



## **Finding Their Place: Exploring the Sense of Belonging Among Alternatively Certified Early-Career Educators**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the impact of belongingness among alternatively certified educators to identify strategies for better supporting them during their early years. Using a qualitative multicase study design, the researchers employed within-case and cross-case analysis, with each case representing an individual alternatively certified educator. Data were collected from three sources: individual meetings with the director of the alternative certification program, a belongingness survey, and a semi-structured focus group with participants. Data analysis included both within-case and cross-case approaches to identify themes across participants and address the research question. The findings hold implications for educational policy and practice, particularly in light of ongoing challenges in teacher recruitment and retention.

**Keywords:** Alternative teacher education, School belonging, Early career educators

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## Finding Their Place: Exploring the Sense of Belonging Among Alternatively Certified Early-Career Educators

The United States is currently facing a shortage of qualified educators (Dillard, 2023; Sutchter et al., 2019). According to Tan et al. (2024), 406,964 teaching positions remain unfilled or are occupied by teachers who lack full certification for their assignments, representing about 13% of the total teacher workforce (3,224,967). This shortage underscores the urgent need to prioritize both the recruitment and retention of well-trained educators. In response to the increasing needs for teachers, many states have expedited entry into teaching through alternative certification programs, which provide opportunities to teach full-time prior to completing certification requirements (Constantine et al., 2009; Whitford et al., 2017).

While efforts to recruit new teachers are essential to address this need, retention is important. Educators who feel valued, supported, and connected to their school communities are more likely to remain in the profession (Wilcoxen et al., 2020). A key factor influencing teacher retention is a strong sense of belonging, which can foster professional commitment and reduce attrition (Allen, 2023). A *sense of belonging* encompasses feelings of being accepted, valued, and included within a community or organization and can influence thoughts, feelings, and actions within individuals (Armellini et al., 2021; Mendoza & Venables, 2023). Additionally, a strong sense of belonging has been linked to improved job satisfaction and retention rates among educators (O'Shea, 2021), especially in the early stages of their careers. When teachers feel isolated or unsupported, they are more likely to leave the profession prematurely (Hausmann et al., 2007; Ingersoll, 2001). People are social beings who have a psychological need to belong (Adedeji et al., 2023; Escalera-Reyes, 2020).

Teacher preparation models can also impact a sense of belonging among early-career educators. Increased guidance and support lead to increased commitment and engagement (Bakker et al., 2008; Kachchhap & Horo, 2021; Rezaee et al., 2018). Traditional teacher preparation programs often emphasize extended field experiences and mentorship (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2018), which can help cultivate a sense of community and social connections before educators enter the workforce (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). In contrast, alternative certification programs tend to be fast-tracked and provide opportunities to teach full-time with minimal supervision (Whitford et al., 2017), potentially leaving early-career educators less equipped to foster relationships within their schools.

A sense of belonging plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of early-career educators; therefore, understanding the factors that contribute to this sense of belonging is essential for supporting teacher retention and success. Additionally, with a growing need to address teacher shortages and high turnover rates (García & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Nketsia et al., 2022), it is essential to understand how different preparation models contribute to fostering a sense of belonging in early-career teachers. While research exists on a sense of belonging in the workplace (e.g., Bjorklund, 2023; O'Shea, 2021), there is less research regarding educators' sense of belonging, specifically for those entering the profession under alternative certification programs.

This article aims to explore the impact of belongingness among alternatively certified educators to determine how to better support educators during their early years. We were guided by this research question: How do alternatively certified educators perceive a sense of belonging

within their school building? Findings demonstrate important implications for educational policy and practice, especially considering the ongoing challenges in teacher recruitment and retention.

## Literature Review

### What is Belonging?

Individuals have a fundamental psychological need to belong (Adedeji et al., 2023; Booker, 2021; Escalera-Reyes, 2020; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Osterman, 2000; Slaten et al., 2016). This need influences behaviors and shapes how people interact within their environments. Research underscores the importance of fostering inclusive work settings where individuals feel valued and connected to their organizations (American Immigration Council, 2024). In the context of this study, a sense of belonging is defined as individuals feeling valued by, included in, and connected to an organization or group (Armellini et al., 2021; Mendoza & Venables, 2023).

Conversely, a lack of belonging can diminish engagement and motivation and adversely affect individuals' well-being (American Immigration Council, 2024). According to Over Zero and the American Immigration Council (2024) survey results, 64% of Americans feel like they do not belong in their workplace. Building a sense of belonging requires trust between individuals and organizations. Adedeji et al. (2023) emphasize that "trust in a social relationship engenders a feeling of belongingness and psychological sense of community that promotes better life outcomes," with trust often predicting the strength of social relationships and participation (p. 2621). Social disconnection impacts relationships and engagement and leads to isolation (Bushman et al., 2018; Kwan et al., 2018).

### Belonging in the Workplace

Organizations continue to recognize the critical role belongingness and social connection play in fostering a positive and productive workplace environment. For example, to address the teacher shortage, the American Association of School Personnel Administrators (2022) proposed five transformative strategies, including a significant shift from the traditional "Support employee wellness" approach to a broader, systemic mandate: "Strengthen educators' sense of purpose, belonging, and connection" (p. 21). This shift highlights the importance of workplaces that are inclusive, welcoming, and committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It also underscores the need to actively create opportunities for educators to build and maintain meaningful social connections (AASPA, 2022). This perspective aligns with the 2023 report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on loneliness and isolation, which highlights the negative effects of social disconnection in the workplace. These include higher turnover rates, diminished productivity, mental health challenges, and poor performance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Similarly, Over Zero and the American Immigration Council (2024) underscores that fostering a sense of belonging boosts workplace outcomes, enhancing productivity, creativity, retention, and loyalty (American Immigration Council, 2024). Together, these findings illustrate the profound impact of social connections on organizational success and employee well-being.

When belongingness is nurtured, teachers perform better (Kachchhap & Horo, 2021). Much like students, educators are influenced by their work environment. This includes multiple contexts (e.g., physical, emotional, atmospheric) that mold teacher learning and perspectives (Kachchhap & Horo, 2021). Shared learning experiences, including mentorship programs, peer

collaborations, and professional learning communities, play a vital role in fostering a sense of connection among educators (Ussher, 2010). For instance, mentoring partnerships not only enhance teachers' feelings of belonging but also boost their confidence in instructional practices (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). This support helps them navigate the challenges of the profession. Similarly, collaborative structures, such as peer collaboration and professional learning communities, help cultivate a sense of community, providing a supportive network that contributes to professional growth and overall well-being (Wilcoxen et al., 2020). Together, these shared experiences create environments where educators feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

Scholars continue to seek to understand key factors that affect well-being in the workplace, such as trust, belonging, inclusion, and work-life balance (Booker, 2021; O'Shea, 2021). These factors are difficult to measure as they are consistently evolving in response to shifting social, cultural, and organizational trends. Adedeji et al. (2023) suggest that as workplace dynamics and broader societal contexts change, researchers must continuously reassess and adapt their understanding of what contributes to a healthy, productive, and supportive work environment. This need to adapt extends to all workplaces and includes alternatively certified educators.

### **Alternative Teacher Certification**

To address teacher shortages and attract individuals seeking a career in education, alternative certification programs (ACPs) have emerged as non-traditional certification pathways that offer expedited routes into the classroom. These programs have been developed to entice second-career educators, providing them with an accelerated entry into the teaching profession (Ingersoll et al., 2014) and reducing teacher shortages (Shaw, 2008). A survey conducted by the American National Center for Education Statistics for the 2015-2016 school year revealed that 18% of public-school educators obtained their teaching license through ACPs (Gray & Taie, 2015).

For the last 25 years, the University of Nebraska Omaha has provided accelerated teacher certification pathways. These programs combine rigorous coursework with valuable field experiences to effectively prepare candidates for initial teacher certification in PK-12 schools (Langfeldt & Wilcoxen, 2023). Individuals can obtain an initial teaching certificate by completing an educator preparation program (EPP) to earn their bachelor's degree. Alternative teaching permits are issued if applicants hold a bachelor's degree in any field and have completed at least 75% of the required content endorsement courses. Additionally, candidates must submit a written agreement with an EPP offered by a state institution of higher education, committing to completing the program to obtain an initial teaching certificate. As part of the program, candidates are required to attend a pre-teaching seminar that covers essential topics such as planning for routines and procedures, communication with families, classroom management, and instructional strategies. Furthermore, their hiring district must submit a written plan outlining the mentoring and supervision arrangements. This plan of support ensures that participants receive the necessary guidance and training to be successful in their classrooms and meet the requirements for a teaching certificate.

The Teacher Academy Project (TAP) was originally designed to address the shortage of certified educators in high-demand areas like math, science, and world languages. This program has expanded based on the growing needs in all content areas. The program allows participants to complete certification requirements in as little as 18 months, in addition to the completion of

any necessary endorsement work. Residents are hired by a school district and teach full-time in the classroom while simultaneously working on their certification courses in the evenings and on weekends. This allows for the integration of practical teaching experience with formalized coursework.

### **Conceptual Framework: Ecological Belonging Framework**

We were guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) seminal ecological framework for human development, which puts individuals at the center of their ecological system. Specifically, drawing on Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) work, we grounded this study in a framework that considers both personal and environmental factors as key contributors to a sense of belonging. Interactions between these two factors drive change: (a) environments can influence and shape individuals, and (b) individuals can modify and transform their environments (Akbarak & Douglas, 2022; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). These interactions impact whether individuals feel valued and connected to their environment, which influences their sense of belonging (Adedeji et al., 2023; American Immigration Council, 2024; Escalera-Reyes, 2020). This ecological belonging framework focuses on how environmental perceptions (value, connection, influence, and authenticity) affect individuals' sense of belonging.

In the context of this study, the first facet, *value*, refers to the importance or worth attributed to individuals and their contributions (Over Zero and The American Immigration Council, 2024). Value encompasses the recognition and appreciation people receive, which makes them feel included and respected in their environment. Walton and Brady (2017) contend that people infer their place within organizations through a series of questions, such as whether they feel valued within an organization. At times, these are articulated aloud, and at other times, internally. Whether or not one feels appreciated, or valued, impacts actions and behaviors (Armellini et al., 2021), which can impact productivity within the workplace.

The second facet, *social connection*, refers to forming meaningful relationships and bonds between individuals or groups (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). A lack of social connections negatively impacts job satisfaction (O'Shea, 2021), well-being, and poses significant health risks such as depression or dementia (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Holt-Lunstad et al. (2017) indicate that these social connections are characterized by structure, function, and quality. *Structure* refers to the number and variety of relationships but also encompasses the frequency of interactions. *Function* refers to the extent to which you can depend on others to help meet different needs or provide support, whereas *quality* refers to the satisfaction and positivity (as opposed to the negative aspects or dissatisfaction) drawn from these interactions (Holt-Lunstad, 2022; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). These characteristics are important in understanding the factors that impact social connections within the work environment. Feeling accepted and included is necessary for effective social connections.

The third facet, *influence*, refers to the ability of individuals to affect decision-making processes within various life settings (Powell et al., 2024; Short & Rinehardt, 1992). This includes having a say in decisions that impact their families, workplaces, local communities, and the nation. Powell et al. (2024) explain influence as agency or co-creation, where the individual helps shape the rules or decisions that affect the environment. Influence has also been linked to empowerment (Short & Rinehardt, 1992; Wilcoxen et al., 2020), which has been linked to efficacy, retention, and effectiveness (Lyons et al., 2013; Soini et al., 2010).

The fourth facet, *authenticity*, refers to being able to bring one’s whole and true self to a setting or environment (Rivera et al., 2019; Walton et al., 2017). It means feeling comfortable to openly express one’s thoughts, opinions, and identity. This directly correlates to Bandura’s (1977) concept of self-efficacy, an individual’s belief in their ability to successfully perform a task or achieve a specific outcome. Philosophical and psychological research on the connection between authenticity and well-being is not new (Rivera et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Waterman, 1993). When someone feels they can be authentic in their environment, it impacts personal confidence, motivation, resilience, and performance.

### Methodology

This qualitative study used a multicase study research design (Stake, 2006). According to Dyson and Genishi (2005), the purpose of qualitative case studies is to understand complex social interactions, including teaching and learning in the classroom setting. Case study methodology looks to generate insights into specific areas of interest to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the case being studied (Yin, 2018). Following Creswell (2013) and Stake (2006), we selected a multicase study design for its unique characteristics that exemplify the interrelationships involved in alternatively certified educators’ sense of belonging in schools.

Each case in the study was bound to one alternatively certified educator in the Teacher Academy Project, with a total of three cases. Grounded in Stake’s (2006) multicase study methodology, our exploration extended beyond an individual case by examining a collective phenomenon, what Stake called a *quintain*. In the context of this study, our quintain was the sense of belonging among early-career educators. While each participant represented a distinct case, the aim of this research was to explore how the quintain (i.e., a sense of belonging) was experienced across cases. By examining multiple cases through the lens of the quintain, we sought to generate insights into the patterns and complexities of belonging within and across contexts.

### Program Participants

Study participants included three secondary educators completing an alternative certification program within one midwestern state. Each held a bachelor’s degree in another content area prior to participation, met the requirements for alternative certification, and was hired to teach high school full-time. Each was hired to teach in an urban high school within the state’s largest district, which serves over 52,000 students. One participant was a second-year educator, and the other two were first-year educators. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

Name	Ethno-Racial Identification	Content Area	Bachelor’s Degree
Terrence (1 <sup>st</sup> year)	Black	Social Science	Political Science
Josue (1 <sup>st</sup> year)	Hispanic	Business, Marketing, and Information Technology	Business & a Master’s in Business Administration
Robert (2 <sup>nd</sup> year)	Caucasian	Math	Physics

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms

This study was submitted to the university's Institutional Review Board and approved under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regulations per code 45CFR46.102. Additionally, permission was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Data collection and reporting were conducted in a manner that ensured confidentiality and protected participant identities in accordance with ethical research standards.

As researchers with experience in teacher education and professional development, we recognize that our background influenced how we approached this study. Having worked closely with early-career educators, our experiences bring both an empathetic perspective and a set of assumptions regarding how belonging is developed within schools.

### **Data Sources**

Data were collected from three sources: individual meetings with the director of the alternative certification program, a belongingness survey, and a semi-structured focus group interview with participants. Triangulation of data sources enhances the credibility of the findings and allows for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within the school environment (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006).

### ***Individual Meetings***

Meetings with the director occurred on a semester basis throughout the program. These meetings were touchpoints between the director and each teacher to ensure they were on course to meet the certification needs of the state. These meetings also included opportunities to check in and problem-solve concerns.

### ***Belongingness Survey***

The belongingness survey, called the Belonging Barometer (Over Zero and The American Immigration Council, 2024), was given in April at the end of their first or second year in the classroom. It included 10 items and utilized a Likert-type scale of 1-5, with 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*. It included the following statements:

1. I feel emotionally connected to [my school building].
2. People in [my school building] welcome and include me in activities.
3. I am unable to influence decision-making in [my school building].
4. I feel unable to be my whole and authentic self with people in [my school building].
5. People [in my school building] value me and my contributions.
6. My relationships with others in [my school building] are as satisfying as I want them to be.
7. I feel like an “insider” who understands how [my school building] works.
8. I am comfortable expressing my opinions in [my school building].
9. I am treated as “less than” other residents in [my school building].
10. When interacting with people in [my school building], I feel like I truly belong.

We chose the Belonging Barometer because the previously validated instrument offered a multidimensional framework for assessing belonging. This extended beyond basic feelings of acceptance to include emotional connection, psychological safety, authenticity, feeling valued, and the ability to influence group decisions (Over Zero and The American Immigration Council, 2024). Unlike tools such as the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (St-Amand et al., 2020) which tends to focus on students, the Belonging Barometer is specifically designed to evaluate belonging across a range of life domains, including the workplace. This makes it especially relevant for understanding the experiences of educators. While the General

Belongingness Scale (Satici & Gocet Tekin, 2016) is useful for measuring general interpersonal belonging and perceptions of acceptance or exclusion, the Belonging Barometer addresses both interpersonal aspects and broader systemic factors like equality and participation in decision-making, which are critical in the context of schools. The Belonging Barometer's broader scope and contextual sensitivity make it particularly valuable for exploring belonging in complex professional environments and, therefore, enabled the researchers to capture the nuanced experiences of alternatively certified educators and generate meaningful insights to inform targeted support during their early-career stages.

### ***Focus Group***

The focus group was semi-structured and guided by an interview protocol consisting of 10 open-ended questions, allowing participants to reflect on their personal experiences, school culture, and support systems. The session lasted approximately 90 minutes and took place in a quiet, private room at the university. Sample questions included: Can you share an instance where you felt particularly welcomed or included in your school community? What made this experience stand out? In what ways do you feel valued by your colleagues and your school administration? Are there specific actions or policies that reinforce this feeling?

A moderator facilitated the discussion while a co-facilitator took observational notes. The session was audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Participants were encouraged to speak freely and to engage with one another's responses. This format enabled interactive dialogue and diverse perspectives, while also allowing for emergent themes to be explored organically. To promote comfort and psychological safety, participants were reminded of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. Refreshments were provided, and the atmosphere remained collegial and conversational throughout the session. The timing allowed for follow-up on concepts resulting from individual meetings and the results of the belongingness survey.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study, an interpretive analysis was used to examine how early-career educators conceptualized and experienced belonging within their school environments. The multicase framework allowed for comparison between individual cases in relation to the quintain, or sense of belonging. This approach supported a deeper understanding of how belonging is constructed and experienced across cases, highlighting both commonalities and differences (Stake, 2006). Rather than treating belonging as a fixed, measurable variable, our analysis emphasized the subjective accounts of each participant, focusing on how they describe, interpret, and assign meaning to their personal experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

Data analysis involved both within-case and cross-case analysis techniques (Kalinnikova Magnusson & Walton, 2021; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify themes and address the research question. This approach allowed for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the quintain by situating individual experiences within a broader conceptual and relational framework.

Following Saldaña(2016), we first familiarized ourselves with participant characteristics by examining attribute codes (see Table 1). Next, we reviewed information collected from semester meetings with the director. This added context and background information pertaining to each participant. After reviewing the director's information, we reviewed each participant's



belongingness survey results based on the five-point Likert-type scale. To add clarity to concepts shared in the survey results, all three authors coded the focus group transcription.

A priori codes were developed from the conceptual framework and included: value, connection, influence, and authenticity. As defined in the conceptual framework, these facets drove the coding process. A *sense of belonging* referred to the extent to which individuals felt included, valued, and connected to an organization or group. This included the perception of being accepted, respected, and supported by others (Armelli et al., 2021; Mendoza & Venables, 2023).

To work toward integrated reliability, the three authors used eight aspects of intercoder reliability as outlined by Cofie et al. (2022). These include:

1. All three authors engaged in the coding process. The recommendation was at least two.
2. To address bias, only one coder was connected to the data.
3. All three authors had previous experience coding qualitative data.
4. All artifacts were coded by all authors.
5. All authors used the same conceptual framework when coding.
6. All Authors shared the meaning of codes through discussion and agreement.
7. Once all artifacts were coded, all three authors reviewed the codes through discussion and agreement (Campbell et. al., 2013).
8. Guided by a conceptual framework, the authors used operational definitions that provided definitions for the coding process.

As patterns were identified during analysis, we remained open to discovering new insights and identifying emergent themes beyond the original framework. This iterative process included a combination of deductive (a priori) and inductive coding. This ensured analysis was both theoretically grounded and responsive to the data to facilitate a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

One author was the program director, another was involved in one of the certification courses, and the third was brought in as an outside perspective. All authors recognize that our positions as researchers may influence participants' responses, particularly if they perceive us as an authority figure within the field of education. By including a researcher with an outside perspective and maintaining transparency about our roles, we sought to balance the advantages of familiarity with the need for rigorous analysis, ensuring that participants' lived experiences were accurately and respectfully represented. Given that the study pertained to school building dynamics and a sense of belonging within that environment, none of the researchers held supervisory roles or were actively involved in that specific setting. Potentially, the relationship with the director allowed for more honesty and vulnerability based on the pre-existing relationship. Additionally, to uphold the integrity of the research, authors prioritized the voices of the participants by using their own words in data presentation and analysis, ensuring that their lived experiences were authentically represented. The team actively engaged in ongoing reflexivity and collaboration throughout the analysis process, and the mindfulness of power dynamics, proximity, and perspective played a key role in maintaining the authenticity of the data.

## Results

We begin by describing the three individual cases and then transition into the findings from our cross-case analysis.

## Case Study: Terrence

### *Director Information*

Terrence's journey to becoming a first-year teacher in an urban school district in the Midwest is marked by diverse professional experiences. Terrence, a Black male, began his professional journey as an Intelligence Specialist in the United States Navy. Following his military service, Terrence broadened his global perspective in Japan, where he served as an Assistant Language Teacher through the Japan Exchange Teaching program. He went on to work as a paraprofessional at an urban high school in the United States, supporting multilingual students from a variety of backgrounds. In his inaugural year as a high school educator at the age of 33, Terrence dove into the teaching profession full-time as an alternatively certified educator.

### *Belonging Survey Responses*

See Table 3 for Terrence's belongingness survey results. Terrence's scores showed a strong and consistent sense of belonging, inclusion, and satisfaction within his school building. He acknowledged limited decision-making influence, but all other indicators showcased an inclusive professional environment.

**Table 3**

*Terrence's Survey Results*

Statement	Rating
I feel emotionally connected to my school building.	5
People in my school building welcome and include me in activities.	5
I am unable to influence decision-making in my school building.	2
I feel unable to be my whole and authentic self with people in my school building.	1
People in my school building value me and my contributions.	5
My relationships with others in my school building are as satisfying as I want them to be.	5
I feel like an "insider" who understands how my school building works.	5
I am comfortable expressing my opinions in my school building.	5
I am treated as "less than" other residents in my school building.	1
When interacting with people in my school building, I feel like I truly belong.	5

### *Focus Group Responses*

In reviewing Terrence's responses to the focus group questions, he expressed feeling valued, connected, influential, and able to be his authentic self at work.

**Value.** Terrence expressed that he feels valued by his principal, his colleagues, and his mentor. "I don't think there's a single person in my building that knows I'm a [first year] teacher... They think I'm a well-seasoned teacher. And I'm like, no, [I'm] not. This is my very first year... And they're like, 'Really?'" This response illustrated that Terrence felt he was perceived as competent and experienced by his colleagues, which aligned with the theme of value. Being mistaken for a seasoned teacher signified a recognition of Terrence's abilities as a

teacher and his contributions to his workplace. Terrence also felt “welcomed and included” as reflected in the following:

“And my principal...is a great principal...and he's always made me feel welcome in that building...I've never felt overly supervised. They don't get [in] my business... but you know, they still hold me accountable at the same time. It's a weird balance strike, but...it's been good.”

The inclusion Terrence felt also aligns with the theme of value, as it illustrated how Terrence’s principal's approach to leadership recognized and appreciated educators, without being overbearing. Such an environment fosters a balance where individuals like Terrence feel respected and held accountable yet not micromanaged.

Terrence expressed his appreciation for his mentor's readiness to address all his inquiries, recognizing this as a generous offering of time and expertise: “He does very little and answers all [my] questions.” His comment, “He does very little,” underscored his mentor’s effectiveness in offering support without undue intervention. This respect for professional autonomy strengthened Terrence's feeling of being a trusted and integral part of his workplace.

The theme of value in the workplace underscores the significance of acknowledging and appreciating individuals and their contributions, cultivating an atmosphere of inclusion and respect. Furthermore, the nurturing environment established by his principal and mentor highlights how effective leadership and mentorship can foster a sense of value, respect, and professional autonomy.

**Connection.** Terrence expressed that he felt connected to his colleagues. He spoke about his lunch gang, “EPD” (extra professional development) sessions, and his previous experience as a paraprofessional in the same district. When asked about an instance when Terrence felt particularly welcomed or included, Terrence shared,

“I've got a lunch gang....I'll grab school lunch and I'll sit with my colleagues and we'll talk and enjoy each other for the short 25 minutes that we have for lunch. And...that's been really great...I really enjoyed that part of my day.”

When asked about how satisfied Terrence was with the relationships he has formed in his building, Terrence candidly reflected on the inherent challenges and natural dynamics of forming connections in a school environment. He shared,

“I probably have the same problems that any other teacher has, when it comes to forming relationships. That [in] our building you get put in your section, and you will have friends around your section. And you'll go across the building and meet people you haven't talked to in like three months. And...that's just part of the way things work because like we said, it's like on the one hand, you want more cross-department interaction and collaboration. On the other hand, we don't want to have staff meetings every week.”

Terrence went on to explain that his colleagues often connected during informal gatherings they humorously dubbed “EPD”—extra professional development—where they could unwind and not focus solely on work discussions at off-campus locations. Terrence's reflection illustrated the balance between the structured and social aspects of building workplace relationships, highlighting both the challenges and fulfillment within his professional community.

Terrence recounted his previous position as a paraprofessional in another school within the district. This role provided him with a unique insider perspective, enabling him to understand school operations. His established sense of belonging in his previous building helped him transition into his current environment.

Terrence exemplified the theme of connection through his experiences with his colleagues during casual and structured interactions. Terrence acknowledged the inherent challenges in fostering relationships across departmental lines, noting how typical schedules sometimes limit cross-departmental interaction. However, informal gatherings allow colleagues to bridge these gaps, engaging in meaningful exchanges outside the formal setting. Additionally, Terrence's unique insider perspective, gained from his previous role as a paraprofessional in another school within the district, contributed to his understanding of school operations, further facilitating his sense of belonging.

**Influence.** Although Terrence spoke the least about his ability to influence others in his workplace, he did touch on this when he mentioned his authentic approach to interactions. By stating, "I do keep it real. Sometimes I keep it so real that others feel welcome to keep it even realer," Terrence highlighted how his authenticity creates an environment where others feel comfortable being genuine. This comment, while brief, suggests a form of indirect influence, one grounded not in authority or hierarchy, but in modeling vulnerability and openness.

This form of influence, while subtle, can have an impact on workplace culture. When individuals model authenticity, they lay a foundation for trust. In Terrence's case, his ability to "keep it real" seemed to invite reciprocal honesty, potentially fostering a more inclusive and transparent environment. This also speaks to the quality of interactions rather than positional power. Even without explicitly framing himself as influential, Terrence's comment reveals how sincere interactions can shape the tone of a professional space and contribute to a culture of belonging.

**Authentic.** Terrence identified a balance between being professional and genuine in an environment that welcomed open expression. Terrence's approach enabled those around him to also "keep it real," thereby nurturing a culture where everyone felt free to be their true selves. This aligns with the theme of authenticity, underscoring the significance of being genuine in interpersonal interactions and their potential to positively influence workplace dynamics.

Further reflecting on authenticity, Terrence's experience at his workplace highlighted how shared cultural backgrounds can bolster this theme. In response to being asked about the school's approach to diversity and inclusion and its impact on his sense of belonging, Terrence noted, "And our principal is Black, so that's nice." Here, Terrence identified how having leadership that shares similar cultural experiences can empower individuals to express their authentic identities.

## **Case Study: Josue**

### ***Director Information***

Josue, a 44-year-old Hispanic male, launched his career in the United States Marine Corps. There, he developed his expertise in human resources management and talent acquisition over nearly two decades, taking on various responsibilities such as personnel processing, staffing, and recruitment, even in challenging combat environments. After achieving a master's in business administration, Josue cultivated an interest in education, which led him to spend several years as a substitute teacher in an urban school district. This experience reinforced his dedication to becoming a full-time educator, prompting him to start his teaching career at an

urban high school in a midwestern state. As a father, husband, and small business owner, Josue had multiple commitments.

***Belonging Survey Responses***

See Table 4 for Josue’s belongingness survey results. Josue felt a strong sense of belonging within his school building. His responses indicated positive relationships, inclusion, and self-expression, while feelings of exclusion were minimal.

**Table 4**  
*Josue’s Survey Results*

Statement	Rating
I feel emotionally connected to my school building.	5
People in my school building welcome and include me in activities.	5
I am unable to influence decision-making in my school building.	1
I feel unable to be my whole and authentic self with people in my school building.	1
People in my school building value me and my contributions.	5
My relationships with others in my school building are as satisfying as I want them to be.	5
I feel like an “insider” who understands how my school building works.	5
I am comfortable expressing my opinions in my school building.	5
I am treated as “less than” other residents in my school building.	1
When interacting with people in my school building, I feel like I truly belong.	5

***Josue’s Focus Group Responses***

In Josue's responses to the focus group questions, he expressed feeling valued and connected, held influence, and was able to be his authentic self at work.

**Value.** Josue spoke extensively about the theme of value; authors coded it more than any other facet. His reflections included both positive and negative aspects, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of feeling valued in the workplace.

Josue described several experiences where he felt appreciated and recognized, fostering a strong sense of value in the workplace. At the beginning of the school year, Josue felt “welcomed” when he was introduced to the entire staff. This initial recognition set a positive tone for his integration into the school community. Additionally, Josue was nominated by his peers and colleagues as Teacher of the Month. He explained that the recognition process was celebratory and public, with the principal and assistant principal presenting a WWE-style (World Wrestling Entertainment) championship belt to him in front of his students. The event included photographs, social media posts, and a public announcement, making Josue feel highly appreciated. “They come to your classroom and announce it to all the students. You know, ‘Your teacher is doing a great job! He deserves this belt.’”

Josue highlighted how students could nominate teachers to receive a special t-shirt with the message, “*You have made a difference in my life.*” He received this recognition from two of his students, which further reinforced his sense of contribution and purpose. These positive

moments reflected how formal and informal recognition, both from colleagues and students, can cultivate an atmosphere where individuals feel seen and appreciated for their efforts.

Despite these positive experiences, Josue also shared challenges that detracted from his sense of value, particularly regarding school space limitations and state certification requirements. Josue expressed frustration in having to rotate between five different classrooms daily. "I have to go to five different classrooms on a daily basis." This limited his ability to personalize, organize, and manage the space according to his preferences and needs. The lack of a permanent space diminished his ability to create a comfortable and consistent environment for himself and his students.

Josue also spoke to the state certification requirements. He felt all his previous experience should have counted toward the state's endorsement requirements. Josue had a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in business. Given he was receiving certification in business, marketing and information technology, the state required additional coursework in computer science. He disagreed with this assessment by the state and the additional cost it incurred.

"I have an MBA, which I finished 10 years ago, and I still owe the program. All those classes should be counted ... Perhaps for qualified individuals, like super qualified individuals like myself ... my life experience and my professional experience [should count]. I don't mind doing this, but everything has to come out of my pocket."

Additionally, he spoke to the certification requirements not recognizing his personal needs given his age and stage in life. "I have a lot of things on my plate besides being a full-time teacher. [I am] a student full-time, father, husband, and I have a side business."

**Connect.** The facet of connection was the second most coded for Josue. His reflections highlighted both informal and formal connections with colleagues, which significantly contributed to his sense of belonging and support within the school environment. Josue described a variety of meaningful connections with his peers and mentors that fostered collaboration, camaraderie, and shared purpose.

Josue emphasized his ability to build excitement and unity among his team during school pep rallies by "hying them up," showcasing his role as a motivator and leader within the school community. Outside of work, Josue regularly participated in social gatherings with colleagues, fostering relationships beyond the professional setting. "We go out to a restaurant, and we have dinner together ... sometimes we have about 10-20 people." These informal social gatherings created a sense of camaraderie and strengthened bonds among colleagues.

Josue shared a unique connection with a retired airman who served as an informal mentor, citing their shared military experience: "He did 20 plus years in the Air Force, and I did 20 plus years in the Marines." This established a foundation of mutual understanding and respect. Josue also spoke about the relationship with his formal mentor, noting their shared academic background in business. "He also has an MBA, so we get along very well. Very smart dude."

Josue went on to share the support these relationships provided. These connections provided Josue with significant support and professional growth opportunities. Josue described how his colleagues frequently helped, demonstrating a culture of collaboration and care within the school. "They offer to help ... and they're always asking me if there's anything that I need." He also referenced opportunities to co-teach with peers who "have lengthy experience at the high school." Co-teaching with experienced peers allowed Josue to further develop his skills and

confidence. The foundation of trust and shared purpose within these relationships allowed Josue to feel supported and connected, enhancing his professional experience.

**Influence.** In terms of influence, Josue described how his involvement in school decision-making and team initiatives allowed him to share ideas and contribute to meaningful changes within his school environment. Josue said, “I can share how I feel” in his building and can “provide different ideas.” This highlighted his ability to express his thoughts and share ideas openly within his building. This sense of having a voice in his workplace fostered feelings of empowerment and respect.

Josue spoke enthusiastically about his involvement in school decision-making. He was an active participant in a team focused on revising the school’s cell phone policy. As one of 20 educators on the team, he attended monthly meetings to work toward reducing student distractions caused by cell phone use. “I am part of the whole no cell phone policy program. I am one of 20 teachers attending meetings, once every month since October of last year.” His contributions included sharing ideas and creating posters to support the initiative, demonstrating his commitment to the team's goals. Josue stated, “I let them know how I feel about it and they [the team] have been very, very supportive of that.” Being part of the decision-making process motivated Josue to invest in school initiatives and strengthened his sense of ownership over the outcomes. Additionally, his ability to contribute ideas and receive support from his colleagues reinforced his sense of agency and influence in his workplace. This highlighted how providing early-career educators with opportunities to influence decisions can enhance their engagement and satisfaction.

**Authentic.** The authors coded authenticity in multiple places within the focus group transcription, although all instances centered on Josue sharing an opinion or excitement for his place in the building. Josue expressed genuine enthusiasm for his role, sharing how his work environment motivated and energized him. “My experience has been great. I mean, I love to be there. I actually wake up every morning at 5:30, and you know, I'm excited! I go there. I prep and I'm a happy camper. I love what I do!” This statement illustrated Josue’s authentic joy and satisfaction in his position, demonstrating a strong alignment between his personal values and his work environment.

Josue noted that he never felt treated differently as an alternatively certified teacher, which contributed to his sense of belonging and ability to be himself in the workplace. Working in a predominantly Latino school provided Josue with a sense of cultural alignment and authenticity. “The students are incredibly diverse.” This cultural connection enabled Josue to relate to his students and foster meaningful relationships, further enhancing his sense of authenticity.

Josue’s ability to be authentic in his workplace had a profound impact on his mindset and work experience. His excitement about going to work each day suggests that authenticity is linked to a more optimistic and motivated approach to his responsibilities. Feeling treated equally as an alternatively certified teacher and connecting with his students’ diversity reinforced Josue’s sense of acceptance and belonging in his role.

## Case Study: Robert

### *Director Information*

Robert's journey to joining the residency program underscores his dedication to education, shaped by nearly two decades of teaching experience in California. As a 54-year-old White male and alternatively certified teacher in California, Robert developed his teaching skills in diverse classroom settings, adapting to the varied needs and challenges of the teaching profession. After teaching for 20 years in California, a move to a new state introduced a significant hurdle: the necessity to fulfill specific certification requirements unique to the state to continue his educational vocation. Through his engagement as a second-year teacher in a new state, Robert completed the requisite certification courses while concurrently working toward an accelerated master's degree in Secondary Education.

### *Belonging Survey Responses*

See Table 5 for Robert's belongingness survey results. Robert expressed a positive sense of connection and inclusion within the school building. He felt valued and welcomed, while ratings concerning influence, authenticity, and relationship depth were lower.

**Table 5**

*Robert's Survey Results*

Statement	Rating
I feel emotionally connected to my school building.	5
People in my school building welcome and include me in activities.	5
I am unable to influence decision-making in my school building.	2
I feel unable to be my whole and authentic self with people in my school building.	2
People in my school building value me and my contributions.	5
My relationships with others in my school building are as satisfying as I want them to be.	3
I feel like an "insider" who understands how my school building works.	3
I am comfortable expressing my opinions in my school building.	5
I am treated as "less than" other residents in my school building.	1
When interacting with people in my school building, I feel like I truly belong.	4

### *Robert's Focus Group Responses*

In Robert's responses to the focus group questions, he articulated a strong sense of connection to his workplace, expressing that he feels empowered to be his authentic self. He conveyed a sense of value and influence within his role, yet his comments also revealed contradictions, indicating a complex internal dialogue about his feelings and experiences.

**Value.** In discussing his sense of value within his school environment, Robert emphasized the "sense of purpose and mission" shared among the staff, particularly in a high-poverty setting. He noted, "It is important like that the schools and districts need people,"



highlighting the critical need for dedicated educators in challenging contexts. This statement underscored his awareness of the vital role strong educators play in these often under-resourced schools.

Moreover, Robert reflected on the importance of teacher retention, stating, “What are they doing to attract and retain those people? I think (school district) is trying...” This insight illustrates his understanding of the systemic challenges facing educational institutions. He further contrasted his current experience with a previous district, stating, “Maybe I’m comparing you to (different school district), which I have horror stories about.” This comparison not only emphasized his appreciation for his current environment but also revealed the significant impact that a supportive workplace can have on an educator's sense of value.

**Connect.** We identified this theme as the strongest aspect of Robert’s experience. He expressed a sense of belonging within a welcoming district, stating, “I feel like I’ve gotten to know and become friends with some of [my colleagues].” This sentiment reflects not only his personal satisfaction but also the collaborative culture fostered within his department.

However, Robert also acknowledged the challenges of establishing connections in a large school setting. He candidly shared, “I basically have social anxiety, and [my high school] is very large.” This admission highlights the complexities of building relationships within a substantial institutional framework. Despite recognizing the potential for collaboration, he noted, “It’s just hard to get to that.” This complexity suggests that while he values the connections he has formed, the size of the school presents barriers to broader engagement. Additionally, Robert identified operational factors as significant barriers to his sense of connection in his school setting. He expressed frustration with the technological systems in place, stating, “I still don’t feel like an insider.” His experience with situations such as malfunctioning Wi-Fi illustrated how operational inefficiencies can detract from an educator's overall experience. He candidly shared with his class, “You’re gonna see what happens to an old person when the computer doesn’t work,” highlighting the generational gap in navigating technology.

Additionally, Robert acknowledged the steep learning curve associated with these operational tools, which can create feelings of exclusion and hinder effective collaboration. This aspect of his experience underscores the importance of providing comprehensive support and training for educators to foster a truly inclusive environment.

**Influence.** Robert articulated this theme in relation to his students, emphasizing the need for diverse representation among educators. He stated, “[School building] should have a lot of Mexican-American teachers by now,” underlining his commitment to ensuring that the teaching staff reflects the community they serve. This desire for representation signifies a deep understanding of the role educators play in shaping the future of their students.

Furthermore, Robert conveyed a proactive stance regarding his legacy, asking his students, “Which one of us is going to take my job?” This forward-thinking approach not only encourages student ownership but also reinforces the importance of mentorship in preparing the next generation of educators.

**Authentic.** Robert expressed that the district's vision aligns with his values, remarking, “(school district) is very positive, supportive for open-minded teaching.” However, when reflecting on moments where he felt unable to express his full identity, he acknowledged, “I’ve kind of adjusted to it in context of the political climate around teaching and particularly, sort of

the moral panics going on around critical race theory.” This recognition of external pressures illustrates the nuanced struggle educators face in balancing personal beliefs with institutional expectations.

He articulated a desire to push boundaries in his teaching, stating, “Next year my class is going to be woke AF.” Yet, he also expressed apprehension about potential backlash, noting, “I am nervous about some parents with a very strong ideological objection.” This tension between aspiration and fear encapsulates the challenges educators encounter in creating inclusive and thought-provoking learning environments.

### Cross-Case Analysis

Across all three cases, participants expressed a strong sense of belonging shaped by the core facets of value, connection, influence, and authenticity. Table 6 demonstrates that these supportive elements were often accompanied by tensions that added complexity to each participant’s experience. All participants reported feeling emotionally connected to their school buildings and described being welcomed and included by colleagues and leadership. Yet how these feelings were sustained or challenged varied depending on contextual factors such as building size, professional autonomy, and sociopolitical climate. Survey responses overall indicated alignment amongst the three individuals, with Robert indicating fewer satisfying relationships and feeling less like an “insider.”

**Table 6**  
*Survey Results*

Statement	Robert	Josue	Terrence
I feel emotionally connected to my school building.	5	5	5
People in my school building welcome and include me in activities.	5	5	5
I am unable to influence decision-making in my school building.	2	1	2
I feel unable to be my whole and authentic self with people in my school building.	2	1	1
People in my school building value me and my contributions.	5	5	5
My relationships with others in my school building are as satisfying as I want them to be.	3	5	5
I feel like an “insider” who understands how my school building works.	3	5	5
I am comfortable expressing my opinions in my school building.	5	5	5
I am treated as “less than” other residents in my school building.	1	1	1
When interacting with people in my school building, I feel like I truly belong.	4	5	5

This supports the broader narrative that alternatively certified early-career educators can experience a complex mix of connection and isolation, and a sense of being valued as well as feelings of constraint. The shared sense of emotional connection, inclusion, and perceived value demonstrates evidence of effective support.

## Value

Participant reflections reveal that feeling valued is deeply tied to recognition, inclusion, and autonomy. Participants consistently highlighted experiences of being recognized and affirmed in their roles. This is additionally supported by their ratings in Table 6, which showcases that all three marked 5s for the statement, “People in my school building value me and my contributions.” Josue’s public recognition as Teacher of the Month and student-nominated accolades reinforced his sense of worth. However, this validation was juxtaposed with his frustration around state certification requirements, which failed to account for his prior professional experience. This disconnect between school-level affirmation and systemic disregard reflects how value can be experienced on one level and undermined on another.

Our cross-case analysis also reflected that a sense of value in the workplace requires a balance of recognition and inclusion. For Terrence and Josue, the desire for “not overbearing leadership” and “not being micromanaged” points to the importance of autonomy and trust. This suggests effective leadership needs to balance providing support and mentorship without being overly controlling to foster an inclusive and respectful workplace culture. This includes promoting diversity, equity, and a sense of belonging for all staff members. Participant acknowledgement of formal and informal appreciation suggests a need for verbal praise, public acknowledgment, and opportunities for leadership roles.

An educator's sense of value and decreased isolation can increase retention (Hausmann et al., 2007; Ingersoll, 2001; Wilcoxen et al., 2020). Despite differences in background, experience, age, and content, all cases demonstrated a link between belonging and support. Given that all participants entered teaching through alternative certification routes, their reflections highlight how alternative pathways reshape the nature of support and belonging compared to traditional teacher preparation pathways. Their prior military or professional experience appears to contribute to their expectations for autonomy, recognition, and influence, which should be considered when designing induction support for alternatively certified educators.

## Connection

Participant experiences illustrated the importance of meaningful connections in fostering a sense of belonging, collaboration, and professional development in the work environment. This facet highlighted informal relationships, such as shared meals and mentorship rooted in common experiences, but also recognized that the size of the school and space led to challenges. While all three participants noted strong interpersonal connections, these relationships were often localized and did not always extend across departments. Terrence and Josue found belonging through informal routines like shared meals or “extra professional development” meetings, while Robert formed close ties within his immediate circle. Robert’s social anxiety and the logistical realities of a large school hindered broader engagement. Our analysis suggests that while informal connections are essential, physical and structural barriers can limit broader inclusion, leading to a fragmented sense of connection. Both Terrence and Josue also emphasized the importance of informal opportunities to interact in large buildings. Initiatives such as “lunch bunch” and “extra professional development” provided additional opportunities to make connections in large buildings. Social connections can impact job satisfaction (O’Shea, 2021), and these actions nurtured camaraderie and mutual respect outside of formal teaching environments.

Formal connections, like co-teaching and mentorship, provided avenues to support learning and growth. This guidance and support work in tandem with teachers’ commitment and engagement (Kachchhap & Horo, 2021; Rezaee et al., 2018). All three participants highlighted

aspects of this support leading to their connections within the building. Robert emphasized the need for dedicated collaborative physical spaces to encourage interaction and shared problem-solving, while Josue and Terrace spoke to the respect and inclusion they felt.

### **Influence**

While coded the least often, the facet of influence emphasized the significance of creating opportunities for employees to contribute to decision-making processes. Josue's participation in school-wide policy efforts demonstrated a clear sense of agency, and Robert reflected on his influence as a role model for future educators. Terrence's commitment to authenticity even helped shape the culture among his peers. All three spoke to the agency that helped them shape decisions and rules that affected their environment (Powell et al., 2024). Still, influence was not uniformly felt. For Josue, the lack of a consistent classroom restricted his ability to influence his instructional space. For Robert, institutional support for progressive teaching clashed with external pressures that made him cautious about content decisions. These tensions reflect how influence is shaped not only by formal roles but also by constraints tied to space, status, or external perception.

### **Authenticity**

All three participants shared a commitment to authenticity, expressing a desire to show up fully in their professional roles. Each of the participants' reflections highlights how being authentic in the workplace fostered a deeper sense of purpose and fulfillment, whether this was through academic freedom, genuine interpersonal interactions, or inclusive workplace cultures. Cultural congruence between educators and their school communities, especially for Terrence and Josue, supported this. Both mentioned their cultural connections to the school community, illustrating how authenticity allows individuals to fully embrace their roles and contribute meaningfully. For Josue, belonging was also mediated through his roles as a father, husband, and business owner. These roles influenced his expectations of support and structure. His identity extended beyond the classroom, suggesting that belonging may not solely be a product of school-based culture, but a broader alignment with life experiences and responsibilities. However, Robert's case illuminated the fragility of authenticity in the face of ideological scrutiny. Despite feeling aligned with the district's progressive values, he admitted adjusting his instruction out of concern for backlash from parents, underscoring how personal identity and professional freedom can exist in uneasy tension. Robert felt dissonance with academic freedom, revealing a multifaceted perspective on his experiences within the educational landscape. While he felt strongly about being his authentic self in the workplace, he simultaneously navigated the complexities of providing rich academic content and fostering critical thinking. When employees can align their personal values and identities with their professional roles, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction, motivation, and engagement (Rivera et al., 2019). This emphasizes the value of fostering authenticity when building supportive and inclusive workplace cultures.

Table 7 summarizes the overall focus group facets identified by each participant.

**Table 7***Focus Group Facets*

<b>Theme</b>	<b><u>Robert</u> # (%) of Facets</b>	<b><u>Josue</u> # (%) of Facets</b>	<b><u>Terrence</u> # (%) of Facets</b>
Value	4 (22.22%)	8 (42.10%)	5 (31.25%)
Connections	9 (50.00%)	5 (26.32%)	8 (50.00%)
Influence	1 (5.55%)	2 (10.53%)	1 (6.25%)
Authenticity	4 (22.22%)	4 (21.05%)	2 (12.5%)

These findings reveal that belonging is not merely a product of inclusion or support. It is a dynamic negotiation shaped by the interplay of personal identity, institutional norms, and sociocultural contexts. By highlighting both what supported and what complicated participants' sense of belonging, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of the early-career experience for alternatively certified educators and points to the need for responsive structures that sustain both their personal and professional growth. See Table 8 for a summary of factors that support alternatively certified educators and those that hinder them.

**Table 8***Summary of Cross-Case Analysis*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Supporting Factors</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
Value	Recognition from peers, students, and leadership	Systemic disregard for prior professional experience (certification)
Connection	Informal gatherings, mentorship, co-teaching	Building size, siloed departments, social anxiety
Influence	Participation in policy teams, student mentorship	Limited role in decisions beyond specific projects or classroom structures
Authenticity	Cultural congruence, emotional expression in role	Fear of ideological pushback, lack of curriculum freedom

### Implications

These findings suggest that while early-career, alternatively certified educators often experience strong interpersonal and cultural support, positive experiences are frequently offset by institutional or structural constraints. Understanding this tension is essential for developing responsive induction programs that not only nurture a sense of belonging but also dismantle barriers to full participation. For example, Terrence felt welcomed and respected by leadership, yet his limited discussion around influence reveals how even supportive environments may fall short in providing genuine opportunities for shared decision-making. Similarly, Robert appreciated the district's open-minded stance on instruction, but remained apprehensive about potential political backlash, underscoring the friction between personal values and external pressures. In contrast, Josue's active role in revising the school's cell phone policy demonstrates how schools can institutionalize teacher voice through participatory leadership teams.

Establishing such formalized pathways for involvement, especially for alternatively certified educators, can enhance feelings of agency and accelerate professional integration.

To meaningfully support early-career educators, schools must intentionally balance mentorship with autonomy, ensuring that guidance does not slip into micromanagement. Recognizing both the time and financial commitments required for transitioning into teaching is essential, especially for those entering from other careers. Expressions of value through both formal recognition and everyday appreciation reinforce belonging and professional worth. Strengthening connections through informal gatherings, structured mentorship, and access to shared collaborative spaces can reduce isolation and foster community. Just as importantly, providing meaningful opportunities for influence, whether through decision-making roles, curriculum design, or school culture initiatives, promotes a sense of ownership and investment. Finally, cultivating a school climate where educators feel safe to express their identities, values, and pedagogical beliefs without fear of judgment ensures authenticity, engagement, and long-term commitment to the profession.

Future research could compare experiences across certification pathways, such as traditionally certified versus alternatively certified educators, to uncover unique affordances or tensions. Additionally, longitudinal designs tracking educators beyond their first two years could provide insight into how belonging evolves over time. Gender differences, particularly given the subset of male educators, also warrant deeper examination in shaping belonging experiences.

### **Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into a sense of belonging among early-career educators, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was limited to three case studies, which may not fully capture the diverse experiences of alternatively certified early-career educators in other contexts. Additionally, because data collection relied on self-reported experiences through interactions with the director, focus groups, and surveys, there is potential for response bias, as participants may have framed their experiences in socially desirable ways. Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the growing body of research on early-career educators and highlights important factors influencing their sense of belonging. It also addresses a gap in the research regarding alternatively certified educators. These insights can inform future professional development initiatives and support systems for new educators.

### **Conclusion**

This research highlights the importance of fostering a strong sense of belonging among early-career educators, particularly those entering the profession through alternative certification pathways. Addressing these educators' unique challenges enables educational institutions and school districts to create supportive environments that promote retention and professional growth. The findings offer valuable insights into key factors shaping the experiences of alternatively certified educators, who remain underrepresented in existing research. Ultimately, investing in meaningful support systems is essential for cultivating a more inclusive and sustainable teaching workforce.

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