.

During one-on-one sessions and Planning and Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, the mentor demonstrated how to employ various data sources to organize, plan, and establish objectives that cater to the individual students and the class's requisites. Additionally, they assisted ALTs in creating a secure, structured environment that fosters an empowering culture that encourages students to collaborate and develop into lifelong learners.

Mentors also assisted with conducting demonstration lessons and managing the classroom. To ensure the effectiveness of this process, dedicated time and resources for professional development was provided. Additionally, ALTs had opportunities to discuss their needs with the school administration to ensure their success.

Do

The mentor and ALT engaged in regular meetings designed to apply, reflect on, and document ALTs instructional practice. These meetings supported the ALT's professional learning, reviewed student data, plan for upcoming classes, and engaged in a feedback cycle that will helped ALTs refine their instructional leadership in the classroom. The ALT meets weekly with the academic coaches to review progress and monitor progress to support ALTs in reaching their instructional goals as documented in the ALT Professional Development Plan (PDP).

Mentors provided modeling and guided practice related to evidence-based instruction. The mentor and ALT cooperated in identifying the needs of the ALTs students, analyzing student data and feedback, and developing lesson plans.

Mentors were trained on the Integrative Framework for Belonging and introduced to its core components, such as emotional support, inclusion, equity, and cultural responsiveness. Real-life case studies, research, and videos demonstrated how belonging impacts teacher well-being, retention, and performance, focusing on the unique challenges ALTs face.

Finally, by early December, the assistant principal and principal began the second round of formal observation. The comprehensive mentoring program continues during the school year, where the ALT and mentor meet to apply, reflect on, and document their instructional practices. Throughout this phase, mentors provided additional professional learning, review student data and feedback, monitor progress, and assist ALT with refining their professional learning goals.

Study

ALT support is refined based on observation data. The mentor and ALT engaged in regular discussions to address the ALT's questions regarding evidence-based instructional practices. The mentor coordinator, one of the CIPs, reviewed and provided feedback on the records utilized by mentors to condense weekly meetings with teachers. The feedback included discussing the rationales for ALTs requiring more or less contact time than the average, offering recommendations for addressing the needs of ALTs, providing guidance on program tools usage, and presenting tips for adhering to the program implementation schedule.

Act

ALTs deliver classroom instruction, demonstrating new instructional practices, while the mentor observed and provided feedback using a rubric. Throughout the mentoring process, the

mentor coordinator supported the mentors and ALTs in tracking the necessary work. The coordinator also assessed the process's impact on them and identified and eliminated potential barriers. This approach enables a refined and personalized support system for everyone involved in the program, ensuring optimal outcomes.

Summary of Phase III

The mentor and ALTs meet regularly to improve teaching practices, review student data, and refine professional goals. The mentor guides evidence-based teaching, helps identify student needs, and analyzes data. The mentor and ALTs discuss questions and plan classroom observations. Experienced teachers carry out peer observation. Mentors receive training on the Integrative Framework for Belonging. Finally, the assistant principal conducts a formal observation. ALT support is refined based on observation data.

Phase IV

Phase IV was the last phase of our improvement-based inquiry. Our primary objective is to determine how a comprehensive mentoring program can improve the instructional leadership of alternatively licensed teachers. This phase is critical in measuring the program's impact.

Plan

During the fourth phase, the assistant principal and principal conducted Teacher Summary/End-of-Year Rating evaluations. The teacher and evaluator subsequently reviewed these evaluations during the Summary Evaluation Conference held at the end of the academic year. At the conference, the principal and teacher engaged in an in-depth discussion covering the teacher's self-assessment, the most recent Professional Growth Plan, components of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process that were completed during the year, classroom observations, artifacts submitted or collected during the evaluation process, and other evidence of the teacher's performance on the NCEES Rubric.

The mentor and ALT also reviewed student, classroom, and program data to assess mentoring's impact on teacher instructional leadership during this phase. Focus group sessions with ALTs were planned to understand the impact of the comprehensive mentoring program fully.

Do

Focus group session consisting of 6 ALTs was held. To minimize the risk of bias and enhance objectivity, the focus group was conducted by CIPs. After the participants provided their informed consent and voluntarily agreed to participate in the inquiry. This approach ensured that the participants were fully aware of the nature and scope of the inquiry and could make an informed decision to participate. This approach helped ensure that the participants' privacy and confidentiality were respected throughout the inquiry.

Study

I conducted an in-depth analysis of data sources to understand the impact the comprehensive mentoring program provided ALTs. These sources included survey data, NCEES evaluations, reflective reports submitted by the ALTs, and focus group sessions.

Along with my CIPs, we reviewed all the data collected to identify key patterns, trends, and insights and organize the data logically and meaningfully using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics is an analysis technique that enables the researcher to summarize, organize, and simplify data (Mertler, 2022).

Act

Based on the evaluations and focus group insights, a structured follow-up plan will be implemented to enhance the mentoring program for ALTs. This plan will involve developing an action plan incorporating feedback from ALTs, findings from the NCEES evaluations, and

identifying trends from data analysis to address any gaps in support. Targeted professional development workshops will be organized based on the needs highlighted during evaluations and discussions, ensuring alignment with areas for improvement. A continuous feedback mechanism was also be established, allowing ALTs to provide ongoing input about their mentoring experiences throughout the academic year through regular check-ins or surveys from the district's BTSP. Finally, the insights gained from the analysis and focus groups will be shared at faculty meetings or professional learning communities to foster collaboration and the exchange of best practices among all educators. This comprehensive approach ensured that the mentoring program effectively supports ALTs' professional growth and instructional leadership.

Summary of Phase IV

The fourth and final phase of the inquiry effort aimed to evaluate the efficacy of the interventions implemented in the inquiry's second phase. To this end, a qualitative data-gathering approach was employed through focus groups, and the resulting data was analyzed with the support of inquiry partners. The goal of this phase was to determine the effectiveness of the interventions in achieving their intended objectives.

Inquiry Design Rigor

Rigor in qualitative research refers to the trustworthiness of research results and the capacity to produce consistent findings within a particular context (Mertler, 2020). The plan-do-study-act inquiry cycle was employed to achieve dependability, and each phase was meticulously designed in collaboration with a team of inquiry partners. Data and evidence were continuously used to make program improvement decisions and ensure the quality of the intervention.

To mitigate the risk of bias in data collection through surveys and interview questions, the scholarly practitioner submitted them to the collaborative inquiry partners for review before

conducting any research involving ALTs. Pilot tests were conducted with non-participants to enhance the validity of surveys and focus groups, thereby improving the overall research outcomes. Validating the survey questions ensured the survey instrument's clarity, concision, and error-free nature.

To minimize the risk of bias and enhance objectivity, the focus group was conducted by designated inquiry partners after gaining informed consent from the participants. This approach ensured that participants were fully aware of the nature and scope of the inquiry and could make an informed decision to participate. Additionally, it helped ensure that participants' privacy and confidentiality were respected throughout the inquiry process. After each interview transcription process with participants, member checking was conducted.

I utilized peer debriefing to reflect and critique the findings in detail, share their perspectives, and collaboratively develop recommendations and action plans based on the insights gleaned from the data by triangulating it. The practitioner thoroughly analyzed diverse data sources, including focus groups, survey data, NCEES evaluations, and individual reflections.

Due to the emotional insights generated by the data collection in this inquiry, I ensured that a participant debriefing occurs following the interview process. Additionally, the scholar-practitioners maintained a journal throughout the study to record their initial interpretations, assumptions, or biases and compare them with the collected data. This approach allowed for a more robust data analysis and ensured that preconceived notions or biases did not influence the findings.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

This inquiry aimed to assess how a mentoring program affects the instructional leadership of ALTs in the Restart Schools of the Whitakers County School System. The study focused explicitly on ALTs who have been teaching for up to two years, and the data was gathered from a single Restart school. While the findings are specific to this particular school, they may provide valuable insights for similar educational settings. The study encompassed teachers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with a significant representation of teachers of color. However, the student body at the school primarily consists of minorities from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It was important to note that the study did not intentionally exclude any particular race or gender. The research also take into account the duration of the mentoring program and the timeframe for data collection to give context to the findings.

It was important to consider the limitations of this inquiry. One major limitation was that the inquiry's scope was limited to the locality and the researcher's knowledge of the inquiry subjects. In addition, participants in the mentoring program must meet the district mentoring requirements, and there was a need to identify enough effective teacher mentors so that each mentor will only have one to two mentees. Identifying effective teacher mentors with the necessary soft skills to build connectivity and empathetic rapport with the participants was also essential. Moreover, standardized tests only measure some of the outcomes teachers are responsible for promoting. Therefore, measures based on these scores provided incomplete information about teachers' effectiveness. To maximize their effect on student achievement, mentor programs may need to provide multiple years of new teacher support and study in less than one year.

A major limitation of this study was the researcher's dual role as an Assistant Principal at the school where the study was being conducted. This role influences the context and scope of

the study, as the researcher was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the mentoring program and ensuring that it aligns with school policies. While this provided valuable insights and a deep understanding of the challenges ALTs face, it also shaped the perspective of the inquiry. However, I wanted to reassure everyone that I remained impartial throughout the research conducted within this inquiry. All participants were informed beforehand that their responses to surveys and interviews would remain anonymous to the best of our ability. As an evaluator, I conducted the ALT's formal observation using the NC Teacher Evaluation tool, which was used as a prescreen and data throughout the inquiry to measure teacher growth.

Several limitations affected this study. Firstly, the scope of the inquiry was confined to a single school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other schools with different characteristics or environments. Although district-wide data was incorporated, the primary focus on one site may impact the broader applicability of the results. Secondly, as both the Assistant Principal and the scholarly practitioner overseeing the study, there was a potential for bias. Despite efforts to remain impartial, this dual role could influence the findings. Another limitation was related to mentor availability and qualifications; the mentoring program's success depended on having effective mentors who meet district requirements and possess the necessary soft skills to build rapport with ALTs. Variations in the quality of mentoring provided could also impact the outcomes. Furthermore, the standardized tests used to measure teacher effectiveness only capture a subset of relevant outcomes, providing an incomplete picture of teacher performance. The mentor program might require more than one year of support to impact teaching practices fully.

Additionally, voluntary participation in the study might lead to a sample not fully representative of the broader ALT population. However, participants were assured that their

participation would not affect their evaluations. Lastly, potential external factors such as changes in school policy, administration, or external stressors affecting teachers and students could influence the effectiveness of the mentoring program.

This inquiry operated under several assumptions. It is assumed that ALTs in their first or second year of teaching require additional support to lead their classrooms effectively. The mentoring program was designed to address this need by providing necessary support to enhance their instructional skills. Additionally, it is assumed that assigning mentors to ALTs would lead to improved teaching practices and professional growth. Mentors were expected to offer sustained and comprehensive support to facilitate this development. The study also assumed that the NCEES (North Carolina Educator Evaluation System) tool effectively tracked teacher progress across multiple observations, allowing for a thorough assessment of growth. Furthermore, it was assumed that mentors are motivated by a genuine desire to support the professional growth of ALTs and contribute to their success. Finally, the inquiry assumed that ALTs would actively engaged in the mentoring process, which was expected to affect the inquiry's outcomes.

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

As a scholarly practitioner, I served as assistant principal at Rise Elementary School and have served as assistant principal at other Restart Schools. Through this experience, I have gained a deep understanding of Restart Schools' challenges. One key challenge has been hiring teachers who are not specialized in specific subjects to teach in those areas. In this regard, I have hired teachers to teach in classrooms outside their area of expertise. I have firsthand knowledge of the level of support required to ensure ALTs' success. Given my experience, my goal has

always been to provide the necessary support to help ALTs excel in their roles. Success in this area is critical to ensuring that Restart Schools can provide students with an excellent education.

As a scholarly practitioner, I assumed full responsibility for overseeing every aspect of the study. This encompassed supervising my team of inquiry collaboration partners, coordinating and strategizing meetings, and implementing each stage of the PDSA framework.

The data collection and analysis techniques were meticulously designed to eliminate the possibility of bias or external influence. The mentor coordinator was delegated the task of facilitating the focus groups, ensuring that teachers could express themselves candidly without any fear of reprisal.

As a scholarly practitioner, I led the inquiry process by effectively arranging, planning, and facilitating this study on improvement science using the PDSA cycle. Our employment of systems and techniques guaranteed that the scholarly practitioner maintained objectivity throughout the inquiry. I transparently presented the findings without any room for distortion. I took a strategic approach to avoid any conflicts of interest among the participants and facilitators of the inquiry.

Summary

A research inquiry using convergent mixed methods was conducted to determine the impact of a comprehensive mentoring program on the instructional leadership of ALTs in Restart schools. This inquiry is a valuable contribution to the literature on mentoring programs and their effectiveness in improving instructional leadership of ALTs in Restart schools. Surveys and focus groups were used to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. Collaborative inquiry partners were critical in the inquiry, providing valuable insights and feedback throughout the

research process. Chapter 4 includes participant demographics and detailed quantitative and qualitative data collection results for implementing mentoring practices.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study was conducted at Rise Elementary School, one of 45 Restart Schools in the Whitakers County School District. In the 2022–2023 school year, the Whitaker County School District operated 35 schools under North Carolina’s Restart model. This model offers increased flexibility in staffing, budgeting, and instructional practices to support schools that have historically academically underperformed. For the 2023–2024 school year, an additional 10 schools applied for Restart status within the district, with implementation planned to begin in the 2025–2026 school year.

As of July 2025, across the state of North Carolina, 174 schools have been approved to operate under the Restart Reform Model. These schools are organized into nine cohorts, starting with Cohort 1 in the 2017–2018 academic year and continuing through Cohort 9, which will begin in the 2025–2026 academic year (NCDPI- Restart Schools, n.d.). Restart Schools use their employment flexibility to hire more alternative licensed teachers than any other type of schools in the state. These schools often allow ALTs to teach outside their licensure areas, which, while intended to address teacher shortages, can present challenges to instructional effectiveness. These ALTs are often placed in high-need schools and expected to assume full teaching responsibilities with minimal preparation and support.

The focus of practice at Rise Elementary is the implementation of a comprehensive mentoring program designed to strengthen the teacher instructional leadership of alternatively licensed teachers, particularly those working in Restart schools. Many ALTs enter the classroom through permit-to-teach licensure, emergency, and residency pathways and begin teaching before completing their certification. Three ALTs at Rise are assigned a Restart Code. Schools

designated as Restart are permitted to hire alternatively licensed teachers and assign them a Restart Code. As long as teachers remain in that code, they are not required to become certified.

With high attrition rates among alternatively certified teachers, especially within the first two years, there is a growing need for targeted support. Given the challenges ALTs face, such as limited preparation, lack of support, and high turnover, this study examines targeted mentorship from experienced educators, rooted in a sense of belonging, can help ALTs develop their instructional capacity and remain in the profession and improve teacher retention in high-need school settings.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

The following questions guided this inquiry:

1. How does a comprehensive mentoring program support alternative licensed teachers in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart school?
2. How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternative licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school?
3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership growth and development be impacted as a result of conducting this inquiry?

To answer these questions, I employed an Improvement Science Framework coupled with a Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Research Design. This design allowed for simultaneous qualitative and quantitative data collection, which was analyzed independently and later compared to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intervention's effectiveness.

The Improvement Science Framework guided the inquiry through the key phases of planning, testing, studying, and acting, to refine and enhance the support provided to ALTs throughout the study. The Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to gather diverse insights. Quantitative data were collected through surveys, while qualitative data were gathered through interviews and reflections from ALTs and mentors. Each dataset was analyzed separately, and the results were then synthesized to answer the research questions and draw conclusions about the program's effectiveness.

A description of the implementation process, data collection, recruitment process, and instrumentation used in the improvement science inquiry study is presented in this chapter. A description of the types of data analysis used for qualitative and quantitative research is also provided. Lastly, the results of the action research study are presented in detail, aligned to the guiding inquiry questions.

Data Collection

In November 2024, all required documentation was submitted to the East Carolina University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. These materials were developed in accordance with IRB standards. On October 3, 2024, the Whitakers County School System (WCSS) granted preliminary IRB approval (see Appendix A), and on February 11, 2025, East Carolina University certified the study as exempt under protocol number UMCIRB 24-002324. The study was determined to pose no more than minimal risk to participants.

Upon receiving approvals from both the university IRB and the WCSS IRB, data collection began in Spring 2025 at one Restart school within a large urban school district. The target population included alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs) in their first or second year of

Table 5*Comparison of Inquiry Participant Characteristics*

Participant ID	Grade Level	Gender	Beginning Teacher Status	Educator Preparation Program (EPP)
1	1st	Female	BT1	No
2	1st	Female	BT1	No
3	2nd	Female	BT1	No
4	4th	Female	BT2	No
5	5th	Female	BT2	Yes
6	Specialist	Female	BT2	No

Note. BT1 = Beginning Teacher Year 1. BT2 = Beginning Teacher Year 2. EPP = Educator Preparation Program.

teaching. The target number for initial participants was between 5-8, as described above. This target was met, with a total of six ALTs participating in this inquiry. There were seven ALTs identified but one resigned at the end of December before the intervention was implemented.

The ALTs received an email invitation from the scholarly practitioner explaining the purpose and scope of the study. The six remaining ALTs consented to participate, three in their first year (BT1) and three in their second year (BT2). Table 6 provides a side-by-side comparison of the six participants in this study. Five of the participants were classroom teachers and one was a specialist. All participants were women. Only one was currently in an EPP (Educator Prep Program). Data from the six participants were included in the analysis.

Both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered from several types of instruments within four phases of this study. The triangulated convergence of data collected from varied sources, including the perspectives from the participants, ensures validity with findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 6 provides a brief overview of the four phases, action, and corresponding data collected. The study was conducted in four sequential phases over the course of one year.

Phase I (Summer 2024-Winter 2024)

The comprehensive mentoring program was developed based on a review of the literature and identified needs among beginning teachers, particularly those in Restart schools. In June 2024, a pilot study using a cognitive laboratory approach was conducted to validate the ALT survey and focus group instruments. Four experienced educators at RES- the Literacy Coach, Math Coach, Instructional Facilitator, and a veteran instructional coach, participated in the think-aloud process, providing feedback that led to several revisions, including clarifying question

Table 6
Phases of Implementation

Phase	Action	Data Collected
Phase I: Planning and IRB Approval (Summer 2024–Winter 2024)	Designed mentoring framework	IRB documentation
Phase I: Planning and IRB Approval (Summer 2024–Winter 2024)	Secured IRB approval from ECU and district	IRB documentation
Phase I: Planning and IRB Approval (Summer 2024–Winter 2024)	Identified participants (6 ALTs in a Restart elementary school)	ALT demographic data
Phase I: Planning and IRB Approval (Summer 2024–Winter 2024)	Developed survey, reflection, and focus group instruments	Initial mentor–mentee assignments
Phase II: IRB and Launch (November 2024–February 2025)	Secured IRB approval from ECU	IRB documentation
Phase II: IRB and Launch (November 2024–February 2025)	Launched mentoring support structure	Mentor observation notes
Phase II: IRB and Launch (November 2024–February 2025)	Launched mentoring support structure	Instructional glimpse note catchers
Phase III: Full Implementation, Data Collection, and ALT–Mentor Collaboration (March 2025–May 2025)	Conducted mentor meetings	Mentor meeting agendas
Phase III: Full Implementation, Data Collection, and ALT–Mentor Collaboration (March 2025–May 2025)	Conducted mentor observations and instructional walkthroughs	Mentor observation notes
Phase III: Full Implementation, Data Collection, and ALT–Mentor Collaboration (March 2025–May 2025)	Conducted mentor observations and instructional walkthroughs	Instructional glimpse note catchers
Phase III: Full Implementation, Data Collection, and ALT–Mentor Collaboration (March 2025–May 2025)	Administered ALT Belonging Survey	ALT Belonging Survey responses
Phase III: Full Implementation, Data Collection, and ALT–Mentor Collaboration (March 2025–May 2025)	Collected NCEES evaluation data	NCEES evaluation scores
Phase III: Full Implementation, Data Collection, and ALT–Mentor Collaboration (March 2025–May 2025)	ALTs engaged in self-reflection activities	ALT reflection journals
Phase IV: Survey, Focus Group, and Leadership Reflection (May 2025–September 2025)	Conducted focus group with all 6 ALTs	Focus group transcript

Phase	Action	Data Collected
Phase IV: Survey, Focus Group, and Leadership Reflection (May 2025–September 2025)	Recorded researcher field notes on leadership growth	Field notes
Phase IV: Survey, Focus Group, and Leadership Reflection (May 2025–September 2025)	Analyzed all data sources using mixed methods	Thematic codes and descriptive statistics summary

wording, refining the definition of “belonging,” and adjusting the format of prompts to align more closely with the inquiry questions. Additionally, the Beginning Teacher Support Program Instructional Glimpse Note Catcher was adopted as a dual-purpose tool for both mentor observations and ALT reflections, based on suggestions to streamline documentation.

Throughout this phase, I worked closely with a team of collaborative inquiry partners to design and refine all tools and processes. This group included the principals, mentor coordinator, instructional facilitator, and mentors. Each played a key role in aligning the program with school priorities and ensuring its relevance and effectiveness. The principals provided guidance and feedback to maintain alignment with the school improvement plan. The mentor coordinator supported the pairing of mentors with ALTs, monitored mentoring relationships, and coordinated professional learning. The instructional facilitator offered guidance on instructional strategies and resources, while mentors contributed valuable feedback through daily interactions with ALTs, including observations, modeling, and reflective discussions. Their contributions ensured the tools were clear, meaningful, and grounded in the day-to-day experiences of teachers at RES.

By late summer, the survey and focus group instruments had been revised and finalized with input from inquiry partners. IRB approval through East Carolina University was requested, and final approval was received in February 2025. At that time, 14 beginning teachers (BTs including 8 ALTs, 6 in their first or second year (BT1 and BT2) and 2 in their third year (BT3), supported by 10 mentors. (see Table 3). ALT mentors were informed in person about the study’s purpose and assured that no changes would be made to the BT program until IRB approval was granted. When one mentor departed RES, a replacement was secured within two weeks to ensure consistent support for the affected ALT. No formal data collection or study-related activities took place during this phase.

Phase II (November 2024- February 2025)

In collaboration with the school's Mentor Coordinator, mentor assignments were finalized for the six ALTs selected to participate in the inquiry study. These six teachers were part of a larger group of eight ALTs at Rise Elementary School. The school had a total of thirteen beginning teachers. Among these, there were three specialists, four Kindergarten–2nd grade teachers, and six 3rd–5th grade teachers. A purposive sampling approach was used to select participants whose experiences matched the focus of this inquiry. These participants were ALTs in their first or second year of teaching (BT1 or BT2) within a Restart school context (Mertler, 2021). This method ensured that participants could provide relevant insights into how the Comprehensive Mentoring Program supported instructional leadership and belonging.

Each participating ALT was paired with a mentor whose experience and qualifications aligned with the expectations outlined in the comprehensive mentoring program. The survey and focus group protocols were co-developed with inquiry partners, including the principal, mentor coordinator, instructional facilitator, and mentor. This process was guided by the study's inquiry questions, which examined how mentoring supports ALTs' instructional leadership development and sense of belonging, and was further informed by known challenges facing ALTs, including planning, differentiation, small group instruction, and building a sense of belonging. Inquiry partners reviewed early drafts of the protocols and provided feedback to ensure clarity, contextual relevance, and alignment with the district's instructional goals.

As part of my responsibilities as Assistant Principal, I met individually with the six participating ALTs to fulfill district Alternative Licensure Institute (ALI) requirements. These meetings allowed me to learn more about their professional backgrounds, highlight their instructional strengths, and offer guidance on how to leverage those strengths in their

classrooms. Supports during this phase included substitute coverage during their initial days, reduced non-instructional duties, and direct assistance with using systems such as PowerSchool (student information and grading), ECATS (digital platform for managing and tracking data related to students with disabilities), WakeLearns (professional development platform), and NCEES teacher evaluation and observation system). I also provided staffing charts and facilitated introductions to key personnel. Each ALT developed a classroom management plan and received support from instructional coaches. The administrative team also ensured release time for observations and mentor collaboration and introduced ALTs to digital tools commonly used at RES. Coordination with English Second Language, Special Education and counseling staff supported completion of their post-ALI assignments.

Although the district's Beginning Teacher Program remained unchanged, mentors followed standard expectations including instructional glimpses during Q1 and Q2, monthly support meetings, support with PDPs, and observation and summary conferences. While awaiting IRB approval, both the six participating ALTs and the broader group of BTs continued to receive district-aligned support.

To better understand BT needs, the Mentor Coordinator administered an anonymous BT Needs Assessment Reflection to all beginning teachers. While the results could not be disaggregated to isolate responses from ALTs, the data revealed common strengths in whole group instruction and relationship-building, and recurring challenges in planning, small group instruction, differentiation, and classroom management. In response, the Mentor Coordinator embedded relevant topics into monthly mentor-mentee meetings, though no formal feedback was collected to evaluate the impact of those sessions.

At the school level, the Instructional Leadership Team and administration incorporated themes from the reflection data into the school's yearlong professional development plan. Weekly instructional planning sessions focused on small group instruction and classroom management were co-led by academic coaches, the principal, and assistant principals. While data on the implementation of small groups was collected by the Instructional Leadership Team, no informal or formal data were collected during this phase to evaluate the impact of my leadership support for ALTs.

Following IRB approval in February 2025, mentors assigned to ALTs were invited to a formal orientation meeting to learn about the study's goals and the structure of the comprehensive mentoring program. This meeting extended beyond the expectations of the district's standard BT program and clarified mentor roles specific to the inquiry. All six participating ALTs received an email invitation to participate and provided informed consent by early March. In March, one mentor-ALT pairing was adjusted due to a personality mismatch. To maintain the quality and consistency of support, the Mentor Coordinator assumed direct responsibility for this mentee, increasing her caseload to three beginning teachers: two alternatively licensed teachers (one BT2 and one BT3) and one traditionally licensed beginning teacher, as shown in Table 7.

Phase III (March 2025-May 2025)

Following IRB approval and participant consent in early March, the comprehensive mentoring program was fully launched. Mentors received professional development on the Integrative Framework for Belonging, which guided their support for helping ALTs develop a sense of confidence, connection, and professional identity within the school community. Mentors were also given release time and support materials and committed to observing and providing

Table 7
Number of Mentees and Beginning Teacher Status

Mentor ID	Mentee Count	Beginning Teacher Status	Alternatively Licensed Teacher (ALT)	Mentor–Mentee Change
1	1	BT1	No	No
2	1	BT1	Yes	No
3	1	BT1	Yes	No
4	1	BT1	Yes	Yes
5	1	BT2	Yes	No
6	1	BT2	No	Yes
6	1	BT3	Yes	Yes
7	1	BT2	No	No
8	1	BT2	Yes	Yes
8	1	BT3	Yes	Yes
9	1	BT2	No	No
9	1	BT2	Yes	No
10	1	BT3	Yes	No

Note. BT = Beginning Teacher. ALT = Alternatively Licensed Teacher. “Mentor–Mentee Change” indicates a reassignment during the study.

feedback to their ALT mentees for at least one hour per week, often broken into 15-minute segments for observations, co-teaching, or reflective dialogue. As part of this phase, four structured ALT Mentor Meetings were held on March 12, March 25, April 15, and April 25, 2025, to support mentor development, strengthen ALT support, and reflect on implementation. These meetings, co-facilitated by school leaders and the mentor coordinator, served as professional learning communities focused on ALT-specific needs.

On March 25th, mentors examined the unique challenges faced by ALTs, including lack of formal teacher preparation, time management difficulties, and the emotional strain of balancing licensure coursework with daily teaching. A deep discussion on “what it means to belong” led to a consensus that intentional administrative check-ins, inclusion on grade-level teams, and positive affirmation were vital for ALT morale. Mentors also reviewed instructional trends from observations, highlighting needs around small group instruction, effective use of manipulatives, and managing student voice.

The April 15th meeting focused on strategies for giving constructive feedback in ways that preserve ALT confidence and promote growth. Mentors shared personal stories and coaching strategies, emphasizing empathy, reflective questioning, and the importance of building trusting relationships. The session reinforced that effective mentorship requires a balance of challenge and support, and mentors were encouraged to code observation notes in preparation for data analysis.

On April 25th I continued to explore the application of the belonging framework in daily mentoring interactions. Mentors discussed observed trends across classrooms, such as the need for increased student engagement, instructional pacing, and pre-planning support, and reflected on their role in affirming ALTs’ sense of belonging. Expectations for ongoing data collection

were reiterated, and a codebook for inductive analysis was collaboratively developed by the group.

The final meeting, held on May 2, focused on continuing the analysis of Observational Glimpses and teacher reflections to expand and refine the codebook. The themes generated from this process and the resulting findings are discussed further in Chapter 5. A summary of the ALT mentor meetings, including discussion topics and key outcomes, is presented in Table 8.

Weekly ALT reflections were intended as a core data source; however, participation was low. After noticing this, I consulted with mentors and considered the feedback from CIPs regarding teacher workload. Mentors said the reflection prompts were meaningful, but a weekly requirement overwhelmed ALTs, who also managed planning, instruction, and licensure coursework. To help, I created a Google Form version of the reflection template. This made access easier and saved time. I wanted to honor ALTs' workload and offer flexibility. Participation remained low, with only three ALTs completing one reflection each. To avoid adding pressure, I sent the reflection link periodically and asked mentors to remind their mentees. These challenges limited data collection.

Despite challenges with reflection data, multiple other data sources were successfully collected to assess the implementation and impact of the comprehensive mentoring program. ALTs completed the ALT Belonging Survey, and their instructional practices were evaluated using the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES). While only one formal mentor observation was conducted on the observational glimpse note catcher due to the fourth quarter launch of the program, mentors provided consistent weekly feedback to their mentees, which was documented informally and discussed during each ALT Mentor Meeting. These weekly feedback cycles allowed mentors to collaboratively determine the next steps and adjust their

Table 8
Summary of ALT Mentor Meetings (March–May 2025)

Date	Key Focus Area	Discussion Highlights and Outcomes
March 12, 2025	Introduction to Inquiry and Program Frameworks	Overview of the dissertation and its purpose
March 12, 2025	Introduction to Inquiry and Program Frameworks	Clarified differences between the Beginning Teacher Support Program and the Comprehensive Mentoring Program
March 12, 2025	Introduction to Inquiry and Program Frameworks	Reviewed the PDSA model and the Integrative Framework for Belonging
March 12, 2025	Introduction to Inquiry and Program Frameworks	Mentors committed to weekly positive interactions and completing at least one observational glimpse by April 12
March 25, 2025	ALT Challenges and Belonging	Identified common ALT challenges, including lack of formal preparation, time management, and balancing coursework with teaching
March 25, 2025	ALT Challenges and Belonging	Explored what it means to belong from both personal and instructional lenses
March 25, 2025	ALT Challenges and Belonging	Reviewed instructional needs, including small group instruction, use of manipulatives, and student voice
April 15, 2025	Giving Constructive Feedback	Discussed strategies for delivering feedback that supports growth and confidence
April 15, 2025	Giving Constructive Feedback	Shared mentor experiences emphasizing empathy and reflection
April 15, 2025	Giving Constructive Feedback	Reinforced the mentor's role in encouraging self-directed growth
April 15, 2025	Giving Constructive Feedback	Prepared mentors to begin coding observational glimpses
April 25, 2025	Belonging Framework in Practice and Data Collection	Continued discussion on how to foster belonging through daily interaction
April 25, 2025	Belonging Framework in Practice and Data Collection	Identified common instructional trends, including student engagement, pacing, and pre-planning
April 25, 2025	Belonging Framework in Practice and Data Collection	Collaboratively developed a codebook for inductive analysis (see Chapter 5)
May 2, 2025	Data Collection	Continued development of codebook and theme construction

support based on ALT needs. By the end of April, all participating ALTs had received their final formal NCEES evaluations conducted by either the assistant principal or principal. All qualitative data resources were analyzed using a blend of inductive thematic coding and descriptive statistical analysis, ensuring methodological rigor and alignment with the study's guiding research questions. In Table 8 you can see how the data sources are aligned to the research questions.

Qualitative data were analyzed using a combination of inductive thematic analysis and descriptive statistics, ensuring rigor and alignment with the study's design. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and interpret repeated patterns of meaning within the coded data. Themes were constructed by grouping related codes that aligned with the research questions or elevated key participant perspectives.

According to Saldaña (2013), coding is the process of assigning labels—or “codes”—to segments of qualitative data that represent meaningful ideas, actions, or experiences. A code typically consists of a word or short phrase that captures the essence of a phrase, sentence, or paragraph. Saldaña emphasizes that coding is not merely a technical process, but an interpretive act that requires careful analysis and reflection.

Following Saldaña's multi-cycle approach, First Cycle Coding was conducted using descriptive coding to summarize the topical content of ALT reflections, focus group transcripts, and observation notes. The Second Cycle Coding involved condensing and organizing the initial codes into broader categories, patterns, and ultimately, themes.

Table 9*Alignment of Research Questions and Data Sources*

Research Question	Data Source
RQ1. How does a comprehensive mentoring program support alternatively licensed teachers in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart school?	NCEES Evaluation Ratings (Standard 1)
RQ1. How does a comprehensive mentoring program support alternatively licensed teachers in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart school?	Mentor Observations
RQ1. How does a comprehensive mentoring program support alternatively licensed teachers in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart school?	Instructional Glimpse Note Catchers
RQ1. How does a comprehensive mentoring program support alternatively licensed teachers in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart school?	ALT Focus Group
RQ2. How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternatively licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school?	ALT Belonging Survey
RQ2. How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternatively licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school?	ALT Focus Group Interview
RQ2. How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternatively licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school?	ALT Mentor Meeting Discussions (Mentor Reflections)
RQ2. How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternatively licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school?	Weekly Interactions (Anecdotal Feedback)
RQ2. How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternatively licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school?	ALT Reflections via Google Form
RQ3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership growth and development be impacted as a result of conducting this inquiry?	Researcher Field Notes
RQ3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership growth and development be impacted as a result of conducting this inquiry?	ALT Mentor Meeting Agendas and Reflections
RQ3. As a scholarly practitioner, how will my leadership growth and development be impacted as a result of conducting this inquiry?	Pilot Study Feedback

ALT Belonging Survey

The ALT Belonging Survey (Appendix C) was designed to assess participants' perceptions of belonging, school culture, leadership support, and professional development within the context of a comprehensive mentoring program. The survey consisted of 28 items, including both demographic questions and Likert-scale items, with a few open-ended components.

The survey covered several key areas, including demographics such as gender, race, and licensure status; mentoring experience, including the frequency and quality of mentor interactions; perceptions of school culture and leadership support; feelings of belonging within the school environment; access to and impact of professional development opportunities; and overall job satisfaction and well-being.

Items were structured primarily as Likert-scale questions (ex. Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), allowing for quantitative analysis of trends across participants. Questions such as *"There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect among staff,"* and *"My contributions are valued at work,"* were designed to align with the Integrative Framework for Belonging, specifically measuring aspects of confidence, connection, and contribution.

The survey was administered via Qualtrics and completed by all six ALTs participating in the study. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends, while any open-ended responses were included in the broader qualitative coding process as part of the study's mixed-methods approach.

NCEES: Observation and Evaluation of ALTs through the Lens of Instructional Leadership

In this study, instructional leadership is defined using Standard 1 of the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES): *Teachers demonstrate leadership*. This standard highlights how teachers lead in the classroom, collaborate with colleagues, contribute to a positive school culture, and advocate for student learning. Importantly, this study centers on teacher instructional leadership, which is distinct from administrative leadership. Rather than focusing on principal-led instructional improvement, this research investigates how ALTs enact leadership practices that influence instruction and support their school communities.

To assess teacher instructional leadership, I used the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES) rubric. This rubric measures teacher performance across five core standards: (1) demonstrating leadership, (2) establishing a respectful environment for a diverse population of students, (3) knowing the content they teach, (4) facilitating student learning, and (5) reflecting on practice. Each standard is rated on a four-level scale: *Developing*, *Proficient*, *Accomplished*, and *Distinguished*. This study focused specifically on teacher performance in Standard 1, *Teachers Demonstrate Leadership*. I used this standard as both a prescreen and post-measure to assess growth during the implementation of the Comprehensive Mentoring Program. Standard 1 captures how teachers lead in the classroom, collaborate with colleagues, contribute to school improvement, and advocate for students. It provides a clear lens to evaluate the development of instructional leadership over time.

As the school's assistant principal and a NCEES evaluator, I conducted formal observations for two of the six ALTs, while the second assistant principal conducted the remaining four. All ALTs completed their self-assessment in September 2024, as required for all

staff. Following IRB approval in February 2025, the comprehensive mentoring program began in early March. Each ALT had one remaining formal observation (their third) within the NCEES schedule, which coincided with the implementation window. This final observation served as the post-intervention data point, while the second observation, conducted prior to the program, was used as a baseline (prescreen).

To show growth in teacher leadership, I compared ALTs' NCEES ratings for Standard 1 before and after the program. Table 10 visually displays changes in performance levels from Developing to Proficient or Accomplished. Although only one observation was available during the implementation period, this was supported with qualitative coding of observation narratives, mentor reflections, ALT focus group data, and self-reported reflections. This triangulation of data helped to validate the growth observed in the NCEES ratings.

Mentors supported the hand-coding of Standard 1 observation comments. A codebook (Appendix I) was created using Microsoft Excel and included the following elements:

- Code Definition – derived from context
- Data Example – a representative quote or evaluator comment
- Theme/Category – *aligned to traits such as confidence, connection, and contribution*
- Source – including NCEES evaluations, Instructional Glimpses, reflections, focus groups, and the ALT Belonging Survey

To improve inter-rater reliability, mentors and I used the codebook collaboratively and held calibration discussions to ensure consistency in applying codes. While the quantitative NCEES

Table 10*ALT Instructional Leadership Growth Matrix*

ALT Participant ID	Pre-Observation Rating (Standard 1)	Post-Observation Rating (Standard 1)	Growth
1	Developing	Proficient	Increased
2	Proficient	Accomplished	Increased
3	Developing	Proficient	Increased
4	Proficient	Accomplished	Increased
5	Proficient	Proficient	No Change
6	Developing	Proficient	Increased

ratings provided measurable growth, the coded narratives added depth, showing how ALTs demonstrated leadership behaviors in their practice.

While using a single formal observation during the implementation window presents limitations, this approach offered a meaningful snapshot of instructional leadership growth. Additionally, this process illustrates how the NCEES evaluation tool can be leveraged not just for accountability for accountability but as a formative measure to support leadership development, particularly for ALTs serving in high need Restart schools.

Phase IV (May 2025- September 2025)

The final phase of the inquiry involved the focus group and a comprehensive analysis of multiple data sources to understand the impact of the comprehensive mentoring program on alternatively licensed teachers. All six ALTs participated in a focus group, which provided rich qualitative insights into their experiences. In addition to the focus group data, this phase included the analysis of previously collected ALT survey responses, NCEES evaluation ratings, and reflective reports submitted by the participants throughout the mentoring program. These data sources were triangulated to identify patterns, evaluate program effectiveness, and determine the extent to which the mentoring experience supported the professional growth and instructional development of ALTs.

Data Analysis

All data for this study were collected between March and May 2025. All files were securely stored in password-protected electronic folders. Quantitative data sources included the ALT Belonging Survey and NCEES evaluation ratings for Standard 1: Teachers Demonstrate Leadership. Survey responses were collected via Qualtrics and exported into Excel for descriptive statistical analysis. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim, organized in

Microsoft Word and Excel, and coded manually. Qualitative data sources included mentor observations, instructional glimpse note catchers, ALT reflections, and a focus group transcript. A total of six alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs), three in their first year (BT1) and three in their second year (BT2), participated in the study.

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the sample characteristics and survey responses. Categorical variables, including race, licensure pathway, and mentoring frequency, were reported as frequencies and percentages. These variables represent groups without a numerical order. Continuous variables, such as age, were summarized with means and standard deviations. These variables can take on any value within a range. Survey items aligned with the Allen et al. (2022) Framework for Belonging. These were analyzed to assess teachers' perceptions of competence, autonomy, connectedness, meaningful engagement, and institutional support. For each construct, composite scores were calculated. Reliability was examined through internal consistency to determine how well items measured the same concept.

For NCEES (North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System) evaluations, teacher ratings on Standard 1 (Demonstrating Leadership) were compared before and after implementation of the mentoring program. Growth patterns were summarized using frequency tables, which present the distribution or proportion of teachers changing rating categories. These tables showed the proportion of teachers who moved from "Developing" to "Proficient," or from "Proficient" to "Accomplished." Observation narratives, which are written accounts of classroom observations, were also coded to add depth to the numeric ratings.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data analysis followed Saldaña's (2013) multi-cycle approach, which uses multiple rounds of coding to interpret data. In the first cycle of coding, descriptive codes (labels summarizing content) and in vivo codes (direct phrases from participants) were used. This process captured recurring ideas in ALT reflections, focus group transcripts, and mentor observation notes. As part of the qualitative analysis, I engaged in analytic memoing to document my reflections, insights, and questions throughout the coding process. Analytic memos served as a bridge between raw data and emerging themes, capturing how my interpretation developed over time. For example, an early memo noted the nuanced transition from "planning" described as an individual task to "planning" framed as a collaborative strategy between mentor and mentee. This observation revealed deeper mentor–mentee interactions that extended beyond logistical preparation into shared instructional leadership.

Another memo captured the recurring phrase "I feel more confident," which appeared in both reflections and focus group transcripts. Initially coded as *emotional support*, the memo highlighted how confidence also functioned as evidence of *competence* within Allen et al.'s (2022) Framework for Belonging. Similarly, a memo from mentor observation notes documented the phrase "students leading the discussion." This was first coded under *engagement* but later memoed as a marker of growing *autonomy*, since ALTs were releasing control and allowing students to take leadership roles.

Including these memos emphasized transparency in the analytic process and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings. They also allowed me to connect participant language more directly to the theoretical framework, such as linking references to "not being alone" with both *connectedness* and *institutional support*. In this way, analytic memos served as an essential tool

for transitioning from first-cycle descriptive codes to second-cycle themes that aligned with the study's research questions.

Second-cycle coding, a method for analyzing qualitative data, involves reviewing and condensing initial codes into categories. These categories were then grouped into higher-order themes. Codes reflecting classroom confidence, instructional planning, and student engagement, for instance, were aggregated into the broader theme of competence. Mentor reflections and focus group data were also triangulated, or cross-checked for agreement, with survey responses. This was done to validate consistency across sources. The categories, codes, and themes that emerged from this analysis are presented in Table 11.

Microsoft Excel was employed to construct a codebook with columns for code definition (descriptions of each code), representative data excerpts (sample text illustrating each code), theme alignment (how each code maps to broader topics), and source (where the data originated). Calibration sessions with mentors were used to check the reliability of coding, meaning coders compared and discussed their choices. This step was particularly important for NCEES narrative data, as it ensured the consistent application of codes.

Mixed-Methods Integration

This study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data (survey results and NCEES ratings) and qualitative data (focus group transcripts, written participant reflections, and mentor teacher observations) were each analyzed independently. The results were then integrated to answer the research questions. The ALT survey provided measurable indicators of belonging. Qualitative sources explained how those perceptions developed through mentoring interactions. NCEES ratings documented observable leadership

Table 11*Alignment of Categories, Codes, and Themes*

Category	Code	Theme Generated
Competence	Instructional modeling	Growing Instructional Confidence through Targeted Mentoring
Competence	Gradual release	Growing Instructional Confidence through Targeted Mentoring
Competence	Confidence building	Growing Instructional Confidence through Targeted Mentoring
Competence	Data-driven feedback	Growing Instructional Confidence through Targeted Mentoring
Competence	Lesson planning support	Growing Instructional Confidence through Targeted Mentoring
Connectedness	Trust with mentor	Belonging through Collaboration and Relational Trust
Connectedness	PLC collaboration	Belonging through Collaboration and Relational Trust
Connectedness	Peer relationships	Belonging through Collaboration and Relational Trust
Connectedness	Collective efficacy	Belonging through Collaboration and Relational Trust
Connectedness	Shared reflection	Belonging through Collaboration and Relational Trust
Meaningful Engagement	Professional identity	Reclaiming Purpose and Professional Identity
Meaningful Engagement	Purposeful practice	Reclaiming Purpose and Professional Identity
Meaningful Engagement	Reflection journals	Reclaiming Purpose and Professional Identity
Meaningful Engagement	Student success focus	Reclaiming Purpose and Professional Identity
Institutional Support	Administrative visibility	Systemic Supports Strengthening Teacher Stability
Institutional Support	Protected time	Systemic Supports Strengthening Teacher Stability
Institutional Support	Leadership presence	Systemic Supports Strengthening Teacher Stability
Institutional Support	Structured mentor meetings	Systemic Supports Strengthening Teacher Stability

Category	Code	Theme Generated
Autonomy	Gradual leadership responsibility	Developing Teacher Leadership and Professional Agency
Autonomy	Decision-making	Developing Teacher Leadership and Professional Agency
Autonomy	Voice in planning	Developing Teacher Leadership and Professional Agency
Autonomy	Initiative taking	Developing Teacher Leadership and Professional Agency
Mentor–Mentee Interactions	Individualized feedback	Mentoring as a Catalyst for Instructional Growth
Mentor–Mentee Interactions	Questioning protocols	Mentoring as a Catalyst for Instructional Growth
Mentor–Mentee Interactions	Reflective dialogue	Mentoring as a Catalyst for Instructional Growth
Evaluation and Feedback	NCEES reflection	Transforming Evaluation into a Growth Tool
Evaluation and Feedback	Observation feedback	Transforming Evaluation into a Growth Tool
Evaluation and Feedback	Targeted skill focus (differentiation, management, data use)	Transforming Evaluation into a Growth Tool
Collaboration and Team Support	Shared planning	Collective Efficacy as a Source of Belonging
Collaboration and Team Support	Goal alignment	Collective Efficacy as a Source of Belonging
Collaboration and Team Support	Peer modeling	Collective Efficacy as a Source of Belonging
Collaboration and Team Support	Cross-grade collaboration	Collective Efficacy as a Source of Belonging
Retention and Sustainability	Burnout prevention	Sustaining Teacher Commitment through Comprehensive Mentoring
Retention and Sustainability	Workload balance	Sustaining Teacher Commitment through Comprehensive Mentoring
Retention and Sustainability	Career commitment	Sustaining Teacher Commitment through Comprehensive Mentoring
Retention and Sustainability	Supportive culture	Sustaining Teacher Commitment through Comprehensive Mentoring

growth. Focus groups revealed the role of mentoring in shaping that growth. A triangulation matrix, a table for cross-referencing types of evidence, was developed to align evidence across datasets. This strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Demographics

The study sample consisted of six alternatively licensed elementary educators employed at a Title I Restart school within an urban public school district. Among the six participants, three were in their first year of teaching (BT1), and three were in their second year (BT2). Two of the participants were working full-time while completing the requirements for their licensure at the time of data collection. Five participants identified as Black and one as White. Their ages ranged from 24 to 42, with an average age of 30. Three entered teaching directly from undergraduate programs in non-education fields. The other three transitioned from prior careers. Teaching assignments included two first-grade teachers, one second-grade teacher, one fourth-grade teacher, one fifth-grade teacher, and one specialist.

Results

Findings across all data sources indicate that during the CMP, ALTs increased their instructional leadership and developed a stronger sense of belonging within the Restart school context. A key distinction of the CMP was its focus on selecting experienced mentors who provided ongoing, individualized coaching. The program also emphasized collaborative planning skills and intentional student discourse, which were less prioritized in other initiatives. While multiple schoolwide initiatives may have contributed to these outcomes, the data suggest that the CMP played a role in supporting teacher growth and development. The study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, giving equal weight to both qualitative and quantitative

Table 12*Pre- and Post-Intervention NCEES Ratings (Standard 1)*

Participant ID	Pre-Intervention Rating (Standard 1)	Post-Intervention Rating (Standard 1)	Change
1	Developing	Proficient	Increased
2	Proficient	Accomplished	Increased
3	Developing	Proficient	Increased
4	Proficient	Accomplished	Increased
5	Proficient	Proficient	No Change
6	Developing	Proficient	Increased

Note. NCEES = North Carolina Educator Evaluation System.

strands. This approach reinforced the credibility of these integrated findings. NCEES ratings rose from an average of 2.3 to 3.1, with every teacher at least Proficient and two advancing to Accomplished as listed in Table 12. Beyond these numbers, teachers reflected a developmental trajectory. They planned collaboratively with mentors, facilitated deeper student discourse, and built the confidence to lead instruction. Belonging was reinforced most strongly in competence, connectedness, institutional support, and meaningful engagement. Autonomy developed more slowly. An additional theme was the influence of collective efficacy within grade-level teams, which shaped the success of ALTs. Together, these results demonstrate how a comprehensive mentoring program with carefully selected and trained mentors influenced the early leadership journey of alternatively licensed teachers in a demanding Restart environment.

Analysis of Inquiry Question 1

How does a comprehensive mentoring program support alternatively licensed teachers in improving their instructional leadership in a Restart school? Results show that ALTs advanced in instructional leadership as defined by North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES) Standard 1, which recognizes how teachers lead in classrooms, contribute to collaboration, and advocate for students. Instructional leadership, as enacted by teachers rather than administrators, includes guiding daily learning practices, facilitating collaboration, and advocating for student needs. Unlike the broader administrative sense of 'instructional leadership,' this study focused on these classroom-based leadership practices. Growth was evident in NCEES ratings, which rose across the cohort; more importantly, it was also evident in how teachers described and enacted their roles.

NCEES ratings increased along with teachers' reflections. Teachers moved from isolated lesson planning to collaborative work with mentors. One ALT said, "My mentor helped me see

planning as something we do together, not just me trying to figure it all out alone.” Mentors noted that teachers attended small-group lessons with prepared questions to promote higher-order thinking. Data showed that collaborative planning increased teachers’ confidence and improved their instructional practices.

These planning changes led to more purposeful student discussions. Surveys and focus groups linked teachers’ growth in questioning and discussions to the modeling of their mentors. One teacher said, “Before our session, I wasn’t sure how to get students to engage more deeply, but my mentor modeled how to use sentence stems, and it was a game-changer.” Mentor observations confirmed that students engaged in more conversations with their peers, not just the teacher.

As teachers gained skill in planning and discourse, they also grew more confident in taking instructional risks. Focus group data indicated a shift from “managing” classrooms to “leading learning.” One ALT reflected, “At first, I wasn’t sure how to run small groups, but after watching my mentor, I felt ready to try. Now I feel like I can actually lead learning, not just manage it.” Mentors described similar changes, noting that mentees began to model strategies for colleagues and contribute ideas in grade-level meetings. Thus, across numbers, observations, and personal accounts, the evidence converges on the same result: teachers were not only improving their instructional skills but also beginning to see themselves as leaders.

A distinctive element of the CMP was its reliance on carefully chosen mentors who were both proven instructional leaders and committed to the demanding work of supporting novice teachers. Unlike the district’s standard Beginning Teacher Support Program, which pairs beginning teachers with available staff, the CMP prioritized the quality of its mentors and their training. These mentors not only guided ALTs but also modeled what leadership looked like in

practice. In turn, the program simultaneously built the capacity of mentors as leaders, reinforcing that instructional leadership exists across multiple layers of the school, not solely in administrative roles.

Together, these findings suggest that during the CMP, alternatively licensed teachers evolved into instructional leaders who made meaningful contributions to student learning and team collaboration. Although schoolwide professional development also addressed planning and discourse, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative data highlights the CMP as a relational and structural support that amplified teacher growth. Growth in instructional leadership was closely tied to teachers' sense of belonging, as competence and connectedness provided the confidence to take on leadership roles.

Analysis of Inquiry Question 2

How does a comprehensive mentoring program impact alternatively licensed teachers' feelings of belonging in a Restart school? Teachers reported a strengthened sense of belonging in four areas of Allen et al.'s (2022) framework: competence, connectedness, institutional support, and meaningful engagement, while autonomy emerged more gradually. Survey results (Table 13) reflected this pattern, with Connectedness and Institutional Support receiving the highest composite scores and Autonomy the lowest. These quantitative results are best understood when viewed alongside qualitative evidence, which explains how teachers experienced belonging in daily practice.

Teachers consistently linked competence to the support mentors provided in instructional planning and small-group leadership. One ALT explained, "My mentor broke things down and

Table 13*ALT Belonging Survey Composite Scores*

Belonging Construct	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Competence	4.2	0.58
Autonomy	3.6	0.74
Connectedness	4.5	0.42
Meaningful Engagement	4.1	0.61
Institutional Support	4.4	0.52

Note. M = mean (average score); SD = standard deviation (amount of variation among responses). Scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

helped me start small groups with intention.” High scores on Connectedness were echoed in focus group discussions, where teachers described mentors as “accessible” and “non-judgmental” and referred to their teammates as “like a second mentor.” These overlaps between survey evidence and teacher narratives underscore that belonging was not an abstract concept but rather rooted in concrete practices, such as collaborative planning and supportive team dynamics.

Institutional support was another defining feature. Participants noted that protected mentoring time, access to professional development, and administrative visibility were indicators that their growth was prioritized. One teacher noted, “Mentors checked in every day, even when I was having a tough week.” Such consistency reinforced trust and helped reduce feelings of isolation. Meaningful engagement was reflected in teachers’ statements about feeling valued as members of the school community. “I feel like my contributions matter now, like I’m part of the team,” one ALT shared, signaling a shift from marginalization to participation.

An additional theme that emerged was the importance of collective efficacy at the grade-level team level. Teams that demonstrated high collective efficacy set clear goals, supported one another, and created conditions where ALTs felt comfortable taking risks and asking for help.

Collective efficacy served as a mediator, directly linking the mentoring process to the sense of belonging among teachers, thereby acting as a catalytic factor in teacher development. In these contexts, ALTs thrived and were able to enact the practices modeled in mentoring. Conversely, when teams lacked collective efficacy, ALTs reported struggling to find support and validation, and their growth was less evident. This finding highlights that individual belonging was reinforced or constrained by the collective culture of the team, underscoring the importance of group dynamics in shaping novice teacher development.

Although autonomy, defined as the ability to make instructional choices and influence decision-making, scored lowest, reflections revealed that it was not absent but was developing slowly. Teachers expressed a desire for more opportunities to influence grade-level planning or lead professional learning community (PLC) discussions. This limitation was partly structural, as the district intentionally shields beginning teachers from additional responsibilities beyond their classrooms. While autonomy lagged behind other constructs, the CMP provided a foundation upon which broader leadership opportunities could later be built.

In this way, the CMP provided more than emotional reassurance; it fostered the professional trust and validation necessary for teachers to see themselves as valued members of the school community. The sense of belonging that developed during the program reinforced teachers' instructional leadership, suggesting that these two constructs function interdependently. While belonging shaped the experiences of teachers, the process of facilitating this growth shaped my own development as a leader.

To clarify how the survey items corresponded to the constructs of belonging, Table 14 lists the ALT Belonging Survey questions aligned with each construct.

Analysis of Inquiry Question 3

How did leading this inquiry shape my own leadership growth? Conducting this inquiry contributed to my development as a leader in three key ways: system design, data-driven decision-making, and equity-oriented practice. Coordinating IRB approval, scheduling mentor meetings, and refining reflection tools required the design and maintenance of systems that consistently supported teachers. This experience enhanced my capacity to build structures that sustain professional learning

Table 14
ALT Survey Evidence

Belonging Construct	ALT Survey Evidence
Competence	Teachers reported mentors helped with instruction (Q10)
Competence	Teachers reported mentors helped with feedback (Q12)
Connectedness	High agreement on mentor support (Q4)
Connectedness	High agreement on positive relationships (Q5)
Connectedness	High agreement on trust (Q14)
Institutional Support	Strong agreement on leadership support (Q6)
Institutional Support	Strong agreement on feedback (Q7)
Institutional Support	Strong agreement on professional development (Q17)
Institutional Support	Strong agreement on professional development (Q18)
Meaningful Engagement	Teachers felt valued and invested in teaching (Q19)
Meaningful Engagement	Mentors helped meet student needs (Q13)
Autonomy	Leadership encourages innovation (Q8)
Autonomy	Staff share a common vision with leadership (Q15)

The feedback loops I established for teachers mirrored the iterative process I engaged in as a leader, where evidence guided each adjustment. These loops not only highlighted the importance of responsive leadership informed by data but also demonstrated a cycle of reciprocal learning between teachers and myself. For example, after noting low participation in weekly reflections, I adapted the tool into a Google Form to reduce barriers to participation. This adaptive strategy, much like the teachers' own adjustment cycles, demonstrated how formative principles, such as feedback and adaptation, were crucial for both teacher growth and my leadership development.

The reciprocal nature of growth—teachers developing as instructional leaders and I developing as a system leader—emerged as a consistent theme across my reflections. Supporting alternatively licensed teachers, many of whom were educators of color or career changers, reinforced my commitment to building inclusive environments where teachers feel valued and affirmed.

Leading this inquiry allowed me to grow alongside participants. Just as ALTs built competence through mentoring, I built competence in designing systems, making evidence-based decisions, and leading with equity. This dual growth underscores that leadership development is not a solitary pursuit but rather emerges from a community and shared purpose.

Triangulation of Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence provides a fuller picture of teacher growth than any single data source could offer. The rise in NCEES ratings reflected measurable progress, but the meaning of that progress came alive in the voices of teachers and the observations of mentors. Similarly, survey data on belonging revealed patterns across various constructs, while focus groups and reflections explained how these patterns were experienced in

practice. This convergence strengthens confidence in the results and helps to illustrate the developmental sequence of growth during the CMP.

Table 15 summarizes the convergence of evidence across data sources, illustrating how themes of instructional leadership and belonging were consistently reinforced throughout the study. For example, the quantitative rise in Standard 1 NCEES ratings parallels teacher accounts of planning collaboratively with mentors, which were also confirmed by observation notes documenting stronger small-group lessons. Similarly, high survey scores on connectedness were echoed by focus group comments about feeling valued and supported, while mentor notes captured the daily practices that built relational trust. Even areas of slower growth, such as autonomy, showed consistent trends across the data: survey ratings were lowest, teachers expressed a desire for more leadership opportunities, and mentors noted limited influence beyond the classroom. The addition of collective efficacy highlights that team culture can amplify or constrain individual growth, reinforcing that teacher belonging is both personal and collective.

Taken together, the triangulated findings highlight that growth during the CMP was not isolated to a single measure but was visible across multiple forms of evidence. This consistency suggests that the program created conditions in which ALTs could strengthen their instructional leadership and experience a deeper sense of belonging within their school community.

Table 15
Triangulation of Data Sources

Construct	NCEES Evidence	ALT Survey Evidence	Focus Group Evidence	Mentor Meeting Evidence
Instructional Planning	Increase in Standard 1b (School Improvement)	83% rated mentors highly in support	Mentor support improved collaborative planning	Pre-planned small-group lessons observed
Student Discourse	Growth in Standard 1d (Advocating for Students)	Not Reported	Sentence stems improved student participation	Students engaged in peer dialogue
Confidence in Leadership	Two ALTs advanced to Accomplished	100% reported applying mentor strategies	Teachers reported increased confidence leading instruction	Teachers demonstrated instructional risk-taking
Connectedness	Not Evident	Mean score of 4.5	Participants reported feeling valued and heard	Positive team and mentor relationships observed
Institutional Support	Increase in Standard 1e (Collaborative Culture)	Mean score of 4.4	Mentors provided consistent support	Administrators protected mentoring time
Autonomy	Not Evident	Lowest construct (Mean = 3.6)	Participants requested more leadership opportunities	Limited leadership opportunities beyond the classroom
Collective Efficacy	Not Reported	Not Reported	Teams with strong efficacy supported ALTs; teams without efficacy showed less support	Mentor notes confirmed influence of team dynamics

Summary of Results

The convergence of evidence across NCEES ratings, surveys, reflections, focus groups, and mentor observations demonstrates that during the CMP implementation period, ALTs both strengthened their instructional leadership and developed a deeper sense of belonging. Leadership growth was visible in collaborative planning, purposeful student discourse, and increased confidence to take instructional risks, while belonging was reinforced through competence, connectedness, institutional support, and meaningful engagement. Autonomy emerged more slowly, reflecting the developmental stage of novice teachers and the structural limits placed on their roles. Collective efficacy also emerged as a powerful factor: ALTs thrived in teams with high trust and shared goals, while those in teams with lower efficacy faced greater challenges.

The results also underscore a critical distinction between the CMP and the district's standard Beginning Teacher Support Program: the deliberate selection and training of mentors who were themselves proven instructional leaders. This emphasis meant that ALTs did not simply receive technical support but daily coaching from educators who modeled what teacher leadership looks like in practice. As a result, instructional leadership was not defined by administrative authority but by the ways teachers guided learning, collaborated with peers, and advocated for students in alignment with NCEES Standard 1.

Ultimately, the inquiry refined my leadership by enhancing my ability to design systems, make data-driven adjustments, and lead with equity. Supporting ALTs, many of whom were educators of color and career changers, reinforced the importance of belonging as a foundation for resilience and persistence in the profession.

Although the short timeframe of implementation and concurrent professional development efforts mean the results cannot be attributed solely to the CMP, the consistency across multiple forms of evidence suggests that the program contributed meaningfully to the conditions that supported teacher growth and belonging in this Restart school.

Chapter 5 brings the study full circle by examining the implications of the findings, their significance, and how they can inform future practice. It begins with a summary of the results presented in Chapter 4, followed by an interpretation of those findings in light of the existing literature and the Allen et al. (2022) Framework for Belonging. The chapter then addresses the study's limitations, explores implications for practice and equity, and offers recommendations for both practitioners and future research. Finally, it concludes with a reflection on the broader significance of the Comprehensive Mentoring Program and its potential to enhance instructional leadership, foster a sense of belonging, and promote teacher retention in high-need Restart school.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study implemented a comprehensive mentoring program at a Restart elementary school during spring 2025 to support six alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs) in their first or second year of teaching. Restart schools, as authorized under North Carolina's Restart Reform Model, are granted increased flexibility in staffing, budgeting, and instructional practices in order to improve historically underperforming schools. While this flexibility is designed to address teacher shortages, it also results in Restart schools employing a higher proportion of ALTs, often with minimal preparation and sometimes outside their areas of licensure. These conditions contribute to high attrition rates, underscoring the need for targeted, sustained mentoring to support teacher growth and retention.

Unlike the district's standard Beginning Teacher program, which provides monthly mentor check-ins and required observations, this intervention expanded both the frequency and depth of support. Each ALT was paired with a trained mentor and engaged in weekly mentor interactions, structured mentor meetings, targeted instructional observations, and reflective activities. For example, during a typical week, an ALT might start with an initial meeting with their mentor on Monday to discuss instructional strategies and set specific goals for the week. Mid-week, the mentor would conduct a classroom observation, focusing on instructional delivery and classroom management. By Friday, the ALT and mentor would revisit initial goals in a follow-up meeting, reflecting on instructional successes and discussing areas for improvement. This cycle of interaction ensures continuous feedback and professional growth. The program also incorporated the ALT Belonging Survey and a culminating focus group, designed to capture the relational and instructional dimensions of teacher growth.

This inquiry used an Improvement Science framework and a Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Research Design to examine how the Comprehensive Mentoring Program (CMP) influenced instructional leadership and belonging among ALTs. The inquiry progressed through four phases: planning and IRB approval, implementation launch, full implementation and data collection, and focus group analysis and reflection. Iterative cycles of plan–do–study–act (PDSA) allowed for ongoing refinement of mentoring practices.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. Quantitative findings from the ALT Belonging Survey and NCEES teacher evaluations were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and growth. Qualitative data from mentor observations, reflections, and focus groups were coded thematically to maintain transparency and rigor. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings, interprets them based on the literature and the Allen et al. (2022) Framework for Belonging, and discusses the implications for practice, equity, and future research.

Summary of the Findings

This study examined the impact of participation in the Comprehensive Mentoring Program (CMP) on the instructional leadership development and sense of belonging of alternatively licensed teachers in a Title I Restart elementary school. ALTs in these contexts often face the challenge of rapidly adapting to complex instructional and cultural expectations without the traditional preparation their peers receive. A convergent mixed-methods design was used to integrate quantitative data from the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES) and the Belonging Survey with qualitative data from focus groups, mentor interviews, and reflective journals. This design was chosen because it allowed for simultaneous data collection, which enabled real-time cross-validation of instructional leadership gains and shifts in

belonging. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of CMP on participating teachers.

Quantitative analysis revealed measurable growth in teacher leadership and perceptions of belonging following participation in the CMP. The NCEES evaluation data for Standard 1, *Teachers Demonstrate Leadership*, indicated significant improvement. Prior to the intervention, three teachers were rated Developing and three were rated Proficient, with an overall mean of 2.3 on the four-point scale. Following the mentoring program, all six teachers achieved a rating of Proficient or higher, with two advancing to Accomplished, and the group mean increased to 3.1. The most notable gains occurred in areas related to contributing to the School Improvement Plan, advocating for students, and demonstrating leadership within Professional Learning Communities. These results suggest that structured, consistent mentoring contributed directly to teachers' growth in confidence and leadership behaviors, particularly in areas emphasizing collaborative goal setting and advocacy for student success.

Results from the Belonging Survey, framed by Allen et al.'s (2022) *Framework for Belonging*, also demonstrated positive changes across all constructs of belonging, including competence, autonomy, connectedness, meaningful engagement, and institutional support. Post-intervention survey scores indicated that teachers felt more capable in instructional planning and decision-making, more connected to their peers, and more supported by school leadership. The most significant increases occurred in the areas of competence and connectedness, reflecting teachers' growing confidence in their instructional abilities and their strengthened relationships with mentors and colleagues. Institutional support scores also rose slightly, indicating progress toward establishing a sustainable mentoring infrastructure that promotes both professional growth and retention. Importantly, these improvements in competence and connectedness have

broader implications for equity. By fostering a deeper sense of belonging and professional capability, the CMP plays a crucial role in retaining teachers in high-need schools. It helps ensure that these schools can maintain stable and effective teaching teams, which is essential for providing equitable educational opportunities to all students.

The qualitative findings provided deeper insight into how and why these outcomes occurred. Analysis of focus group and interview data revealed that participants experienced increased confidence in lesson design, classroom management, and data-driven instruction as mentors modeled and provided feedback through regular coaching cycles. A typical cycle involved weekly one-hour sessions, consisting of direct observation followed by feedback discussions. Each cycle spanned over four weeks, focusing on specific skill sets to ensure gradual and continuous development. The mentors used structured feedback to highlight strengths and areas for improvement, which allowed teachers to track progress and set actionable goals. Teachers expressed appreciation for the gradual release of responsibility embedded within the program, noting that their mentors encouraged independent problem-solving while remaining accessible for guidance. This balance of support and autonomy helped participants view themselves as competent and capable educators.

A strong sense of connectedness also emerged as a central theme. Mentorship fostered collaboration and trust within grade-level teams and Professional Learning Communities. Teachers in teams with high levels of collective efficacy reported setting clear goals, supporting each other's growth, and feeling more comfortable taking instructional risks. Conversely, in teams where trust and collaboration were weaker, mentors noted greater challenges in maintaining engagement. Participants also described a renewed sense of professional purpose,

emphasizing that the CMP helped them see their work as meaningful and aligned with the school's improvement efforts.

Institutional support was another key factor identified in the qualitative data. Teachers valued administrative visibility, protected mentor time, and consistent communication from school leaders. These supports validated the importance of their development and reinforced a collective investment in their success. One participant stated that “having the AP check in made it feel like the program mattered,” reflecting how leadership involvement strengthened the overall impact of the mentoring process.

When viewed together, the quantitative and qualitative findings converge to demonstrate that the Comprehensive Mentoring Program enhanced both the technical and relational dimensions of teacher growth. Improvements in NCEES ratings and belonging scores were substantiated by teachers' narratives of increased confidence, collaboration, and professional agency. The integration of these data sources provides compelling evidence that a structured, relationship-based mentoring model can strengthen teacher efficacy, retention, and sense of belonging within high-need school contexts. These outcomes directly address the study's guiding questions by demonstrating how intentional mentoring practices can cultivate both instructional leadership and professional connectedness among alternatively licensed teachers.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study to accurately contextualize the findings. The research was conducted at a single Title I Restart elementary school, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other settings. Additionally, the relatively small sample size could influence the statistical significance and impact of the outcome data. Nonetheless, these limitations do not diminish the positive indications observed; rather, they suggest areas for further exploration. Reflecting on the study, there is room to consider how the Comprehensive

Mentoring Program might be adapted or expanded in different school environments or with varied teacher demographics. Such adaptations could enhance transferability and provide deeper insights into the program's efficacy in diverse educational settings. Future research partnerships might focus on these areas to enrich the understanding and application of mentoring practices.

Interpretation of the Findings

An analysis of the impact of a comprehensive mentoring program designed to enhance the instructional leadership of alternatively licensed teachers, particularly those in Restart schools, was examined. Findings demonstrated measurable improvement in teacher leadership. All six ALTs achieved "Proficient" or higher on NCEES Standard 1 by the end of the program, with two advancing to "Accomplished." These achievements were facilitated by specific underlying conditions at the school and district level. The school's emphasis on collaborative planning and the district's support for professional development played significant roles in these gains. Additionally, the leadership's commitment to providing protected time for mentorship and fostering an inclusive culture contributed to creating an environment conducive to teacher advancement. Qualitative data revealed that participants improved in instructional planning, facilitation of student discourse, and confidence in leading instruction. By identifying these enabling conditions, this program model can be seen as scalable, providing policymakers with confidence that its results can be replicated in similar contexts.

In interpreting the findings related to belonging, it is important to clarify how the belonging framework guided the analytic process. Allen et al.'s (2022) Integrative Framework for Belonging identifies four core constructs: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. In this study, these constructs informed five components to better reflect the lived experience of alternatively licensed teachers. Specifically, meaningful engagement was

examined separately from competence, autonomy was mapped onto opportunities, connectedness corresponded with motivations, and institutional support aligned with perceptions. These five components—meaningful engagement, competence, autonomy, connectedness, and institutional support—offered a more precise lens for analyzing survey responses, mentor reflections, and focus group transcripts. Using this expanded framework ensured that the interpretation of belonging was both theoretically grounded and sensitive to the unique professional and emotional needs of ALTs in a Restart school.

The program also enhanced belonging. Viewing belonging through the 'four lenses of belonging' as defined by Allen et al. (2022), these include competencies (meaningful engagement), opportunities (autonomy), motivations (connectedness), and perceptions (institutional support). Evidence from this study aligned closely with each of these constructs. Teachers reported feeling more confident in planning, small group instruction, and facilitating student discourse, supported by mentor modeling and feedback which illustrates levels of competence. In contrast, growth in autonomy was less pronounced, which may reflect the district's practice of limiting beginning teachers' responsibilities outside of their own classrooms during their first years. While teachers gained independence in instructional decision-making, opportunities for broader leadership were limited. However, instances of micro-leadership emerged within the classroom context. Teachers shared successful strategies in grade-level meetings, taking initiative in classroom initiatives, such as leading small-group projects and coordinating collaborative learning sessions. These smaller acts of leadership indicate progress towards greater autonomy and the potential for future broader leadership roles. In contrast connectedness emerged as the strongest area of belonging. ALTs consistently described relational trust with mentors and strong grade-level collaboration as sources of encouragement

and validation. Furthermore, participants reported meaningful engagement by feeling valued and included in their school community, with mentoring and collaborative planning reinforcing their sense of identity as contributing members of the staff. Similarly, teachers highlighted the importance of administrative visibility, feedback, and protected mentoring time as evidence that the school valued their growth.

Together, these findings demonstrate that the comprehensive mentoring program fostered belonging across multiple dimensions, creating the conditions for both professional growth and retention in the unique and challenging context of a Restart school. This sense of belonging, coupled with leadership development among teachers, directly translates into richer and more engaging student experiences, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes. By strengthening teacher confidence and instructional capabilities, students benefit from enhanced teaching quality and a more supportive learning environment. Facilitating this transformation also became a catalyst for my own professional growth. I saw the program's impact on others. At the same time, I was transformed as a leader. I gained deeper insight into system design, data use, and equitable support.

Leading the program also shaped my leadership skills. Coordinating the intervention and analyzing its outcomes strengthened my skills in system design, data-driven decision-making, and equity-focused leadership. Most importantly, it gave me a deeper awareness of the diverse needs of staff, even among ALTs who appeared to have similar challenges on the surface. I learned that effective leadership requires asking the right questions to uncover individual needs and then aligning resources to provide the specific supports that foster growth.

To translate this awareness into practice, I recommend implementing individualized questioning protocols during one-on-one meetings with staff to better understand their unique challenges and aspirations. This allows leaders to tailor professional development opportunities to the specific needs of each teacher. Additionally, I suggest establishing a mentorship system that pairs teachers with mentors who can provide customized support, encouraging teachers to set personal goals and track their progress in achieving them. These practices can empower leaders to address diverse needs and enhance overall staff engagement and performance.

Belonging is a fundamental catalyst for teacher growth and effectiveness, serving as a foundation for both personal and professional development in educational settings. These findings confirm existing literature on the importance of mentoring and extend the field's understanding of belonging as a driver of teacher growth. Research shows that early-career teachers benefit most from mentoring that is relational, sustained, and instructionally focused—approaches that build trust, confidence, and efficacy rather than compliance (Allen et al., 2022; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). This study reinforces Allen et al.'s (2022) Framework for Belonging: competence, connectedness, meaningful engagement, and institutional support were strengthened through the program, while autonomy emerged as an area for continued growth. Specifically, the mentoring and belonging constructs are directly connected to measurable improvements in teacher effectiveness and retention.

One explanation for autonomy's limited development is structural: beginning teachers in the district are intentionally given minimal responsibilities outside of teaching and managing their classrooms. This approach is designed to be developmentally appropriate, enabling new teachers to concentrate on mastering core instructional practices before assuming broader leadership roles. However, by limiting formal opportunities for independently leading projects or

influencing school initiatives, the organizational design constrains teachers' ability to develop and demonstrate autonomy. To address this, novice teachers could be gradually introduced to small, low-stakes leadership roles, such as co-facilitating a Professional Learning Community (PLC) or leading a short inquiry cycle. These roles provide a platform for teachers to develop autonomy safely and demonstrate leadership without feeling overwhelmed. Descriptive data from the ALT Belonging Survey indicated that autonomy scores averaged approximately 12–20% lower than the other belonging constructs, with the largest differences observed when compared to connectedness and institutional support. This suggests that structural boundaries may significantly influence the development of autonomy in early-career teachers. Further research should investigate how these limitations on autonomy impact both teacher persistence and student learning outcomes.

The findings also extend the literature by showing how belonging functions as a foundation for instructional leadership. When ALTs felt supported and connected, they were more willing to take instructional risks, engage in collaborative planning, and assume leadership roles within the classroom. Specific cultural mechanisms within the school, such as monthly 1st Friday gatherings, staff shout-outs, Great Things weekly emails, Wellness Wednesday activities, and PLCs, served as cultural artifacts that fostered this sense of belonging. These routines enabled teachers to share experiences, celebrate successes, and collectively address challenges, thereby strengthening the connectedness and support among teachers. School leaders could further cultivate these practices by intentionally integrating team-building activities and peer mentoring programs into the school's professional development agenda.

To illustrate the potential of belonging as a lever for systemic change, a reinforcing loop can be conceptualized: when belonging is reinforced, it encourages teachers to take risks, which

leads to collaborative successes. These successes then contribute to deeper feelings of belonging, creating a cycle that scales micro-practices to macro-outcomes. In this model, cultural routines like PLCs and peer mentoring not only enhance teacher engagement but also contribute to broader school improvement, such as higher teacher retention rates, enhanced student achievements, and a more collaborative school environment. This mapping of micro-practices to macro-outcomes underscores that belonging should be seen not as an add-on, but as a core change strategy in educational settings.

The Comprehensive Mentoring Program influenced the professional growth of ALTs and mentors and made a lasting impact on Rise Elementary School's culture. Ongoing conversations about belonging, mentorship, and well-being led the leadership team to realize that belonging forms the foundation of an inclusive, thriving school community—not just a component of induction. Consequently, Rise Elementary embedded belonging into its core values, adopting the guiding statement:

“Creating a culture of well-being and belonging for our students, staff, and families. When every student, educator, and family feel seen, valued, and connected, we build not just a school but a community where all can thrive.”

This vision, rooted in inclusive education and whole school wellness, now anchors the school's daily practices and decisions. Additionally, the school established Supporting Conditions for Success in its Instructional Priorities Plan, systematizing mentoring and orientation for beginning and alternatively licensed teachers. This shift demonstrates the CMP's evolution from a single program into a comprehensive framework that redefines teacher support, professional learning, and collective well-being at Rise Elementary.

Belonging was not simply an affective outcome, but a catalyst for persistence and the formation of professional identity in high-need school contexts. By striking a balance between protection and opportunities for autonomy, we create the conditions that nurture resilient teachers who are well-equipped to thrive. These findings highlight the importance of designing support systems with this balance in mind, a consideration that directly informs the recommendations for practice in the following section. A specific district-level policy that could operationalize this balance is the implementation of phased leadership assignments. This policy would gradually introduce novice teachers to leadership roles, ensuring they have foundational support while also allowing them to build autonomy over time. Additionally, establishing autonomy benchmarks could guide teachers' development, further bridging research insights into actionable, systemic change.

Limitations of the Study

This study was bound by several limitations. The small sample size (six alternatively licensed teachers in a single Restart school) restricts generalizability. However, this constraint also allowed for deeper individual engagement and rich qualitative insights that larger groups might not have permitted. The short intervention window (March–May 2025) further limited opportunities to capture long-term effects on teacher retention or student outcomes, yet it highlighted the program's immediate impact and adaptability under time constraints.

Weekly reflection participation was inconsistent, reducing one source of qualitative data and illustrating the need for improved engagement strategies in future implementations. In addition, NCEES ratings relied on a single post-intervention observation, which may not fully reflect sustained growth. Nonetheless, these limitations emphasize the importance of ongoing, formative evaluation rather than one-time assessments.

One limitation of this inquiry was the reassignment of a mentor–ALT pairing midway through the implementation because of a personality mismatch. The transition was handled smoothly and benefited both participants. However, it introduced a variable in the mentoring experience. This may have influenced the mentee’s growth and data consistency. The adjustment highlights the human side of mentoring—relationships are central to program effectiveness and need ongoing monitoring to ensure alignment. Future implementations should plan for such occurrences by making mentor assignments flexible and by offering ongoing training in relational communication and conflict resolution for mentors.

This study did not include a formal comparison group (e.g., beginning teachers who participated only in the district’s standard Beginning Teacher Support Program). As a result, it is not possible to attribute observed growth exclusively to the Comprehensive Mentoring Program (CMP). This design choice was intentional: I did not withhold support from non-ALT beginning teachers, who continued to receive the baseline supports provided by the district program. In practice, I encouraged non-ALT BTs and their mentors to engage in informal check-ins and provided opportunities for observation and feedback. However, these supports were not systematically monitored or studied. The absence of a control group limits the strength of causal claims and means that findings should be interpreted with caution when applied to other contexts.

Finally, as both the assistant principal and scholarly practitioner, my dual role may have influenced participants’ responses despite intentional efforts to mitigate bias. However, this positionality also provided an insider perspective that enriched understanding of the school context, mentoring dynamics, and the lived experiences of alternatively licensed teachers.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

Alternatively licensed teachers enter the classroom through nontraditional pathways and often have limited preparation in instructional planning, classroom management and school culture. In a Restart school, these challenges are intensified by high levels of student need, persistent vacancies and increased accountability pressures. For ALTs in this context, belonging cannot be incidental. It must be built deliberately because it is the condition that allows them to learn, lead and remain in the profession. Findings from this inquiry show that intentional support anchored in belonging strengthens competence, connectedness, and institutional trust, which, in turn, increase teachers' confidence, instructional leadership, and persistence in a demanding setting.

The findings suggest several implications for schools and districts seeking better support for ALTs, particularly in Restart schools such as Rise, where teachers often face unique challenges, including limited preparation, high turnover, and the expectation to teach in high-need contexts with minimal prior experience. These challenges require urgent attention because failure to support ALTs has direct consequences for both students and the district. High turnover disrupts instructional continuity, weakens school culture and contributes to declines in student performance. It also increases district costs through repeated recruitment, onboarding and training cycles. Strengthening systems of support for ALTs can stabilize the teaching workforce, improve instructional quality and ensure students in Restart schools receive consistent, high-quality learning experiences.

The ALTs at Rise Elementary entered through different licensure pathways and assumed full teaching responsibilities before completing their certification requirements. Their licensure types included Permit to Teach, Emergency and Residency licenses. This limited preparation left

them vulnerable to burnout and attrition, particularly in a Restart context where expectations are high and supports are often inconsistent. Mentoring should therefore be intentionally designed around belonging, with mentors trained to emphasize relational trust, instructional collaboration and pedagogical skills. In this approach, mentors act as both coaches and content experts, helping teachers strengthen instructional strategies and classroom management while fostering a sense of inclusion and professional connection. Survey data reflected this need, showing a 75 percent increase in teachers reporting higher relational trust following participation in the program.

In addition to limited preparation, the high demands in Restart schools often reduce opportunities for meaningful collaboration. Teachers in Title I Restart contexts juggle instructional pressures, behavioral challenges, and accountability requirements that frequently leave little time for team-based planning. School leaders should therefore prioritize protected release time for mentor-mentee collaboration and grade-level planning. Participants in this study reported a 71% increase in collaboration frequency indicating that intentional scheduling can foster a sense of belonging, shared problem-solving, and instructional alignment even under demanding conditions.

Another factor influencing teacher development and retention involves the way evaluation systems are perceived. In many Restart schools, NCEES observations can feel high-stakes and compliance-oriented, particularly for early-career ALTs whose ratings affect contract renewal and licensure. To address this challenge, evaluation systems should be leveraged formatively, with observation feedback framed as a tool for growth in instructional leadership rather than a mechanism for accountability alone. In this study, 88% of participants identified feedback sessions as vital to their professional development. Shifting from compliance to growth

requires observers to focus on a few high-leverage teaching skills, such as differentiation, classroom management, and data-driven decision-making, and to provide targeted, actionable feedback in those areas.

Taken together, these insights highlight the importance of designing support systems that balance accountability with belonging and compliance with capacity-building. Restart schools, where ALTs face steep learning curves and fragile retention patterns, benefit most from intentional mentoring, structured collaboration, and formative feedback practices that promote both professional growth and stability.

Finally, findings highlight the need to balance support and autonomy for beginning teachers. While it is developmentally appropriate to limit responsibilities outside the classroom during their initial years, schools should provide phased opportunities for leadership where appropriate. Examples include gradually expanding roles in grade-level planning, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), or school committees. By scaffolding autonomy, schools enable ALTs to build confidence and leadership capacity over time. A detailed progression of milestones (Year 1: observer, Year 2: co-leader, Year 3: leader) could serve as a replicable model and may be best represented in an appendix figure.

Embedding comprehensive mentoring programs into school improvement plans ensures that ALT support is not an isolated initiative but a sustained, integrated strategy. To accelerate adoption, leaders could follow a 90-day plan that creates urgency, builds a coalition of stakeholders, and identifies quick wins to demonstrate value early on. This structured entry plan can build momentum for embedding mentoring into broader improvement strategies.

Implications of the Findings for Equity

This study carries important implications for equity and social justice. The participant group itself reflects the diversity often found among ALTs: all six were women, five identified as Black and one as White, with ages ranging from 24 to 42. Half entered teaching directly from non-education undergraduate programs, while the other half transitioned from prior careers. Their assignments spanned grades 1-5 and included a specialist role. Nationally, alternatively licensed teachers are disproportionately women and people of color, with approximately 40% identifying as Black or Hispanic, contrasting with the traditional teaching force that is predominantly White. These demographics illustrate that ALTs frequently include educators of color and career changers who bring valuable perspectives and experiences to the profession.

At Rise Elementary, a Restart school serving a historically marginalized student population, supporting ALTs through comprehensive mentoring had direct equity implications for both teachers and students. For teachers, mentoring created spaces where their identities were affirmed, their voices were valued, and their professional growth was nurtured. This was particularly significant for teachers of color and career changers who might otherwise feel isolated in high-stakes, high-need contexts. For students, increased teacher stability and improved instructional leadership meant more consistent, high-quality learning opportunities and stronger relationships with adults in their classrooms.

At a broader level, the findings highlight a systemic equity issue: ALTs are disproportionately placed in high-need, under-resourced schools, often without the preparation or support required to thrive. This practice inadvertently perpetuates inequities by placing the least-supported teachers with the students who most need effective instruction. Comprehensive mentoring becomes not only a professional development strategy but also a social justice

intervention, one that affirms diverse educators, reduces turnover, and ensures that students in historically marginalized communities have access to stable, effective instruction.

In this way, the study contributes to the field by demonstrating that equity-oriented mentoring programs can serve as levers for both teacher retention and student success. They address the dual challenge of diversifying the teaching force and ensuring that students in high-need schools experience consistent, high-quality teaching.

Recommendations for Practice

Grounded in these findings and aligned with the Allen et al. (2022) Framework for Belonging, several actionable recommendations emerge for sustaining teacher growth and retention in high-need contexts. Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are offered. It is recommended that district supports be extended beyond district requirements so that positive interactions are provided on a weekly basis, mentor training is structured, and instruction is targeted and improved. This approach is not only pivotal for individual teacher growth but also fosters a culture of continual learning and development throughout the school, aligning with broader educational improvement goals. This recommendation is supported by findings that ALTs rated mentors as "quite confident" or "extremely confident" in helping them improve instructional practices, and all six participants grew to Proficient or higher on NCEES Standard 1.

Teacher induction should intentionally integrate belonging as a core outcome rather than a byproduct of mentoring. Aligning practices with Allen et al.'s (2022) Framework for Belonging, which encompasses competence, connectedness, meaningful engagement, institutional support, and autonomy, ensures that mentoring addresses both professional and

emotional dimensions of teacher development. Findings from the ALT Belonging Survey indicated that participants reported strong connectedness and institutional support, but lower perceptions of autonomy. These results underscore the importance of designing induction programs that cultivate five constructs, fostering environments where teachers feel both supported and empowered.

Teachers consistently described collaboration as a primary factor in reducing isolation and reinforcing belonging. Grade-level planning and shared problem-solving fostered relational trust, increased efficacy, and provided emotional support during challenging periods. Formalizing peer collaboration within ALT induction structures, through protected planning time, shared reflection protocols, or team-based goal setting, can strengthen teacher morale and improve retention, particularly within Restart schools where professional demands are heightened.

Survey data revealed that autonomy scores were 12–20% lower than other belonging constructs, highlighting a developmental gap. Establishing scaffolded leadership pathways can address this need. A structured sequence, such as Year 1: observer, Year 2: co-leader, and Year 3: leader, would allow alternatively licensed teachers to gradually assume increasing responsibility within professional learning communities, planning teams, and school committees. This approach builds leadership confidence, encourages ownership of instructional decisions, and reinforces professional identity over time.

Leadership reflections from this study emphasized the value of intentional questioning in uncovering teachers' unique challenges, goals, and motivations. Structured one-on-one conversations using individualized questioning protocols can help leaders differentiate support

and tailor professional development opportunities to specific needs. This approach not only strengthens instructional capacity but also deepens relational trust, aligning leadership practices with principles of responsive, human-centered mentorship.

Eighty-eight percent of participants identified feedback sessions as critical to their professional growth. Rather than treating NCEES evaluations as compliance measures, school leaders and mentors should use them as formative tools for reflection and dialogue. Observation feedback should prioritize two to three high-leverage teaching practices, such as differentiation, classroom management, and data-driven instruction, helping teachers focus their improvement efforts while connecting performance data to actionable growth goals.

At Rise Elementary, the mentoring program gained traction and sustainability when it was aligned with broader instructional and school improvement goals. Integrating ALT mentoring into the School Improvement Plan ensures that support for new teachers is not an isolated or short-term initiative but a systemic, ongoing strategy for teacher development and retention. When mentoring becomes part of a school's continuous improvement framework, it reinforces shared accountability among administrators, mentors, and teachers, ultimately enhancing instructional coherence and collective efficacy.

Recommendations for Future Study

Future research should expand this inquiry by including multiple Restart schools (public schools granted operational flexibility and autonomy to support rapid improvement efforts), enabling greater generalizability and comparative analysis. A multi-case study design with purposive sampling, utilizing criteria such as location, size, demographic diversity, and performance, could capture a range of varied contexts and experiences. Longitudinal studies are

also needed to examine the sustained impact of mentoring (ongoing professional guidance and teacher support) on retention, leadership, and student achievement. Following teacher cohorts over several years with surveys and interviews would provide a more comprehensive view of long-term mentoring effects.

Future research could strengthen the evidence base by including a comparison group. For example, a quasi-experimental design might compare ALTs in a comprehensive mentoring program with non-ALT beginning teachers (BTs) who receive only the district's standard Beginning Teacher Support Program. This design would help researchers isolate the impact of comprehensive mentoring while all teachers still receive baseline supports. Matched-group or case-comparison designs could also examine differences across teacher subgroups. These approaches would clarify how targeted mentoring affects belonging, instructional leadership, and retention.

Further research should explore strategies to strengthen autonomy, particularly through distributed leadership and peer-led professional learning. Distributed leadership enables teachers to share responsibility for school outcomes. In contrast, peer-led learning encourages collaborative professional development. Action research methodologies could be especially useful. These methods engage teachers directly in cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, which fosters continuous improvement.

Mixed-methods studies using student perception data offer more insight into how teacher growth affects classroom climate. For example, a measure such as *"My teacher encourages me to share ideas"* can be paired with classroom observations and student focus groups. This

feedback loop positions student voices as catalysts for teacher reflection, linking teacher development to student engagement and achievement.

Finally, future research should directly refine how key constructs are measured. In this study, belonging was defined as feeling accepted, valued, and included in a professional community, as outlined in Allen et al.'s (2022) framework, and was measured through surveys, focus groups, and reflective exercises. Similarly, empowered teacher leadership means taking initiative, influencing peers, and improving schools. This can be measured by leadership roles in PLCs, facilitation of peer learning, contributions to improvement initiatives, or growth in NCEES Standard 1 descriptors. As with belonging, research should define and validate a clear framework for empowered teacher leadership that includes measurable behaviors and teachers' self-perceptions of influence. Mixed-methods will allow the pairing of quantitative and qualitative evidence. This strengthens understanding of how mentoring affects belonging, leadership, and retention in high-need schools.

Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm that mentoring, when grounded in a sense of belonging, is a transformative experience. For alternatively licensed teachers, belonging served as the foundation for instructional leadership, professional confidence, and persistence in the field. Comprehensive mentoring, therefore, is not simply an induction strategy but a lever for school improvement and equity. In Restart schools, where stability and growth are urgently needed, mentoring that emphasizes belonging offers a pathway to strengthen teachers, schools, and communities.

As a scholarly practitioner, this study also reshaped my own leadership. It underscored the importance of listening deeply, asking the right questions, and tailoring support to meet the diverse needs of staff. The work of mentoring is not about adding tasks to a leader's plate but about building the conditions for teachers to thrive.

Although this inquiry was conducted in a single school, its implications extend more broadly. Districts and states facing shortages of qualified teachers and high turnover in high-need schools can adapt the lessons learned here to stabilize and empower their own teaching force. To ensure successful adaptation, the core components of a belonging-centered mentoring model should be preserved. These include consistent mentor-teacher interactions to foster trust, tailored support to address individual teacher needs, and community-building activities that integrate teachers into the school culture. Mentoring designed around belonging is not an isolated intervention but a systemic change strategy.

Ultimately, supporting ALTs through comprehensive mentoring is an act of equity. When teachers are affirmed, connected, and equipped to lead, their students, often those in historically marginalized communities, benefit from consistent, high-quality instruction. The evidence is clear: belonging is not a luxury but a necessity and mentoring grounded in belonging must be a cornerstone of efforts to build strong schools and just educational systems.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership

Conducting this study profoundly shaped my leadership journey. I strengthened my system-building and organizational leadership skills by coordinating the design, implementation, and evaluation of the program. Adapting data collection methods improved my evidence-based decision-making. Most importantly, I gained deeper awareness of the diverse needs of staff,

realizing that even ALTs with similar challenges require individualized support. Ultimately, I learned that effective leadership means uncovering unique needs and intentionally matching resources to promote growth.

Personally and professionally, my perspective has undergone profound changes. I was already aware of the dedication and realities of teaching. Walking alongside alternatively licensed teachers revealed a dimension marked by uncertainty, anxiety, and not fully belonging. Many worried about being a burden to their teams. I also saw mentors, administrators, and colleagues invest greatly to support ALT success and retention. I now view mentoring as a leadership priority and a moral imperative.

As a scholar, I was constantly engaged in an iterative process: each week, I reflected on what could be improved, refined, or strengthened. My key takeaway is that growth occurred on two fronts, ALTs developed instructional leadership and a sense of belonging, while mentors expanded their professional expertise through coaching, affirmation, and empowerment. This dual focus has deepened my understanding of leadership as reciprocal growth: by supporting one group of educators, we simultaneously build the capacity of another.

Through this process, I came to see myself as both a practitioner and a scholar generating knowledge. Leadership became about inquiry, reflection, and contributing to collective learning; not just day-to-day decisions. Supporting alternatively licensed teachers, many of whom are teachers of color or career changers, reaffirmed my commitment to equity and highlighted the impact on marginalized students.

I now define my leadership as collaborative and equity-centered. The key takeaway is that I believe teacher belonging directly influences student success. Moving forward, I am

committed to building systems that support teacher empowerment and belonging, seeing it as both a moral responsibility and a pathway to sustainable school improvement.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284**
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB

To: [Chanteal Alston](#)

CC: [Elizabeth Hodge](#)

Date: 2/11/2025

Re: [UMCIRB 24-002324](#)

Preparing Alternatively Licensed Teachers

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 2/11/2025. This is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1,2A.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your protocol.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Belonging Survey(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Chapters 1-3(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Focus Group Protocol(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Informed Consent for Focus Group(0.01)	Consent Forms
Informed Consent for Surveys(0.01)	Consent Forms
Recruitment Email(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additional elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PREPARING ALTERNATIVELY LICENSED TEACHERS TO LEAD IN RESTART SCHOOLS

UMCIRB#:

Principal Investigator: Chanteal Reynolds Alston

Participant Full Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

Please PRINT clearly

You have been invited to participate in an **action research study** called “PREPARING ALTERNATIVELY LICENSED TEACHERS TO LEAD IN RESTART SCHOOLS,” which is being conducted by Chanteal Reynolds Alston, a doctoral student at East Carolina University in the College of Education LEED department. The study aims to survey and interview alternatively licensed teachers at Rise Elementary School to understand how to better support year one and year two teachers with alternative licenses and if a comprehensive mentoring program has effectively improved teacher pedagogy. The survey will take about 5-10 minutes, while interviews will take approximately 10-15 minutes. If you choose to participate in an interview, it will be audio recorded and kept confidential. Your name will not be used, and your responses will be kept confidential. Most people outside the research team will not see your name on your research record. This includes people who try to get your information using a court order. **It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.** Your participation in this study is **voluntary**, and you have the right to stop at any time. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions, and there is **no penalty for not participating**. If you decide you no longer want to be in this research after it has started, you may stop at any time. You will not lose any benefits that you should normally receive by quitting. Please note that we **will not be able to**

pay you for the time you volunteer to be in this study. You may contact the Principal Investigator, Chanteal Reynolds Alston at **919-624-3433**, Monday- Friday. If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the ECU University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914. The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I understand that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Principal Investigator (PRINT)
(If other than person obtaining informed consent)

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: BELONGING SURVEY FOR ALTERNATIVELY LICENSED TEACHERS

Preliminary Demographic Information

Gender

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

Race

- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Multi-racial
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ White non-Hispanic
- ☐ White Hispanic
- ☐ Other

Q1 What is your BT status?

- ☐ BT1
- ☐ BT2
- ☐ BT 3

Directions: Use the scale provided to indicate (mark with an “X”) your level of agreement with each statement.

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Strongly</u> <u>Disagree</u> <u>(1)</u>	<u>Disagree</u> <u>(2)</u>	<u>Neutral</u> <u>(3)</u>	<u>Agree</u> <u>(4)</u>	<u>Strongly</u> <u>Agree (5)</u>
Sense of Inclusion					

1. I feel welcomed by my colleagues & mentors.					
2. I feel that my team values my contributions.					
3. I am comfortable sharing my ideas and concerns with others in the program.					
Support and Resources					
4. I receive adequate support from my mentor to address the challenges I face in the classroom.					
5. The professional development resources provided are relevant to my needs and help me improve my practice.					
6. I have access to the resources and tools I need to succeed in my role.					
Communication and Feedback					
7. I receive constructive feedback from my mentor that helps me grow professionally.					
8. There are clear channels for communication between me and my mentor.					
9. I feel comfortable discussing any issues or concerns with my mentor or program coordinator.					
Social Connections					
10. I have built meaningful professional relationships with my colleagues and mentors.					
11. I feel a sense of camaraderie with my peers in the mentoring program.					
12. There are opportunities for social interaction and networking with other teachers and mentors.					
Overall Belonging					
13. Overall, I feel like I belong to this educational community.					
14. I feel that my presence in the program contributes positively to the group.					
15. I believe that my input and feedback are valued in the program.					

APPENDIX D: NCEES TEACHER RUBRIC

North Carolina Educator Evaluation System

North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process

Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers (Required for Self-Assessment and for Observations)

This form should be used for the teacher self-assessment, classroom observation, and the summary evaluation.

Name: _____ Date: _____

School: _____ District: _____

Evaluator: _____ Title: _____

Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Standard I: Teachers Demonstrate Leadership

Observation	Element Ia. Teachers lead in their classrooms. Teachers demonstrate leadership by taking responsibility for the progress of all students to ensure that they graduate from high school, are globally competitive for work and postsecondary education, and are prepared for life in the 21st century. Teachers communicate this vision to their students. Using a variety of data sources, they organize, plan, and set goals that meet the needs of the individual student and the class. Teachers use various types of assessment data during the school year to evaluate student progress and to make adjustments to the teaching and learning process. They establish a safe, orderly environment, and create a culture that empowers students to collaborate and become lifelong learners.				
	Developing	Proficient	Accomplished	Distinguished	Not Demonstrated (Comment Required)
✓	☐ Understands how they contribute to students graduating from high school. ☐ Uses data to understand the skills and abilities of students.	... and ☐ Takes responsibility for the progress of students to ensure that they graduate from high school. ☐ Provides evidence of data-driven instruction throughout all classroom activities. ☐ Establishes a safe and orderly classroom.	... and ☐ Communicates to students the vision of being prepared for life in the 21st century. ☐ Evaluates student progress using a variety of assessment data. ☐ Creates a classroom culture that empowers students to collaborate.	... and ☐ Encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. ☐ Uses classroom assessment data to inform program planning. ☐ Empowers and encourages students to create and maintain a safe and supportive school and community environment.	
	Element Ib. Teachers demonstrate leadership in the school. Teachers work collaboratively with school personnel to create a professional learning community. They analyze and use local, state, and national data to develop goals and strategies in the school improvement plan that enhances student learning and teacher working conditions. Teachers provide input in determining the school budget and in the selection of professional development that meets the needs of students and their own professional growth. They participate in the hiring process and collaborate with their colleagues to mentor and support teachers to improve the effectiveness of their departments or grade levels.				
	☐ Attends professional learning community meetings. ☐ Displays awareness of the goals of the school improvement plan.	... and ☐ Participates in professional learning community. ☐ Participates in developing and/or implementing the school improvement plan.	... and ☐ Assumes a leadership role in professional learning community. ☐ Collaborates with school personnel on school improvement activities.	... and ☐ Collaborates with colleagues to improve the quality of learning in the school. ☐ Assumes a leadership role in implementing school improvement plan throughout the building.	

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group Protocol

Welcome, and thank everyone for coming. Introduce yourself (as the focus group facilitator), the note taker, and the recorder. Ask participants to introduce themselves.

Script: “Hi, I am [name] and will facilitate our focus group today. I want to introduce you to the individual who will be helping me with this process; taking notes and recording our session. {State the name of the co-moderator} I’d like to find out who you are, so let’s go around the circle and have each person introduce themselves to the rest of group.”

Introductions

Why we are asking for their input. Purpose of the assessment. Review and collect informed consent forms.

Script: “Before we start, there are a couple of things that we need to do, and I would like to tell you a little bit about why we are here and how we will conduct the focus groups. We have got some forms that we are going to pass out to you now. These forms tell you a little bit about the purpose of this focus group and this process. I would like to review them with you.”

Pass out informed consent.

Script: “Okay, now I will read through the informed consent form with you. If you have any questions, please stop me at any time.”

Read through form and the participants may keep the form.

Review the procedures and process for the focus group. Some of this may be repetitious from the informed consent.

Script: “In a minute, I’m going to ask you some open-ended questions, and I’d like you to share your responses to them. Please share only information with this group you are comfortable sharing. Everything you say is strictly confidential – your real names will not be used at any time during this assessment project. Please remember that you can leave at any time.”

Script: “At this time, I would like you to write down your first name only on your name card. Only using your first name will help keep your identity confidential. Have group members write their first names on the name cards.

Script: “I would like to ask that before you comment, please tell us your first name and then make your comment. This helps us transcribe the conversation from the recording to identify who is making a specific comment; sometimes, it can be difficult to differentiate voices. For example, if I wanted to make a comment on one of the questions or what one of my peers had said, I would say, I am [facilitator insert your name], and I agree with what Jim had to say about that, but I’d like to add....”

Note: If they forget to state their first name, do not remind them because it will disrupt the flow of the group. Just make sure the note-taker is notating who is talking.

Script: “OK, are there any questions or concerns before we begin?”

Address any questions or concerns.

Read the ground rules as follows.

Script:

Ground Rules:

1. Confidentiality –Please respect the confidentiality of your peers. As the facilitator, I will only anonymously share the information from this focus group.

- 2. One Speaker at a Time—Only one person should speak at a time to ensure that we can all hear what everyone is saying.*
- 3. Use Respectful Language—To facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.*
- 4. Open Discussion – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. You will not be asked to reach a consensus on the topics discussed. There will be no right or wrong answers.*
- 5. Participation is Important—Everyone’s voice must be shared and heard to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!*

Thank you, now let us begin.

Turn on Recorder

Start asking the questions. One at a time. Use your judgment when deciding when to move on to the next question. Watch your time. Once the recorder is on, you might start by saying:

*Script: “Again I would like to extend our appreciation for your participation here today.
Our first question is....”*

Questions to be Asked, Listed Fully and in Order

- Q1. How would you describe your relationship with your mentor?*
- Q2. Tell me about your first interactions with your mentor. What were some of things that he or she asked you to do?*
- Q3. What does it mean to belong?*
- Q4. Where do you get your sense of belonging from and what is your contribution to that?*

a. Did you mentor contribute to your sense of belonging ? How

Q5. How can an increased sense of belonging enhance the workplace experience?

a. Does it make a difference? Why or why not?

Script: “That was our final question. Is there anything else that anyone would like to add or any additional comments concerning what we have talked about here today?”

Allow time for comments

Script: “This concludes our focus group. Thank you for coming and participating. Once we have conducted all of the focus groups and analyzed the transcript, you will receive an e-mail asking you to comment on our conclusions based on our analysis of the comments made during the group discussion. If you have any questions at any time, please contact Chanteal Alston.”

APPENDIX F: FIELD NOTES TEMPLATE

First and foremost, your field notes should be useful for you. Organize them as you will best be useful to you, which might include searchable keywords or a very regular format. Below is one possible template for your field notes, including a complete and regular format. Feel free to adapt it to your needs. You can see two different formatting examples in the document entitled “Example Field Notes.”

Summary

Write a one-paragraph summary or abstract of the events. Include analytic descriptions.

Date:

Site/location:

Activity (explain in detail):

Participants (list names):

Length of Observation:

Description and photograph

Write a detailed narrative of what you observed. Document specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language.

If you can or would like, include a photograph. Tag the photo.

Questions/Things to follow up with and sketch

This is the interpretive part of your notes. Please ensure you relate the field observations to larger issues discussed in the field school or the required readings. For future investigation, list additional questions about people, places, or behaviors at the site.

“Analysis of what you learned in the setting regarding your guiding question and other related points. This is how you will make links between the details ... and the larger things you are learning about how culture works in this context. What themes can you begin to identify regarding your guiding question? What questions do you have to help focus your observation on subsequent visits? Can you draw preliminary connections or potential conclusions based on what you learned?”

Add a sketch of a detail that explains your observations.

Reflections

This includes your personal responses to fieldwork. “Reflection on what you learned of a personal nature. What was it like for you to be doing this research? What felt comfortable for you about being in this site and what felt uncomfortable? In what ways did you connect with informants, and in what ways didn’t you? While this is extremely important information, be especially careful to separate it from analysis.”

Your Name and Date

Photo

Sketch

Reflections

http://www.gpgrieve.org/PDF/How_to_write_Field_Notes.pdf

**APPENDIX G: BEGINNING TEACHER SUPPORT PROGRAM INSTRUCTIONAL
GLIMPSE NOTE CATCHER**

Section 1: Observation- Classroom Descriptors	
Descriptors:	Notes:
Clear classroom expectations are established to support learning.	
The classroom is student-friendly and supports learning	
The behavior management system is evident with respect and rapport	

Positive relationships are fostered both among peers and between teachers and students	
Section 2: Observation- Instructional Strategies Descriptors	
Descriptors:	Notes:
Learning objectives are aligned to specific learning outcomes	
Lesson includes authentic, high-quality tasks and texts	
Teacher communicates clearly and effectively	

Various of teaching strategies and protocols are implemented	
Students are engaged in active and collaborative learning	
Teacher meets the needs of diverse learners	
Teacher provides an opportunity for students to make their thinking visible through written or verbal discourse in response to high level questioning or open-ended tasks	

Teacher uses various formative assessments to check for understanding and provides timely and appropriate feedback	
Section 3: Coaching Focus	
Descriptors:	Notes:
Based on the instructional glimpse, provide a description of the focus area(s) for the beginning teacher	
Provide strategies to support the focus area	
Behavior management system is evident with respect and rapport	
Provide multiple resources to support the teacher's growth in the focus area	

Section 4: Reflections	
Descriptors:	Notes:
Beginning Teacher's reflection on the process and growth (What teaching practices have changed due to implementation of new skills?)	
Mentor's response to the Beginning Teacher's reflection (Support and challenge the BT response including the determination of next steps.)	

APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT FOR FOCUS GROUPS

You are being invited to participate in a **research** study titled “*Preparing Alternatively Licensed Teachers to Lead in Restart Schools*” being conducted by *Chanteal Reynolds Alston*, a student at East Carolina University in the *Educational Leadership Department*. The purpose of this focus group is to explore how a comprehensive mentoring program supports alternatively licensed teachers (ALTs) in enhancing their instructional leadership at a Restart School. As part of this study, you will be placed in a group of 3-5 individuals. A moderator will ask you several open-ended questions while facilitating the discussion. The focus groups will last approximately 1 hour.

This focus group will be audio-recorded, and a note-taker will be present. However, your responses will remain confidential, and no names will be included in the final report. You can choose whether or not to participate in the focus group, and you may stop at any time during the course of the study. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to focus group questions. A variety of viewpoints are welcomed, and everyone is encouraged to share their thoughts and perspectives. Out of respect, please refrain from interrupting others. However, feel free to be honest even when your responses counter those of other group members. Your participation may benefit you and other alternatively licensed teachers by improving how mentors support is provided to alternatively licensed teachers. However, no risks are anticipated beyond those experienced during an average conversation. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to respect the privacy of other focus group members by not disclosing any content discussed during the study. The Lead Researcher will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, however, the nature of focus groups prevents the researcher from guaranteeing confidentiality. The Lead Researcher will remind participants to respect the privacy of fellow participants and not repeat which is shared in the focus groups to others. Researchers will keep your name or any information that may identify you confidential in any reports or transcripts. To secure the data the Lead Researcher will store all data in password-protected, cloud-based storage through Microsoft 365 for storage and archiving purposes and will be destroyed after five years. When the results of the research are published or presented at conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity

Please call *Chanteal Reynolds Alston*, Lead Researcher, at 919-624-3433 for any research related questions or the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

I have read and understand the information provided. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

APPENDIX I: CODEBOOK

Code / Construct	Definition	Illustrative Example (Participant Excerpt)	Data Source	Theme	Analytic Note / Interpretation
Instructional Confidence	Teacher's belief in planning and delivering instruction effectively.	"I can plan small-group lessons on my own now."	Observation / Reflection	Instructional Growth	Mentoring reinforced professional confidence and self-efficacy.
Feedback Integration	Applying mentor or administrator feedback to improve practice.	"When my mentor observed me, she showed me how to fix it."	Focus Group	Reflective Practice	Feedback cycles built habitual reflection and increased competence.
Instructional Guidance	Mentor models lessons or provides resources for practice.	"She would even model a lesson for me if I needed help."	Focus Group	Mentor Modeling	Demonstrations enhanced skill transfer and confidence.
Goal-Setting & Monitoring	Setting goals aligned to NCEES standards and tracking progress.	"We set a goal for Standard 1 and checked in each week."	Reflection	Growth Accountability	Goal alignment made improvement visible and measurable.
Relational Trust	Feeling valued and supported by mentors and peers.	"My mentor checks in about how I'm doing, not just my lessons."	Focus Group	Relational Trust	Trust was the strongest predictor of belonging and retention.
Validation	Experiences and opinions acknowledged and respected.	"Belonging is being valued—my opinions matter."	Focus Group	Professional Validation	Validation strengthened identity and psychological safety.
Team Support	Support from colleagues and grade-level teams.	"It takes a village—my team was so supportive."	Focus Group / ALT Survey	Collegial Support	Collaboration reduced isolation and fostered collective efficacy.
Peer Collaboration	Working with other teachers to share ideas or activities.	"We joined classes for a joint project."	Reflection	Collaboration	Shared planning reinforced connection and peer learning.

Purposeful Contribution	Opportunities to share or lead within teams.	"I shared a reading strategy with my team."	Focus Group / Reflection	Teacher Agency	Micro-leadership developed through small contributions.
Debriefing	Reflecting and processing the day to reduce stress.	"Debriefing at the end of the day makes leaving work lighter."	Focus Group	Collective Reflection	Routine reflection built community and resilience.
Reflective Dialogue	Professional conversations linking feedback to growth.	"We debrief after each observation to see what worked."	Observation	Reflective Practice	Dialogue connected action to purpose.
Engagement Rituals	Participation in school-wide activities and events.	"Wellness Wednesdays make me feel part of something bigger."	Reflection	Community Engagement	Rituals strengthened identity and shared values.
Instructional Decision-Making	Confidence to make independent instructional choices.	"I adjusted the lesson when students didn't get it."	Observation	Instructional Autonomy	Independence grew with mentor trust.
Role Adjustment	Navigating the transition without traditional training.	"I didn't go to school for teaching... everything was a lot."	Focus Group	Transition Adaptation	Contextualized need for structured mentorship.
Scaffolded Independence	Gradual release of mentor support.	"At first we planned together; now she lets me take the lead."	Reflection	Gradual Release	Balanced guidance and independence built confidence.
Administrative Visibility	Presence and accessibility of school leaders.	"When my AP stops by to check in, it means a lot."	Observation	Visible Leadership	Leadership visibility signaled value for teacher growth.
Protected Mentoring Time	Scheduled and uninterrupted time for mentoring.	"Our planning time was sacred."	Reflection	Structural Support	Consistent time enabled depth and trust.
PD Alignment	Professional development aligned with mentoring goals.	"The PD matched what my mentor and I were working on."	ALT Survey	Instructional Coherence	Alignment reinforced transfer of learning.

Institutional Commitment	School structures support teacher success and well-being.	“Having weekly mentor time shows the school values our growth.”	Focus Group/ Observation	Organizational Support	Systemic conditions sustained belonging and retention.
Emotional Support	Mentor provides empathy and encouragement.	“She just calmed me down... take it day by day.”	Focus Group	Emotional Support	Addressed stress and prevented burnout.
Accessibility	Mentor is available beyond school hours.	“I can call her on the weekend—she’ll answer.”	Focus Group	Consistent Support	Availability reinforced trust.
Adaptive Mentorship	Adjusting support to mentee readiness.	“She gave me space once I was ready.”	Reflection	Differentiated Coaching	Tailored approach fostered growth.
Feedback Loops	Continuous observation and reflection cycles.	“We met weekly to talk about next steps.”	Observation	Continuous Improvement	Created momentum and accountability.
Reflective Practice	Self-assessment and goal setting for improvement.	“After feedback, I think about what I’ll try next.”	Reflection	Professional Reflection	Reflection linked belonging to identity.
Distributed Leadership	Shared leadership within teams.	“We rotate who leads our PLC.”	Observation	Shared Leadership	Built collective ownership and capacity.
Mentor Growth	Mentors develop coaching skills through experience.	“Mentoring made me a better teacher too.”	Focus Group	Mentor Development	Mentorship served as leadership training.
Instructional Leadership Growth	Leading instructional dialogue and team learning.	“I feel comfortable sharing strategies in PLCs.”	Observation	Instructional Leadership	CMP nurtured leadership identity.
Wellness & Recognition Rituals	Celebratory and community-building practices.	“Those little things remind us we’re appreciated.”	Reflection	Community Culture	Reinforced staff morale and connection.
Supporting Conditions for Success	Mentoring and orientation embedded in plans.	“New teachers automatically have mentors.”	Reflection	Structural Integration	Belonging became systemic practice.

Limited Autonomy	Structural restrictions on novice teachers.	"We can't take on committees yet."	Focus Group	Structural Constraint	Policies delayed leadership growth.
Time Constraints	Competing demands reduce mentoring time.	"Planning gets pushed aside for testing."	Reflection	Resource Constraint	Limited time threatened consistency.
Emotional Labor	Emotional strain of early-career teaching.	"Some days I felt overwhelmed."	Reflection	Emotional Strain	Highlighted need for belonging supports.
Pairing Challenges	Mentor-mentee mismatches.	"We realized our styles didn't align."	Focus Group	Relationship Mismatch	Informed future mentor training criteria.