

## ABSTRACT

PERRY-HIGGS, JACQUELINE JEANETTA. Understanding How Economically Disadvantaged, Low-Achieving Rural Districts Promote Early Career Teachers' Sense of Community. (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman and Dr. Michael E. Ward).

Research shows that a significant proportion of teachers who elect to not remain in the profession make this choice within 3 to 5 years. Thus, the perceptions of teachers in this experience range, who persist and remain in the field, are important. This is particularly the case in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts, which experience disproportionately high attrition rates among early career teachers.

This study examined the importance of sense of community among early career teachers and its impact on their persistence. Sense of community encompasses four tenets: Membership, Meeting of Needs, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection. Through a quantitative lens, I found that early career teachers perceived that sense of community is important. Their perceptions of the degree to which sense of community actually existed in their districts were lower. There was no significant difference in perceptions among the ratings for the four tenets of the sense of community theory.

Qualitative results from the study showed that the early career teachers were largely motivated to continue to work in their districts. They based these decisions, in part, on the sense of community that they perceived in their districts; support and connections were also factors related to their persistence. Participants said the districts were intentional about instilling a sense of community and identified the most common strategies their districts used to promote sense of community.

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Understanding How Economically Disadvantaged, Low-Achieving Rural Districts  
Promote Early Career Teachers' Sense of Community: A Case Study

by  
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

Education Administration and Supervision

Raleigh, North Carolina  
2021

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## **DEDICATION**

To my beloved grandparents, Mable Stokes, Pattie Lee Stokes, Ruth Elaine Woodard Perry, and Geanie Perry, Sr., who always encouraged me to be the best in all that I do through the love they bestowed upon me. Spending time with my grandparents during the summers provided experiences that helped me to have an open-mind to think critically in order to attain what I need and desire in life. I will forever cherish the time spent with each one of them. I love and miss each one of my grandparents. Thank you for instilling in me to never give up and the importance of being a role model.

Most importantly, I dedicate this work to my parents who told me, “You are going to college.” My dad received his Tool & Die Maker certification from the NCSU Apprenticeship program. While working on my degree, my mother earned her bachelor’s and master’s degree in Biblical Studies. I am thankful and proud to be the daughter of William and Daisy Perry.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Jacqueline Perry-Higgs was born to William and Daisy Perry. She attended Wake County schools until middle school when her parents decided to move back to eastern North Carolina where they both grew up and graduated from high school. Jacqueline attended Franklin County Public Schools until she graduated from Louisburg High School. She has a younger sister, Dakisha, and a younger brother, Saul.

Jacqueline graduated with a major in both Communication Studies and Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After graduation, she worked with adults with disabilities. She entered the field education as a lateral entry teacher for Warren County teaching fourth grade. After three years, she accepted a position with Orange County schools and taught sixth grade mathematics and science at A.L. Stanback Middle School. During this time, she obtained her Bachelor's degree from North Carolina Central University in elementary education grades K-6. After a year, she accepted a position with Centennial Campus Middle School in Wake County, where she worked for six years. While working at Centennial Campus Middle School, Jacqueline taught sixth and seventh grade mathematics and science, completed her Bachelor's degree, and earned her Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction in Supervision from North Carolina State University. Next, she spent two years in Washington, DC teaching math to seventh and fourth graders for Friendship Public Charter Schools. Jacqueline decided to return to North Carolina and teach eighth grade math and science in Edgecombe County. After 14 months, she worked in the Halifax County school system as a middle school instructional coach for mathematics and science in grades 6-8.

Jacqueline decided to pursue a degree in school administration at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC. During this time, Jacqueline married her husband, Daniel E. Higgs

of Oak City, NC, and they have one child in the home, Asia Freeman. She continued her education at East Carolina University (ECU) and completed her administration internship at A.G. Cox Middle School located in Winterville, NC. After graduating from ECU, she became an assistant principal for Inborden Elementary School. Within a year and four months, Halifax County schools assigned her to be the principal of Everettes Elementary in Roanoke Rapids, NC. As principal, she led the school to meet expectations the first year and exceed expectations the second year. During her principalship, the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) at North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh, NC accepted Jacqueline as a student in their first cohort-based doctoral program. While attending NCSU, Jacqueline went through several job transitions due to life circumstances. She held the Secondary Curriculum Specialist position in Washington County schools for about two years and was the Academic Dean for grades 8-12 for a short while at North East Carolina Prep School located in Tarboro, NC. She worked for Martin County schools supporting curriculum and instruction in math and science for grades 6-8. Currently, Jacqueline works for Bertie County Schools in the curriculum and instruction department as the director of secondary education and AIG programs. She continues to work and lead in rural areas with economically disadvantaged schools that are considered Title I schools.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful and appreciative to everyone who has supported me on this journey to receive my Ed.D. I am thankful for my grandfather, Emeritus Bishop Geanie Perry, the patriarch of our family. He was a hard-working man who continued to teach his family to live by faith until the end and, because of him, my faith has brought me this far as well as the art of persistence I learned from both set of grandparents.

I have the utmost appreciation and respect for Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman, my advisor and committee co-chair, for her unwavering support of me during this time. She provided the direction and guidance for me to understand that I must be committed to my research. Dr. Bass Freeman provided relevant opportunities for growth as I diligently completed my research. I am grateful that she supports my ultimate career goal of becoming a college professor.

I am thankful for the many hours Dr. Ward put into my work showing me that my research matters. Dr. Ward proved to be an excellent co-chair, one who would not let our cohort go into the dissertation process blindly. His direction, guidance, and support helped me make it to the finish the line; moreover, it was such a great pleasure to have worked with him side-by-side in order to complete my work.

Drs. Lance and Bonnie Fusarelli believed in my potential as a doctoral student and provided me the opportunity to be a part of the first doctoral NELA cohort at North Carolina State University. In the midst of the different trials and tribulations I faced during this program, they encouraged me to continue with my work. Drs. Egalite and Drake were awesome during my time of recovery from Hurricane Matthew. I am thankful to Dr. Henry Johnson for being a part of my committee and providing insight to provoke my thinking. I thank Dr. Tamara Young for her guidance and work to help me narrow my focus in the area of teachers' sense of community.

Additionally, I must give a shout out to my NELA cohort that poured out so much love and generosity when Daniel, Asia, and I lost everything due to the flood in Princeville, NC.

My husband, Daniel, took the brunt of the journey. Thank you for your support while I worked to finish school. I appreciate the understanding you provided me as I worked through the stages of graduate school. Thank you for loving me when I was not available to give you the attention you desired.

I would be nothing without my mom and dad. This drive to attain my doctoral degree is because of my mom and dad. My parents encouraged me to attend school in order for me to make something of myself. I had no idea that two bachelors, two masters, and now a doctoral degree were going to be my future. However, they spoke into my life. I love them very much for their belief in me, for their love, and for all that they have done for me to get to this point in my life. In the midst of their ups and downs, they did not allow their personal trials or tribulations to get in the way of supporting me throughout my life. My sister and brother, Kisha and Saul, have been by my side the entire time. I have my sister on my heels working on her doctorate. I appreciate my two little nieces, Montana and Zoey, for the hugs and kisses on the weekends to keep me going. Family means the world to me. I am thankful for the family God gave me.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Chapter Introduction**

It is common practice for principals and human resource directors to search, interview, and hire new teachers at the end of a 185-day school year cycle due to vacancies. In addition, some level of recruitment is year-round in most districts because of unfilled vacancies at the beginning of the school year and vacancies that occur mid-year. Such attrition is typically more problematic in districts that have significant recruitment and retention challenges. Some of those vacancies may have been unforeseen, especially when professional development and coaching have taken place to build capacity within the teaching staff. Other vacancies, however, take place due to teacher transfers within the school district or to other districts. More importantly, this concern is not an isolated event for just those principals in districts that have low-performing schools but for education as a whole, because there is constant turnover of new teachers at the end of each school year. However, for the purpose of this mixed methods study, economically disadvantaged, low-achieving rural districts were the focal point to understanding how sense of community acts as a factor in teacher attrition.

The conditions of North Carolina's teacher turnover rate drew the attention of Redding and Henry (2018), who examined the issue of early career teachers leaving the profession during the school year and at the end of the year. Documenting month-by-month during the three-year study, they followed three cohorts in a sample size of 13,665 teachers to see if they would return for their fourth year. They also included in their study "how turnover may affect students, other teachers, and school operations differently" (Redding & Henry, 2018, p. 2). Overall, Redding and Henry (2018) found that timing and magnitude were two important factors with the potential for negative consequences and negative impact on student achievement from teachers departing

during the school year versus between years. Hanushek et al. (2015) connected new teacher turnover to the practice of providing preferred teacher assignments to veteran staff, restrictions on tenure, and salary schedules that are rigid. In addition, Carroll and Fulton (2004) concluded that minimal professional support, inadequate school leadership, low pay, and personal issues are the top reasons teachers leave the profession. However, while tracking teaching quality issues for the National Conference of State Legislatures, Exstrom (2009) concluded that “low salaries are not the top reason teachers leave” (p. 16).

This study focused on attrition among early career teachers. Through the research protocol, I examined the impact of sense of community on these early-stage teachers. In light of the fact that rural, economically disadvantaged, struggling districts face particular challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, the exploration of additional factors which affect retention was important. And, given the assertions of researchers like Exstrom (2009) that, contrary to the opinion of many, salaries are not the greatest factor in teacher decisions to leave, it was important to gain additional insights into environmental and affective dimensions of teaching that may be correlated with teachers’ persistence in such districts. The relationship of sense of community to early career teacher persistence was therefore an important area of inquiry.

Chapter 1 introduces the study by sharing the problems that gave rise to the research. The statement of purpose follows; this section previews the research activity that was conducted. The research questions and definitions of selected terms used within the study are then addressed. The chapter closes with a discussion of the significance, overview, and organization of the study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Teacher attrition is a grave concern in the rural areas of east North Carolina, especially in the economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts. According to the Schools and

Staffing Survey (SASS) of 2011-2012 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 6,700 new teachers were hired by North Carolina school districts for grades K-12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). With such numbers, one may wonder why eastern North Carolina contends with high attrition and limited number of applicants when it comes to hiring and keeping highly qualified certified teachers. As Walsh (2016) profoundly stated in an opinion piece:

What I find so frustrating is that we do actually have a huge, long-standing problem with teacher supply and demand. For 30 years, most districts in the nation have struggled to find enough certified secondary science and math teachers, while rural and urban districts have been unable to tap into a reliable and stable source of new teachers. (p. 3)

Bjerede (2018) elaborated on the scope of this issue by describing the extent to which schools serve students in rural locations:

More than half of school districts and about one-third of public schools in the United States are in rural areas. Rural districts have unique challenges, ranging from poverty (23.5 percent of children in rural areas were poor in 2016, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture) and vast distances (many rural children ride the school bus for long periods each day) to a lack of affordable Internet access. (p. 1)

Poverty and high teacher attrition rates are related. The rate of transfer out of high-poverty schools in 2012-2013 was 12%, compared to 6% in low-poverty schools. The rate at which teachers left the profession altogether was 10% in high-poverty schools and 6% in low-poverty schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

A number of factors, including those mentioned above, lead to increased demand for teachers. “Teacher demand is on the rise, as a function of changes in student enrollment, shifts in

pupil-teacher ratios, and most significantly, high levels of teacher attrition” (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 2). On average, 20% of teachers in North and South Carolina leave their current positions each year (Duncan, 2018). However, such attrition is not dispersed evenly over the range of years associated with a teaching career. Departures from the current position or from the profession are most heavily concentrated during the early years and retirement years of teaching. According to the United States Department of Education (2014), 28,200 teachers with 1 to 3 years of experience left the profession during the 2012-13 school year. Another 62,500 teachers with 4 to 9 years of experience left the profession. The average rate of attrition among teachers in each of these years was 7%; more than 20% of teachers left in their first three years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

It is important to understand that teacher attrition has fiscal implications for districts and taxpayers. In “The High Cost of Teacher Turnover” policy brief, Carroll (2007) opined “America’s schools are struggling with a growing teacher dropout problem that is costing the nation over \$7 billion a year. It is draining resources, diminishing teacher quality, and undermining our ability to close the student achievement gap” (p. 1). The investment in a new teacher is costly and substantial due to recruiting, hiring, and training each replacement teacher. A pilot study conducted by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) in selected school districts (Chicago Public Schools, Milwaukee Public Schools, Granville County Schools in North Carolina, Jemez Valley Public Schools in New Mexico, and Santa Rosa Public Schools in New Mexico) found that the average cost per teacher who leaves their job ranged from just under \$10,000 in Granville, North Carolina to \$15,325 in Milwaukee (Barnes et al., 2007).

There are persistent arguments about teacher shortages and turnover versus supply and demand. Sutcher et al. (2016) posited that teacher demand is on the rise and projected annual hires to be approximately 300,000 teachers a year by 2017-2018. Relative to supply and demand for teachers, the supply of teachers is greater in some disciplines than others. For example, there is a greater need for teachers in special education, math, and English language learner teachers than for teachers who major in elementary education (Walsh, 2016). Moreover, Putman and Walsh (2017) reported that the estimated number of teachers reached over 3.8 million in 2015-2016, signifying that the “workforce is not shrinking but growing” (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2017, para. 3). Although the teacher workforce is growing, there is still a significant shortage of teachers in certain areas of the nation where students do not receive quality education, in part because of issues that present unique challenges for these locales. Unfortunately, easy solutions to these problems do not exist for schools that are in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural areas with high teacher turnover rates. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) described the circumstances in challenged schools as follows:

School characteristics are also associated with high turnover rates. Teachers are more likely to leave schools that have lower salaries and less-desirable working conditions. Too often, these conditions exist in schools with more students of color and more students from low-income households. Turnover rates are 70% higher for teachers in schools serving the largest concentrations of students of color and nearly 50% higher for teachers in Title I schools, which serve more low-income families. These schools are staffed by teachers with fewer years of experience and, in many cases, significantly less training. Turnover rates in these schools are even higher in key shortage fields, such as mathematics, science, and special education. Turnover rates for mathematics and science teachers are nearly 70%

greater in Title I schools than in non-Title I schools. Mathematics and science teacher turnover is 90% greater in the top quartile of schools serving students of color than in the bottom quartile. (p. 4)

As Exstrom (2009) explained, educators consistently indicated that they need:

“supportive school leadership, engaged community and parents, a safe environment, sufficient facilities, enough time to plan and collaborate, high-quality professional development, an atmosphere of trust and respect, effective school improvement teams, and appropriate assignments and workload” (p. 17). When identifying approaches and solutions to address new teacher turnover, Smith (2007) posited that the commitment of new teachers to their job is influenced by their relationships with their principals and the particular induction activities that facilitate communication, member acceptance, and assisting new teachers to understand their role in a school community. At the core of these factors is the construct of sense of community.

Previous references were made to the costs associated with teacher turnover. Attrition and teacher shortages exact a toll on students, especially in rural, high-poverty schools. Redding and Henry (2018) highlighted this concern in their study focused on within-year turnover among teachers in North Carolina. They noted that turnover “significantly disrupts student learning when replacements, including short- and long-term substitutes, enter the classrooms; forces students to adjust midyear to a different instructional pace and practices; and disturbs ongoing relationships with students and collaboration with other teachers” (Redding & Henry, p. 3).

The absence of a certified teacher impacts student achievement. When looking at how teacher turnover affects students, Miller et al. (2008) conducted a study to show that teacher absences impact student achievement in an urban school district. The student sample primarily contained disadvantaged students, as more than 83% of students in the district were eligible for

free or reduced price lunch. Based on the findings, “10 additional days of unexpected absences reduced student achievement in mathematics by more than 10% of a standard deviation” (Miller et al., 2008, p. 196).

As Høglund and McClung (2012) maintained, “The value of a quality teacher cannot be overstated” (p. 5). This speaks to the vacancies that go unfilled for lengthy periods of time due to teachers leaving in the middle of the year and vacancies that are not filled at all during the year. The problem is exacerbated by constraints on the employment of retired teachers who might help fill such gaps. School administrators and district staff in such circumstances find themselves in a bind to provide uninterrupted instruction for students when vacancies occur because of their obligations to follow the “Employer Mandate” provisions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) (Shive, 2015, p. 1). “It is not prohibited but districts put a cap on substitute days to avoid exceeding the 30-hour limit under the ACA and thus being obligated to pick up the cost of the employee’s health insurance” (A. Schafer & K. Boyd, personal communication, December 19, 2018). This requires school administration to do a 3-day/2-day split week in classes, which breaks up the pace of instruction for students. If retired teachers work more than 30 hours, they are in jeopardy of losing their retirement system insurance (Shive, 2015).

Districts sometimes find it necessary to hire teachers without a degree in education for the hard-to-fill vacancies. A lateral entry teacher is an individual who may be hired without adequate credentials or with provisional certification. Both the absence of a teacher and the staffing of a vacancy with a marginal teacher threaten the progress and achievement of students. In a historical study, Sanders and Rivers (1996) found:

Students benefiting from regular yearly assignment to more effective teachers (even if by chance) have an extreme advantage in terms of attaining higher levels of achievement. In

fairness to children of all achievement levels, teacher assignment sequences should be determined to insure that no child is assigned to a teacher sequence that will be unduly hurtful to his or her academic achievement. Even within the context of current teacher resources, administrators should insure that no student is assigned to a very ineffective teacher more than once, and even then insure that each student so assigned, has a highly effective teacher before and after. (p. 7).

There have been numerous studies focusing on teacher turnover. These include Grissmer and Kirby's (1997) historic research of teacher attrition and teacher quality and Grissom's (2011) study of strategies for lowering the seemingly perpetual high teacher turnover rates seen in some locales. DeAngelis and Presley (2010) also provided insight into individual schools to help with the understanding of new teacher attrition within urban school settings. Although the concerns of the previous studies parallel the current study, my analysis extended existing theory and research on new teacher turnover in economically disadvantaged rural areas by focusing on the relationship between sense of community and teacher persistence in such districts, whether the districts influenced early career teachers' sense of community and, if so, how the districts sought to influence early career teachers' sense of community to improve teacher persistence in the profession.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The goals of this study were to expand the understanding of the impact of sense of community on early-career teachers' choices to persist in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts. The data show that "the highest rates of teacher attrition come within the first two years on the job, during what's termed the 'survival period' where teachers are asking if they are up to the task" (Glazer, 2018, p. 62). Furthermore, if an early-career teacher

receives minimal support in the first place where they are employed, the experience influences future relationships with colleagues (Kardos & Johnson, 2007).

Early-career teachers, for the purposes of this research, were defined as those teachers who have 3 to 5 years of experience. I chose early career teachers as opposed to new teachers (0 to 2 years of experience) for specific reasons. Teachers with 3 to 5 years were of interest to the study because these participants enabled me to not only determine their perspectives on why their new colleagues left, but also to find out why they themselves chose to persist. Most importantly, given the focus of this study, these early-career teachers were at an appropriate stage in their professional growth to facilitate the research goal of understanding what is considered sense of community from their perspective as teachers in economically disadvantaged rural areas. Research like the current study was warranted due to the lack of extant literature focused on sense of community as a factor in teacher persistence.

This study focused on the sense of community of early-career teachers. The idea of sense of community refers to “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Having a sense of belonging makes a difference in how a person reacts, responds, and interacts in society or within social and vocational settings (Brewer & Kramer, 1985). Strayhorn (2012) provided a working definition in his work on sense of belonging for college students as being “relational, and thus there’s a reciprocal quality to relationships that provide a sense of belonging. Each member benefits from the group and the group in a sense benefits from the contributions of each member” (p. 3). Therefore, this study employed a mixed methods approach. The research design for this inquiry incorporated a case study methodology. The rationale for this research approach was to “actively involve participants in assessing

whether the interpretations accurately represent them” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). While quantitative research approaches yield results that are more readily generalized to other circumstances, the richness of data from a qualitative design better served the purposes of the current study. Hence, I used a mixed methods case study approach.

Historically, individuals have entered the field of teaching as a lifelong profession; however, the profession is often considered a temporary job, as evidenced by the increased attrition rates, “to the point that more teachers leave voluntarily rather than remain in the classroom until retirement” (Glazer, 2018, p. 62). However, this is not an entirely new phenomenon. For example, related concerns were addressed by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) in their *A Nation at Risk* report:

...not enough of the academically able students are being attracted to teaching; that teacher preparation programs need substantial improvement; that the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable; and that a serious shortage of teachers exists in key fields. (p. 22)

Eastern North Carolina is one of those “key fields” wherein rural school districts typically experience high attrition rates for new teachers, are economically disadvantaged, and are low-performing. “All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1). To this end, ensuring that teachers remain past two years increases the prospects that economically disadvantaged students in low-performing schools will have a fair chance of receiving high-quality instruction.

## **Research Questions**

In order to achieve the purpose of this investigation, the following research questions were used to guide the current study:

1. How important to participants is a sense of community with other community members?
2. What are the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists within their northeastern North Carolina districts?
3. Are there differences among the survey ratings of teachers regarding the four tenets of sense of community theory, which include Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection?
4. What are the perceptions of participants in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers?
5. What are the perceptions of participants regarding the degree to which the school districts seek to instill a sense of community for early career teachers?
6. What are the strategies that school districts use to promote early career teachers' sense of community?
7. To what degree are the strategies used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community perceived to be effective in improving new teacher persistence?

## **Definitions of Terms**

The following terms were used throughout this study. These constructs are essential to understanding this research. In some instances, I defined terms to operationalize them

specifically for the study. Other constructs are defined based upon accepted use in the pertinent body of knowledge and are supported by citations.

*Attrition.* “A reduction in the number of employees that occurs when employees leave an employing unit” (North Carolina Department of Instruction, 2016, p. 4)

*Beginning teacher.* A “teacher in a public school who has been teaching less than a total of three complete school years” (Beginning Teacher, 2021).

*Early career teacher.* The teacher participants who are the focus of my research. For the purposes of this study, I have operationalized this term to designate teachers who have from 3 to 5 years of teaching experience.

*Economically disadvantaged.* “An individual who (a) receives, or is a member of a family which receives, cash welfare payments under a federal, state, or local welfare program; (b) has, or is a member of a family which has, received a total family income for the six-month period prior to application for the program involved (exclusive of unemployment compensation, child support payments, and welfare payments) which, in relation to family size, was not in excess of the higher of (i) the poverty level in accordance with the criteria established by the Department of Health and Human Services, or (ii) 70 percent of the lower living standard income level; (c) is receiving food stamps pursuant to the Food Stamp Act of 1977; (d) is a foster child on behalf of whom state or local government payments are made; or (e) is a handicapped individual whose own income meets the requirements of paragraph (a) or (b) of this definition, but who is a member of a family whose income does not meet such requirements” (Economically disadvantaged, 2007, p. 272).

*Economically (financially) disadvantaged school districts.* Districts “that serve student populations with much greater-than-average need but do so with much less-than-average funding” (Baker, 2014, p. 1).

*Influence.* A “sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

*Local Education Agency (LEA).* A “public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for a combination of school districts or counties that is recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools” (Local Education Agency, 2018).

*Loneliness.* The “cognitive awareness of a deficiency in one’s social and personal relationships, and ensuing affective reactions of sadness, emptiness, or longing” (Asher & Paquette, 2003, p. 75).

*Low-performing schools.* “Schools that receive a school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of “met expected growth” or “not met expected growth” as defined by G.S. 115C-83.15” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018).

*Low-performing district.* A local school administrative unit in which the majority of the schools in that unit that received a school performance grade and school growth score as provided in G.S. 115C-83.15 have been identified as low-performing schools as provided in G.S. 115C-105.37” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018).

*Membership.* The feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

*Meeting of needs.* For the purposes of this study, this construct means the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The construct evolved in the 1986 work of McMillan and Chavis, who originally used the terms "integration and fulfillment of needs" and then "reinforcement of needs." The term "meeting of needs" is identified in the final iteration of their Sense of Community Index II, the instrument that was used in this study (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

*Persistence.* "The fact of continuing in an opinion or course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition; the continued or prolonged existence of something" (Oxford Dictionary, 2018, n.p.). For the purposes of this study, persistence is defined as a teacher's continuation in the profession.

*Rural.* "An open swath of land that has few homes or other buildings, and not very many people; the population density is very low; homes and businesses are located far away from one another" (National Geographic Society, 2018, n.p.).

*Rural community.* A rural community comprises a group of inhabitants who live a rustic or country lifestyle. Rural communities typically have smaller populations and an agricultural setting, but some areas contain forests (Reference, 2018).

*Self-efficacy.* The "personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals" (Bandura, as cited by Zimmerman, 2000, p. 83).

*Sense of belonging.* "A secure physical, emotional and political locus within society" (UNESCO/CIDREE, 1983, p. 13).

*Sense of community.* A "feeling that members have a belonging, feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' need will be met" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

*Shared emotional connection.* “The commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

*Social isolation.* The “social disconnectedness that is marked by a lack of social relationships and low levels of participation in social activities and perceived isolation which is defined by loneliness and a perceived lack of social support” (Cornwell & Waite, 2009, p. 2).

*Teacher turnover.* 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” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016, p. 4). While the term *turnover* appears frequently in the literature concerning teacher transitions into and out of their places of employment, the term was eliminated in North Carolina’s policies in 2016. These policies now use the terms *attrition* and *mobility* to describe changes in teacher employment. Attrition “tracks the loss of teachers at the state or school level and mobility shows where teachers are moving within the state” (Hinchcliffe, 2016, n.p.). One effect of the changes in policy was to significantly lower the rates that states report for teacher departures from their places of employment.

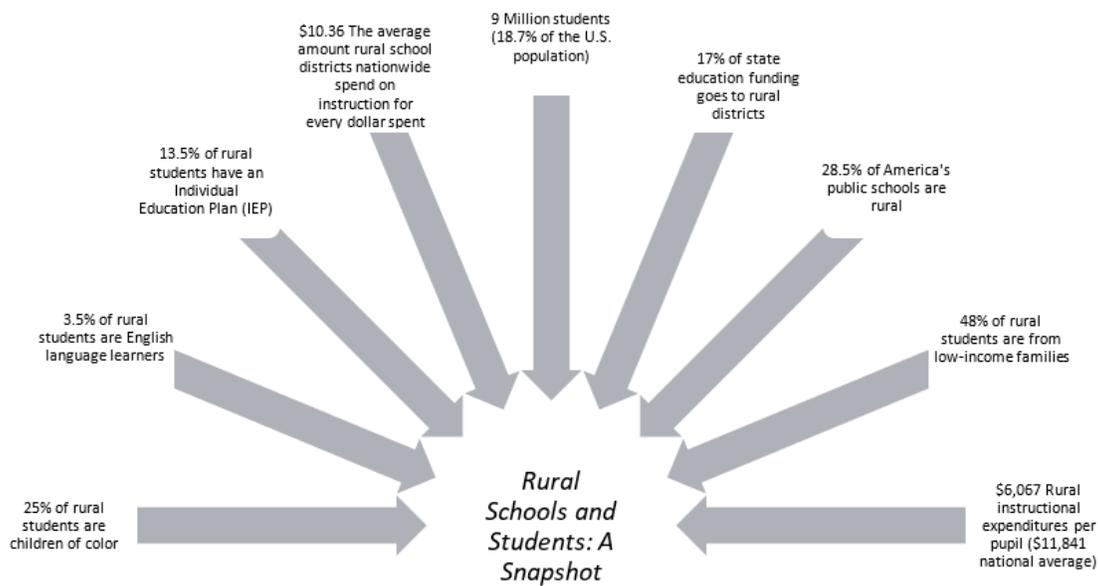
*Work engagement.* A “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption...The combination of all three characterizations leads to engaged employees [who] have high levels of energy and are enthusiastic about their work” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008, p. 209-210).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study matters for a number of reasons. The most important was to provide insight into whether or not early career teachers develop a sense of community in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. On the whole, early career teachers have a higher

tendency to leave a school system during their first five years of service. My focus was on teachers who fit in this continuum and have 3 to 5 years of teaching experience. This study provided a deeper understanding of teacher sense of community for educators, administrators, and policymakers. The focus on this subgroup of teachers in economically disadvantaged, low-performing districts contributed to the body of knowledge; I did not find other studies that focused on this demographic of early career teachers.

According to Smith (2007), there has been a “concern about teacher turnover and its impact on teacher quality” since 1980, and this concern has factored “into the development of state-level policies regarding new teachers” (p. 273). However, much of the attention to attrition has focused on urban areas. As Walker (2017) pointed out, there are nine million rural students in the United States; this number exceeds the enrollments of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago and 75 other large school districts (p. 45). Although each rural district has its own unique and staggering challenges, most deal with “concentrated poverty, inadequate access to health care services, early childhood education and after-school programs, ballooning class size, high transportation costs, teacher shortages and lack of broadband access” (Walker, 2017, p. 45-46). Figure 1.1 provides a snapshot of selected statistics regarding the status, needs, and deficits of economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts.



Note: Adapted from Walker (2017)

**Figure 1: Selected Statistics of Rural Schools and Students in Disadvantaged Areas**

Additionally, this study informs theory, practice, and policy. Such insights are important because, based on projections, about 888,900 new jobs in education, training, and library occupations will be added between now and 2026 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). From a practical standpoint, this study explored sense of community and its impact on decisions of teachers to remain in or leave economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. It further determined strategies that such districts are using or, conversely, may not be using to promote sense of community for early career teachers.

For policymakers, this study draws attention to the relative importance of different strategies, revealing if there is consensus or divergence in perceptions of importance between early career teachers and school leaders, or among different categories (e.g., different grade levels or content disciplines) of early career teachers. The findings can inform district decisions

about which strategies for retaining teachers to employ or disregard, as well as support the reduction of wasteful use of already limited resources being deployed for ineffective strategies. This study focused on sense of community, suggesting that this factor influences new teacher persistence and has strategies which are readily implementable. Districts and leaders may find that they can easily influence this aspect of teachers' work, perhaps more readily than factors such as salary and benefits.

This study further informs theory, practice, and policy because the early career teachers are within their third and final year of beginning teacher support. These teachers are considered novice in the field of education; among many duties, they must develop the ability to manage behaviors, complete lesson plans, identify individual learning paths, attend meetings during and after school, and build relationships with students, parents, and co-workers. Current theory about teachers leaving the profession is largely based on concerns about monetary compensation and support. The current research effort adds to the knowledge base of researchers about sense of community within economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts. From a practical perspective, this research has the potential to make administrators and district staff more sensitive to some of the experiences of early career teachers and advise on how to provide interactions that increase sense of community. For policymakers, this research, along with the research of other sense of belonging theorists, continues to build awareness of the underlying dynamics of isolation among teachers in the educational arena. In addition, this research may also prompt policymakers to expand support mechanisms for early career teachers.

This study was needed because of the importance of understanding how sense of community impacts the persistence of early career teachers in the field of education. It was additionally useful to examine these phenomena in economically disadvantaged, low-performing

districts. As Feeney and Collins (2015) asserted in their study regarding social supports, there is uncertainty in how relationships intersect with the idea of community and persistence. The findings of this study expand the literature on these topics and may ultimately influence academic achievement in the P-12 education arena with regard to closing the achievement gap and building stronger relationships between administrators, support staff, and early career teachers.

### **Overview of Research Design**

To answer the research questions, I used a mixed methods case study design. A case study approach provided a comprehensive, contextualized, thick, and rich depiction of district activities relative to new teachers' sense of community. Quantitative research allowed for the analysis of the data that are less subjective in nature and are more readily quantifiable. Qualitative research allowed for profound explanation of a specific event while allowing for concepts, data collection tools, and methods to be adjusted during the research process because it is considered exploratory. This qualitative research addressed new teachers in their teaching community while trying to make sense of why they choose to persist in the profession of teaching and the phenomena that are attached to the choices of teachers who leave school districts with the characteristics of being rural, economically disadvantaged, and low-performing. The case study methodology was selected for this study to focus on answering "how" and "why" questions. The behavior of the individuals involved could not be manipulated, and contextual conditions were examined that appeared to be relevant to the phenomenon studied, while clear boundaries were not easily seen between the phenomenon and the context (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

This case study was bounded by a single education region to provide an in-depth example of how districts shape early career teachers' sense of community. Criteria sampling was used to

select the districts. Purposive sampling enabled me to select participants who represent different perspectives; these participants included early career teachers. I used semi-structured interviews to allow the early career teachers to tell their stories and surveys to collect data from the other early career participants within the districts.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 pointed out the need for additional research on how early career teachers' sense of community impacts their persistence in teaching in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. The chapter provided an overview of the study, addressing the statement of problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 focuses on the literature review, including background and policy context, review of the literature with pertinent research and professional perspectives, and the theoretical framework of the study, which is focused on sense of belonging and sense of community. Chapter 3 describes the methodological design of this study, including data collection, analysis procedures, and the researcher's subjectivity statement. In Chapter 4, the findings from the current study's data analysis are presented. Chapter 5 concludes with the results of the study, provides a summary of the study's conclusions and limitations, and outlines specific implications for further research.

### **Chapter Summary**

Teacher attrition is more than a school concern. It is a district concern that turns into a state concern, which ultimately turns into a national concern. Rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing districts in northeast North Carolina tend to suffer accelerated rates of teacher attrition. The aim of this study was to learn how sense of community impacts the persistence of early career teachers in such districts. This study was needed because it is important to

understand the experiences of teachers who stay in and leave the teaching profession. The findings of this study may ultimately influence overall district performance.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter provides a review of literature on sense of community, economically disadvantaged schools in rural districts, and teacher attrition. A review of the background and policy context, theoretical framework, and pertinent research and expert perspectives are included.

### **Background and Policy/Practice Context**

#### **Community and Sense of Community**

In looking at the construct of community on a theoretical level, Mannarini and Fedi (2009) presented the notion that community implies “an undifferentiated identity, and emphasizes unity instead of diversity, spontaneity instead of mediation, emotions instead of reasoning, cohesion instead of conflict, and stability instead of change” (p. 212). The idea of community can be found in other spaces outside of education; for instance, in the public health arena, community is defined as “a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings” (MacQueen et al., 2001, p. 1929). In this public health study, MacQueen et al. (2001) looked “at the potential effect of local and historic experience on the way people defined community and to determine whether a single definition of community could effectively encompass the diversity of local experience” (p. 1929). The Great Schools Partnership (2019) provided a definition of school community that more closely aligns with the context of this study:

The term school community also implicitly recognizes the social and emotional attachments that community members may have to a school, whether those attachments are

familial (the parents and relatives of students, for example), experiential (alumni and alumnae), professional (those who work in and derive an income from the school), civic (those who are elected to oversee a school or who volunteer time and services), or socioeconomic (interested taxpayers and the local businesses who may employ graduates and therefore desire more educated, skilled, and qualified workers). (para. 3).

Within a school community, a teacher's experience or lack of experience of a sense of community is an important construct related to how teachers become a part of the school district, school, grade level, and/or professional learning community. It is important for particular conditions to exist for an early career teacher (3-5 years of experience) to persist in a school district. This study examined whether teachers who choose to work in districts located in northeast North Carolina seek a community that provides social and emotional attachments. The Attachment theory suggests that early experiences influence cognition of self and those with whom a person makes a connection mentally (Read et al., 2018). Riley (2012) conducted similar research on the motivation of pre-service and experienced teachers by investigating the role of attachment and emotional experience to choose teaching as a career. The results of the study could not prove for certain which attachment style is involved when it comes to choosing teaching as a career; however, support was provided that "some teachers may be unconsciously seeking corrective emotional experiences via their career choice" as well as having "an insecure attachment style" (Riley, 2012, p. 11).

When considering the community in rural school districts, it is instructive to note that "most states are struggling to recruit and retain effective educators, and many school systems – especially urban and rural districts, tend to serve the most vulnerable student populations – are having particular trouble filling teaching vacancies, especially in shortage fields" (Guha et al.,

2017, p. 31). As Mitchell (2018) pointed out, “rural areas face a unique set of problems” by not having as many economic and social opportunities, and by having smaller tax base, fears of isolation in an unfamiliar area, and limited housing and recreational options (p. 1).

### **Teacher Shortage**

Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019) defined personnel shortage as “an inadequate quantity of qualified individuals willing to offer their services for available jobs under prevailing wages and conditions” (p. 3). Since the 1930’s there have been “frequent waves” of teacher shortages in areas that serve children of color who live in communities that have concentrated areas of poverty (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019) included in their analysis that more than 40 states reported severe shortages in 2016. During this time, North Carolina was noted as one of the states in which school districts engaged in practices of hiring substitutes and individuals without teaching credentials to fill gaps.

Sutcher et al. (2019) narrowed the construct of personnel shortage to specifically address teacher shortage, defined as “an insufficient production of new teachers, given the size of student enrollments and teacher retirements” (p. 4). The authors identified three factors that had the largest changes that took place “at the same time teacher shortages increased: 1) decline in teacher preparation enrollments; 2) an effort to return to pre-recession course offerings and class sizes resulting in lower pupil-teacher ratios and 3) increasing student enrollment” (Sutcher et al., 2019, p. 23).

Megan Lavalley (2018) of the Center for Public Education focused on rural schools and why they are sometimes left out of research and policy discussions. She discusses rural America, academic hurdles for rural students, growing and developing the rural educator, operating a rural district, and prioritizing rural schools. Lavalley (2018) pointed out three factors that may impact

teacher attrition in such districts: 1) “rural schools employ slightly more novice teachers than do suburban and town schools”; 2) the rural teacher “may come to the classroom with a less selective educational background,” which 3) “may negatively impact the learning of the students that they teach” (p. 15).

### **Economically Disadvantaged, Low-Performing Rural Districts**

Economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts are byproducts of communities dealing with change and challenges. This is not a new concept as seen in a 2011 press release by the U.S. Department of Education, which stated that, “schools serving low-income students are being shortchanged because school districts across the country are inequitably distributing their state and locals funds” (p. 1). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was enacted to address locales with high concentrations of poor and minority students. It was fitting that President Johnson championed the legislation:

It is no coincidence that one of the most comprehensive and far-reaching pieces of federal legislation regarding public education became law during the term of a president who had been a schoolteacher. That the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 focused squarely on the academic needs of poor and minority children also was not a coincidence. Lyndon Baines Johnson, himself a product of impoverished parents, had made his intentions known just after assuming office when his administration launched the War on Poverty. He believed that the first line of defense against perennial poverty was a sound education. If some states, particularly states in the South, were unwilling or unable to take necessary steps to guarantee a sound education for all children, then the federal government would have to get involved (Duke, 2016, p. 3).

Educational Reform has changed throughout the years in an effort to create successful outcomes in schools, especially in low-performing schools and districts. The timeline below shows how federal and state officials implemented higher standards in order to improve systems nationwide over a span of 57 years (Clark, 2010):

- 1958 – National Defense Education Act: American government realized that American math and science was lagging. The NDEA was triggered by the Soviet satellite, Sputnik.
- 1965 – Elementary and Secondary Education Act: Funding for primary and secondary education increased, with a particular emphasis on children in poverty.
- 1967 – Education Professionals Development Act: Required and allowed for extensive training for educational trainers.
- 1979 – Department of Education Act: Established United States Department of Education as a cabinet position within the United States Government.
- 1989 – National Council of Teachers of Mathematics: Published “Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics,” which reformed mathematics education to study concepts rather than specific equations and algorithms.
- 1990 – Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technologies Act: Mandated federal funding and schools (at all levels) toward preparing student for a technologically oriented future in the workplace.
- 1994 – Educate America Act (Goals 2000): Required individual states to submit applications describing how they will create a school improvement program and make subgrants to local schools. Set several goals for school nationwide to be reached by the year 2000.

- 1994 – Improve America’s School Act: Reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 added a heavy emphasis on low-income schools.
- 2001 – No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB): This reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act required annual standardized testing for students nationwide in grades 3-8 and focused on highly qualified teachers for the nation’s schools.
- 2006 – Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technologies Act: Reauthorized previous act of 1990 and strengthened the connection between primary and secondary education.
- 2009 – American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: Allocated over 100 billion dollars in funding toward K-12 educational institutions.
- 2009 – Race to the Top Fund (RttT): Obama era grant program that provided competitive education funding opportunities among states. Funds were provided through the America Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Eligibility hinged upon applications’ compliance with Department of Education priorities that included state adoption of specific policies like use of student achievement data in teacher evaluation and adoption of specific models for intervention low-performing schools. Compliance was judged state by state.
- 2015 – Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Included provisions that will help to ensure success for students and schools. Maintained an expectation that there will be accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

North Carolina received \$400 million in funding from Race to The Top (RttT) for “approximately 216 low performing schools (schools with performance composites below

50%, the vast majority of which are located in northeastern North Carolina)” (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012, p. 47- 48). In the midst of receiving the funds, North Carolina has continued to struggle with low-performing schools that do not meet the expectations of growth as defined and calculated in Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS). According to the school accountability growth results for the 2016-2017 school year, 2,531 schools participated in the statewide testing program. Out of the 2,531 schools that participated, 665 schools did not meet growth. In 2018, 2,506 schools participated in the statewide testing program and 683 schools did not meet growth (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018).

**Table 1: School Accountability Growth**

Growth Category	2016–17 Number	2016–17 Percent	2017–18 Number	2017–18 Percent
Exceeded Expected Growth	666	26.3%	677	27.0%
Met Expected Growth	1,200	47.4%	1,146	45.7%
Did Not Meet Growth	665	26.3%	683	27.3%
Total	2,531		2,506	

*Note.* Adapted from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2018), p. 6.

Wise (2015) stated that the “geographical approaches are important when assessing the social psychology of sense of community to conceptually position meanings surrounding everyday experiences – by putting emphasis on place” (p. 920). For this study the geographical location of the study is the northeastern part of North Carolina. Table 2.2 below shows the disparities in the accountability ratings on the state’s A-F graded accountability system among the eight regions, not including the virtual region, which serves students across North Carolina. The northeast

region's overall performance is the lowest of all eight regions; the region has the lowest percentage of A's and B's, while earning the highest percentage of D's and F's.

**Table 2: Number and Percent of School Performance Grades by Region**

Region		Overall Performance Grade					Total Schools
		A	B	C	D	F	
Northeast	Number	7	27	77	50	11	172
	Percent	4.1	15.7	44.8	29.1	6.4	
Southeast	Number	18	63	107	43	9	240
	Percent	7.5	26.3	44.6	17.9	3.8	
North Central	Number	40	156	216	115	23	550
	Percent	7.3	28.4	39.3	20.9	4.2	
Sandhills	Number	15	56	124	62	7	264
	Percent	5.7	21.2	47.0	23.5	2.7	
Piedmont-Triad	Number	31	106	179	85	25	426
	Percent	7.3	24.9	42.0	20.0	5.9	
Southwest	Number	50	152	199	98	15	514
	Percent	9.7	29.6	38.7	19.1	2.9	
Northwest	Number	10	75	89	11	2	187
	Percent	5.3	40.1	47.6	5.9	1.1	
Western	Number	14	82	80	6	0	182
	Percent	7.7	45.1	44	3.3	0.0	
Virtual**	Number	0	0	0	2	0	2
	Percent	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	

\*Due to rounding, the percent of schools may not total 100%.

\*\*The two virtual charter schools serve students statewide and are not assigned to a specific region.

Note. Adapted from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2018), p. 17

In the midst of the strides to enhance conditions within northeastern North Carolina, rural communities are disproportionately affected and face significant challenges when it comes to filling vacancies for educators (Latterman & Steffes, 2017). North Carolina was one of 10 states included in a study by Stuit (2010) where the question was asked: Are bad schools immortal? The study focused on low-performing charter schools and districts to determine if it is better to close a school that is low-performing or to classify it as a turnaround school. Characteristics of low-performing schools included the need to have afterschool programs and additional academic support staff. In Stuit's (2010) study, North Carolina did not show skill in dramatically improving low-performing schools in the charter or district sector, and Stuit used the word, "unimpressive" (p. 84) to describe the state's performance.

There are 44 counties served in the eastern district of North Carolina by the United States District court. Of those 44 counties, 12 counties are located in the northern division which consists of Bertie, Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Gates, Hertford, Northampton, Pasquotank, Perquimans, Tyrell, and Washington. Bennett (2017) reported that Bertie, Northampton, and Washington counties have the greatest population decline within the years of 2010-2016. Changes in population have a bearing on changes within the communities of these districts.

The Rural Center, located in Raleigh, North Carolina, has worked diligently since 1987 to improve opportunities for individuals in rural areas by focusing on "workforce development, infrastructure, rural health, manufacturing, faith community, small towns, disaster recovery, small business development microenterprise lending, food and agriculture and leadership development" (NC Rural Center, 2019, n.p.). A rural county has an average "population density of 250 people per square mile" or less (NC Rural Center, 2019, n.p.). The NC Rural Center

launched Rural Counts in 2016; the 10 strategies from Rural Counts provide significant insight into the challenges faced by rural parts of the state and, by extension, rural school districts:

1. Vigorously advocate for innovation in education and workforce development.
2. Stabilize and transform rural health.
3. Expand accessible and affordable high-speed fiber broadband.
4. Accelerate modernization of essential rural water and wastewater infrastructure.
5. Expand and upgrade transportation and natural gas infrastructure.
6. Invest in stronger entrepreneurship and small business development systems.
7. Strengthen homegrown manufacturing.
8. Develop opportunities for agriculture and natural resources, including biotechnology and value-added food processing.
9. Enhance regional collaboration and partnerships.
10. Stabilize and leverage rural development funding, capacity building and technical assistance. (NC Rural Center, 2019, n.p.)

This section served to provide background and policy/practice context to shed light on the importance of community and sense of community, teacher shortage, economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts, and attributes of rural districts. The background information of the rural districts of North Carolina was provided to help frame the sense of community for teachers who persist to work in this part of the state.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The sense of community theory guided this case study. The need to belong has two main characteristics: a) positive or pleasant interactions need to happen on a frequent basis and b) a stable bond that is affectionate with concern and is continuous must be perceived (Baumeister &

Leary, 1995). Social belonging leads to sense of community, which is based on the four elements of the sense of community theory: Membership, Influence, Integration, and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This framework acknowledges the centrality of sense of community that examined the experiences of early career teachers. Hagerty et al. (1992) used the definition of belongingness as a “sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of that system” (p. 173). Baumeister and Leary (1995) hypothesized that a “need to belong is a fundamental human motivation”, which causes a “drive to form and maintain, at a minimum, lasting, positive, and interpersonal relationships” (p. 497).

### **Sense of Community**

Community can be described as a common location with an interacting population of various kinds of individuals. A school has individual communities; examples include individual classrooms, the teachers’ lounge, the teacher work area, the front office, and so on. McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed that a “sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). The definition of sense of community and the related theory proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) included four elements: Membership, Influence, Integration, and Fulfillment of Needs, and shared emotional connection. These dimensions of sense of community are defined below:

- *Membership* is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness.
- *Influence* is a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members.
- *Integration and Fulfillment of Needs* is the feeling that members’ needs will be met by

the resources received through their membership in the group.

- *Shared emotional connection* is the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences.

(McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9)

With the sense of community theory, McMillan and Chavis (1986) posited that an individual wants to feel a part of and wants to know that they matter to the community. The idea of job satisfaction is connected to all four tenets of sense of community. When one thinks of job satisfaction, the assumption is that people like their jobs (feel satisfied) or dislike their jobs (feel dissatisfied); the construct of satisfaction may be applied to the job generally or to dimensions of the job. Guglielmi et al. (2016) posited that job satisfaction “is a result of individuals’ perception and evaluation of their job, influenced by their own unique needs, values and expectations, which they regard as being important to them” (p. 2). Job satisfaction and sense of community are parallel constructs that show how an individual may persist in their job based on belonging to a community that provides relatedness, membership, and a connection to the workplace.

### **Teachers’ Sense of Community**

Teaching is a profession that presents challenges for its participants. Teachers deal with role conflict and ambiguity. Such job attributes are often called hindrance stressors, and they can lead to fatigue and emotional exhaustion. Examples of job ambiguity include the potential salary and benefits components like reduction in force (RIF), changes in salary scales, adjustments to retirement, and incentive pay guidelines. Ambiguity applies to more than uncertainties related to compensation. Byrne (1993) considered the following constructs when looking at ambiguity: “the development of negative and uncaring attitudes towards others, reduced personal accomplishments, deterioration of self-competence and dissatisfaction with one’s achievements”

(p. 198). Emotional exhaustion is defined as a “chronic state of emotional depletion and stress related to one’s work” (Dishop et al., 2019, p. 733). It can result from hours of lesson planning, supervising disruptive behaviors, engaging in strenuous parent-teacher meetings, or experiencing homesickness. Such hindrance stressors cause employees to “react in terms of greater anxiety and nervousness, and indeed they are related to job dissatisfaction and turnover” (Guglielmi et al., 2016, p. 3). When employees are stressed and unsure of their role and are not provided a clear vision or mission for their place of work, feeling a part of a community may be a difficult task.

Conversely, sense of community helps to alleviate such stressors. Madyun’s (2011) study spoke about the closeness of a community via the social disorganization theory that focused on how neighbors felt closeness and how collective actions helped them control their own problems within their community. Consequently, it would benefit school districts to provide challenge (positive or aspirational) stressors for teachers; such practices include providing clear and compelling vision and mission statements along with clear goals, empowering teachers with responsibilities that will promote personal achievement and future (Guglielmi et al, 2016). Branzei et al. (2007) focused on the development of a culture-contingent model of how trust forms in emergent relationships in collective groups versus individual groups. The study suggests that trust heightens productivity showing “greater engagement and involvement [because] they are committed to mentally demanding jobs” (Guglielmi et al, 2016, p. 3).

According to Royal and Rossi (1999), sense of community provides a foundation for teachers and a place of solace. For early career teachers who enter the field of education without experience or who move to a rural area from another location, interacting with colleagues may help to build and maintain a community that provides a place of comfort and reduces anxiety

(Royal & Rossi, 1999). The elements of sense of community (i.e., Membership, Influence, Integration, and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection) are tenets that provide the foundation for this study.

### **Persistence**

Chang (2009) noted that “in the USA, up to 25% of beginning teachers leave the teaching field before their third year, and almost 40% leave the profession within the first 5 years of teaching” (p. 194). In the study, Chang (2009) focused on the factors of teacher burnout, along with related emotions that lead to teachers leaving the profession. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) completed a study with 2,569 Norwegian teachers from 127 elementary and middle schools to examine the relationships that develop among factors such as “between school context variables, teachers’ feeling of belonging, emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and motivation to leave the teaching profession” (p.1032) . The variables that were included in the context of the study were as follows: “value consonance, supervisory support, relations with colleagues, relations with parents, time pressure and discipline problems” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, p. 1032). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) found that “teachers’ feeling of value consonance as well as supervisory support and positive relations with colleagues and parents were predictive of belonging; also, both teachers’ feeling of belonging and emotional exhaustion were predictive of job satisfaction” (p. 1036).

Goldhaber et al. (2011) asked the questions, “Are public schools keeping their ‘best’ teachers, and what conditions predict who stays and who goes?” Their study took place in North Carolina in 1996 to 2002, where they examined “three types of teacher job moves: moving to another school in the same district, moving to a school in another district and moving out of the North Carolina public school system altogether” (Goldhaber et al., 2011, p. 59). These

researchers noted that teachers in the early years left at a faster and higher rate, “with 25 percent of teachers exiting the North Carolina system within the first four years of teaching” (Goldhaber et al., 2011, p. 62). The researchers concluded in their study that, while “more effective teachers are less likely to leave their schools and the public school system” (Goldhaber et al., 2011, p. 81), “teachers across the effectiveness distribution are more likely to leave schools serving disadvantaged and lower performing student populations” (p. 83).

Continuing the conversation about persistence, Chiong et al. (2017) examined the reasons that teachers remain in the teaching profession. Within their study, long-serving teachers are defined as “as one with 10 years and more of teaching experience” (Chiong et al., 2017, p. 1085). The variables within the study were intrinsic and altruistic reasons, extrinsic reasons, perceived professional mastery and pupil achievement, and the role of context. The results of the study yielded altruistic and intrinsic motivators to explain why teachers stay in the field of education. Extrinsic motivations are less important for why teachers stay in the profession, but more important in retention (Chiong et al., 2017).

In this study, I examined whether persistence and sense of community are related in order to provide additional insights into the needs of early career teachers. The research makes clear that there are different reasons that prompt teachers to leave certain locales, but in this context, theorists rarely mention sense of community. Within the current study, sense of community and persistence were theories of interest for early career teachers who work in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. This theory impacts my research because a deeper understanding of the early career teacher’s needs is important to the proactive development of a system that will increase the prospect of lengthening their time of service in rural districts.

## **Pertinent Research and Expert Perspectives**

In this section, the study's research constructs, relevant studies, and expert opinions related to the variables are addressed. The body of knowledge related to the research questions is explored. Past research studies addressing the research questions for this study or similar questions are summarized. The current study can help make the body of knowledge more robust by providing data on teacher decisions to remain in the field of education, as well as by illuminating the impact of sense of community on such decisions among early career teachers who choose to work in economically disadvantaged rural school districts.

### **Teacher Persistence**

Having a sense of belonging makes a difference in how a person reacts, responds, and interacts in society or within social and vocational settings (Brewer & Kramer, 1985). "In educational settings, a sense of belonging has been associated with academic motivation, success and persistence" (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, p. 925). Teacher persistence and its inverse construct, attrition, are not new concepts nor new issues, but rather they are issues that have lingered. In 2008, the Bureau of National Affairs reported a national teacher turnover rate of 11%, and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) reported a slightly higher rate of 14% (Terry & Kritsonis, 2008). Darling-Hammond and Sykes ' (2003) study in 2003 reported that the turnover of new teachers was especially high, with 30% of new teachers leaving the profession every 3 to 5 years and low-income schools having rates as much as 50% higher than their affluent peers. A review of the report *A Nation at Risk* revealed key findings that still resonate 35 years after its publication and could shed light on the current research:

- Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students.
- The teacher preparation curriculum is weighted heavily with courses in "educational methods" at the expense of courses in subjects to be taught. A survey of 1,350 institutions training teachers indicated that 41 percent of the time of elementary school teacher candidates is spent in education courses, which reduces the amount of time available for subject matter courses.
- The average salary after 12 years of teaching is only \$17,000 per year, and many teachers are required to supplement their income with part-time and summer employment. In addition, individual teachers have little influence in such critical professional decisions as, for example, textbook selection.
- Despite widespread publicity about an overpopulation of teachers, severe shortages of certain kinds of teachers exist in the fields of mathematics, science, and foreign languages and among specialists in education for gifted and talented, language minority, and handicapped students.
- The shortage of teachers in mathematics and science is particularly severe. A 1981 survey of 45 states revealed shortages of mathematics teachers in 43 states, critical shortages of earth sciences teachers in 33 states, and of physics teachers everywhere.
- Half of the newly employed mathematics, science, and English teachers are not qualified to teach these subjects; less than one-third of U. S. high schools offer physics taught by qualified teachers. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 22)

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) provides an annual report on the teaching profession. NCDPI (2016) defines attrition as “a reduction in the number of employees that occurs when employees leave an employing unit” (p. 4). In their annual report, attrition was examined by individual local education agencies (LEA) and the new State Board of Education (SBE) districts of 2015. Five categories of attrition were examined (NCDPI, 2016):

1. Teachers who left the LEA but remained in education.
2. Teachers who left the LEA for personal reasons.
3. Teachers who were terminated by the LEA.
4. Teachers who left the LEA for reasons beyond the LEA’s control.
5. Teachers who left the LEA for other reasons not listed above. (p. 5)

The calculations from the report showed an overall state attrition rate of 9.04%. A comparison of certain subgroups, such as experienced and beginning teachers (fewer than 3 years of experience), indicated that “the state attrition rate for beginning teachers is approximately 56% higher for beginning teachers than for their more experienced counterparts” (NCDPI, 2016, p. 7).

Any examination of teacher attrition rates in North Carolina should acknowledge that the state’s method for calculating attrition changed in 2016, as did the term “teacher turnover,” which was replaced with the words “attrition, which tracks the loss of teachers at the state or school level, and mobility, which shows where teachers are moving within the state” (Hinchcliffe, 2016, n.p.). The rate for 2015-2016, using the old method, was 13.4%. The new method yielded a rate of 9.04%. Hinchcliffe (2016) noted:

That’s because this year’s 9 percent attrition rate only counts teachers who are no longer employed in North Carolina public schools. In previous years, the state’s turnover rate

included teachers who transferred to other school systems or charter schools in the state or were promoted to principal or other non-teaching school positions. (n.p.)

In a recent study, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) posited that the high teacher attrition rate is a “primary contributor to teacher shortages nationally” (p. 1). They noted that “the profession has a national attrition rate of about 8% annually, and research shows that the number of teachers leaving each year accounts for close to 90% of annual teacher demand” (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 1). In the 2015-2016 *State of the Teaching Profession in North Carolina* report by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, (2016), the key findings were as follows:

1. Generally, teachers are remaining in the classroom in North Carolina. The overall state attrition rate for 2015-2016 was 8.70%.
2. There were 94,792 teachers employed in NC between March 2015 and March 2016. Of these teachers, 8,249 are no longer employed in NC public schools (including public charter schools).
3. Teachers with fewer than three years of teaching experience are considered beginning teachers in North Carolina. During the period between March 2015 and March 2016, there were 21,276 beginning teachers (BT) employed statewide and 2,619 were reported as attrition. The attrition rate for beginning teachers in NC is 12.31%, substantially higher than the attrition rate for those not classified as a beginning teacher.
4. There were 4,643 Lateral Entry (LE) Teachers employed and, of those, 726 (15.64%) were no longer employed in North Carolina public schools in March 2016. A total of 943 teachers were employed in North Carolina as Visiting International Faculty

(VIF) teachers, and 162 (17.18%) of those teachers were not retained; a total of 422 Teach for America (TFA) teachers were employed in March 2015 and 139 (32.94%) were no longer employed in March 2016.

- a. VIF teachers are international teachers who are limited to a five-year visa.
  - b. TFA teachers do not commit to a career in teaching, but rather two years of service in hard-to-staff schools.
5. The majority (53.6%) of teachers who left employment in North Carolina public schools cited “Personal Reasons” for their decision to depart. Retirement with full benefits and family relocation were the largest individual reasons (18.7% and 12.3%, respectively) cited for teachers’ decision to leave employment in North Carolina public schools.
  6. On average, teachers who leave employment with the state have lower teaching effectiveness (as measured by EVAAS index scores) than their counterparts who remain employed in North Carolina public schools. This relationship holds true when departing teachers are compared with remaining teachers in terms of years teaching experience.
  7. LEAs experience attrition as the combined effect of teacher attrition from the state and mobility of teachers from one LEA to another LEA/charter school. On average, 4.83% of the state’s teaching force changed employment during the measurement period. The average effect of the LEA-attrition rate for the state is 13.53% (8.70% state attrition rate + 4.83% mobility rate). There are a wide range of LEA-attrition rates across the state.

8. Some LEAs are able to recapture their losses due to teacher attrition by capitalizing on teacher mobility. The rate at which LEAs are able to attract transferring teachers to their system is defined as the “recoupment rate.”
9. Hard to staff subject areas are determined by teacher vacancy reports submitted by the LEAs. For elementary schools, core subject teaching positions exhibit the highest vacancy totals. In middle schools (6-8) and high schools (9-12), LEAs have the highest vacancies in teaching positions for mathematics. (p. 6)

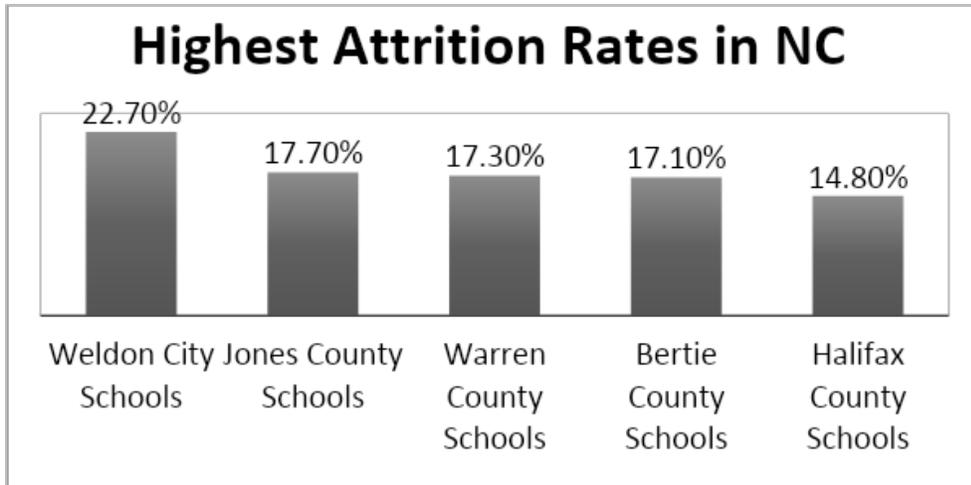
In addition to this report’s key findings, data from the eight education districts of North Carolina show that the Northwest region is reported to have the lowest attrition rate (6.4%), while the Southeast region has the highest rate (9.9%), with the exception of one regional school listed at 10.0% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016, p. 16). Table 2.3 illustrates the total number of teachers in each region, the number of teachers leaving public schools by region, and the attrition rate by region for the 2016-2017 school year. As illustrated by the information in Table 2.3, the North Central, Piedmont Triad, and Southwest regions in North Carolina have the largest number of teachers as well as the highest number of teachers that leave employment.

**Table 3: North Carolina Attrition Rates by Region, 2016-2017**

Region Name	Total Number of Teachers	Number of Teachers Leaving Employment in NC Public Schools	Attrition Rate by Region
Regional School	10	1	10.0%
North Central	23,004	2,085	9.1%
Northeast	5,016	446	8.9%
Northwest	5,744	370	6.4%
Piedmont Triad	16,181	1,306	8.1%
Sandhills	9,008	851	9.5%
Southeast	9,010	895	9.9%
Southwest	21,060	1,832	8.7%
Western	5,759	463	8.0%
State Totals	94,792	8,249	8.70%

Note: Adapted from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2016), p. 15.

The report also lists the five highest LEAs for teacher attrition rates: Weldon City Schools, Jones County Schools, Warren County Schools, Bertie County Schools, and Halifax County Schools. Weldon City Schools has the highest attrition rate (22.7%), which is approximately 162% greater than the overall state attrition rate (8.70%). On the whole, these rural LEAs are comprised of large proportions of economically disadvantaged students. Although the state’s population is becoming increasingly urban, North Carolina still has a large rural population (Ross, 2018). As evident from Figure 2.1, rural areas are facing high attrition rates.



Note: Adapted from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2016), p. 16.

**Figure 2: Five Highest Attrition Rates in North Carolina**

Mobility is a factor to consider, due to its impact on the instructional capacity of LEAs. Mobility involves teachers moving among school districts as well as high-achieving teachers leaving schools with low-performing students (Boyd et al., 2005).

The LEAs with the highest attrition rates in North Carolina are considered rural areas. As Webb (2007) studied rural schools and the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, noting how rural schools faced unique challenges and difficulty finding qualified staff due to the remote location of the school districts. This is not to say that other schools districts do not experience staffing difficulties, but these data echo national trends. For example, Ingersoll (20011997) found that teacher turnover is more than double the national average in high-poverty public schools than for other schools. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2017) reported that the annual turnover for teachers is highest in rural areas: 8.4% in rural areas, 6.4% in towns, 7.3% in suburbs, and 7.9% in cities. Additionally, in North Carolina in 2016-2017, there were a total of 21,276 beginning teachers, which included Visiting International Faculty (VIF), Teach

for America (TFA), and lateral entry teachers; 2,619 of the new teachers (approximately 12.31%) left North Carolina public schools (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, p. 7).

Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) concluded that a number of factors cause dissatisfaction among two-thirds of teachers who change schools:

- concerns with school administration (33%),
- lack of influence on school decision making (29%),
- school conditions, including facilities and resources (27%). (p. 6)

On the whole, these data show that rural districts, especially those in districts with large populations of students from economically disadvantaged homes, generally experience higher attrition and mobility rates of teachers than their more affluent counterparts. These data additionally reveal that more early career teachers are leaving the field than teachers with more experience.

### **Impact of Teacher Attrition**

Teacher attrition rates impact the quality of teachers placed in K-12 classrooms in rural school districts. Webb (2007) focused on the struggle of rural school districts in meeting the demands of No Child Left Behind and noted unique challenges faced by these districts, such as inadequate funding and difficulty finding qualified staff. As a result of not finding qualified staff, “lower performing schools tended to teach the test and set goals of improving test scores, rather than concentrating on improving mastery of content” (Webb, 2007, p. 193). Hanushek et al. (2016) analyzed how a school year is negatively impacted by teachers leaving or moving, because the teachers who remain have to be moved to another grade to fill the vacant position; this teacher reassignment impacts instruction. Additionally, low-performing rural schools in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods “are nearly twice as likely to be assigned to the most

ineffective teachers and half as likely to be assigned to the most effective teachers” (Terry & Kritsonis, 2008, p. 3).

Administrators often replace leaving and moving teachers with ineffective teachers, such as substitute teachers who contribute to “instability [and] low quality of instruction” that “as a consequence leads to low student performance” (Terry & Kritsonis, 2008, p. 2). These replacements also have low teacher commitment, which parallels the conjectures made by Guglielmi et al. (2016) that job satisfaction and work engagement can be impacted by a teacher’s sense of belonging/community. Ronfeldt et al. (2013) reported the following from their study on teacher turnover and student achievement:

This study finds some of the first empirical evidence for a direct effect of teacher turnover on student achievement. Results suggest that teacher turnover has a significant and negative impact on student achievement in both math and ELA. Moreover, teacher turnover is particularly harmful to the achievement of students in schools with large populations of low-performing and Black students. (p. 30)

Marginally prepared teachers, and their students, may struggle even more in schools with large concentrations of minority students. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) concluded that disparities in turnover rates for teachers who enter teaching through an alternative pathway “were slightly greater in schools with predominantly students of color” (p. 25). Ronfeldt et al. (2013) noted:

Teachers who received an alternative pathway to certification left at a greater rate of 28% than regular certified teachers when in high-minority schools. However, the direction of the casual relationship is unclear; teachers leaving may cause low achievement, but low achievement may cause teachers to leave. (p. 5)

Glazer (2018) added to the body of research about teacher attrition with a mixed methods case study that shares the point of view of invested leavers through interviews with teachers who possessed three or more years of teaching experience before leaving. The study looked at attrition from a resistance lens. Teachers included in the study shared their experiences and views about feeling competent, their decision to leave, mandates to teach certain curricula, constant testing interfering with teaching, insecurities about job stability, and other opportunities outside of teaching. In his study, Glazer (2018) chose to focus on a different population with a different lens; however, his research provided insight on how to prepare for novice teachers who enter the teaching profession. Based on the interviews, common themes were recognized from the personal accounts by the invested leavers: sense of autonomy, need for administrative support, feeling okay with the decision to leave, and implications of job security (Glazer 2018).

Research by Barnes et al. (2007) concluded that the cost of teacher turnover nationally can be as low as \$5.6 million but as high as \$4.9 billion. Even though many of the assessments of costs in their research were based on estimations or calculations from incomplete data, the information established the possible scope and scale of teacher turnover costs. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) further expanded the construct of cost by asserting that “turnover impacts the achievement of all students in a school, not just those with a new teacher, by disrupting school stability, collegial relationships, collaboration and the accumulation of institutional knowledge” (p. 1). Adding to this body of knowledge, Darling-Hammond (2003) articulated why it matters to keep good teachers and how leaders can retain good teachers on staff, concentrating on the teachers who are valuable human resources for schools and therefore need to be “treasured and supported if schools are to become and remain effective” (p. 7). Hiring inexperienced teachers each year yields scarce resources by continually pouring money into

professional support for new teachers who are untrained, and mentors are stretched thin because there are not enough to match the number of new teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003). A teacher who stays is valuable, as one principal in Darling-Hammond's (2003) study noted:

Having that many new teachers on staff at any given time meant that there was less of a knowledge base. It meant that it was harder for families to be connected to the school because, you know, their child might get a new teacher every year. It meant there was less cohesion on the staff. It meant every year, we had to recover ground in professional development that had already been covered and try to catch people up to sort of where the school was heading. (p. 9)

In the literature, there is a continuous theme about qualified teachers being a resource. Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) focused on policy analysis with regard to a highly qualified teacher, as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required a highly qualified teacher in every classroom. These researchers argued that lowering teacher standards “fail to prepare teachers to succeed or to stay, thus adding to the revolving door of ill-prepared individuals who cycle through the classrooms of disadvantaged schools, wasting district resources and valuable learning time” (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003, p. 4). Similarly to NCLB, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 required each state to implement a plan to ensure equitable access to excellent educators. Each state was to ensure that “poor minority children were not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p. 21).

Some researchers have contended that turnover is not exclusively negative in impact. Departures may be beneficial because they can result in better job matches and infuse new ideas in the organization (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). The authors shared examples of how turnover is a

benefit when less effective teachers leave and the more effective teachers stay, but they did posit that “turnover may impact student achievement beyond the relative effectiveness of those who stay as compared to those who leave” (Ronfeldt et al., 2013, p. 7). For example, the stayers ultimately feel the brunt of the leavers because of the increased instructional burden and lessened professional development resources due to the shifting of available resources to the new hires.

### **Approaches to Reducing Attrition**

Colleges and universities, state boards of education, and LEAs have undertaken a range of initiatives to reduce attrition and turnover. In North Carolina, the Teaching Fellows program was created in 1986 to curtail the need of quality teachers; this program was eliminated in 2011 by the state General Assembly (Hall, 2018), but it has since been reestablished. A merit-based college scholarship program geared towards decreasing teacher turnover and attrition seeks “to recruit and retain greater numbers of highly qualified teachers in special education and STEM fields and to create a robust pipeline for providing highly qualified teachers to low-performing schools” (NC Teaching Fellows, 2018, p. 1). Teaching Fellows aligns with some of the suggestions provided by Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), who outlined ways to decrease teacher attrition while building teacher capacity through teacher preparation and support opportunities such as teacher residency programs, grow your own teacher preparation programs, and high-quality mentoring and induction.

The literature shows that school districts in rural areas, especially economically disadvantage areas have low-performing schools. Morgan and Kritsonis (2008) made recommendations for three critical questions regarding teacher recruitment, retention, and development in hard-to-staff schools:

1. How do hard-to-staff schools aggressively recruit teachers for their campuses?

2. What steps should principals take to develop new teachers once they become a part of their faculty?
3. What activities should principals engage in to secure a teacher's long-term commitment to the school? (p. 2)

Morgan and Kritsonis (2008) characterized hard-to-staff schools by the following: “large percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, difficult teaching environment, undesirable school location and low academic achievement of student population” (p. 2). These authors also provided proactive approaches for principals to implement in staffing before the first day of school, the first day of school, and beyond the first day of school so that the principal will keep quality teachers. They maintained that as a building leader, it is important to invest in the staff because they are the individuals that pour into the students (Morgan & Kritsonis, 2008).

Similar calls to invest in teachers were made by Greenlee and Brown (2009) as seen in their study about retaining teachers in challenging schools. Adding to the dialogue about how financial incentives, working conditions, and principal behaviors are pertinent in recruiting and retaining teachers in challenging schools, they looked closely at teacher retention, teacher recruitment, teacher-principal relationships, effective teaching, and educational leadership. In their study, teachers were surveyed to “identify principal leadership behaviors and incentives that are most effective to create a school environment where teachers will want to stay” (Greenlee & Brown, 2009, p. 97). Greenlee and Brown (2009) found “that many of the teachers would choose to teach in a school with high numbers of disadvantaged students if they had more autonomy and resources to create strong curriculum innovations” (p. 99). This finding is similar to Guglielmi et al. (2016), who pointed out that providing challenges which promote personal gain or growth works to trigger in teachers “positive emotions and an active or problem-solving style of coping”

(p. 3). Feeney and Collins (2015) examined the need to provide support for teachers as they encounter adversity, asserting that thriving through adversity buffers an individual from negative effects of stress and helps them deal with circumstances that may arise. In other words, teachers will feel a sense of community because their engagement and identification is increased, leading to a greater commitment to a mentally demanding job (Guglielmi et al., 2016).

Smith (2007) explored standards-based reform policies and the impact on induction experiences and new teacher turnover. Reiterating many of the same ideas from Greenlee and Brown (2009), Guglielmi et al. (2016), and Morgan and Kritsonis (2008), Smith's (2007) research noted that everyone in the organization should receive information about role performance and that member integration must take place for members to participate in relationships within the organization (p. 276). Providing further insight into how to transform teaching, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2016) report highlighted:

...how to comprehensively transform teaching and learning for the students they serve, leveraging the opportunities presented by the recent federal legislation that provide more autonomy to states and districts, advances in the science of how people learn, transformational technologies, and student populations with increasingly diverse backgrounds and global connections. (p. 4)

### **Social Support**

As approaches to reduce teacher attrition are considered, social support is also a factor to include when making decisions to put certain legislation or policy in place. Choenarom et al. (2005) defined social support as "both structural characteristics of a social network and perceived availability of resources" (p. 20). A social network involves individuals developing relationships; therefore, "social support has been defined as information from others that one is

loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligations” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 518). Support among early career teachers is of particular concern as “up to 30 percent of elementary and secondary school teacher leave the profession after three years, and up to half take off after five years” (DeAngelis, 2012, p. 66). DeAngelis (2012) shared how psychologists understood the need to support and retain good teachers by developing programs that provide services to build teacher effectiveness through socialization, advanced training, and community connections with hands-on experiences.

Through the lens of community support, Struyve et al. (2016) examined how social connectedness played a role in early career and experienced teachers’ intent to leave the teaching profession. They observed that large numbers of early career teachers leaving the profession had become a global issue, using the social network theory to show the relevance of social connectedness of early career teachers with their colleagues. Struyve et al. (2016) asserted that the “social network theory moves beyond just the individual and takes into account the dynamic supports and constraints of the larger social infrastructure in which actors find themselves” (p. 201). Seven of the 10 schools included in the study were located in a rural area that included early career teachers with four or less years of teaching experience. The results of the study showed that “early career teachers’ support needs to go beyond the mere presence of a social connection between the mentee and the mentor and thus that teachers need more than a mentor” (Struyve et al., 2016, p. 211).

### **Social Support and Sense of Community**

Social support is embedded within the construct of sense of community. The current study explored how the two relate to the persistence of an early career teacher within the field of education. Tang et al. (2016) studied social engagement and support to determine their

relationship with sense of community as they investigated how older Chinese Americans maintain their quality of life and well-being. The authors utilized the Sense of Community Index (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) in their study and focused on the components of emotional connection, Influence, Membership, and needs fulfillment. Results disclosed an increase in sense of community based on positive engagement in social activities and support (Tang et al., 2017). In addition, the study specifically yielded results that showed “positive social support may buffer social isolation and psychological distress that is associated with...life transitions” (Tang et al., 2017, p. 104). While this study was not directly related to sense of community among teachers, it provides insight into how individuals gain sense of community from social engagement and social support.

Feeney and Collins (2015) examined social support by investigating a theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships. A parallel exists between thriving and persistence, which is defined as “progressing toward or realizing a goal despite or because of circumstances” (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 3). The study presented an integrative model of thriving through relationships that conceptualized social support as an interpersonal process that functioned to promote thriving in two ways: “experiences of adversity and opportunities for growth in the absence of adversity” (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 3). The authors focused on relationships that provided two-way supports, emphasized how results are important if teachers are to thrive, and identified supports important for long-term thriving outcomes. They concluded that “the link between social support and any thriving outcome cannot be adequately assessed without careful attention to the relational dynamics surrounding specific instances of received support” (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 30). The authors also admitted that “we still know relatively little about when, how, and why relationships have the impact they do” (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 36).

The studies conducted by both Tang et al. (2017) and Feeney and Collins (2015) shed light on the importance of relationships within the constructs of social support and sense of community. Overall, these authors concluded that more development is needed in why individuals feel the need to have relationships that build a sense of community as well as when, how, and why relationships make a difference within a community.

In the current study's investigation of early career teachers' persistence to remain in economically disadvantaged rural districts, I identified similar factors to understand their decisions to stay. The studies shared in this literature review thus far suggest uncertainty about the impact of social interactions and support. This uncertainty undergirded my study, as I worked to provide additional insights into the impact of social supports and focus those insights on the context of teaching in low-wealth, rural school districts.

### **Importance of Sense of Community**

Communities are experiencing a change in residential patterns; this yields uneven distribution of poverty among ethnic groups, thereby producing rich schools and poor schools (Fusarelli, 2011). As a result, communities in rural districts tend to be economically disadvantaged as well as low-performing. In addition to the change of residential patterns, schools are impacted by the fact that teachers do not necessarily come from the community in which they choose to become employed. There are characteristics or nuances that cause individuals to want to work in a certain area. Social supports depend on one's surroundings and community. In this subsection, the focus is on how an individual chooses a place or remains in a certain place.

Wise (2015) focused on the how behavioral geographers assess particular places. He studied how "meaning is imbedded in particular spaces, deemed important through engagement

and socialization, and new understandings of social interactions in space and place” (p. 920).

Wise (2015) noted that “space becomes place through experience, power, designation, and control or processes and social constructions” (p. 922). The four conditions of the theory sense of community were stressed as essential components of the study:

- Membership: Those who reside within either fluid or designated boundaries seek to defend their sense of belonging against outside forces and threats, or to define who is in and who is out;
- Influence: Deals with social capital, and is often based on or bias of politics, economics, and culture;
- Integration and Fulfillment of Needs: Influential factors/variables reinforce individual and group networks; make personal satisfactions possible while collective needs can also be fulfilled;
- Shared emotional connections: Collective emotions are supported through contact, interactions, bonds, investments culture or beliefs. (p. 923)

My study focused on economically disadvantaged rural school districts and how early career teachers persist to teach in low-performing schools. It is important to understand sense of place because early career teachers often come from places different than the geographic area in which they choose to work. “A sense of place refers to a sense of belonging, socially and emotionally, through collective attachment”(Wise, 2015, p. 924).

Wise (2015) conducted an ethnographic study and used Google Earth images of spaces that represent meaning in certain areas; participants would identify the space based on a psychological connection. He concluded that sense of community is important because “it is the places where these interactions occur that are important to recognize because people naturally

congregate” (Wise, 2015, p. 927). This particular study provided insight for the current study as I interviewed early career teachers to understand why they persist in economically disadvantaged rural areas.

Teachers consider the place where they work to be important, just as they consider their professional commitment to the field of teaching to be important. Ware and Kitsantas (2007) studied four types of commitment:

- a. Affective commitment – whether individuals feel valued and supported by their school and are emotionally attached to it and the teaching profession,
- b. Continuance commitment – the extent to which individuals believe that they must remain in the teaching profession because of lack of alternatives or possible disruptions resulting from leaving their jobs,
- c. Normative commitment – the moral obligation that individuals sense to remain in the teaching profession, and
- d. Organizational commitment – dedication that teachers exhibit toward their school by regular work attendance. (p. 304)

Based on their findings, the authors asserted that interventions focused on individual teacher effectiveness as well as teacher effectiveness overall may help to retain teachers by providing the necessary supports to enhance teachers’ beliefs that they can overcome challenges as a team.

As teachers overcome challenges and adversities as a team, it is reasonable to conclude that they are more likely to experience the McMillan and Chavis (1986) definition of sense of community, i.e., a “feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met by the commitment to be together” (p. 9). It can be asserted that if teachers experience sense of community among one another, they may be

better able to provide support for the students in the areas of academic achievement, physical and emotional well-being, and decrease in substance use and violent behaviors (Michela et al., 2017).

### **Impact of Social Supports and Sense of Community**

Early career teachers experience more challenges than their colleagues (Mansfield & Gu, 2019). Mansfield and Gu (2019) noted that early career teachers deal primarily with two challenges when interacting in social contexts with colleagues, students, and parents: sense of professional self and sense of belonging. In education, the aim of a teacher induction process is ordinarily to provide support and professional learning experiences to help early career teachers with a successful transition to the profession while preparing them for a fulfilling teaching career. Mansfield and Gu (2019) investigated the access to formal and informal learning experiences of early career teachers who were involved in a teacher induction program in Western Australia. The following results were yielded from the study:

1. For most participating teachers, what mattered most were school-based informal dialogues with colleagues and personalized, targeted support in the form of in-class coaching.
2. In this research, learning activities that were highly ranked by participating teachers were those whose effectiveness and impact essentially builds on trusting relationships between those involved.
3. A worrying observation of the study was that many teachers did not have access to a mentor. (Mansfield & Gu, 2019, p. 654-656)

Mansfield and Gu's (2019) overall conclusion was that "supportive relationships and school contexts are critical to ensure the future generation of teachers are equipped to provide high-quality teaching and remain committed and resilient beyond the early career years" (p. 656).

From their study, it can therefore be concluded that support, in part, impacts commitment and resilience among early career teachers.

For early career teachers, the motivation to persist tends to wane over a period of 3 to 5 years, a period of time “when a teacher attempts to apply what was learned in preparation coursework to the complexity of public school classrooms during internships and beyond” (Thompson et al., 2013, p. 575). Thompson et al.’s (2013) study had implications for teacher development as well as teacher education and induction. The authors posited the “need to provide continuity across learning-to-teach contexts and a need to work with K-12 schools to encourage and support principled experimentation during teaching practicum” (p. 611). Toom et al. (2017) focused their attention on first-year teachers’ sense of professional agency, defined in their study as the “student teacher’s intellectual and behavioral capacity to prepare the grounds for intentional and accountable management of learning in various contexts of teacher’s work” (p. 126). The aim of their study was to investigate the complexity for a first-year student teacher by exploring the teacher’s sense of professional agency in the professional community. They tested the following areas: sense of community, social support from teacher educators, and first-year student teachers’ capacity to reciprocate what was learned in their professional peer groups. The results of the study showed that the variables would likely promote sense of professional agency and professional community later within teachers’ careers by providing a smooth entrance into the profession of education. The authors asserted that the first year of a student teacher’s service has significant impact on their path as a teacher and in determining whether the teacher will continue in the field of education (Toom et al., 2017).

Garcia and Weiss (2019) examined the magnitude of the teacher shortage and the factors that contribute to it. The authors focused on the early career supports for teachers in their first

year along with supports that are available through their careers. With regard to teacher persistence, they found the following positive actions in their report: supports already in place for a strong foundation, first-year teachers assigned to a mentor, participation in a teacher induction program, professional development/workshops/trainings, subject matter activities, collaboration on instruction with other teachers, and opportunities to observe other teachers. The following weaknesses were addressed in the report as reasons why teachers leave the profession: limited access to highly effective professional development, novice/veteran teachers receiving resources to prepare for their practice, professional development not being satisfying to teachers, learning community not supporting teaching and career growth, and needed resources and professional development lacking in high-poverty schools (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Additionally, Garcia and Weiss (2019) found that schools and districts need to provide access to more helpful and effective training and development based on the judgment and autonomy of the teachers. The authors also pointed out the importance of the learning community; this parallels the conclusions of McMillan and Chavis (1986) regarding the impact on sense of community when teachers are included in the membership of a learning community and have a shared emotional connection. Garcia and Weiss (2019) found that there is a mixed picture of what is needed for early career teachers when it comes to supports, consistent professional development, and opportunities to collaborate and share professional opinions to improve the role of system supports in teacher retention.

The impact of social support is related to the construct of sense of community. Royal and Rossi (1996) examined sense of community in high schools in order to identify the influences and consequences of community experiences for individuals. Employed adults were part of the study, and the two factors considered were tenure and status; status in this case means greater

organizational influence. In the study, there was no evidence of a relationship between tenure or status and sense of community; however, it was noted that the “learning community affiliation was positively associated with sense of community” (Royal & Rossi, 1996, p. 407). Additionally, the authors indicated “that sense of community may be important to the success of school restructuring activities by revealing an association between staff members’ sense of community and their attitudes toward school reform” (p. 413).

### **School Districts’ Attention to Sense of Community**

In the midst of early career teachers experiencing a sense of community in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts, there is the factor of the demographics of the students who are served in these districts. Bass and Gerstl-Pepin (2011) brought attention to bankruptcy in matters of educational equity by looking at the “long-term accumulated societal inequities that are linked to inequitable outcomes” (p. 909). This concept of bankruptcy intersects with a school district’s attention to sense of community in multiple ways. If classrooms are vacant without a certified teacher, then that may be considered a deficit based on the school district being deemed economically disadvantaged and low-wealth. Districts with attrition rates as high as those in the eastern North Carolina LEAs depicted in Figure 2.1 could be considered bankrupt based on these criteria. Bass and Gerstl-Pepin (2011) noted that, in the context of educational inequity, “when declaring bankruptcy, filers must carefully evaluate their circumstances in order to determine the most appropriate chapter to file to best suit their personal situations” (p. 912). The findings of Bass and Gerstl-Pepin (2019) suggested that school districts may need to evaluate the circumstances that influence early career teachers to persist, especially in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts.

School districts provide beginning teacher support and assign mentors based on need. According to the reviewed literature, there is a need for more research to determine if such programs are sustaining the needs of early career teachers. Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (2003) noted factors influencing teacher attrition as follows:

- Salaries
- Working conditions
- Preparation
- Mentoring support in the early years of teaching. (p. 9)

The above factors have been noted in other research studies as well; however, the list does not include sense of community. This an area for evaluation based on the bankruptcy theory.

Egalite et al. (2017) defined an equitable community:

...one that pursues the common good by affirming the identities of constituent groups defined by race/ethnicity, gender, national origin, language, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and the intersection of these identities; an equitable community is proactive about encouraging inclusive practices and promoting cooperation between groups. (p. 3)

Even though the focus of their definition stems from their evaluation of The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it seems generalizable to multiple types of all communities. Under ESSA, local agencies with low-performing schools are to design necessary interventions and supports for subgroups which perform poorly by developing and implementing a support and improvement plan (Egalite et al., 2017).

To meet the needs of the students located in northeast North Carolina, school districts need to develop and implement support and improvement plans that include support for early career teachers who will remain in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts.

Adams and Miskell (2016) focused on capacity building through the relational context of the district and school and teacher actions based on trust. The authors said, “trust operates like glue by connecting individuals and groups to a common purpose and as a lubricant that eases collaboration and cooperation among interdependent actors” (Adams & Miskell, 2016, p. 676). District trust, principal trust, and teacher commitment were the three variables of the empirical test conducted by these authors. Teacher trust beliefs were connected to their personal commitment; district trust had a large effect on commitment when contributing to principal trust. It appeared from the results that district leaders had a greater influence on teacher commitment than principals. Based on the findings, the authors asserted that further understanding is needed about how to develop district leaders in order for them to manage system-wide improvement efforts (Adams & Miskell, 2016).

Social supports and sense of community are factors of concern for an economically-disadvantaged, low-performing rural district in northeast North Carolina if these LEAs are to impact the persistence of early career teachers. Egalite et al. (2017) brought to light how local districts can develop and implement support and improvement plans based on ESSA. Glazer (2018) gleaned strategies needed to reduce attrition from public school teachers who left the classroom: importance of autonomy, a supportive administration, listening to teacher voice, and taking a closer look the power of school policies. In a study of teachers who were qualified to enter the teaching profession but did not along with early career teachers who did not continue to teach, Struyven and Vanthournout (2014) collected additional data for districts to consider; the authors revealed overarching motivators related to teachers’ decisions to persist: “job satisfaction and relations with students, school management and support workload, future prospect, and relations with parents” (p. 43). The themes and motives are initial areas of focus to provide

support and show improvement by developing and implementing a plan for areas of needed change.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 provided background for this study of sense of community and teacher persistence. It provided a theoretical framework for the study and examined pertinent and professional perspectives regarding teacher turnover/attrition and sense of community. This information provided insight into the importance of each variable within this study. The literature offers a foundation and understanding for the extant research on the perceptions of new teachers regarding sense of community as it relates to high teacher attrition and persistence. With the current research, my intent was to determine how sense of community influences early career teachers' decision to continue to teach in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. These demographic factors, according to consistent research findings, impact teacher retention rates. Thus, the current study examined the sense of community among early career teachers in northeastern North Carolina rural school districts that are economically disadvantaged and low-performing.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Chapter Introduction**

Chapter 3 discusses the research design and methodology of this study. A description of the application of the theoretical framework to the research questions and the research protocol are included. Following these elements are descriptions of the study's participants and instrumentation used in the study. Instrument validity and reliability are also addressed, as are the research procedures. The processes for data collection and analysis as well as the subjectivity statement, limitations, and assumptions for the research are discussed. The chapter closes with a summary.

The aim of this mixed methods case study was to expand the understanding of sense of community among early career teachers who work in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing districts in the northeastern part of North Carolina. I was interested in early career teachers' perceptions related to their experiences with sense of community in their schools and how those experiences impacted their desire to stay in or leave the field of education.

### **Research Design**

A mixed methods case study was well suited for this research. Adding a qualitative approach to quantitative analyses allowed me, as the researcher, to consider five features:

- Studying the meaning of people's lives, under real-world conditions;
- Representing the views and perspectives of the people (participants) in a study;
- Covering the contextual conditions within which people live;
- Contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behavior; and

- Striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone. (Yin, 2011, p. 7)

Such a study design helped me gather personal accounts with regard to individual perceptions in an “attempt to get to the truth of matters” (Moran, 2000, p. 4) regarding sense of community among early career teachers. The current case study provided insights into the perspectives of early career teachers in school districts to determine if they felt a sense of belonging at the schools where they worked. Through this case study, I examined the phenomenon of sense of community and how it related to the decisions of early career teachers with 3 to 5 years of experience to remain in the teaching profession.

In this study, I looked for what would come to light and be revealed as early career teachers shared and discussed their perceptions and I conducted observations. The task of a researcher is to refrain from the influence of any preexisting framework and remain true to the facts (Groenewald, 2004). The case study approach enabled me to develop an in-depth analysis of a case by using a variety of data collection procedures to retain detailed information (Creswell, 2014).

### **Application of Theoretical Framework to the Study**

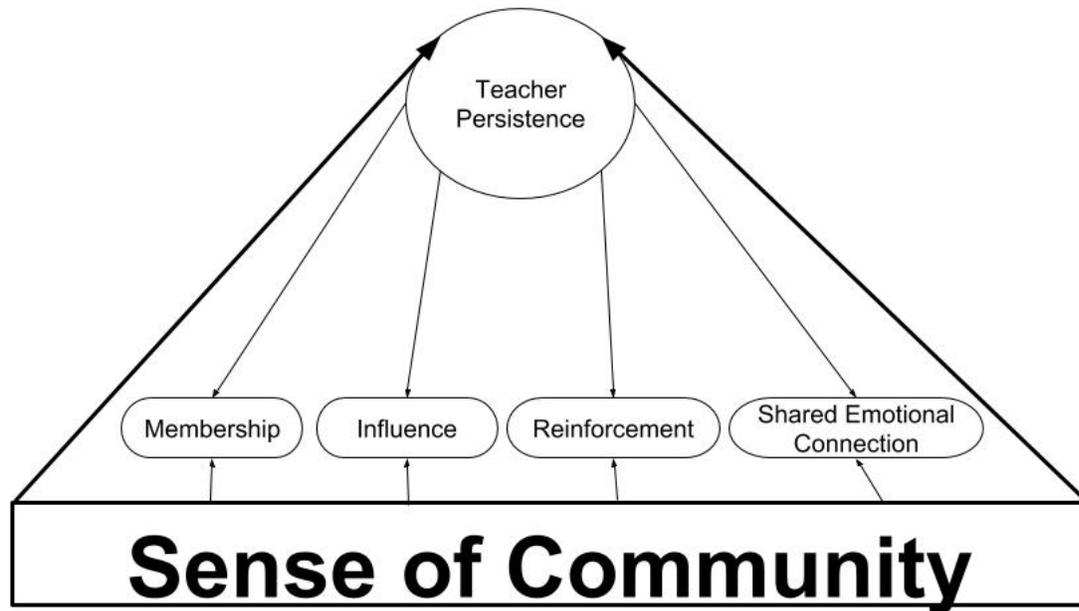
Based on the review of literature, I hypothesized that teacher persistence is, in part, a result of how a teacher views the community to which she/he belongs and how they view or value her/his self-worth, and that these perceptions lead to sense of community in the school. Therefore, the current case study was undergirded by the tenets of the sense of community theory as I examined the experiences of early career teachers who worked in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed:

...sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" based on four tenets: membership, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection. (p. 9)

Participants in this study shared their perceptions of their experiences in rural districts that are economically disadvantaged and low-performing. The narratives they shared helped to "provide the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting" (Ladson-Billing, 1998, p. 15).

Figure 3 depicts the relationship between persistence and the tenets of sense of community: Membership, Influence, Reinforcement of Needs (this tenet evolved into Meeting of Needs in the instrument), and Shared Emotional Connection. I theorized that a teacher persists, in part, because she/he has a feeling of belonging as a member of the school community.

Persistence is further impacted by the way the perceptions of her/his presence in the school influence what happens in the school and possibly the district. Reinforcement comes from the leader and co-workers integrating the early career teacher within planning and decision-making processes and providing feedback that the teacher's actions as a member of the community are impactful. The last tenet, Shared Emotional Connection, rounds out the theory as the early career teacher develops a commitment and belief that he/she has shared history with colleagues due to spending time together and having similar experiences in a common place.



**Figure 3: Theoretical Framework of Teachers’ Sense of Community**

### **Research Questions**

This mixed methods research study investigated early career teachers’ perceived sense of community and its impact on their desire to continue to work in low-performing, economically disadvantaged rural school districts. Therefore, the central constructs explored in this study were sense of community. Of most importance is the theory of sense of community, which focuses on four elements: Membership, Influence, Integration, and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The research questions for the study are as follows:

1. How important to participants is a sense of community with other community members?
2. What are the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists within their northeastern North Carolina districts?

3. Are there differences among the survey ratings of teachers regarding the four tenets of sense of community theory, which include Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection?
4. What are the perceptions of participants in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers?
5. What are the perceptions of participants regarding the degree to which the school districts seek to instill a sense of community for early career teachers?
6. What are the strategies that school districts use to promote early career teachers' sense of community?
7. To what degree are the strategies used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community perceived to be effective in improving new teacher persistence?

### **Study Participants**

The archival data collected for the research did not require interaction with human subjects. The archival data were compiled to determine where the case study should take place. It was determined that the teacher attrition rate is higher in northeastern North Carolina. As noted in the literature review, the LEAs with the highest attrition rates at the time of the study were located in northeastern North Carolina. The school performance grade and school accountability growth index were used to identify the geographic areas for this case study. These data are collected yearly and are published and publicly accessible at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. The rationale for utilizing the school performance grade and school accountability growth index was to discern districts from which to choose for the study.

The case sites for this study were several rural districts located in the northeastern part of North Carolina, where the schools were low-performing, economically disadvantaged, and experience high rates of teacher attrition. The participant sample consisted of early career teachers in eight different school districts. For this case study, purposive homogenous sampling was conducted since the focus of the study was early career teachers with 3 to 5 years of experience in grades P-12.

After the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board approved the current study, I sought the permission of superintendents from school districts in northeastern North Carolina (Appendix A) to conduct my research. Once the superintendents had provided consent to move forward with research in their respective districts, I sent an email to the human resource director requesting a list of teachers with 3 to 5 years of teaching experience who had been working in the district for three consecutive years (Appendix B). Following receipt from the human resource director of the list of these individuals, I sent an email to invite teachers to participate in the online survey (Appendix C). The survey was preceded by an informed consent document (Appendix D) that explained the study, the research process, and the participant's rights. The informed consent document explained that completion of the instrument signified consent to participate and included the following statement: "In order to further safeguard your identity, you are not asked to sign this form. Clicking the link to access the survey will signify your consent to participate."

Purposive sampling was a deliberate process for selecting the specific study units in order to find those that would yield the most relevant and plentiful data (Yin, 2011). The perceptions of these early career teachers shed light on the relationship of sense of community to teacher persistence in economically disadvantaged, low-performing, rural school districts. In this mixed

methods case study, purposive sampling took place within the survey that was sent to all teachers. I included the following item at the beginning of the instrument, to which the participant was asked to indicate yes or no: “I have at least 3 years of total teaching experience and have not yet reached 6 years of total teaching experience.” The next statement that followed said, “If you have less than 3 years of total teaching experience, or 6 or more years of teaching experience, please end your participation at this point.” In addition, at the end of the survey, an item was included asking whether participants were willing to volunteer to be interviewed. If the participant responded yes to be interviewed, she/he was notified that they were exiting the survey and were routed out of the survey site to another site to provide an email address where they could be contacted for an interview. If the participant responded no to the query concerning their willingness to participate in an interview, she/he received a thank-you message and exited the survey after responding “no” to the final survey item.

After the responses of the survey participants were received, I identified six early career teachers from the survey respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in interviews based on the criteria set for participation. For those teachers who indicated such willingness, I sent each a letter to provide details about participation in the interview (Appendix E). During and after the interviews, the confidentiality of the participants was ensured. Prior to engaging in the interview, participants were asked to review and sign an informed consent document (Appendix F). I assigned pseudonyms to participants and removed identifying indicators from the transcripts. Participants did not receive compensation for agreeing to participate in the interview process. Table 4 below provides a brief profile of this study’s participants.

**Table 4: Profile of Participants**

Participant Name	Gender	Years of Experience in District
Brittany	Female	5
Griffin	Male	5
Casey	Female	5
Levi	Male	5
Katrina	Female	4
Stevie	Female	3

A brief bio is provided for each of these participants in Chapter 4. The current research focused on the impact of sense of community on teachers in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. The scope of the research was limited due to time constraints, geographical location, and the focus on economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. The study identified the perceptions of early career teachers in northeastern North Carolina school districts regarding the impact of sense of community on their decision to persist in their roles.

### **Research Variables**

This section describes the major constructs that were measured for the purpose of answering the current study’s research questions. Data for this study were collected by two means – one quantitative and the other qualitative – and was related to several variables. The first variable appears in Research Question 1; it is the importance of sense of community with other community members to participants. The data for this variable were derived from participant ratings in response to Item A.1 in the Sense of Community Index 2 (SCI-2) (Appendix G).

The second variable, which appears in Research Question 2, is the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists. The third construct is a

set of variable elements, in this case, the four tenets of sense of community, and Research Question 3 queried whether participant ratings differed for these four tenets.

There were two independent variables and two dependent variables in this study, and these variables were addressed in the qualitative components of the research protocol. The first of the independent variables was perceptions of sense of community, and it appears in Research Question 4. The dependent variable associated with sense of community in this research question was perceptions about the persistence of early career teachers. Another variable in the study was included in Research Question 5, which was also part of the qualitative portion of the study. This research question examined the perspectives of participants regarding whether the school districts seek to instill a sense of community in early career teachers. The variable in this instance was the degree to which the districts seek to instill such a sense of community.

The second independent variable, strategies utilized to promote sense of community, was part of the qualitative portion of this study. Research Question 7 invited interviewees to describe such strategies. This variable became an independent variable in Research Question 7, where it was paired with the dependent variable, persistence of early career teachers.

### **Instrumentation**

The current case study employed a mixed methods approach that included a combination of the use of the Chavis et al.'s (2008) Sense of Community Index 2 (SCI-2) and an interview process. The descriptive statistics of the case study came from the utilization of Chavis et al.'s (2008) instrument; it is located in Appendix G. The Sense of Community Index 2 (SCI-2) has one initial question, Item A.1, which asks participants to rate the importance of sense of community. Survey Item A.1 provided data that allowed for the answering of Research Question 1 in this study. Section B of the SCI-2 includes 24 items that are constructed with a Likert Scale,

with the following response choices: Not at all, Somewhat, Mostly, or Completely. For the purposes of analysis, a point value was assigned to each response: Not at all = 0, Somewhat = 1, Mostly = 2, and Completely = 3. The subscales of the instrument are organized around the four tenets of sense of community: Reinforcement (Meeting) of Needs (Items B1-B6), Membership (Items B7-B12), Influence (Items B13-B18), and Shared Emotional Connection (B19-B24). These survey items provided data that helped answer Research Questions 2 and 3 in this study.

The qualitative components of this mixed methods case study took place during the individual interviews. Participants in these activities responded to open-ended items that pertained to the research questions. The individual teacher interview protocol (Appendix H) was aligned with the tenets of the sense of community theory and provided data to answer the research questions. Interview Items 1, 2, 3, 6, 6a, and 7 provided data for Research Question 4, which aligns with the theoretical framework tenets of Membership and Shared Emotional Connection. This research question addressed the relationship between sense of community and persistence of early career teachers. Research Questions 5 and 6 aligned with the theoretical framework tenets of Influence and Meeting of needs. Interview Items 4, 5, and 9 provided data for Research Question 5, which examined the degree to which the districts seek to instill a sense of community for early career teachers. Interview Items 7, 10, 11, and 12 provided data for Research Question 6, which enabled me to determine the strategies that the districts used to promote early career teachers' sense of community. Lastly, Interview Items 8, 13, and 14 provided data for Research Question 7, which aligned with the theoretical framework tenets of Membership and Meeting of needs. This research question assessed the degree to which early career teachers perceived school districts to be effective in promoting sense of community and improving new teacher persistence.

The interview protocol provided an opportunity for early career teachers to share their perceptions about sense of community based on their experiences in northeastern North Carolina school districts. With this mixed methods design, basic quantitative statistics was used in the analysis of the survey results, and qualitative methods were used in the analysis of the interview responses. For this case study, it was important to gain a comprehensive picture of how the early career teachers perceived their belonging to the community and the impact of sense of community on their decisions to persist in their northeastern North Carolina school districts.

### **Instrument Validity and Reliability**

#### **Sense of Community Index 2 (SCI-2)**

The Sense of Community Index (SCI) is based on the research of McMillan and Chavis (1986), in which they examined community as a construct with four elements: Membership, Influence, Meeting of Needs, and a Shared Emotional Connection (Chavis et al., 2008). The SCI has been utilized in other studies for various cultures in North and South America, Asia, and the Middle East, in different contexts such as urban, suburban, rural, tribal, workplace, school, university, recreational club, and Internet communities. Critics were concerned about the true-false response, limited variability, and adequacy of the SCI cross-cultural measure of the instrument and, as a result, the Sense of Community Index version 2 (SCI-2) was created. While the original index only included a 12 true-false response items in a set, the new SCI-2 version has 24 questions on a Likert scale that covers all of the attributes of the four elements. Once the instrument was revised, 1,800 people were surveyed, and the analysis of the SCI-2 indicated that the instrument was very reliable with a coefficient alpha of .94; the subscales proved reliable with coefficient alpha scores of .79 to .86 (Chavis et al., 2008).

## **Interview Protocol and Individual Teacher Interview**

The interview protocol used in the study is an instrument that I created based on the Sense of Community Index. The teacher interview questions were based on the four tenets: membership, influence, meeting of needs, and a shared emotional connection. The questions were used to identify how teachers perceive sense of community and teacher persistence in the Cherry Hill school district. Prior to conducting the interviews, I reviewed the confidentiality statement and obtained written consent from each participant. All participants were fully informed that involvement was voluntary and that they could opt out at any time during the study.

To validate the interview instrument, I sought a panel of experts within the field. The panel consisted of four members: a) a northeastern North Carolina school district superintendent, b) a northeastern North Carolina former district director of human resources, c) a former state superintendent of schools with expertise in human resources, and d) a researcher with expertise in the area of sense of community. A feedback form was created in order to solicit specific comments from these individuals on the appropriateness of the interview elements. Panel members reviewed the instrument using the feedback protocol found in Appendix I. Based on panel member recommendations, I edited the instrument to create a final version.

## **Data Sources, Collection, and Analysis**

The case study approach requires data collection about and/or from one or more participants (Creswell, 2014); therefore, this study included a survey and interviews to gather the data needed to determine the recurring themes and enable me to report results from the case study. As the researcher, I obtained permission from the districts to conduct the case study. I also

obtained permission to audio-record participant interviews to facilitate the sharing of personal accounts as they pertained to the study.

As the data were collected, they were refined in order to determine the interrelationship of categories of information. I conducted initial surveys with all the teachers in the districts to identify the early career teachers. I then did a brief follow-up to collect pertinent information from early career teachers as needed. The interviews in this mixed methods case study were conducted in a conversational mode with open-ended questions. For the purposes of this study, I felt that it was important to determine the demographics of early career teachers. I interviewed six early career teachers from northeastern North Carolina school districts for about 30 minutes each. To gather the necessary data for this case study, it was possible that follow-up interviews, per the recommendations of Yin (2011), would be needed. This, however, was not necessary, as the initial interviews adequately provided the data needed.

In Table 5, I display the sense of community construct with the research question for each tenet of the theory. In addition, the collection tool and participants are assigned to each tenet. The survey and interviews in this study provided data to inform me about teacher attrition and early career teachers' perceptions about sense of community.

**Table 5: Sense of Community Research Matrix**

Research Question	Variables/Tenets	Data Source	Participants
RQ1: How important to participants is a sense of community with other community members?	Variable - importance of sense of community	Sense of Community Index 2, Item A.1.	Survey participants
RQ2: What are the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists within their northeastern North Carolina districts?	Variable -perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree which sense of community exists	Sense of Community Index 2, Items B.1-B.24	Survey participants
RQ3: Are there differences among the survey ratings of teachers regarding the four tenets of sense of community theory, which include meeting of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connection?	Variables - tenets of sense of community theory, which include meeting of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connection	Sense of Community Index 2, Items B1-B6; B7-B12; B13-B18; B19-B24.	Survey participants
RQ4: What are the perceptions of participants in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers?	Variables-independent: the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists dependent: persistence of early career teachers Tenets-membership; shared emotional connection	Individual interview protocol, Items 1,2,3,6,6a,7.	Individual interview participants
RQ5: What are the perceptions of participants regarding the degree to which the school districts seek to instill a sense of community for early career teachers?	Variable-degree to which the districts seek to instill a sense of community Tenets-influence; meeting of needs	Individual interview protocol, Items 4,5,9.	Individual interview participants

**Table 5 Continued**

Research Question	Variables/Tenets	Data Source	Participants
RQ6: 6. What are the strategies that school districts use to promote early career teachers' sense of community?	Variable - strategies district uses to promote early career teacher's sense of community Tenets-influence; meeting needs	Individual interview protocol, Items 7, 10, 11, 12	Individual interview participants
RQ7: To what degree are the strategies used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community perceived to be effective in improving new teacher persistence?	Variables - independent: degree of effectiveness of the district strategies to promote sense of community dependent: improving the persistence of early career teachers Tenets-membership; meeting needs	Individual interview protocol, Items 8, 13, 14.	Individual interview participants

It was my responsibility to keep a personal journal to capture data throughout the case study, as well as to jot down information and thoughts during the research timeline. Consistent with the guidance from Yin (2011), as I made observations of participants or participated with them, I needed to journal and take down analytic and methodical notes about my interactions and conjectures on a daily basis. This provided a way for me to capture my own feelings and reflections about my research.

### **Data Management and Security**

As Yin (2011) advised, I was protective and sensitive about my notes, electronic files, and hardcopy files while carefully handling any documents and/or artifacts that were part of my data. I mastered the audio equipment prior to scheduling times to meet with participants in order

to be efficient with the device to refrain from extending the meeting time, having to re-record, or needing to reschedule due to mistakes. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed. I was aware that services were available to have an outside party transcribe them, but then I would have taken the chance of losing some of the authenticity of the data. Time was scheduled in order for me to review the recordings.

When it came to note-taking, I kept a notebook/journal. I used the first few pages in the notebook to create a table of contents to keep up with the notes taken on a daily basis. I also numbered the pages and included the date of each entry. I organized the notebook in Cornell note fashion, leaving space on the right side for fieldwork comments. I also developed my own transcribing language when I met with participants, but at the same time, I ensured precision and accuracy.

The hard-copy data were secured on my person and in a locked filed cabinet located in my home when not in use. Participants' information was kept confidential via the transcribing language I developed; in addition, I created pseudonyms so that participants' names were not included in the field notes. I maintained a master list that matched participants' actual names to their pseudonyms as a separate password-protected file on my personal computer. All electronic data and files were secured with a password on my personal laptop computer.

### **Data Analysis**

Rigor is an important aspect of data analysis. According to Yin (2011), rigor results by exercising three precautions:

1. Checking and rechecking the accuracy of your data;
  2. Making your analysis as thorough and complete as possible rather than cutting corners;
- and

3. Continually acknowledging the unwanted biases imposed by your own values when you are analyzing your data. (p. 177)

I began with analysis of the survey data, which provided information through which I could answer Research Questions 1 and 2. I provided basic descriptive statistics for these results, including frequency, means, standard deviations, and percentages. I also calculated some basic differential analyses among subscale means.

As I analyzed the data from the interviews, I coded the data by categorizing it and putting it into chunks of text. Consistent with the recommendations of Joffe and Yardley (2004), once the data were in chunks of text, I labeled them as I noticed the data falling into certain categories; this allowed for retrieval and analysis later. Open coding was the appropriate coding procedure for this case study, due to the fact that I was investigating the perceptions of early career teachers. Open coding primarily involves taking the data apart and examining the discrete parts for the differences and similarities, which allows other concepts or sub-categories to arise in the data (Priest et al., 2002).

### **Statement of Subjectivity**

In my experience as a former teacher, teacher mentor, instructional coach, administrator, and central office administrator who continues to work in economically disadvantaged and low-performing schools and districts, I have seen early career teachers come and go. Some of them do not even stay in the profession for two years. I have been a teacher mentor and was responsible for providing support and guidance to early career teachers. As an administrator, I found that there were times when, no matter what I tried to do to encourage the early career teacher to stay, she or he would leave. New teachers are sometimes provided with mentors, buddy teachers, assignment of a retired teacher, and a peer evaluator, but the majority of them

still leave these districts. I have worked with early career teachers who were recent graduates of traditional preparation programs, those who were part of Teach for America (TFA), and those who had come to the United States on a visa. The attrition rates among these groups varied. I have 24 years of experience in education, having entered the profession as a lateral entry teacher. In fact, I was once an early career teacher who left an economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural district after my third year for a more affluent district.

The majority of my educational career has focused upon addressing the learning needs of students in economically disadvantaged, rural schools. My first teaching position was that of a fourth grade teacher in an economically challenged district where I was a lateral entry teacher. I am entering my 24th year in education and the longest I have stayed in a district was in an affluent urban/suburban district; however, I was working at a Title I school in that district. Since then, I have worked in multiple rural areas within North Carolina. Thus, I can speak to the unique challenges and difficulties of such districts because of these personal experiences. Teachers, administrators, and staff alike left at an accelerated rate, just as I perceived and the data showed to be true. I have noticed that the staff members who would be considered stayers were often individuals who were born and raised in the area or neighboring districts. In my experience, schools located in rural, economic-disadvantaged districts with low-performing schools deal with movers and leavers quite frequently.

As a teacher leader and mentor coordinator, I have worked with beginning teachers and early career teachers who enter education at a rural, economically disadvantaged, and low-performing school for their first teaching position. As I reflect on those experiences, I see where I advocated more for the students than the novice teacher by providing assistance to impact instruction for the students. However, when I became an administrator, I quickly noticed the

need to advocate for both teachers and students. The reason that I noticed the need for both was when one of my second-year teachers, who was a TFA participant and from Kentucky, reported that she felt threatened by another teacher. Both teachers were on the School Leadership Team, and I considered them to be model teachers in the building. I therefore had to quickly devise a plan of action to address and improve the morale and relationships of the teachers in the building, to make sure everyone felt they belonged to the community of the school. As a result, the collegial relationships within the building became better, the academics of the entire school were impacted, and the school exceeded growth.

In conducting the current study, I was aware that these experiences could possibly hamper my objectivity. Thus, I took steps to make sure that I remained objective. My measures to safeguard against subjectivity are outlined in the section on trustworthiness that follows.

### **Trustworthiness**

Due the significance of this research, I wanted to ensure a valid case study of early career teachers' sense of community. Yin (2011) stated, "a valid study is one that has properly collected and interpreted its data, so that the conclusions accurately reflect and represent the real world that was studied" (p. 78). In an effort to help researchers address validity challenges, Maxwell (2009) developed seven strategies for combatting threats to validity in qualitative research:

1. *Intensive long-term involvement* – to produce a complete and in-depth understanding of field situations, including the opportunity to make repeated observations and interviews;
2. *Rich" data* – to cover fully the field observations and interviews with detailed and varied data;

3. *Respondent validation* – to obtain feedback from the people studied, to lessen the misinterpretation of their self-reported behaviors and views;
4. *Search for discrepant evidence and negative cases* – to test rival or competing explanations;
5. *Triangulation* – to collect converging evidence from different sources;
6. *Quasi-statistics* – to use actual numbers instead of adjectives, such as when claiming something “typical,” “rare,” or “prevalent”; and
7. *Comparison* – to compare explicitly the results across different settings, groups, or events. (p. 244-245)

Yin (2011) provided three objectives for building trustworthiness in qualitative research. He mentions transparency, methodic-ness, and adherence to evidence. In order to be transparent in this study, I described and documented my research procedures for the purpose of others reviewing and assessing them. Others had to be able to scrutinize my work, as such scrutiny would serve to aid me by providing criticism, support, or refinement. It was also my responsibility to do my qualitative research methodically. I followed an orderly set of research procedures to ensure that the research was complete, with a systematic way of crosschecking the study’s procedures and data. It was also important for me to have a researcher’s journal for the purpose of self-reflection to record my “experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise” (Yin, 2011, p. 20). Lastly, my qualitative research had to be based on analysis of an explicit set of evidence to which I firmly adhered when interpreting the data fairly in order to reach objective conclusions.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The findings of this study are specific to northeastern North Carolina economically-disadvantaged low-performing rural school districts. Early career teachers with 3 to 5 years of teaching experience were the focus for this mixed methods cases study of sense of community. The teachers for participation were identified via an electronic survey sent to the districts or through inquiries with the districts' human resource departments. For this study, I focused on northeastern North Carolina school districts, thereby limiting the number of participants to consider. In addition, when surveys are sent via the Internet, responses may be limited, due in part to individuals not opening emails to complete the surveys. In light of this, selected participants received notification that they were chosen for this study.

For this study, teachers with more than five years were not considered because they seemed to be more invested and stable in the district. The literature of interest included the following topics: persistence, sense of community, economically disadvantaged rural school districts that are low-performing, and early career teachers. North Carolina school districts that were high-performing or performing at the state level and had a low attrition rate were not included in this study. Consistent with the guidance of Creswell (2013), this was a mixed methods case study for the purpose of providing an in-depth understanding of the new teachers' sense of belonging and sense of community in order to derive meaning from the study. The nature of the chosen methodology and the number of districts and participants did limit the degree to which results could be generalized to locations other than those included in the study.

### **Assumptions**

According to Wargo (2015), there are common assumptions to be made when writing a dissertation. For this study of early career teachers, the following assumptions were included:

1. The participants would be honest and candid when answering the survey and interview questions.
2. Based on the criteria for selection of the sample, all participants in the research would have shared similar experiences.
3. Participants would not fear retribution for their participation in the study or for their responses.
4. Participants would be sincere in participating and their motives for being a part of this research would be honorable.

### **Chapter Summary**

The aim of this study was to explore perceptions of early career teachers' sense of community in a rural, economically disadvantaged, and low-performing district. A mixed methods case study allowed me to inquire of participants sense of community in order to determine the impact of sense of community on their decisions to persist in their teaching position in such districts.

Chapter 3 introduced the study research design and methodology. An application of the theoretical framework and research questions were included. Following these elements were descriptions of the study's participants and instrumentation. Instrument validity and reliability were also addressed, along with the research procedures. The processes for data collection and analysis were addressed, followed by my subjectivity statement, trustworthiness, delimitations, and assumptions for the research. Chapter 4 follows with a summary of the results of this study.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter provides results from my study of early career teacher perceptions about their sense of community and choices to persist in an economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school district. The following sections address the results from the quantitative elements of the study that are included in Research Questions 1-3. This is followed by the results for the qualitative elements from the teacher interviews in Research Questions 4-7.

The purpose of this study was to expand the understanding of the impact of sense of community on early career teachers' choices to persist in an economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school district. A mixed methods approach was taken with this study. The study contained a survey that was administered to early career teachers. Interviews were conducted with six of the survey completers to enable me to further detail teachers' perceptions of their sense of community within their districts. This chapter reports the results of the analyses of the survey and interview data from the study.

### **Results for the Quantitative Elements of the Study**

The quantitative elements of the study were based on the Sense of Community Index 2, which consisted of items that pertained to the four tenets of sense of community: Reinforcement (Meeting) of Needs (Items B1-B6), Membership (Items B7-B12), Influence (Items B13-B18) and Shared Emotional Connection (B19-B24). The survey, which was administered in Qualtrics, is located in Appendix C. Participants received an electronic request to complete the survey.

### **Demographic Data Results**

The survey collected demographic information in order to screen potential candidates so that only those who met the criteria for participation would complete the instrument. A pre-

survey that consisted of two questions was included at the beginning of the survey to identify early career teachers with 3 to 5 years of teaching experience and whether they had taught in their current district at least three of these years. The items were worded as follows in the survey:

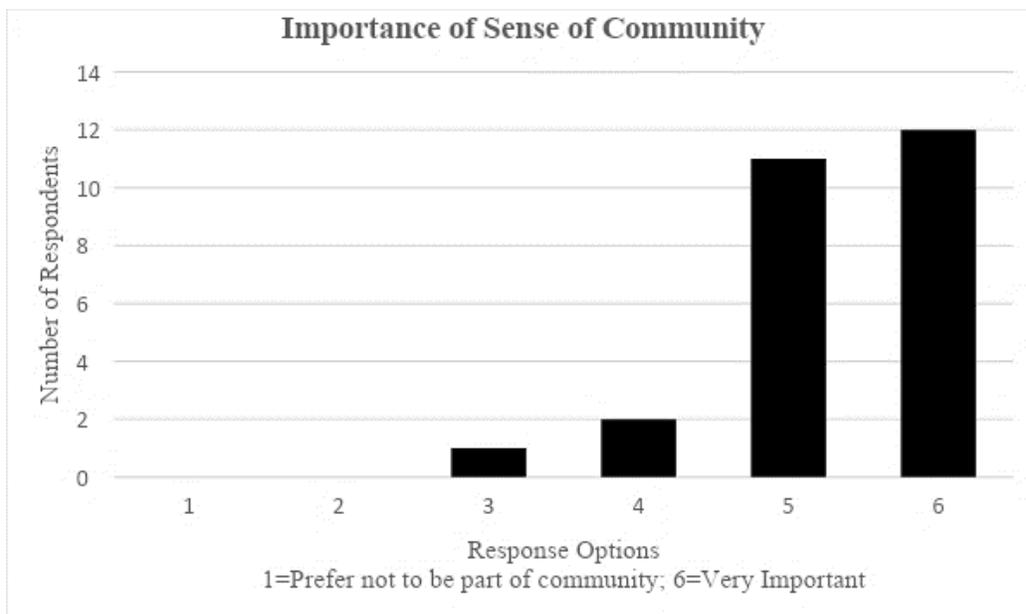
1. Please select the number of years of teaching experience.
  - a. Less than 3 years
  - b. 3 to 5 years
  - c. More than 6 years
  
2. Please select the number of years of teaching experience you have in your current school.
  - a. Less than 3 years
  - b. 3 years or more

The pre-survey questions were included to screen for early career teachers in seven economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. The survey was distributed to 151 teachers based on names provided by the Human Resource Director of each district. Eighty individuals opened the survey. Of these respondents, 58 completed the two-question pre-survey. Of the 58 individuals who completed the pre-survey, 26 had both 3 to 5 years of teaching experience and three or more years in the current district.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was written as follows: How important is a sense of community with other community members to participants? After responding to the demographic items, those participants who met the criteria completed Section A of the instrument that included a single query: How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members? There were six response choices on the Likert scale: prefer not to be a part of the community (1), not important at all (2), not very important (3), somewhat important (4),

important (5), and very important (6). I assigned point values to the response options ranging from 1 (prefer not to be a part of the community) to 6 (very important). The responses to this item from the survey were analyzed using quantitative descriptive statistics. These analyses yielded a mean of 5.31, a standard deviation of 0.79, the minimum rating (3.00), the maximum rating (6.00), and the median rating (5.00). The mean response of these early career teachers regarding the importance of a sense of community with other community members was 5.31 and fell between the responses of important and very important. Figure 4 displays the frequency distribution of responses from the participants.



Notes: n = 26. The mean value was 5.31.

**Figure 4: Frequency of Responses Regarding Importance of Sense of Community**

## Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was stated as follows: What are the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists within their northeastern North Carolina districts? The survey gave participants 24 statements about beliefs that represent feelings towards community. These early career teacher participants rated their level of feeling towards the community within the school district. The response options for each statement were on a scale with point values from 1-4 as follows: not at all (1), somewhat (2), mostly (3), and completely (4). The scale midpoint is 2.5 on such a scale. Mean scores and standard deviations for each statement rated by the participants were calculated. The minimum and maximum values were computed. The results of Research Question 2 are displayed in Table 6 below.

**Table 6: Rating of Survey Items**

*Prompt to participants: How well do each of the following statements represent how you feel about this community?*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
1. I get important needs of mine met because I am part of this community.	2.34	0.75	1	4
2. Community members and I value the same things.	2.46	0.71	1	4
3. This community has been successful in getting the needs of its members met.	2.23	0.65	1	4
4. Being a member of this community makes me feel good.	3.00	0.89	1	4
5. When I have a problem, I can talk about it with members of this community.	2.53	0.81	1	4
6. People in this community have similar needs, priorities, and goals.	2.34	0.89	1	4
7. I can trust people in this community.	2.42	0.76	1	4
8. I can recognize most of the members of this community.	2.69	0.79	1	4
9. Most community members know me.	2.65	0.80	1	4
10. The community has symbols and expressions of membership such as clothes, signs, art, architecture, logos, landmarks, and flags that people can recognize.	2.50	0.95	1	4
11. I put a lot of time and effort into being a part of this community.	2.84	0.73	1	4

**Table 6 Continued**

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
12. Being a member of this community is a part of my identity.	2.61	0.98	1	4
13. Fitting into this community is important to me.	2.50	0.81	1	4
14. This community can influence other communities.	2.73	0.92	1	4
15. I care about what other community members think of me.	2.57	0.86	1	4
16. I have influence over what this community is like.	2.07	0.89	1	4
17. If there is a problem in this community, members can get it solved.	2.23	0.82	1	4
18. The community has good leaders.	2.53	0.86	1	4
19. It is very important to me to be a part of this community.	2.76	0.99	1	4
20. I am with other community members a lot and enjoy being with them.	2.46	0.90	1	4
21. I expect to be a part of this community for a long time.	2.80	0.94	1	4
22. Member of this community have shared important events together, such as holidays, celebrations, or disasters.	2.73	0.72	1	4
23. I feel hopeful about the future of this community.	2.80	0.80	2	4
24. Members of this community care about each other.	2.73	0.83	1	4
Total	M = 2.57	S = 0.8	1	4

Notes: n = 26

The mean scores of Items 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 19, 21, 22, 23, and 24 were higher than the 1-4 scale midpoint of 2.5. The data show that early career teachers agree slightly to mostly with these statements about sense of community. Item 4, which read, “Being a member of this community makes me feel good,” had the highest mean of 3.00. This statement was one of the six items under the sense of community subscale of Reinforcement (Meeting) of Needs.

The next highest mean occurred with Item 11 (M = 2.84); this item was one of the six under the sense of community subscale of Membership. Items 21 (M = 2.80) and 23 (M = 2.80) had the next highest means; both statements fell under the sense of community subscale of Shared Emotional Connection. Items 10 and 13 had the mean score of 2.50, which is the midpoint of the 1-4 scale. A mean of 2.50 shows that the statements moderately represent how early career teachers feel about the sense of community in their school district. Item 10 was one

of the 6 items within the sense of community subscale of Membership. Item 13 was one of the six items within the sense of community subscale, Influence.

The mean scores of Items 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 16, 17, and 20 were lower than the 1-4 scale midpoint of 2.5. The data show that early career teachers agree somewhat to not at all with these statements about sense of community. Item 16, which read “I have influence over what this community is like,” had the lowest mean score of 2.07. This statement was one of the six items under the sense of community subscale of Influence. The next lowest mean scores were Items 3 (M = 2.23) and 17 (M = 2.23). Item 3 was one of the six items under the sense of community subscale of Reinforcement (Meeting) of Needs, and Item 17 is within the sense of community subscale of Influence. Item 7 had a mean score of 2.42 and is one of the six items under the sense of community subscale of Membership. Items 2 and 20 both had the mean score of 2.46. Item 2 is one of the six items under the sense of community subscale of Reinforcement (Meeting) of Needs. Item 20 is one of the six items under the sense of community subscale of Shared Emotional Connection.

The calculated grand mean of all the survey item scores was 2.57. The grand mean score of data is 0.07 above the midpoint of 2.5 on a 1-4 scale. The grand mean score gives the average rating of the 26 participants across all survey items and represents the degree to which these early career teachers agreed with the statements about sense of community in their districts. The grand mean score shows that early career teachers’ level agreement about the degree to which the statements about sense of community fit their community was almost exactly in the middle of the somewhat to mostly range. There are some sense of community subscales where teachers tended to agree a bit more than others (see Table 7 below).

**Table 7: Sense of Community Subscales and the Midpoint**

	Items	Below 2.50	Above 2.50
Reinforcement (Meeting) of Needs	(B1-B6)	1, 2, 3, and 6	4 and 5
Membership	(B7-B12)	7	8, 9, 11, and 12
Influence*	(B13-B18)	16 and 17	14 and 18
Shared Emotional Connection	(B19-B24)	20	19, 21, 22, 23, and 24

\*Item 13 is not listed because it equals the midpoint.

The table of subscale means above shows that these early career teachers tended slightly to feel that the community somewhat meets their needs. They tended slightly to feel mostly that they are members of the community. The data show that they tended slightly to feel they somewhat have influence within the community. They tended slightly to feel mostly that they have a shared connection to the community.

### **Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 was stated as follows: Are there differences among the survey ratings of teachers regarding the four tenets of sense of community theory, which include Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection? The 24-item survey was divided into four subscales, each with six items related to one of the tenets.

Reinforcement (Meeting) of Needs was addressed by Items B1-B6, Membership was addressed by Items B7-B12, Influence was addressed by Items B13-B18, and Shared Emotional Connection was addressed by B19-B24. The mean score for each tenet was calculated and placed Table 8.

**Table 8: Mean Scores of the Four Tenets of Sense of Community**

Participant	Tenet 1 (B1-B6)	Tenet 2 (B7-B12)	Tenet 3 (B13-B18)	Tenet 4 (B19-B24)
1	1.83	2.00	2.00	2.83
2	1.50	1.67	1.67	1.83
3	2.50	3.33	2.33	3.33
4	2.67	2.50	2.00	2.00
5	2.83	2.67	2.50	3.17
6	2.17	2.33	2.00	2.00
7	2.83	2.67	2.67	3.00
8	1.83	2.83	2.33	2.50
9	3.17	3.00	2.83	3.00
10	2.67	2.67	2.00	2.17
11	1.67	1.33	1.67	1.67
12	2.50	2.67	2.67	3.00
13	2.67	3.00	2.33	2.50
14	2.83	3.00	3.00	3.00
15	1.83	2.50	2.33	2.67
16	1.50	1.67	1.50	1.33
17	2.00	2.17	1.83	2.67
18	2.50	2.17	2.33	2.67
19	1.83	3.17	2.50	2.00
20	2.17	2.33	3.17	3.17
21	3.67	3.83	3.83	3.83
22	3.50	3.83	3.50	4.00
23	2.50	1.83	2.00	2.33
24	3.17	3.17	2.83	3.67
25	2.83	3.00	2.67	3.00
26	3.50	2.83	3.00	3.33
Total mean score for subscales	2.49	2.62	2.44	2.72

Within the data, Tenet 4 (Shared Emotional Connection) had the highest mean score ( $M = 2.72$ ); Tenet 2 (Membership) was the next highest mean score ( $M = 2.62$ ). These were both slightly above the midpoint of the scale response range. Thus, participants on average slightly perceived that they mostly have a shared emotional connection to their community and that they

are members of the community. The means for Tenet 1 (Meeting of Needs) and Tenet 3 (Influence) were very close in value; Meeting of Needs had a mean of 2.49, and Influence had a mean of 2.44. These means were very slightly under the midpoint of the scale response range. Thus, the perception of the participants about the degree to which their needs are reinforced by the community and about their influence within the community fell midway along the continuum from somewhat to mostly.

After calculating the mean scores for the four tenet subscales, I conducted an ANOVA test in order to determine if the differences in the four subscales means were statistically significant (Table 9). The results of the ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences among the four subscale means. Statistically speaking, no significant difference was found in the participants' level of agreement among the four subscales that represented the four tenets. Means for each of the subscales fell between [agree] somewhat and [agree] mostly, suggesting moderate agreement with the subscale statements.

**Table 9: ANOVA Summary**

Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
Tenet 1	26	64.67	2.49	0.39
Tenet 2	26	68.17	2.62	0.39
Tenet 3	26	63.49	2.44	0.33
Tenet 4	26	70.67	2.72	0.45

The variance gives a rough idea of the spread. According to the data, the variation of responses was similar in Tenets 1, 2, and 3. The variation of responses was different in Tenet 4, which is Shared Emotional Connection. Thus, participants perceive there are varying levels of shared emotional connection within the community even though they feel connected. The ANOVA summary shows that the level of agreement among participants about the degree to which their school districts address the tenets of a sense of community fell between the continuum of somewhat and mostly; i.e., to a moderate degree. The mean scores hovered around the midpoint score of 2.50.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare participants' perceptions of the four tenets of community: Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection. There was no significant difference between the means of the four tenets at  $p < .05$  [ $F(3, 100) = 1.06, p = 0.36$ ]. These results suggest that there are not meaningful differences in responses across the four tenets. Participants did not see these four tenets as being distinct from one another (see Table 10 below).

**Table 10: ANOVA Variation**

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	1.24	3	0.41	1.06	0.36	2.69
Within Groups	38.95	100	0.39			
Total	40.19	103				

In this mixed methods study, the quantitative results were gathered from the 26 respondents who met the criteria for participation. The quantitative results were used to answer

Research Question 1, 2, and 3 of this study. I summarized the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum in order to answer Research Question 1: How important to participants is a sense of community with other community members? The mean rating was 5.31. Out of 26 responses, 23 participants responded that it was either important or very important to feel a sense of community with other community members.

Research Question 2 read: What are the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists within their northeastern North Carolina districts? To answer this question, I analyzed the pertinent data from the Sense of Community Index survey. There were 26 participants who rated the 24 survey items. The rating scale for the items was as follows: not at all (1), somewhat (2), mostly (3), and completely (4). The midpoint is 2.50 of the scale. After calculating the subscale means, I calculated the grand mean to be 2.57 across all item responses. The grand mean and midpoint are within 0.07 points of one another; this showed that the participants were in very slight agreement with the total scale statements about the community.

Research Question 3 was the last quantitative research question and it read: Are there differences among the survey ratings of teachers regarding the four tenets of sense of community theory, which include Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection? I ran an ANOVA as my test for a differential statistics test. The subscale means were as follows: meeting of needs (2.49), membership (2.62), influence (2.44), and shared emotional connection (2.72). There was no significant difference between the tenets. Participants perceived the tenets to be similar within the context of sense of community.

## **Results for the Qualitative Elements of the Study**

I asked teacher participants whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. I interviewed six teachers who responded affirmatively in order to obtain data needed for the qualitative elements of this study. The responses from the survey were categorized by the research question and tenet to capture codes. From this process, I was able to identify emergent themes and topics.

Prior to asking questions that addressed the research questions, I asked a set of opening questions to gain demographic information about each participant. The remainder of the interview questions were used to gather data for the qualitative elements of the protocol addressed in Research Questions 4, 5, 6, and 7. The interview questions and research questions for which they provided data are organized in matrices at the beginning of the pertinent subsections that follow.

### **Analysis of Participants' Demographic Data**

Each participant in this study signed the consent form that signified her/his willingness to be interviewed. Before beginning each interview, I asked participants for permission to audio-record the conversation, and each consented to this as well. Each participant was informed that the interview would not exceed one hour.

Of the six teachers who met the purposive sampling criteria and were contacted for an interview, all agreed to participate in the study. All six participants taught in northeastern North Carolina. Each teacher who participated in the interview was assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of preserving confidentiality in the processes of data analysis and reporting. Each teacher was interviewed individually via the Zoom online meeting platform.

To carry out the interviews, I developed a structured interview protocol (Appendix G). Data were collected from the six teachers during audio-recorded interviews that were conducted via the Zoom online meeting platform. Prior to the face-to-face interview, each teacher first signed a consent document (Appendix F) indicating her/his willingness to participate in the interview. During the interviews, the individuals responded to the questions that I posed from the protocol. These responses provided me with deep and rich insights about teachers' sense of community. Teachers answered 14 questions regarding sense of community, what it means to have sense of community, how they define persistence, strategies that are used to instill sense of community, and strategies used by the district to sustain employment and keep them in the district.

A transcription of the recordings was completed after each interview. Interview data were analyzed. Common themes, trends, and patterns were identified from the responses of all participants. Transcripts were read and Excel was used so that codes and quotes were captured. These interview protocol for teachers began with background items. Organized in Table 11 below are these interview questions. The interview questions asked for information about how long each participant had been a teacher, how long they had been in their position and school district, their highest degree, what they taught, and where/how they received their preparation to become a teacher. Each teacher who participated in the interview was assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of preserving confidentiality in the processes of data analysis and reporting.

**Table 11: Matrix of Demographic Items from the Teacher Participants**

Opening	Interview Questions
Background of participants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How long have you been a teacher? In your present position? In this school district?</li><li>2. What is your highest degree?</li><li>3. What do you teach?</li><li>4. Where/how did you receive your teacher preparation?</li></ol>

### **Overview of Participants**

Four of the participants were female and two were male. Their combined experience in teaching totaled 27 years. Individual details about each participant, offered in response to the interview prompts above, are provided below.

**Brittany.** Brittany was a high school teacher who had five years of experience, she had been in her present position for five years and worked in the same school district for five years. Her highest degree was a Master of Arts degree in Political Science. At the time of the interview, she taught American History and Civics. She received her teacher preparation training from the University of Pennsylvania, where she was originally from, and she took the praxis in order to obtain a teaching job in North Carolina.

**Griffin.** Griffin was a high school teacher in the special education department who had five years of experience in the same teaching position and same school district. Griffin’s highest degree was a Master’s degree in Business Administration. He taught adapted special education. He received his teacher preparation online from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

**Casey.** Casey was a high school teacher who taught English I and English II; she had 5 years of experience in her current position and school district. Casey’s highest degree was a

Master's degree. Her undergraduate degree was in English and Biblical studies. She was a lateral entry teacher through Teach for America.

**Levi.** Levi was a high school teacher who taught World History and Psychology and was entering his sixth year of teaching; five of the years were in the same teaching position at the same school and same school district, and he had spent one year at another school in another district. Levi received his Bachelor's degree and was working on his Master's degree. Levi taught ninth and tenth graders. The subjects he taught were history, civics and economics, psychology, and world history, and he previously taught American history. He graduated with an Associate's degree, received his Bachelor's degree from East Carolina University, and completed the two-year teaching licensure program.

**Katrina.** Katrina was a high school teacher in the special education department who had four years of experience; all four of these years were in the same position and same school district. Her highest degree was a Bachelor's degree in Education and Special Education. She taught in an exceptional children's program and worked with students in pursuit of an occupational course of study. She received her teacher preparation from Grand Canyon University.

**Stevie.** Stevie was a middle school teacher who taught STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and who had three years of experience in her present position in the same school district. Her highest degree was a Bachelor's of Science Education (Science and Social Studies). She received her teacher preparation from Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania.

## **Analysis of Qualitative Interview Data to Answer Research Questions**

The following sections address the results for Research Questions 4 to 7, each of which was explored through qualitative data collected in participants' interview responses. Research Question 4 explored the perceptions of teachers in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers. Research Question 5 explored the perceptions of teachers regarding the degree to which the districts seek to instill a sense of community for early career teachers. Research Questions 6 and 7 are likewise a pair of queries that explore perspectives regarding the strategies used by school districts to promote sense of community and improve persistence of early career teachers.

### **Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 was a qualitative inquiry and read as follows: What are the perceptions of participants in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers? The theoretical framework addressed the elements of sense of community and posited that four tenets embedded in the construct of sense of community; these include Membership, Influence, Meeting of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection. The tenets that undergird Research Question 4 are membership and shared emotional connection. The membership tenet is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness, and shared emotional connection speaks to commitment and belief that members share similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). I collected data to answer this research question from the six teachers who were described in the previous subsection. The interview questions were designed to elicit participant responses regarding the theoretical framework tenets described above. Table 12

presents the items from the interview protocol for teachers that were used to gather responses needed to answer Research Question 4.

**Table 12: Matrix of Research Question 4 and Participant Interview Questions**

Research Question	Interview Questions
RQ4: What are the perceptions of participants in rural, economically disadvantaged low-performing school districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What words come to mind when you think of community?</li> <li>2. How do you define a sense of community?</li> <li>3. How important is community to you as an early career teacher?</li> <li>4. Share examples of how you perceive community in this district.</li> <li>5. How do you define persistence with respect to employment?</li> <li>6. Why do you think teachers persist in this district?</li> <li>7. Why have you stayed for 3 years or past 3 years?</li> </ol>

The questions in Table 12 were not asked in sequence during the interviews; the responses of the six participants often transcended the particular question on the table and addressed previous questions or anticipated other questions. In some instances, the participants provided information not addressed in the interview protocol. As a result, I elected to organize the findings from these interviews by thematic subsections rather than in the sequence of the interview items listed in Table 12.

**Giving Meaning to the Sense of Community**

Each participant offered different terms when I asked the interview questions that called upon them to share words that they associated with “community.” While the words varied,

several were repeated across multiple interviews. These included the themes of family, working together, and support. These themes are explored in separate subsections that follow. There were also descriptors that came up only once.

## **Family**

As I analyzed the responses of the participants, I noted that family was mentioned in 3 of the 6 (50%) of the responses. The early career teachers expressed the importance of family in their community, sharing how they believed the construct of “family” at work provides comfort and allows them to feel at ease in doing their job. Brittany spoke of a “sense of belonging...kind of like your family that’s not related to you.” Griffin gave the following words: “togetherness, thoughtfulness, and like a family. Casey provided a list of words that consisted of partnership, success, parents, teachers, students, business, and school districts. The belief of family made it easier for them to come to work, continue to work, and work in strenuous circumstances. Levi’s response was “family, working together, and accomplishing goals.” The words that Katrina stated were simply, “helping each other.” Stevie had a string of thoughts when stating her words: “respect for one another, working together, being there for one another, and supporting when it is needed.” Other terms associated with family that were brought out in this question were: thoughtfulness, parents, respect for one another, and being there for one another. Further along in the interview, Stevie made the statement, “I truly feel a sense of family.” The belief of family gave the early career teachers the confidence that if something happened to them, their colleagues would assist them. Their responses showed how elements of community moved dimensions of their jobs past the professional and into personal realms.

## **Working Together**

The participants defined sense of community, and their definitions contained references to working together and being there for one another. These constructs became themes, as they were evident in each participant's response. The theme of working together was a thread in responses throughout 3 of the 7 interview prompts that were designed to provide data for Research Question 4 (Item 1, Item 2, and Item 4 in Table 12). The theme of working together is explored in the concepts from their personal definitions of community in the paragraphs that follow.

Brittany continued to elaborate from her list of words by defining sense of community in the following way: "like a feeling of belonging, feeling valued; kind of like a cohesive unit that works together." Griffin defined sense of community as "a group of people that are working together and they're trying to achieve a goal." Casey's definition was comparable as she said, "everyone's working together for the greater good." Levi provided a more detailed definition of sense of community:

...people that get along together. People that even though you have disagreements, you still come together, you're there for each other during the good times and the bad times. You want to help each other out. You want to support each other, but you also can give criticism but...good criticism to help each other grow and be better.

Katrina's definition was stated as, "gathering, it takes a whole community to raise a child; coming together, being there for one another; communities can be anywhere." Stevie's definition was as follows: "I define it by how you know what is needed, how people react to one another when someone needs help. People are there for one another, willing to help where it is needed." In the early career teacher responses, their belief that working together creates community, a

supportive community where individuals learn from one another and develop closer relationships that helps them to grow into better teachers.

### **Support**

The participants were asked to provide examples of how they perceived community in the school district, and the themes of togetherness and support were prevalent in their observations. Brittany was asked for examples of what she perceived as community, to which she responded, “Friends I can lean on for support; close knit; PLC; staff meetings, activities; strong sense of community...just like activities that bring us closer together.” Griffin said that “veteran teachers assist teachers that are new.” Casey responded by saying, “having someone come to my classroom that’s willing to help me...being able to help me or being able to give me pointers and feedback.” When Levi responded to the question, he said, “I know at our school we all work together. We all share.” Katrina’s example of community was succinctly described as, “a lot of people helping.” Stevie seemed to use a more personal example in stating, “something happens with a family or myself personally, they’re always there to be supportive.” These early career teachers perceived togetherness and support as pertinent parts of a community. These themes are particularly noteworthy because the six early career teachers are not originally from the rural area in which they are teaching.

### **Importance of Community**

I asked the participants whether sense of community is important to early career teachers. In their responses, it was evident that these early career teachers believed that support was an important part of sense of community and that sense of community is essential. Casey and Katrina both stated that sense of community is “very important.” Griffin said that community among colleagues is “very important; you would expect them to come and assist; united.” The

other male, Levi, stated that sense of community is, “very important because if you have a community, you’re going to be more successful.” Brittany responded to the question about the importance of sense of community by describing it, “very, very important. If I wasn’t friends with my co-workers, then I don’t think I could do this job if I didn’t have friends who I could lean on for support.” Stevie expressed the importance of sense of community by describing it as, “how you know what is needed, how people react to one another when someone needs help. People are there for one another, willing to, you know, help where it is needed.” In these responses, teachers relayed the importance of a new teacher needing supports in order to feel successful and a part of the community. Brittany said in one of her other responses during the interview, “We can always talk to someone if we’re having an issue. The staff at my school is particularly supportive.”

### **Significant Outlier Observations**

Levi was an early career teacher who was entering his sixth year of teaching. During the interview process, multiple participants said that community is in part about the work that is done together, but Levi also associated sense of community with process improvement and results. He observed that it is “very important because if you have community, you’re going to be more successful.” He believed that community contributes to the success of early career teachers; where people work together in community, performance improves. In his definition about sense of community, Levi pointed out how community helps early career teachers grow and become better through support and criticism:

Even though you have disagreements, you still come together, you’re there for each other during the good times and the bad times... You want to support each other but you also can give criticism, good criticism to help each other grow and be better.

His definition asserted that community goes deeper than just being there for one another; more than that, it shows that as teachers work together, have misunderstandings, and work through those misunderstandings, growth takes place as the early career teachers improve in their craft.

### **Persistence**

When asking the participants to define persistence with respect to employment, I had to repeat the question a few times before receiving a response. Each participant needed extra time to think about a response to the question. The primary theme that emerged from the responses was that persistence meant that teachers would continue. However, the nature of the activity or role in which they would continue varied in participants' responses.

Brittany described persistence as, "having the will to stay at a location or/and having the will to continue to do the work that you do every day." Griffin's response focused on the job, "It's where you want to make sure you were doing your job; make sure you're doing your job so you can keep it." Casey seemed to respond from a place of introspection by saying, "Going beyond what is in yourself; always be willing to reflect on practice." The following definition provided by Levi seemed to reflect persistence with the district office in mind; he said it meant "everyone is treated fairly; you're not moving around every year." Katrina based her response on the universal health crisis, "with the pandemic, folks been laid off; hard to keep teaching; teaching is not for everybody." Stevie wrapped up the definitions by saying, "the odds are against us in a lot of ways; I am continuing to train myself to go to different conferences...being persistent in that way, learning from other staff members."

### **Reasons for Persistence**

Once the participants provided definitions for the word *persistence*, they were asked, "Why do you think teachers persist in this district?" As I reviewed their responses, the themes

varied. Brittany said, “I think that teachers persists in this district, because [the district leaders] take good care of us, they provide us with materials that we need.” According to Griffin, “[Teachers] don’t have anywhere else to go. Central and Western [school districts] want more experience...nervous about switching to a different school or district.” Casey made it more about “different reasons: product of the county, you see a need and you see that you can make a difference; we’re here because students need us.” Levi made reference to the fact that, “a lot of the teachers are born and raised in our school district; it keeps them in the district because their families are here.” Katrina stated, “We’ve had a lot of turnover; five teachers left one school; we deserve more pay; we are second parents.”

After the participants shared their thoughts on why teachers persist in their district, I asked them why they had stayed three years or more in their current district. As I reviewed their responses, the themes of enjoyment and commitment to students emerged. Brittany said, “I like it, the area, the kids are great.” Griffin similarly shared, “ I enjoy my job and I like working with the kids.” Katrina also referenced the students, saying, “First year I couldn’t take it; kids are the main reason I stay.” Casey spoke confidentiality and said, “I know I am an effective teacher and these students need [a] quality education.” Levi made reference to the size of the district in his response, “We have a smaller number of students, we really get to know the students and I’ve really enjoyed working with the students.” Stevie’s response echoed many of the participants’ comments about the students:

I think we persist because we want what’s best for the students; being persistent and wanting to make the best experience for them...we do it for the students...I truly feel a sense of family, I feel that our voices, my voice is heard here. My principal lets me run my classroom how I see fit, in the best way possible. I feel like I’m happy here.

Research Question 4 was stated as follows: What are the perceptions of participants in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers? The perceptions of the participants who work in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts were that sense of community and persistence are interrelated. The following themes regarding dimensions of community emerged from the early career teachers' responses during the interviews: family, working together, support, importance of community, enjoyment of their work with students, and their impact upon their students. Multiple responses asserted that the early career teachers leaned on others for support; they felt their co-workers were their family based on the type of support offered to them. The theoretical framework tenets of membership and shared emotional connection resonate from the themes and responses provided by these early career teachers. The responses aligned with definitions of both tenets; the early career teachers expressed a feeling of belonging and shared similar beliefs and/or shared common experiences with other teachers in their district. These manifestations of community motivated them to continue working in their districts.

### **Research Questions 5 and 6**

Research Question 5 and Research Question 6 are interrelated, as both questions provide insight about the early career teachers' perceptions of how the district instilled and promoted sense of community. Research Question 5 was a qualitative inquiry and read as follows: What are the perceptions of participants regarding the degree to which the districts seek to instill a sense of community for early career teachers? Research Question 6 was also a qualitative inquiry and read as follows: What are the strategies that are used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community? The theoretical framework tenets that undergird Research

Questions 5 and 6 are influence and meeting of needs. The influence tenet is a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. Meeting of needs is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

I collected data to answer these research questions from the six teachers who were described earlier in the chapter. Table 13 presents the items from the interview protocol for teachers that were used to gather responses needed to answer Research Question 5 and Research 6. The interview questions were designed to elicit participant responses regarding the theoretical framework tenets described above.

**Table 13: Matrix of Research Question 5 & 6 and Participant Interview Questions**

Research Question	Interview Questions
<p>RQ5: What are the perceptions of participants regarding the degree to which the districts seek to instill a sense of community for early career teachers?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do you feel this district is a community? Why or why not?</li> <li>2. Do you feel like a part of the district? Why or why not?</li> </ol>
<p>RQ6: What are the strategies that are used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Do you feel your school district instills a sense of community within the district? Please explain your response.</li> <li>4. Describe the strategies the district uses to promote your sense of community.</li> <li>5. Which strategies do you feel are effective in improving your willingness to remain in this district?</li> </ol>

The questions in Table 13 were asked during the interviews, and the responses of the six participants often transcended the particular question in the table and addressed previous questions or anticipated other questions. In some instances, the participants provided information

not addressed in the interview protocol. As a result, I elected to organize the findings from these interviews by subsections.

### **Perceptions of District as Community**

As I began to inquire among the early career teachers about the degree to which they felt like part of the district, the way in which they responded was different than when they provided definitions and pertinent examples of the district. Across multiple responses, the theme of being valued emerged from the interviews with the early career teachers. The teachers expressed that they felt valued when the district “highlight[ed] specific teachers or staff members,” or “I feel like when I am around, I am seen,” or “the district makes you feel wanted,” and “I have voice.” These expressions illustrated that teachers do have perceptions of the district instilling sense of community.

The early career teachers expressed how they felt about their district and if they felt a part of the district. In addition, they talked about the community and their personal experiences within the district that made it felt like a community. In response to the question regarding whether the district is a community, Brittany said, “Definitely, definitely” but then described the district in more detail, “very unique, I have friends who work in other districts and in other counties in the state and when they describe their working conditions, it nowhere near mirrors what I experience [in my district].” Stevie responded as emphatically as Brittany did by saying, “Absolutely, yes. We all support one another, our superintendent every week sends out a community newsletter highlighting specific teachers or staff members...they’re there for us as much as they can be.” Casey responded:

Overall I do, I mean, you have some [people from other places] here and there, but I feel this overall is a community, because I feel like everyone knows one another. I know who

to ask for resources when I need them or when I need help...I do feel like I'm part of the community.

Katrina's perspective was that the district was a community because of the help provided to the larger community, "yes...we helped with the coat drive, toy drive, donated desks, and delivered food."

Levi and Griffin, both male teachers, provided a different perception of their districts. Their responses shed light on the differences in rural districts that are in the same region. Griffin felt the district was a community "in some aspects" .but "if you're not originally from that area, it's like you're an outcast." Levi responded, "absolutely," to the question about the district being a community but then continued to say, "There are sometimes now, I feel like our school is a community, but I don't feel like our district as a whole is a community. It is more in the different schools."

After the early career teachers provided context around the idea of the district as a community, it was important to know if the teachers felt a part of the community that they defined and characterized and whether they felt a part of the district. The uniformly appeared to believe that there was community and shared why this was the case. Brittany said, " I do, I do. I just feel that my contributions are valued, that we truly are part of that community. It's just like a community that supports the school; supports what's going on in the school." Being valued made Brittany feel like a part of the community and I saw commonalities in Casey's response when she said, "Overall I do. I feel like when I am around, I am seen. I know who to ask for resources. I do feel like I am part of the community." Early career teachers come to districts not knowing people or knowing who to go to for resources or for help. The interview question about whether these teachers felt a part of the district shed light on how they found a way to feel a part. Levi

said, “Yes, I feel like there’s always someone you can count [on].” In response to feeling like a part of the district, Katrina said, “Yes, I do. I received the certificate for the most improved beginning teacher. The district makes you feel wanted.” Stevie responded, “Absolutely, yes. The first day I started, I was welcomed with open arms. I have a voice.”

The response brought out something different for Griffin. When asked if he felt like part of the district, he responded, “Most of the time, they do help you solve problems.” However, he continued by saying, “some of the times when [the district] don’t see it from your point of view, it makes you not feel that you are a part of the district.” He said it again, “It makes you feel like you’re not apart. In addition, you feel like sometimes they’re picking on you. It’s like you feel like you’re under [a] microscope.” Griffin’s experience was inconsistent with those of the other five early career teachers in their districts.

### **District Intentionality in Supporting a Sense of Community**

**Instilling a sense of community.** Interview questions associated with Research Question 6 went beyond the perceptions of the degree to which participants believed that the district represented a community, and worked to assess whether the districts were taking actions that intentionally augmented sense of community among teachers. Beyond the previously described perceptions of whether the district was a community, I was interested in assessing the degree to which these early career teachers perceived that the district played a role in building community.

With this issue of intentionality in mind, I first sought to determine if the district played a role in instilling a sense of community. Compared to responses to previous interview question, the participants’ perceptions about this part of the inquiry were less consistent. Participants expressed their thoughts about whether the district instilled sense of community in these comments. Casey responded to the question of whether the district played a role in instilling a

sense of community by simply responding, “I do.” Stevie was even more emphatic in saying “Absolutely, yes,” as she perceived that the district was responsible for promoting sense of community.

Others indicated intentionality on the part of the district in instilling a sense of community, but were either less certain or less enthusiastic. Brittany responded, “I think so.” Griffin said, “Sometimes.” Later in the interview, he shared that “most of the district is trying to introduce sense of community, but the older teachers are fighting change; the district is trying to help.” Katrina affirmed her district’s intentionality in instilling a sense of community, stating, “Yes, they do as much as they can...It’s there but could be better...that district is divided into four different counties; all separate and in the rural county there are not a lot of opportunities.” Levi stated, “I feel like it does a little bit, but I just feel like there needs to be more. I don’t feel it’s the district as a whole.” In answering this question, Levi somewhat repeated part of his response from Item 1 in Table 14 when he was asked if he felt the district was a community. His response in this instance was, “We have communities in each school but not as a district.”

The participants were asked to explain their responses. These explanations made it evident that some thoughts from other questions still lingered throughout the interview. Brittany continued to bring to light to how her district is different from other districts by saying, “I know teachers in other counties and they go through things differently.” Griffin continued to mention the feeling of being on his own, stating, “Trying to help us; other times you feel like you are out on your own.” It was apparent from his responses that Griffin did not consistently feel supported. Casey, on the other hand, mentioned, “We do have mentors. We have different things that happened along the way; we have a point of contact.” Levi appeared to echo Griffin somewhat by saying, “I feel [community exists] in the different schools.” He did not say the same of the

district. Katrina felt that her district leaders were doing the best they could with the “teacher shortage everywhere.” Stevie tied her response to “the community, weekly newsletter...and they post on Facebook about the great things that we’re doing.”

**District strategies.** These early career teachers had chosen to remain in the rural, low-performing, economically disadvantaged districts for one or more reasons and they stated, in general, that they were happy. The participants expressed how much they enjoyed working in their current districts and discussed interactions and relationships between their school-based administrators and district leaders. With this as a backdrop, I delved further into construct of intentionality, beyond whether the district instills a sense of community, to the question of actual strategies the district used to promote sense of community among the early career teachers. As I reviewed the responses to the related interview questions, the commonality found among participants was professional development and/or professional meetings of some kind, whether district or school-based. Additional common threads elaborated the nature of such training, and most of the specific examples involved either groups of peers at a similar level of experience or expertise or some element of the professional development that was designed to strengthen community.

Brittany shared that “beginning teachers, years 1-3, have meetings to go to.” Griffin expressed that “professional development and team building” takes place in his district. Casey said, “district PD, district PLCs, select teachers go for additional training; [the district administrators] ask for our input using surveys and [we] are part of the decision making.” Katrina stated, “The assistant director is always supporting things; we had a cookout for kids and families to come out; teachers come out on the first day of school to have a PLC. The public is invited to board meetings through Zoom.” Stevie shared, “We have monthly get-togethers with

our superintendent to talk about things that are going well, and we also talk about things that need to improve.”

Several of these early career teachers offered observations about their sense of being valued. While it was not clear whether this was a dimension of intentional, strategic behavior on the part of the district, it was evident that the participants associated this behavior with instilling a sense of community. The teachers expressed that they felt valued when the district “highlight[ed] specific teachers or staff members,” making comments such as “I feel like when I am around, I am seen,” “the district makes you feel wanted,” and “I have voice.”

In addition to the strategies utilized by the districts to promote sense of community, the early career teachers discussed the strategies that they would like to see in their districts that would strengthen their willingness to stay. Brittany said that she would like “opportunities to grow.” Due to Griffin being an exceptional children’s teacher, he said that he’d like for the district to “cut back on the paperwork.” Casey felt “incentives twice a year” needed to be offered to teachers. Stevie mentioned that it would be good to “just have an email saying you’re doing a great job once in a while.” Levi advised “consistency” while Katrina voiced, “more resources.”

**Significant outlier observations.** The majority of the early career teachers described strategies that promoted a sense of community in their districts. However, Levi focused on district actions that did not promote sense of community. His response suggested ways that the district is not intentional in developing a sense of community. For example, he said, “If we all collaborated...there would be community between all the schools.” He continued by saying, “We don’t get together as much for fun activities. It’s just for formal meetings, we don’t get to socialize that much among the schools.”

Given that there were common threads in the responses to related interview prompts, I brought Research Questions 5 and 6 together for the reporting of results. These two research questions sought to determine the perceptions of participants regarding the degree to which the districts sought to instill a sense of community for early career teachers and the strategies that are used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community. Based on the qualitative data, for the most part, early career teachers see their districts as communities. They further perceived that the sense of community that they felt in their districts was not simply happenstance; rather, there was evidence of intentionality related to sense of community in the districts. The participants also believed, for the most part, that the districts sought to instill a sense of community. Furthermore, most of the participants identified strategies that were implemented by the districts that augmented the sense of community. The theoretical framework tenets of influence and meeting of needs resonate from the themes and responses provided by these early career teachers. In addition, the responses aligned with definitions of both tenets; a sense of mattering and making a difference to a group while mattering to the members of the group and feeling that their needs will be met because they are members of a group. Based on these early career teachers' responses, dimensions of professional development and professional meetings were the most common strategies through which the districts sought to promote sense of community.

### **Research Question 7**

Research Question 7 was a qualitative inquiry and read as follows: To what degree are the strategies used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community perceived to be effective in improving new teacher persistence? The tenets that undergird Research Question 7 are membership and meeting of needs. The membership tenet is the feeling

of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness and the tenet of meeting of needs is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). I collected data to answer this research question from the six teachers who were described in the previous subsection. Table 14 presents the items from the interview protocol for teachers that were used to gather responses needed to answer Research Question 7.

**Table 14: Matrix of Research Question 7 and Participant Interview Questions**

Research Questions	Interview Questions
RQ7: To what degree are the strategies that are used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community perceived to be effective in improving the persistence of early career teachers?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How would you describe the relationship of sense of community and persistence in this district?</li> <li>2. Has sense of community been a factor in your choice to stay?</li> <li>3. Are you thinking about leaving employment with the district? If so, why or why not?</li> <li>4. What areas do you think the district needs to improve upon to ensure your continued employment?</li> </ol>

The questions in Table 14 were not asked in sequence during the interviews, and the responses of the six participants often transcended the particular question on the table and addressed previous questions or anticipated other questions. In some instances, the participants provided information not addressed in the interview protocol. As a result, I elected to organize the findings from these interviews by subsections of the interview items listed in Table 14.

**The Impact of District Efforts Related to Sense of Community on Persistence**

The items in Table 14 were the concluding questions in the interviews and addressed the thoughts of the early career teachers regarding the degree to which they perceived that the

strategies that are used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community were effective in improving their persistence in the districts. The early career teachers were complimentary of the districts they worked for and described how the district promoted sense of community. This in turn affected how members of the district cared for one another. The participants uniformly asserted that sense of community was a factor in their choices to stay. They all attributed their decision to stay on to their belief that someone cared for them or provided what they needed to feel a part of the district. Brittany said that had these conditions not existed, she "definitely, probably wouldn't have stayed." Even in the midst of Griffin expressing frequent reservations, he responded, "In some ways [the district] has been very helpful." Casey shared, "In the beginning I felt loyal. I'm beginning to get comfortable. I do feel like there is sense of community...when I go somewhere I know who I can talk to for certain things." Levi said, "Oh absolutely, I feel like people care about you." Katrina said "yes" without hesitation and then added, "[there is a] connection." Stevie had the most in-depth response of all the participants for this question:

Absolutely, yes. I've had other opportunities given to me from other school districts around that are not Title I and I have decided to stay, because I do feel that sense of community. I do feel that we have a mutual respect for one another.

In analyzing why the early career teachers decided to stay in their current rural, low-performing, economically disadvantaged school district, I looked at their description of the relationship between sense of community and their choices to remain in their districts. There were some commonalities in their references to the construct of support and their descriptions of the relationship between sense of community and persistence. Brittany described her time in the district as "a great experience," saying "I have never felt more supported." Stevie said, "It starts

at the top with our school district...we have respect coming from the top. We have certain things we have to complete...but they also respect us in a way that we don't feel overwhelmed." Casey responded at first with uncertainty, "I'm not sure honestly...there are people who have helped me to get to where I [am] right now, helped me along the way." But she then affirmed the district's impact: "It was a sense of community [that] helped me get this far." Levi stated:

I think [sense of community and persistence are] closely related; most people are from around the area . . . so, not only is their community within the school, but a lot of those people are connected within the community outside of the school.

### **Thoughts of Leaving**

There were occasional musings about leaving their district among some of these early career teachers; however, none of them said in absolute terms that they were planning to resign. I asked Brittany whether she was thinking about leaving employment with the district, to which she responded, "No, 'cause I like it here." Stevie was settled in her answer:

I am not. I was given an opportunity to work in another district that was not Title I and I decided to stay here because I feel my time here is not done. I have so much more I want to achieve in this school district.

Griffin, on the other hand, admitted, "I have thought about looking." Casey's response was, "I'm not sure what the future holds." Levi shared that he has thought about leaving "a little bit" and had given thought to "possibly teaching at a community college."

I also asked about improvements that the district could make to ensure that the early career teachers remained in the districts. There were not consistent responses, but each participant had a least one recommendation. Brittany mentioned salary, but noted the challenge that the district faced in addressing this issue. "Pay is something difficult...[there could be]

better lobbying of the General Assembly.” Katrina also addressed financial considerations; she felt that the district needed to provide sufficient “resources” and noted that she “[bought] stuff on [her] own; she added that she needed “more resources; students need kits, books, workbooks.” Casey dealt more with the needs of early career teachers, voicing that the district needs to “make a better effort of being sure that the mentees or beginning teachers are getting what they actually need and [providing mentors who can actually meet the needs] of the beginning teachers.” Levi felt the district needed to “see patterns [in teachers’ problem performance] and try to solve the pattern or stop the pattern instead of passing the person around, because I think that happens a lot in our district.” Levi added, “Also, there’s not a lot of consistency... We’re told ten different things and two weeks later we still aren’t given very clear definitions of what we’re supposed to do sometimes.” Stevie said, “I think we need more communication when it comes to certain areas; just having an email saying you’re doing a great job every once in a while.” Katrina and Griffin based their responses on their experiences as special education teachers. Griffin wanted the district to “cut back on paperwork.”

Given that there were common threads in the responses to the items regarding the impact of district efforts related to sense of community on teachers’ perspectives about staying in their districts, it appeared that the participants found that the previously reported strategies used by districts were effective in improving the persistence of the early career teachers. Most of these early career teachers wanted to remain in their districts because they experienced some dimensions of a sense of community. They further perceived that the sense of community that they felt in their districts was associated with their persistence in their districts; even if they had occasional thoughts about leaving the district, they remained. The participants believed, for the most part, that the districts sought to promote a sense of community. Furthermore, most of the

participants identified strategies that were implemented by the districts to augment their sense of community. The theoretical framework tenets of membership and meeting of needs resonate from the themes and responses provided by these early career teachers. The responses aligned with definitions of both tenets; the early career teachers expressed a feeling of belonging and personal satisfaction with the fulfillment of their needs in their district. Based on these early career teachers' responses, support and connections were the most common threads that caused them to remain in their districts.

### **Chapter Summary**

The results of this mixed methods survey revealed that early career teachers in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts perceived sense of community within their northeastern North Carolina districts. The study focused on seven research questions; data through which to answer the questions were acquired through survey and teacher interviews. The survey used was the Sense of Community Index (SCI) 2. I used the SCI-2 instrument to first assess, via the 24-item instrument, how early career teachers in eight northeastern North Carolina districts felt about their community. Then, based on participants' willingness to participate further, I interviewed six teachers from five of the eight northeastern North Carolina districts that were included in the survey portion of the study.

Overall, results from the survey indicated that early career teachers felt that community was important in the economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school district where they worked. I analyzed the responses from the 24-item survey using quantitative descriptive statistics. Research Question 1 focused on the importance of sense of community with other community members. For 88% of the participants, it was either important or very important to feel a sense of community with other community members. The importance of sense of

community was further emphasized by the mean of 5.31 on the survey instrument's scale of 1-6. Research Question 2 captured the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists. Based on the subscale means from the 24 items, the early career teachers tended to feel somewhat to mostly 1) that the community reinforced their needs, 2) that they are members of the community, 3) that they have influence within the community and 4) that they have a shared connection to the community. The last question in the quantitative section, Research Question 3, asked if there were differences among the survey ratings of early career teachers regarding the four tenets. There were no significant differences among the means of the four tenets; it was perceived by the participants that the tenets were similar within the context of sense of community.

Six early career teachers from five northeastern North Carolina school districts were interviewed for this study. Five participants were from high schools and one was from a middle school. All participants worked in an economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school district in northeastern North Carolina. Participants were asked 14 questions regarding their perceptions of sense of community and persistence. Results from the teacher interviews outlined factors for promoting sense of community for early career teachers. These early career teachers perceived that the sense of community that they felt in their districts was associated with their persistence in their districts; even if they had occasional thoughts about leaving, they remained in the district.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Chapter Introduction**

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings detailed in Chapter 4. The conclusions drawn from the study are addressed. Additionally, the implication of these findings for policymakers and practitioners is discussed, as well as limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of sense of community on early career teachers in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts in northeastern North Carolina. School districts in northeastern North Carolina typically experience high attrition rates among new teachers who work in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural areas. This research is important because it adds insights to the body of knowledge that can aid policymakers and school leaders in addressing practices that may strengthen the persistence of beginning and early career teachers. In this study, I examined early career teachers regarding the degree to which they perceived that a sense of community exists in their districts. The current study also sought to determine whether there were differences among the four tenets of sense of community theory: Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection. This study also examined the perceptions of participants in their districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers; the degree to which the districts seek to instill sense of community; and effective strategies in improving new teacher persistence.

Sense of community theory posits that a community is a “feeling that members have a belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that

members' needs will be met" (McMillian & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). This mixed methods case study actively involved assessing the perceptions of participants via a survey and interview. To carry out this study, I surveyed teachers about their beliefs regarding sense of community in their district. To provide deeper and richer insights beyond those offered by the results of the surveys, I interviewed six teachers who responded to an invitation at the end of the survey instrument.

In this study, I assessed the demographic data of the early career teacher participants and employed descriptive statistics to determine their perceptions about sense of community. To explore teacher perspectives about sense of community in greater depth, I interviewed six teacher participants who worked in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts located in northeastern North Carolina. The interview protocol enabled me to assess their perspectives on how sense of community was promoted or instilled within early career teachers. I also assessed participants' perspectives regarding whether there was a relationship between their perceptions about sense of community and their decisions to remain in the district.

### **Summary of Findings**

Findings from the survey and interviews were analyzed. To gain insights into early career teachers' perspectives about sense of community and their decisions to remain in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts in northeastern North Carolina, I analyzed the data from teacher participants' responses to a 24-item survey, as well as the emergent themes from teachers' responses to prompts during six interviews. The study posed the following seven research questions:

1. How important to participants is a sense of community with other community members?

2. What are the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the degree to which sense of community exists within their northeastern North Carolina districts?
3. Are there differences among the survey ratings of teachers regarding the four tenets of sense of community theory, which include Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection?
4. What are the perceptions of participants in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing school districts regarding the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers?
5. What are the perceptions of participants regarding the degree to which the school districts seek to instill a sense of community for early career teachers?
6. What are the strategies that school districts use to promote early career teachers' sense of community?
7. To what degree are the strategies used by the school districts to promote early career teachers' sense of community perceived to be effective in improving new teacher persistence?

### **Quantitative Findings**

The quantitative elements of the study were addressed through Research Questions 1-3, which examined participants' perceptions about of sense of community in their school districts. The data came from their response to items on the Sense of Community Index 2 (SCI-2). The SCI-2 consisted of one pre-survey item and 24 items that pertained to the four tenets of sense of community theory: Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection. Study participants received an electronic request to complete the survey in Qualtrics. This research used a mixed methods case study approach. First, a survey was

distributed to 151 teachers based on the criteria and purposive sampling. Once the survey was distributed, 80 individuals opened the survey and 58 completed the two pre-survey questions. After the pre-survey questions were completed, 26 teachers had both 3 to 5 years of teaching experience and three or more years in the current district, making them suitable for participation in the study.

Research Question 1 addressed the importance to participants of having sense of community with other community members. These data for this research question were gathered from a single query at the beginning of the survey. A Likert scale that included six response choices on a scale of 1-6 was used by participants. A quantitative analysis revealed that, overall, teachers felt that having a sense of community with other community members was between important and very important (mean = 5.31).

Research Question 2 examined early career teachers' perceptions regarding the degree to which sense of community exists within their district. The participants completed a survey that consisted of 24 statements that allowed them to rate their feeling about community in their districts based on a four-point Likert-type scale. The 24 items statements were each oriented to read as a positive reflection on sense of community, with which the early career teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement. The grand mean (2.57) of early career teachers' overall responses was slightly above the midpoint of 2.50; thus, their overall level of agreement with the items on the survey fell between the ratings of somewhat and mostly.

Research Question 3 examined whether there were differences among the survey ratings of teachers regarding the four tenets of sense of community theory. The four tenets of the sense of community theory are Meeting of Needs (Tenet 1), Membership (Tenet 2), Influence (Tenet 3), and Shared Emotional Connection (Tenet 4). Each tenet was addressed through six items

within the survey. There were 24 responses to the survey and four subscale means for the tenets. Tenet 4 and Tenet 2 had the highest mean scores (respectively,  $M = 2.72$  and  $M = 2.62$ ); these means were slightly above the midpoint of the scale response range. Tenet 1 and Tenet 3 were close in value (respectively,  $M = 2.49$  and  $M = 2.44$ ); these means were slightly under the midpoint of the scale response. In analyzing the subscale means, I found that there was no significant difference among participants' ratings for the tenets.

### **Qualitative Findings**

Using an interview, the qualitative portion of this study sought deeper and richer insights into early career teachers' perceptions about sense of community. Six teachers participated in the interview process. The interview protocol consisted of 14 questions. The qualitative elements of the study assessed the participants' perspectives about the importance of sense of community as well as its relationship to their decision to remain in their respective districts (persistence). The study also sought to identify the efforts of districts to instill or promote sense of community among early career teachers.

Research Question 4 examined the relationship between sense of community and the persistence of early career teachers. The results from the interview data revealed that the perceptions of the participants about sense of community and persistence were interrelated. The themes that surfaced included family, working together, support, importance of community, enjoyment of their work with students, and their impact upon their students. The responses described manifestations of community that motivated them to continue working in their districts.

Research Question 5 and Research Question 6 were brought together for the reporting of results because they were interrelated. I assessed the participants' perceptions regarding the

degree to which districts sought to instill a sense of community and the strategies the districts used to promote a sense of community for early career teachers. The teachers generally perceived their districts as communities. They largely perceived that their districts were intentional with instilling a sense of community and implementing strategies that heightened their sense of community.

Research Question 7 examined the participants' perceptions about the degree to which district strategies improve sense of community to impact the persistence of early career teachers. Most of the teachers in this study wanted to remain employed in their district, in part because they experienced some aspects of sense of community. The teachers perceived that the sense of community they felt in their districts was associated with their persistence in their districts.

### **Discussion of the Study Findings**

Sense of community theory is comprised of four elements that encompass “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). McMillan and Chavis (1986) described four elements as tenets of sense of community theory: Meeting of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection. The findings of the current study of sense of community among early career teachers were consistent with the body of knowledge centered around community, teacher shortage, attributes of high-poverty rural districts, and professional persistence.

### **Quantitative Findings**

Research Question 1 addressed the importance of sense of community with other community members to the participants. Early career teachers in the study believed that sense of community is important. The mean response of these early career teachers regarding the

importance of sense of community with other community members was 5.31 on a six-point scale, falling between the responses of important and very important. This finding is consistent with findings of other researchers. Royal and Rossi (1999) discovered that sense of community provides a foundation for teachers and a place of solace. Wise (2015) concluded that sense of community is important, noting that “it is the places where these interactions occur that are important to recognize because people naturally congregate” (p. 927). Maydun’s (2011) study spoke about the closeness of a community via social disorganization theory, which focused on how neighbors felt closeness and how collective actions helped them control their own problems within their community. Having a sense of belonging makes a difference in how a person reacts, responds, and interacts in society or within social and vocational settings (Brewer & Kramer, 1985). Garcia and Weiss (2019) pointed out the importance of the learning community; this parallels the conclusions of McMillan and Chavis (1986) regarding the impact sense of community when teachers are included in the membership of a learning community and have a shared emotional connection. “In educational settings, a sense of belonging has been associated with academic motivation, success and persistence” (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, p. 925).

I believe that my finding regarding the importance of sense of community expands the body of knowledge about this topic. In my research of the extant literature, I did not find other studies addressing the importance of sense community to early career teachers. Though Fox and Wilson (2009) studied sense of belonging within a network of beginning secondary science teachers, their research differs from my study, which focused on early career teachers within economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts.

Research Question 2 examined early career teachers’ perceptions regarding the degree to which they agreed with statements about sense of community within their district. The mean

rating scale was between somewhat and mostly. The participants clearly signaled that sense of community is important, but they were more tepid about the degree to which it actually existed in the school districts where they worked. In reviewing the literature, a parallel with this study could be identified in the research conducted by Wise (2015). Wise's (2015) study focused on a sense of place that encompassed a sense of belonging, socially and emotionally, through collective attachment, and the researcher concluded that "space becomes place through experience, power, designation and control or processes and social constructions" (p. 922). In my work of identifying literature to substantiate the findings of my research, I found that the available body of knowledge lacked literature addressing early career teachers' perceptions about sense of community. I did find literature that spoke to early career teachers' sense of professional agency in the classroom, teachers' perceptions of personal and school cultural factors, and student/teacher perceptions of school climate, but nothing related to early career teachers' perception of sense of community.

Research Question 3 examined whether there were differences among the survey ratings of teachers regarding the four tenets of sense of community theory. I employed the use of the SCI-2. The 24-item survey was divided into four subscales, each with six items related to one of the tenets (Reinforcement (Meeting) of needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection). There was not a significant difference among the mean ratings for the tenet subscales. Participants perceived the tenets to be similar within the context of sense of community. At the end of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) study, it was determined that there were "dynamics within the elements" and they were considered to be sub-elements that work together to "create each element and how all work dynamically together to create and maintain a sense of

community”

(p. 15). The sub-elements of each tenet are below:

1. Membership: Boundaries, emotional safety, personal investment, sense of belonging and identification, and common symbol system.
2. Influence: Openness to influence, community members, power of member, and influence of community; consensual validation x community’s need for conformity = community’s power to influence members (community norms).
3. Integration and fulfillment of needs: Communities successfully facilitate person – environment fit (meeting of needs) among members, members will be able to develop sense of community.
4. Shared emotional connection:
  - a. Formula 1: Shared emotional connection = contact + high quality interaction.
  - b. Formula 2: High quality interaction = (events with successful closure – ambiguity) x (event valence x sharedness of the event) + amount of honor given to members – amount of humiliation.

I was unable to find other studies pertaining to early career teachers and the Sense of Community Index. The sense of community theory and research was developed to examine communities within neighborhoods.

### **Qualitative Findings**

Six early career teachers agreed to participate in the interview portion of the current study. The participants rated and discussed the importance of community. Research Question 4 examined the relationship between sense of community and the decision of early career teachers to remain employed in their districts (persistence). These early career teachers had elected to

persist in rural, economically disadvantaged, low-performing schools, based in part on their perceptions that a sense of community existed in the districts. The early career teachers who participated in the interview part of this study felt that community equated with family, unity, togetherness, partnership, support, and working together. In rural districts, there are small towns that typically exude a homey feeling; people grow up and work in the district, neighbors attend community events and worship together, and teachers may have taught for many years at the same school. One participant noted that “a lot of teachers are born and raised in our school district [and] it keeps them in the district because their families are here.” In addition, the participants quite frequently mentioned the construct of family. One participant’s comment was very illustrative, “I truly feel a sense of family.” Mannarini and Fedi (2009) noted that community implies “an undifferentiated identity, and emphasizes unity instead of diversity, spontaneity instead of mediation, emotions instead of reasoning, cohesion instead of conflict, and stability instead of change” (p. 212). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) discovered in their research that “teachers’ feeling of value consonance as well as supervisory support and positive relations with colleagues and parents were predictive of belonging; also, both teachers’ feeling of belonging and emotional exhaustion were predictive of job satisfaction” (p. 1036).

Goldhaber et al. (2011) noted that teachers in the early years left at a faster and higher rate, “with 25 percent of teachers exiting the North Carolina system within the first four years of teaching” (p. 62). Based on the research I conducted, the six teachers with 3 to 5 years of teaching experience occasionally thought about leaving but remained, in part because they felt a sense of community in their districts. Darling-Hammond and Sykes’ (2003) study reported that turnover of new teachers was especially high, with 30% of new teachers leaving the profession after 3 to 5 years; the rate of attrition in low-income schools was much as 50% higher than that

in their affluent peers. However, my study revealed that, when teachers had the opportunity to work at more affluent schools, they turned the offers down. The participants in this study worked in economically disadvantaged, low-performing schools. The experiences shared by participants in the survey and the interview indicate that these teachers are remaining in the low-income schools. One reason echoed by many participants is that the teachers recognized that the students who attend the schools in the rural districts needed their presence.

The participants of this study felt they were needed in their districts. They felt that they were effective in the economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts. Johnson and Birkeland (2003) conducted a longitudinal interview study that focused on a sense of success based on school organization, collegial interaction, opportunities for growth, appropriate assignments, adequate resources, and schoolwide structures for supporting student learning. If those situations or circumstances were in place, then teachers were more likely to stay in their schools. These studies are consistent with my finding that, among early career teachers, decisions to persist in high-poverty rural districts were based in part on their perceptions that a sense of community existed in their districts.

Research Question 5 and Research Question 6 assessed the participants' perceptions regarding the degree to which the school districts seek to instill a sense of community and, if so, the strategies used to promote a sense of community among early career teachers. For the most part, the participants believed that the districts sought to instill a sense of community. Furthermore, most of the participants identified strategies implemented by the districts that augmented the sense of community. The participants shared that they felt a part of the district, based on comments like the following: "my contributions are valued; I feel like when I am around, I am seen; the district makes you feel wanted; and I have a voice." Their responses

signified that a social network had developed within their district. A social network involves individuals developing relationships; therefore, “social support has been defined as information from others that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligations” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 518).

Based on these early career teachers’ responses, dimensions of professional development and professional meetings were the most common strategies through which the districts sought to promote sense of community. The interviewees were more emphatic that sense of community existed in their districts, but there were some reservations as well. Garcia and Weiss (2019) identified the following reasons that teachers leave the profession: limited access to highly effective professional development, novice/veteran teachers receiving resources to prepare for their practice, professional development not satisfying to teachers, learning community not supporting teaching and career growth, and needed resources and professional development lacking in high-poverty schools. In reviewing the body of knowledge, I did not find additional research that pertains to instilling a sense of community or promoting a sense of community. Thus, I concluded that my findings regarding district intentionality related to sense of community are novel. The early career teachers in this study, for the most part, perceived that the districts sought to instill a sense of community and implemented specific strategies to promote a sense of community.

Research Question 7 examined the perceptions of the participants about the degree to which district strategies improve sense of community and impact the persistence of early career teachers. The participants believed, for the most part, that their districts sought to promote a sense of community and that the districts’ strategies for building community positively impacted their interest in remaining in the districts. While I found that some of the teachers admitted to

occasionally “thinking” about leaving, they also expressed that the students needed for them to stay. Chiong et al. (2017) examined the reasons that teachers remain in the teaching profession, and it was determined that teachers remain for altruistic and intrinsic motivators, while extrinsic motivators were less important for why teachers stay in the profession.

Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) concluded that a number of factors cause dissatisfaction among two-thirds of teachers who change schools: concerns with school administration (33%), lack of influence on school decision making (29%), and school conditions, including facilities and resources (27%) (p. 6). An interview participant in this study stated, “They don’t have anywhere else to go...central and western [school districts] want more experience...[they are] nervous about switching to a different school or district.” In some instances, participants in this study mentioned concerns with school administration; on the other hand, at least three participants shared that they felt they have a voice when it comes to school decision making, and none of the participants spoke about school conditions as far as facilities. The two special education teachers in my study spoke about resources.

The early career teachers largely wanted to stay because they felt the students needed them. The economically disadvantaged, low-performing districts where they worked are high needs areas. Much of the time, these high-needs schools have substantial behavior issues, as noted by Michela et al. (2017), and therefore need provisions to support students in the areas of academic achievement, physical and emotional well-being, and decrease in substance use and violent behaviors. One of the teachers in my study shared, “I still have work to do [in my district].”

Darling-Hammond (2003) also noted factors influencing teacher attrition as follows: salaries, working conditions, preparation, and mentoring support in the early years of teaching

(p. 9). Only one of the teachers in this study spoke of turnover and pay throughout the interviews. When the question was asked, “Why do you think teachers persist in this district?” Katrina mentioned, “We’ve had a lot of turnover...five teachers left one school...we deserve more pay.” Two of the interview participants who were special education teachers felt that they had too much paperwork to complete and not enough resources. Mentoring was a recurring topic of discussion for the participants. One participant in particular recommended “making a better effort of being sure that the mentee or the beginning teachers are getting what they actually need and having [mentors] who are actually able to give [the beginning teachers what they need]. Garcia and Weiss (2019) found that the following impacted teacher persistence: supports already in place for a strong foundation, assignment of first-year teachers assigned to a mentor, participation in a teacher induction program, professional development/workshops/trainings, subject matter activities, collaboration on instruction with other teachers, and opportunities to observe other teachers.

Lee (2018) focused on district strategies that strengthened capacity to attract and retain high-quality teachers in challenging urban districts. Among other initiatives, the researcher found that community scholars, school practitioners, and university faculty came together to help bridge the gap between universities and urban classrooms for pre-service teachers. The conceptual framework and programmatic examples were developed to “positively affect teacher persistence, resilience, and higher rates of retention over time” (Lee, 2018, n.p.). Although Lee’s (2018) research study did not focus on sense of community of early career teachers in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts as did the current study, the findings were nevertheless instructive.

### **Discussion of Theoretical Framework**

My study was guided by the sense of community theory by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Each research question within the qualitative portion of my study related to one or more of the tenets identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986): meeting of needs, membership, influence or shared emotional connection. The four subscales of items in the study survey that provided data for Research Questions 1 through 3 were explicitly linked to these tenets. The qualitative research questions also were undergirded by elements of sense of community theory. Research Question 4 aligned with the tenets of membership and shared emotional connection; the participants expressed a feeling of belonging and shared similar beliefs and/or shared common experiences with other teachers in their districts. Research Questions 5 and 6 aligned with the tenets of influence and meeting of needs; the participants expressed a sense of mattering that makes a difference to a group and a feeling that their needs were being met by the resources received by being a member in their district. Research Question 7 aligned with the tenets of membership and meeting of needs; the participants expressed a feeling a of belonging and personal satisfaction with how their district fulfilled their needs.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The focus of this study was on participants who worked in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts in northeastern North Carolina. Thus, this study gathered participants' perceptions which were limited to high-poverty areas of northeastern North Carolina. Additionally, participation in the current study was limited to early career teachers. Therefore, the applicability of this study's results is likely limited to teachers who have 3 to 5 years of teaching experience in high-poverty, low-performing rural school districts.

The survey was distributed to 151 teachers based on the criteria provided to the human resource director of each district. Once the survey was distributed, 80 individuals opened the survey and 58 completed the two pre-survey questions. After the pre-survey questions were completed, 26 teachers among those who elected to complete the survey had both 3 to 5 years of teaching experience and three or more years in the current district. The survey sample size was limited to these 26 participants who consented to complete the survey. Thus, the current study had a small sample size. If the sample size had been larger, it is possible that there may have been additional findings of significance. Time of the year may have been a factor in the reduced level of participation of the survey. The interviews were conducted approximately two weeks and four days after the survey end date. Six of the 26 teachers who volunteered to participate in the survey also consented to an interview; my original aim was to secure eight such interviews. A larger sample size might have strengthened the findings and enhanced their generalizability.

It is important to mention that, during the time of my research, the school systems were dealing with COVID-19. At the time I sent the request to superintendents to approve this study, schools were closed to in-person instruction because of the pandemic. Encouragingly, most superintendents responded within a week and agreed to participate in the study. However, the pandemic delayed the response of human resource directors in responding to my request for the email addresses of teachers who had 3 to 5 years of teaching experience and had taught in their district for at least three years. The pandemic caused many different changes in the work environment, and these changes were particularly challenging for teachers; this may have diminished some of the teachers' interest in participating in my study. The pandemic was an unforeseen impediment to the study. If the pandemic had not happened, additional teachers may have participated and the response times may have been lessened.

## **Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice**

Early teachers who make the choice to stay in their current districts do so for a reason. Based on the findings of this study, sense of community is important to early career teachers. It is a natural instinct for an individual to stay where she/he feels wanted and belongs. In school districts, particularly those where there are economic and performance challenges, it is imperative to “find a way to build communities that are based on faith, hope, and tolerance, rather than on fear, hatred and rigidity” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 20). The way the adults are treated may, in turn, impact how they treat the students.

### **Implications for Policy**

Marker et al. (2013) focused on maintaining the integrity of beginning teacher support programs by doing more with less. Their study captured the concerns of teachers regarding retention in rural and high-poverty districts, as well as the challenges brought about by budget cuts in a demanding rural district. Due to budget cuts, the mentor program was eliminated. The thought of teachers having to do more with less is not a novel idea, but it is certainly a counterproductive policy orientation. This is an issue that continues to plague economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts and has implications for the retention of early career teachers.

Policymakers should consider the pivotal role of induction programs and mentoring. Policymakers need to invest in teacher recruitment, preparation, and professional learning opportunities (Berry & Shields, 2017). These supports are integral in retaining teachers. During the interviews in this study, the early career teachers were vocal about needing a mentor who matched their needs. They voiced their need for support at the beginning of the year and throughout the year, and they noted the importance of being valued. The early career teachers in

the current study also shared that they remained in the rural areas because they knew the students needed them. Thus, the state should show teachers that they are needed. For policymakers, this appears to be an opportunity to revisit the expectations of the beginning teacher programs and early career supports within the northeastern rural districts in North Carolina.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of the current study showed that more can, and indeed, should be done to ensure that early career teachers experience a sense of community in the districts where they choose to work. Early career teachers with 3 to 5 years of experience who worked in the same district for at least three consecutive years met the criteria for participation in this study. The survey results showed that sense of community is important to participants. During the interviews, participants shared the following thoughts about strategies for building a strong sense of community: “PLCs, staff meetings, activities to bring us closer.” This finding informs district leaders that early career teachers are longing for more direction.

From the responses of the early career teachers in this study, it is evident that sense of community is present in their respective school buildings, but the teachers expressed wanting to experience a greater sense of community within their district. Thus, a recommendation for practice among district leaders is to consider consistent, quarterly district PLC meetings as well as opportunities for early career teachers to socialize with one another. In scheduling consistent opportunities for early career teachers to interact and meet more routinely, there is a need to provide authentic opportunities for interaction versus required meetings with a district agenda. Based on the data collected from the participants’ responses in the interviews and survey ratings, it was determined that they had a desire to stay in their current districts but felt that their districts

needed to provide more substance and direction that will instill and promote a sense of community.

Interview participants uniformly said that mentors would be helpful. It was made clear that the mentors need to “actually be able to give the beginning teachers what they actually need.” Ingersoll and Strong (2011) performed a literature review of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers. They noted in the review that the goal of such support programs is to improve the performance and retention of beginning teachers. Upon evaluating state and district mentoring programs, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) found that “induction had positive effects...beginning teachers who received some type of induction had higher job satisfaction, commitment or retention” (p. 211). In addition, they found in their review that the strongest factors to an induction program was the “number of supports, having a mentor from the same field, having common planning time with other teachers in the same field, having regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers” (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011, p. 214). A recommendation for practice is for district leaders to identify mentors who match the needs of the early career teachers and the subject matter they teach so that strong, lasting relationships can be developed.

This study focused on sense of community among early career teachers and its impact on their decisions to remain in the districts where they were employed. The findings of this study suggest that sense of community impacts these decisions. Investments in teacher retention and recruitment, along with expanded professional development, are needed. Policymakers and practitioners need clear goals related to the retention of early career teachers who work in economically-disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings of the current study warrant additional inquiry. I noted in my research that one of the participants stated, “Most of the time, it seems the district is trying to introduce sense of community, but the older teachers are fighting change.” From this, it seems an area of new study would be to understand why veteran teachers may be adverse to a sense of community when the early career and novice teachers are seeking it.

Another recommendation is to broaden the study to the entire northeastern region of North Carolina. It would be interesting to discover how early career teachers in other districts that are not economically disadvantaged or low-performing feel about the sense of community in their school district. I believe the districts can learn from one another to understand why teachers persist in some areas and not in others, and how attention to community may strengthen persistence.

With that being said, a recommendation for future research is to replicate this study in a more affluent area and one in which the rates of attrition among teachers are lower. Studying these phenomena in such a region, where attrition is lower and socioeconomic status is higher, would shed light on the sense of community for early career teachers in that area and offer an opportunity to contrast how early career teachers perceive sense of community in different types of districts.

I also recommend increasing the sample size by inviting more rural districts that fit the criteria to participate in order to increase the significance of the study findings. In addition, it would be helpful to identify a different timeframe for conducting the study. I began to contact superintendents and human resource directors during May, a period of time that is particularly busy in school districts. The calendar at this time is crowded with end-of-year assessments,

summative evaluations, personnel changes and hires, along with many other tasks. For teachers, participation in a survey and an interview is a low priority during such a season. Thus, conducting the study at a different time of the year may result in increased participation.

### **Chapter Summary**

Research shows that a significant proportion of teachers who elect to not remain in the profession make this choice within 3 to 5 years of beginning their teaching career. Thus, the perceptions of teachers in this experience range who persist and remain in the field are important. This is particularly the case in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts, which experience disproportionately high attrition rates among early career teachers.

The current study examined the importance of sense of community among early career teachers and its impact on their persistence. Sense of community theory encompasses four tenets: Membership, Meeting of Needs, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection. Through a quantitative lens, I found that early career teachers perceived that sense of community is important. Their perceptions of the degree to which sense of community actually existed in their districts were lower. There was no significant difference in perceptions among the ratings for the four tenets of the sense of community theory.

Qualitative results from the study showed that the early career teachers were largely motivated to continue working in their districts. They based these decisions, in part, on the sense of community that they perceived in their districts; support and connections were also factors related to their persistence, as was being there for the students. Participants said the districts were intentional about instilling a sense of community and identified the most common strategies their districts used to promote sense of community.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Letter to the Superintendent

Superintendent's Name

Superintendent's address

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Superintendent:

I am currently enrolled in the Educational Administration and Supervision doctoral program at North Carolina State University. I am conducting a study on the sense of community among early career teachers in multiple economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. This research study involves an online survey with teachers who have 3-5 years of teaching experience and who have taught at least the past 3 years in your district. In addition, I would like to interview 1-6 of these teachers. The survey will take about 20 minutes and the interviews will take about an hour. Both of these activities will occur outside of the employees' working hours.

The purpose of this letter is to request permission to reach out to your human resources director to provide me with the names and emails of the early career teachers in your district so that I can invite those teachers to participate in the online survey and personal interview. All research results will be reported in such a manner that the direct identities of teachers or school districts are obscured.

If you agree to allow me to contact your human resources director, please email me with your permission at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu). Replying "yes" to this email would suffice.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns at (919) 497-7536 or [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu). My dissertation co-chairs are Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman and Dr. Mike Ward. They can be contacted at [lbass@ncsu.edu](mailto:lbass@ncsu.edu) and [meward@ncsu.edu](mailto:meward@ncsu.edu), respectively. I have obtained approval from NC State's Institutional Review Board for this research. They can be contacted at [ncsuirboffice@ncsu.edu](mailto:ncsuirboffice@ncsu.edu) or 919-515-4514.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Perry-Higgs

## **Appendix B: Email to Human Resource Directors**

Dear <Insert Name>:

I am Jacqueline Perry-Higgs, a graduate student doing research under my faculty advisors, Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman and Dr. Mike Ward, at North Carolina State University. For my doctoral dissertation, I am studying early career teachers' sense of community and its impact on teachers.

Your superintendent has given me permission to contact you to ask for your assistance.

Can you help me by providing the district email addresses for all teachers in your district who have 3-5 years teaching experience and who have taught at least the last 3 years in your district? I would like to invite them to take an online survey. In addition I would like to interview 1-6 of these teachers about their experiences of community as an early career teacher. I will request that teachers complete the survey and schedule all interviews outside of working hours. The surveys and interviews will be handled in a confidential manner. Any results will be reported in such a manner that will obscure identities of participants and the school district. .

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in contact with me by email at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu) or by phone at (919) 497-7536.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Perry-Higgs

## **Appendix C: Letter to the Educator**

Greetings Educator,

This email is an invitation for you to participate in a research study to investigate teachers' perceptions regarding a sense of community. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Below you will find a link to an informed consent letter detailing the study for your records. If you agree to participate, a second link to a 28-item survey is at the end of the informed consent that should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Once you are at the survey site, you will have an opportunity to signify your consent to participate before proceeding to answer the survey items.

As a thank you for participating in this survey, your name will be entered in a \$75 electronic gift card drawing. Also, if you participated in the interview, you will receive a \$50 gift card.

All responses to survey items are anonymous. Neither I nor anyone else will be able to associate your responses with you as an individual. Your input will help inform the research on how teachers perceive the value of a sense of community, and how districts can effectively implement strategies to build a sense of community for early career teachers.

Thanks so much for your time,

Jacqueline

919-497-7536

*Link to Informed Consent*

## Appendix D: Adult Consent Form (Survey)

# NC STATE UNIVERSITY

**Title of Study:** Understanding How Economically Disadvantaged, Low Achieving, Rural Districts Promote Early Career Teachers' Sense of Community: A Case Study (**eIRB #20511**)

**Principal Investigator:** Jacqueline Perry-Higgs at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu) or 919-497-7536

**Funding Source:** Doctoral Dissertation Research Continuity Grant (NC State University)

**Faculty Points of Contact:** Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman at 919-515-6291 or [lrbass@ncsu.edu](mailto:lrbass@ncsu.edu) and Dr. Mike Ward at 919-710-7317 or [meward@ncsu.edu](mailto:meward@ncsu.edu)

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### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of early career teachers' sense of community in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts. We will do this through a survey.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. You may want to participate in this research because you will help others to understand the experiences of teachers like yourself that choose to teach in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. You may not want to participate in this research because you might be de-identified due to the information you share.

Specific details about the research in which you are invited to participate are contained below. If you do not understand something in this form, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation in this research, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office. The IRB office's contact information is listed in the *What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?* section of this form.

### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of the study is to understand how economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts promote a sense of community among early career teachers.

### **Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?**

There will be approximately 30-50 participants in this study.

In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and be an early career teacher with 3 or more but less than 6 completed years of teaching with at least years of working experience in your district.

You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet the inclusion criteria.

### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take an online survey that will ask you to reflect on your experiences as an early career teacher. The questions will be multiple choice or fill-in-the-blanks and should take you about 15 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you would like to participate in a personal interview. The total amount of time that you will be participating in this survey is 15 minutes.

### **Risks and benefits**

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. The risks to you as a result of this research are related to participants' employment. The likelihood of the risk occurring is minimal because of study design elements such as confidential survey and data management procedures that include data encryption, pseudonyms, reporting in aggregate, maintaining confidentiality relative to participant, school, and district names, and sensitivity to context clues that might serve to unintentionally identify any of these entities.

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are that your participation in this study will contribute to an understanding of how teachers perceive a sense of community in an economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural district.

### **Right to withdraw your participation**

You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. In order to stop your participation, please contact the researcher, Jacqueline Perry-Higgs, at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu) or 919-497-7536 or you can contact my faculty advisors, Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman at 919-515-6291 or [lrbass@ncsu.edu](mailto:lrbass@ncsu.edu) and Dr. Mike Ward at 919-710-7317 or [meward@ncsu.edu](mailto:meward@ncsu.edu). If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, you can expect that the researcher will redact your information from their data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent future uses of your data for research purposes wherever possible. This is possible in some, but not all, cases.

### **Confidentiality, personal privacy, and data management**

Trust is the foundation of the participant/researcher relationship. Much of that principle of trust is tied to keeping your information private and in the manner that we have described to you in this form. The information that you share with me will be held in confidence to the fullest extent allowed by law.

Protecting your privacy as related to this research is of utmost importance to me. There are very rare circumstances related to confidentiality where I may have to share information about you. Your information collected in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety. In other cases, I must share instances in which imminent harm could come to you or others.

How we manage, protect, and share your data are the principal ways that I protect your personal privacy. Data generated about you in this study will be confidential. Data that will be shared with others about you will be de-identified.

**De-identified.** De-identified data is information that at one time could directly identify you, but that I recorded this data so that your identity is separated from the data. I will have a master list with your district email address. When the research concludes, there will be no way your real identity will be linked to the data I publish.

Please note: If your email is chosen during the drawing for the \$75 gift card compensation, I will share identifiable information about you with my accounting office only so that I can give you the gift card.

### **Future use of your research data**

To help maximize the benefits of your participation in this project, destruction of the master list of names and emails will take place at the end of the study. Your de-identified information will, however, be kept and used for future research purposes by this researcher without further consent from you.

### **Compensation**

If you submit a completed survey and provide your email at the end of the survey through a link out, you will be entered into a drawing for an opportunity to win a \$75 electronic gift card. If you do not submit a complete survey or do not enter your email, you will not be entered into the drawing. All participants will be notified via email about the results of the drawing as to whether or not they won the gift card or not.

### **Sponsorship and Funding**

This research is funded by NC State University. This means that the sponsor is paying the research team for completing the research. The researchers do not, however, have a direct financial interest with the sponsor or in the final results of the study. If you would like more information, please ask the researcher listed in the first page of this form about the funding and sponsorship.

### **What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Jacqueline Perry-Higgs, at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu) or 919-497-7536 or you can contact my faculty advisors, Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman at 919-515-6291 or [lrbass@ncsu.edu](mailto:lrbass@ncsu.edu) and Dr. Mike Ward at 919-710-7317 or [meward@ncsu.edu](mailto:meward@ncsu.edu).

### **What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) Office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State IRB Office via email at [irb-director@ncsu.edu](mailto:irb-director@ncsu.edu) or via phone at (919) 515-8754.

### **Consent To Participate**

By clicking the link below, I am affirming that I have read and understand the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. I have chosen to participate in this study with the understanding that I may stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time. *By clicking the link below, which takes you to the survey, you are providing your consent to participate. If you choose not to participate, simply exit this page.*

*Link to Sense of Community Survey in Qualtrics*

## **Appendix E: Invitation to Participate in Study-Related Interview**

Greetings,

Thank you for participating in the Sense of Community survey.

I would like to extend an invitation to participate in a personal interview to reflect on early career teachers' sense of community and how a sense of community factors into your decision to continue teaching in a rural school district. Please take a few minutes to review the consent form.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and is not a condition of your employment in your school district. This conversation will take about an hour of your time outside of work hours and, if you agree, will be audio recorded. After the interview is transcribed into written form, the audio recording will be destroyed.

If you're interested in participating, click the consent form link below, read, reply with your email address and let me know times and dates that are convenient for you to meet with me. If you complete the interview and provide your email at the end of the interview, you will receive a \$50 electronic gift card for your participation. If you do not complete the interview or do not provide an email, you will not receive a gift card. All participants will be notified via email as to when the gift card will be sent.

Thank you so much for your consideration.

Jacqueline

919-497-7536

[jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu)

*[Link to the Consent Form](#)*

## **Appendix F: Adult Consent Form (Interview)**

**Title of Study:** Understanding How Economically Disadvantaged, Low Achieving, Rural Districts Promote Early Career Teachers' Sense of Community: A Case Study (eIRB #20511)

**Principal Investigator:** Jacqueline Perry-Higgs at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu) or 919-497-7536

**Funding Source:** Doctoral Dissertation Research Continuity Grant (NC State University)

**Faculty Points of Contact:** Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman at 919-515-6291 or [lrbass@ncsu.edu](mailto:lrbass@ncsu.edu) and Dr. Mike Ward at 919-710-7317 or [meward@ncsu.edu](mailto:meward@ncsu.edu)

### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of early career teachers' sense of community in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school districts. We will do this through an interview.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. You may want to participate in this research because you will help others understand the experiences of teachers like yourself that choose to teach in economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts. You may not want to participate in this research because you might be re-identified due to the information you share.

Specific details about the research in which you are invited to participate are contained below. If you do not understand something in this form, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation in this research, do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above or the NC State IRB office. The IRB office's contact information is listed in the "What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?" section of this form.

### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of the study is to understand how economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural districts promote a sense of community among early career teachers.

### **Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?**

There will be approximately 6-8 participants in this study.

In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and be an early career teacher with 3 or more but less than 6 completed years of teaching experience with at least 3 years of working experience in your current district. You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet the inclusion criteria.

### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:

1. If you express interest in a personal interview, the researcher will contact you via email to schedule a time to chat in a private location using digital platform for the duration of COVID-19.
2. Participate in a personal interview on a date and time that is convenient to you outside of your workplace commitments. I will ask you to reflect on your experiences as an early career teacher in your district and would like to record this conversation. The interview will take about an hour.
3. If necessary for the purposes of clarification, I may ask you to review your interview transcript via Google Drive so that I may make sure that I recorded what you share with me in an authentic manner and to give you the opportunity to clarify or redact any material from your transcript that you wish. I expect this will take about 15 minutes of your time.

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is about 75 minutes.

### **Recording**

As a part of this research, I would like your consent to audio record you. Please initial next to the sentence(s) that you agree to.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to being audio recorded.      \_\_\_\_\_ I do not consent to  
being audio recorded.

*If you do not consent to being audio recorded, I will take notes about your responses.*

### **Risks and benefits**

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. The risks to you as a result of this research are related to participants' employment. I am mitigating this risk as much as possible by removing direct identifiers from the data prior to publication, reporting interview data with all identifiers stripped, and reporting quotes from the interview in such a manner that your name and the name of your school or district will not be on the data I publish.

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are that your participation in this study will contribute to an understanding of how teachers perceive a sense of community in an economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural district.

### **Right to withdraw your participation**

You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. In order to stop your participation, please contact the researcher, Jacqueline Perry-Higgs, at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu) or 919-497-7536 or you can contact my faculty advisors, Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman at 919-515-6291 or [lr Bass@ncsu.edu](mailto:lr Bass@ncsu.edu) and Dr. Mike Ward at 919-710-7317 or [meward@ncsu.edu](mailto:meward@ncsu.edu). If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, you can expect that the researcher will redact your information from their data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent future uses of your data for research purposes wherever possible. This is possible in some, but not all, cases.

### **Confidentiality, personal privacy, and data management**

Trust is the foundation of the participant/researcher relationship. Much of that principle of trust is tied to keeping your information private and in the manner that we have described to you in this form. The information that you share with me will be held in confidence to the fullest extent allowed by law. Protecting your privacy as related to this research is of utmost importance to me. There are very rare circumstances related to confidentiality where I may have to share information about you. Your information collected in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety. In other cases, I must share instances in which imminent harm could come to you or others.

How we manage, protect, and share your data are the principal ways that I protect your personal privacy. Data generated about you in this study will be re-identifiable.

**Re-identifiable.** Re-identifiable data is information that I can use to identify you indirectly because of my access to information, role, skills, combination of information, and/or use of technology. This may also mean that in published reports others could identify you from what is reported, for example, if a story you tell us is very specific. If your data is re-identifiable, I will report it in such a way that you are not directly identified in reports. Based on how we need to share the data, I cannot remove details from the report that would protect your identity from ever being figured out. This means that others may be able to re-identify from the information reported from this research.

Please note: You will receive a \$50 gift card compensation, I will share identifiable information about you with my accounting office only so that I can give you the gift card.

### **Future use of your research data**

To help maximize the benefits of your participation in this project, destruction of master lists of names, emails, audio recordings, and transcripts will take place at the end of the study. Your re-identifiable information will not be kept for future research purposes by this or other researchers.

### **Compensation**

If you complete an interview and provide your email at the end of the interview through email, you will receive a \$50 electronic gift card. If you do not submit an email, you will not receive the electronic gift card. All participants will be notified via email when the electronic gift cards will be sent out.

### **Sponsorship and Funding**

This research is funded by NC State University. This means that the sponsor is paying the research team for completing the research. The researchers do not, however, have a direct financial interest with the sponsor or in the final results of the study. If you would like more information, please ask the researcher listed in the first page of this form about the funding and sponsorship.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Jacqueline Perry-Higgs, at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu) or 919-497-7536 or you can contact my faculty advisors, Dr. Lisa Bass Freeman at 919-515-6291 or [lrbass@ncsu.edu](mailto:lrbass@ncsu.edu) and Dr. Mike Ward at 919-710-7317 or [meward@ncsu.edu](mailto:meward@ncsu.edu).

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) Office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State IRB Office via email at [irb-director@ncsu.edu](mailto:irb-director@ncsu.edu) or via phone at (919) 515-8754.

**Consent To Participate**

By completing this consent form, I am affirming that I have read and understand the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. I have chosen to participate in this study with the understanding that I may stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

Participant's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix G: Pre-Interview Survey**

1. I have at least 3 years of total teaching experience and have not yet reached 6 years of total teaching experience. YES NO
  
2. I have taught at least the last 3 years in this district? YES NO
  
3. If you answered NO to item 1 or 2 above, please end your participation at this point.

**Sense of Community Index II**

The following questions about community refer to your school district.

**Section A**

1. How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Prefer Not to be a part of This Community	Not Important at All	Not Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

**Section B**

How well do each of the following statements represent how you *feel* about this community?

	<b>Not at All</b>	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>Mostly</b>	<b>Completely</b>
1. I get important needs of mine met because I am part of this community.				
2. Community members and I value the same things.				

3. This community has been successful in getting the needs of its members met.				
4. Being a member of this community makes me feel good.				
5. When I have a problem, I can talk about it with members of this community.				
6. People in this community have similar needs, priorities, and goals.				
7. I can trust people in this community.				
8. I can recognize most of the members of this community.				
9. Most community members know me.				
10. The community has symbols and expressions of membership such as clothes, signs, art, architecture, logos, landmarks, and flags that people can recognize.				
11. I put a lot of time and effort into being a part of this community.				
12. Being a member of this community is a part of my identity.				
13. Fitting into this community is important to me.				
14. This community can influence other communities.				
15. I care about what other community members think of me.				
16. I have influence over what this community is like.				

17. If there is a problem in this community, members can get it solved.				
18. The community has good leaders.				
19. It is very important to me to be a part of this community.				
20. I am with other community members a lot and enjoy being with them.				
21. I expect to be a part of this community for a long time.				
22. Member of this community have shared important events together, such as holidays, celebrations, or disasters.				
23. I feel hopeful about the future of this community.				
24. Members of this community care about each other.				

**Section C. Answer the following before you complete the survey:**

1. Are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview? YES NO

*If yes, please click on this link to complete a form indicating your willingness to participate. If you choose to complete the form, you will be contacted soon thereafter. (Link name = Study-Related Interview).*

**If no**, thank you for your participation in this survey. Please click this link to exit the survey. (Link name = EXIT).

## Appendix H: Instructions for Scoring the Revised Sense of Community Index

### Instructions for Scoring the Revised Sense of Community Index

#### *1. Identifying the Community Referent*

The attached scale was developed for use in many different types of communities. Be sure to specify the type of community the scale is referring to before administering the scale. Do not use “your community” as the referent.

#### *2. Interpreting the Initial Question*

The initial question “How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?” is a validating question that can be used to help you interpret the results. We have found that total sense of community is correlated with this question – but keep in mind this may not be true in every community.

#### *3. Scoring the Scale*

For the 24 questions that comprise the revised Sense of Community Index participants:

**Not at All = 0, Somewhat = 1, Mostly = 2, Completely = 3**

Total Sense of Community Index = Sum of B1 to B24

Subscales

Reinforcement (Meeting) of Needs = B1 + B2 + B3 + B4 + B5 + B6

Membership = B7 + B8 + B9 + B10 + B11 + B12

Influence = B13 + B14 + B15 + B16 + B17 + B18

Shared Emotional Connection = B19 + B20 + B21 + B22 + B23 + B24

## Appendix I: Individual Interview Protocol

### Introduction

(Say)

*You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as an early career teacher and as someone who has a great deal to share about a sense of community. In your response in the survey about a sense of community you indicated your willingness to be interviewed and subsequently designated this time and place for the interview.*

*My research project as a whole focuses on the perceptions of early career teachers who have persisted to remain in an economically disadvantaged, low-performing rural school district. My study does not aim to evaluate your techniques or experiences. Rather, I am trying to learn more about teacher persistence and hopefully learn why early career teachers remain in northeast North Carolina.*

*Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, but if something surfaces where an individual is an imminent threat to themselves or someone else, I will report (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable and (3) If you complete the interview and provide your email at the end of the interview, you will receive a \$50 electronic gift card for your participation. If you do not complete the interview or do not provide an email, you will not receive a gift card. All participants will be notified via email as to when the gift card will be sent. Please review the consent form and let me know if you have questions or concerns. If you are willing to continue with the interview, please sign the consent form.*

(If the individual agrees to participate and signs the consent form, we will proceed with the script below. If the individual does not agree to participate, I will thank her/him and conclude the session.)

(Say)

*To facilitate accuracy in note-taking, I would like to audio record our conversations today. For your information, only I, and my committee advisor will have access to the recording, which will be eventually destroyed after it is transcribed. During the recording I will refer to you only by the pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_ in order to further protect your confidentiality.*

*If you prefer that I do not audio record you, I will transcribe the interview by hand and I will refer to you only by the pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_ in order to further protect your confidentiality.*

**Ask:** *May I audio record this interview?*

**For those who give permission to record say:** *To ensure I capture your interview and adhere to validity, I am recording this interview. Recordings will be stored and locked in a safe location. This interview is voluntary and confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym and I will not disclose your name with your interview responses. I will be taking notes during the interview and you stop this interview at any time without any consequences or penalties. The interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. I will be asking you a series of questions relating to teacher retention in northeastern North Carolina. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.*

**For those who refuse to record say:** *To honor your audio recording preference, I will not record this interview. To ensure that I capture your interview and adhere to validity, I will be scribing your interview by hand. You can stop this interview at any time without any consequences or penalties. Your scribed interview will be stored and locked in a safe location. This interview is voluntary and confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym and I will not disclose your name with your interview responses. The interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. I will be asking you a series of questions relating to teacher retention in northeastern North Carolina. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.*

**For those who give permission to record say:** *The recording will now begin and I will start the interview process. During this process, I will refer to you with a pseudonym to protect your identity.*

**For those who refuse to record say:** *I will start the interview process and scribe your responses. During this process, I will refer to you with a pseudonym to protect your identity.*

*You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. In order to stop your participation, please raise your right hand to signify that you want the interview to stop. If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, you can expect that the researcher will stop the recorder, halt the interview, and excuse you with her thanks. The recording to that point will be destroyed.*

*We have planned this interview to last 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Thank you for agreeing to participate.*

### **A. Interviewee Background**

(Pose each of the interview items below to the participant)

How long have you been...

\_\_\_\_\_ a teacher?

\_\_\_\_\_ in your present position?

\_\_\_\_\_ in this school district?

Background information on interviewee:

What is your highest degree? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you teach? \_\_\_\_\_

Where/how did you receive your teacher preparation? \_\_\_\_\_

## **B. Interview Questions**

1. What words come to mind when you think of community?
2. How do you define a sense of community?
3. How important is community to you as an early career teacher?
  - a. Follow-Up Question: Share examples of how you perceive community in this district?
4. Do you feel this district is a community? Why or why not?
5. Do you feel like a part of the district? Why or why not?
6. How do you define persistence with respect to employment?
  - a. Follow-up Question: Why do you think teachers persist in this district?
7. Why have you stayed for 3 years or past 3 years?
  - a. Follow-up Question: If sense of community doesn't come up, has sense of community been a factor in your choice to stay?
8. How would you describe the relationship of sense of community and persistence in this district?
9. Do you feel your school district instills a sense of community within the district?
10. Please explain your response.

11. Describe strategies the district uses to promote your sense of community.
12. Which strategies do you feel are effective in improving your willingness to remain in this district?
13. Are you thinking about leaving employment with the district? If so, why or why not?
14. What areas do you think the district needs to improve upon to ensure your continued employment?

### **Conclusion Text**

Thank you for participating in today's Sense of Community interview. If necessary for the purposes of clarification, I may contact you to review your transcript via Google Drive. As a reminder, I will be sharing the information learned from the research with the district in order to help them improve their programs and services. Also, provide your email to receive your \$50 electronic gift card. If you do not provide your email, you will not receive the gift card. All participants will be notified via email as to when the gift card will be sent. If you think of any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share, please contact me at [jjperry2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jjperry2@ncsu.edu) by phone (919) 497-7536.

## **Appendix J: Expert Panel Review Protocol**

### **Understanding How Economically Disadvantaged, Low Achieving, Rural Districts Promote Early Career Teachers' Sense of Community: A Case Study**

Thank you for volunteering to serve on the expert panel for evaluating the interview protocol designed for this study. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between sense of community and early career teachers' decisions to remain in or leave economically disadvantaged rural districts in northeastern North Carolina. As part of my study, I will interview the teachers in a rural district regarding sense of community and strategies the district uses to promote early career teachers' sense of community. The study will further research the impact of rural districts' behavior on sense of community and teacher persistence in the northeastern region of North Carolina.

Your time, expertise, and assistance are needed to evaluate the content validity of the interview protocol. The attached interview outline is designed to identify teachers' perceptions regarding sense of community and to identify practices, processes, and systems implemented in schools that are associated with teachers' sense of community.

Your input and feedback are extremely important, greatly appreciated, and will provide useful information about the clarity, appropriateness, and relevance of the interview questions. Your knowledge and experience in education qualifies you to serve as an expert panel member. Your input and feedback will provide valuable insight for possible adjustments or revisions to the interview protocol.

Please take your time and critique the attached interview protocol by answering either "Yes" or "No" to the questions below, as well as providing your reasoning behind any responses that receive a "No" on the lines that follow.

Questions	Yes	No	<p><b>If you selected No, please write why, and provide any feedback and/or suggestions that you feel would correct this aspect of the survey.</b></p> <p>This section of feedback will be most helpful.</p>
<p>1. Are the interview questions/statements direct and specific?</p>			
<p>2. Are the questions/statements designed in such a way that participants can understand them?</p> <p><i>Please note that in order for the survey to be successful, the language needs to be understood by an early career teacher.</i></p>			
<p>3. Do you feel additional information is needed in order for participants to answer these questions regarding the degree to which the district seeks to instill a sense of community for early career teachers? If so, please indicate the type of additional information that is needed in the box to the right.</p>			
<p>4. Do the interviews adequately address factors that will allow the researcher to obtain sufficient information regarding strategies that the school district uses to promote early career teachers' sense of community?</p>			
<p>5. Do the interviews adequately address factors that will allow the researcher to obtain sufficient information regarding the perceptions of early career teachers regarding the relationship between sense of community and persistence?</p>			

<p>6. Do the interviews adequately address factors that will allow the researcher to obtain sufficient information regarding the school district to promote early career teachers' sense of community perceived effective in improving the persistence of early career teachers?</p>			
<p>7. Are there any particular items within the interviews that you would modify?</p>			<p><i>*Please specify the item number(s) with your response if you selected "Yes".</i></p>
<p>8. Are there any items within the survey that you believe should be excluded from the survey?</p>			<p><i>*Please specify the item number(s) with your response if you selected "Yes".</i></p>
<p>9. Are there any survey items that you feel should be included that are <b>not</b> currently included on the questionnaire attached?</p>			<p><i>*If you selected "Yes" please write your suggested statement(s) below:</i></p>
<p>10. Do you have any suggestions related to the 'readability' of the interview questions (i.e.: wording of the questions, the layout of the questions, etc.)? If so, please write them in the box to the right.</p>			