

## **ABSTRACT**

RICHARDSON, ANGELA HARRIS. A Qualitative Exploration of Factors Contributing to Teach For America Teachers Remaining in a Rural, High-Poverty School System Beyond Their Two-Year Contracts. (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass).

High teacher turnover is an issue that plagues the nation's education system, particularly rural schools. To address this, much research has been conducted on why teachers leave. However, reasons for why teachers stay in rural schools have not been aptly examined, and understanding this can also provide valuable insight on the problem of teacher retention. With a stated mission of battling another issue of concern in education, inequality, Teach For America (TFA) is an organization that helps rural and high-poverty schools staff their classrooms by recruiting high-achieving, recent college graduates and other professionals to teach in these areas for a contracted term of two years. One rural area that has leveraged the value of TFA is Blue County, North Carolina, which has one of the highest teacher turnover rates in the state. However, while many of its TFA teachers leave immediately after their contractual obligation of two years, others have stayed. This study worked to find out why.

To fill the gap in the literature, this qualitative explanatory case study sought to determine what personal, school, and county characteristics kept some TFA teachers in their initial work assignments in rural, high-poverty schools after their original two-year contracts ended. Through 60-minute, in-depth-interviews, 11 TFA teachers, selected through criterion sampling, were questioned about their personal and school-related reasons for staying in their Blue County position longer than their TFA contracts required. In addition, participants were asked to share the obstacles they faced in teaching in Blue County and their feelings about choosing to stay on after the first two years. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, then analyzed using the concept of job embeddedness to identify recurring themes.

From the analysis of the findings on the personal and school-related factors cited by the participants, four common themes emerged to explain why these TFA teachers stayed in Blue County past the initial two years; each of these themes aligned with an element of the job embeddedness framework. Emergent themes included a commitment to teaching for TFA and supporting its mission to see students succeed, strong relationships with colleagues and positive relationships with students in the Blue County school as well as with people in the Blue County community, the welcoming nature of the Blue County community, and the support of school colleagues and administrators. Implications for policy and further research are discussed.

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A Qualitative Exploration of Factors Contributing to Teach For America Teachers Remaining in  
a Rural, High-Poverty School System Beyond Their Two-Year Contracts

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Victoria and Katelyn, and to my late husband Leslie, for their unending love and support throughout my educational career. My children have been keystones throughout my studies and research by cheering me on, keeping me on track, and helping put my goals clearly in sight. Moreover, my husband's diligence and love have sustained and allowed me to pursue this difficult though rewarding process—time and time again. His example demonstrates the meaning of hard work and what the support of a “good man” can offer.

Without the loving support and encouragement of each of you, my dream of earning an Ed.D. would not have been possible—thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Angela Harris Richardson earned a Bachelor of Science degree in English Education from East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. She later received a Master of Arts degree in English from North Carolina Central University in Durham, as well as a Master of School Administration degree from Raleigh's North Carolina State University. After teaching for five years, she attained and has maintained National Board Certification, which awards teachers for accomplishments in their field.

In all, Angela has worked in education for the past 24 years, serving in a variety of roles including middle school English teacher, curriculum specialist, high school English teacher, teacher mentor, and principal. Currently, she works as an Instructional Coach in Warren County, North Carolina.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Chapter Introduction**

Teacher turnover is an ill that continues to plague schools in rural America. According to the American Association of School Administrators, attracting and keeping teachers is the main problem of rural schools (Collins, 1999, Public Schools First NC, 2016). Of course, many employees leave their jobs, but when teachers quit, students often suffer. It typically takes five years for a teacher to be effective, but evidence shows that 40% of teachers are gone before they reach that fifth year of efficiency (Ingersoll, 2002; Kini & Podolsky, 2016). Rural, high-poverty schools, those with 76% to 100% of their students on free and reduced-priced lunch, have an even harder time retaining their workforce of teachers (Public Schools First NC, 2016).

Poverty is a pressing issue in our nation's schools, and one that has an impact on the education of students, and, ultimately, their lives. The United States has the second highest child poverty rate among 35 industrialized nations. In the United States, 51% of students are low-income (Public Schools First NC, 2016), and a similar 50% of students in the state of North Carolina are rural and low-income (Southern Education Foundation, 2013). The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), signed into law by President Obama as a replacement for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, includes guidelines and requirements for issuing performance grades to schools as an indicator of their success rates. North Carolina schools with higher poverty rates had more Cs, Ds, and Fs than more affluent schools, and 98% of schools that received an "F" had 50% or more of their students in poverty (Public Schools First NC, 2016). That is, high-poverty schools received lower performance grades, and nearly all the schools that failed had half or more than half of students coming from low-income families. These data suggest a correlation between a school's performance grade and the poverty level of its students.

In North Carolina alone, 75 of the state's 115 districts are rural (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016; Public Schools First NC, 2016). Despite the considerable number of rural districts, however, populations are low. McCullough and Johnson's (2007) report on quality teachers in North Carolina determined that a meager 788,000 students attend rural schools. Furthermore, although many community schools have consolidated, 15 of the state's rural counties continue to see population decreases and are failing economically. The study also looked at 30 of the highest-poverty rural districts in the state, and found that students in these districts are 16% more likely to be taught by a new teacher and 66% more likely to be taught by a non-certified teacher (McCullough & Johnson, 2007). Monk (2007) similarly observed that rural schools have a below average share of highly trained teachers. Data such as these indicate that students in high-poverty, rural schools may not receive the quality instructors needed to overcome their challenges and achieve success.

Even more, and possibly correlated, McCullough and Johnson (2007) found that students in high-poverty, rural districts are 40% less likely to graduate from high school. It should be noted that these statistics likely result from a combination of factors affecting students, including inadequate instruction and resources, low achievement, alienation from school, and increased pushout and dropout. Simply put, these students need better teachers; however, many of the best and most qualified teachers do not stay if they cannot relate to, respect, and feel part of the school's community and families (McCullough & Johnson, 2007).

The literature identifies four major concerns for teachers in high-poverty school districts: (1) lower pay; (2) geographic and social isolation; (3) difficult working conditions (such as having to teach classes in multiple subject areas); and (4) ESSA requirements, since many rural teachers need certification in multiple subject areas yet face few professional development

opportunities (McClure & Reeves, 2004). Monk (2007) suggests that other factors pushing teachers away include high concentrations of special needs populations, high populations of English learners, and low college attendance, as well as industries “poaching” teachers by luring them away from jobs in education with better offers. In 2015-2016, when the current study began, the teacher turnover rate was on the rise in North Carolina. In fact, the state’s 2014-15 Annual Report on Teachers Leaving the Profession found that 14,255 (14.84%) of public school teachers left their classrooms—an increase from 14.12% in the 2013-2014 academic year (Public Schools of NC, 2015). At the time, the county with the highest turnover rate of any other within its district—approximately 7% higher—was Blue County (a pseudonym assigned to maintain anonymity). Within the last five years, Blue County’s teacher turnover rate has been increasing overall, specifically over each two-year period with decreases in between, with values of 20% (2010-2011), 12% (2011-2012), 25.7% (2012-2013), 18.34% (2013-2014), and 30.06% (2014-2015) (NCDPI, n.d.).

Clearly, there is a teacher retention problem within this rural, high-poverty county. The most recent report on teacher turnover, completed in November 2016, cites that overall turnover in North Carolina was down to 9.04%. This drastic decrease from the prior year’s 14.84% (NCDPI, 2016) is not reflective of the trend toward increased teacher turnover seen statewide in the last five years, and research needs to be done to investigate the causes for the discrepancy. Even still, within Blue County, the 2015-2016 turnover rate was approximately 14.63%, which is higher than the most recently reported rate for the state.

One plausible reason for the improved overall turnover rate could be in large part due to Teach For America (TFA) teachers remaining in their positions past their two-year commitments, which was the focus of this study. TFA is a non-profit organization that enlists

people, typically new graduates with little to no teaching experience, to work in low-income communities at various schools around the nation (TFA, 2016a). Rural school systems often rely heavily upon alternative licensure programs such as TFA to staff their schools, and Blue County is one such district; in fact, Blue County has relied upon TFA to fill vacant staff positions since the 1990s. Many TFA teachers leave their positions after completing their obligated two years, but, interestingly, some choose to remain at their original assignments longer than their contract requires. This study worked to discover why those teachers stay.

It should be noted here that Blue County is no longer in the top five North Carolina districts with the highest turnover rates; notably, though there was a mass exodus at the end of 2016, and those figures will be discussed in the pending 2017 report. Even if overall turnover rates in North Carolina's schools have shown some decreases, along with those in rural, high-poverty counties being examined in this study, it seems likely that TFA teachers' job placement decisions influence the numbers. Thus, the questions remain: What factors cause TFA teachers to remain in their positions at rural, high-poverty schools past their two-year contracts, and how does this affect teacher turnover rates in the state of North Carolina?

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to uncover the factors that influence a TFA teacher to remain at the program-assigned school past the terms of the mandatory two-year contract. Blue County is a rural, high-poverty North Carolina county that relies heavily on many sources to staff teaching positions in its fewer than 10 schools. Teachers hired in Blue County are traditionally certified; some join via a lateral entry program, and others are Visiting International Faculty (VIF) or associated with Educational Partners International (EPI). In addition, a considerable number of Blue County's teachers are from TFA. In fact, during the 2015-2016 school year,

approximately 20% (28 out of 181 teachers) of Blue County's staff consisted of teachers from the TFA program (Weldon, 2016).

While most TFA teachers fulfill their two-year contracts and move on, some remain past the terms of their original agreement. By examining TFA teachers who stayed at a rural, high-poverty county school in North Carolina after their assignment had ended, this study worked to better understand why a TFA teacher might choose to remain in that setting. Specifically, this study sought to determine what factors influence those TFA teachers to stay beyond their two-year commitment in Blue County, using the following research questions to guide the investigation:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?
2. Are there characteristics of the school at which they teach, the school system, or the county that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

### **Teacher Turnover in North Carolina**

#### **Increasing Teacher Turnover**

The high school dropout rate among American students has long been a major concern in education. Today, though, teacher “dropout” has become just as pertinent an issue, as Seidel (2014) aptly states, “Worried about your teenager dropping out of school? You might also want to worry about his teacher” (p. 1). Residents of North Carolina know well the constant turmoil teachers there have faced, including salary freezes, cuts in funding for supplies, a reduction of textbook funding and a move toward only purchasing digital textbooks, removal of tenure, and the elimination of automatic pay raises for those with Master's degrees. In fact, North Carolina

was recently ranked 50<sup>th</sup> on a list of the best states for teachers (District of Columbia was included in the ranking), making it next to the worst state for teachers; though its position has risen, it is still currently only at 45<sup>th</sup> place (Bernardo, 2017). To address this dilemma of such unfavorable conditions for teachers, Johnson (2016) contends that policies must be created to assist and improve working conditions for new and veteran teachers in North Carolina. Teachers remain in schools where conditions are suitable for effective performance (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009). Policies that make teaching less appealing as a career, additionally, should not be considered, as these are not in the best interests of the students, teachers, or public schools—nor are they good for the state or our nation. Moreover, while the impetus for such policies usually relates to fiscal budgets, any money that may be saved by not spending on benefits and higher salaries for more experienced teachers will just be spent on turnover costs later (Kain, 2011).

At the onset of this research, the teacher turnover rate in North Carolina was on the rise. The 2014-15 Annual Report on Teachers Leaving the Profession found that 14,255 (14.84%) public school teachers left their classrooms, an increase from 14.12% the previous year (Public Schools of NC, 2015). While the rate did decrease markedly in the 2015-2016 year, falling to 9.04% (NCDPI, 2016), the trend over the last five years points to increased teacher turnover that makes it remain an issue of concern in our schools. Each year, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), compiles data reported by departing teachers to school personnel during exit interviews, along with surveys and information from school databases. They listed five main reasons teachers gave for leaving their current positions:

- Personal reasons, such as career change, dissatisfaction with teaching, family circumstances, health issues, moving to teach in another state, and reduced retirement benefits for teachers
- Leaving the school district, but remaining in the field of education
- Reasons beyond district control, such as seeking retirement with full benefits, orders from the military, expiration of the VIF or TFA term, and reduction in workforce
- Termination by the local school district
- Other reasons (NCDPI, n.d.; Public Schools of NC, 2015).

It should be noted that many believe that teacher turnover stems almost entirely from retirement, but data show otherwise. In fact, of the 14,255 teachers who left in the 2015-2016 school year, only 1,755 (approximately 12%) left due to retirement with full benefits (NCDPI, 2015). The data above indicate teachers leave their positions for various other reasons as well, including migrating to another location, choosing another career, being terminated by the school, or voluntarily retiring. Nonetheless, while there may be many reasons for it, there is clearly an issue of high turnover in the teaching profession (Ingersoll, 2002; Johnson, 2016).

The monetary costs of teachers leaving the profession are extremely high, and the expense of recruiting and replacing those teachers “seriously underestimates the cumulative costs of eroding the caliber and stability of the teacher workforce, particularly in chronically under-performing schools serving the neediest students” (Haynes, 2014, p. 3). Research has found that 40% of teachers leave the profession within five years (Johnson, 2016). Such high teacher dropout rates lead to teacher turnover costs that have been estimated between \$4.9 billion (Haynes, 2005) and more than \$7 billion a year (Center for Urban and Multicultural Education, 2009). With numbers like this, North Carolina cannot afford to curtail its growth and diminish its

resources by continuously spending on teacher turnover. Considering that teaching quality is the most effective school-based component in a child's learning and a major factor influencing their life success (Haynes, 2014), the importance of retaining teachers is evident, and the need for the current study clear and justifiable.

The district examined in the current study, Blue County, ranks high among the various counties in the state for its teacher turnover. In fact, it was ranked in the top five of the state's 115 school systems for the highest turnover rates in the 2014-2015 school year, with a total turnover rate of more than 30% (NCDPI, 2016). Of its nearly 163 teachers, 49 of them left the county, a rate more than double the average number for the entire state (NCDPI, 2015). In general, high-poverty schools tend to have a turnover rate of 20%, which is 50% higher than that of other schools (Ingersoll, 2004). Thus, since Blue County is a rural county with higher poverty levels, its turnover rate can be expected to be greater than that of a wealthier county. Nonetheless, its 30% turnover rate exceeds that of the average high-poverty school by 50% (Haynes, 2014). With a turnover rate so much higher than the rest of the state's districts, even when only compared to other high-poverty counties, Blue County stands out among others in North Carolina. More information is clearly needed on Blue County, its teachers, and the varying teacher turnover rates to improve education in the county's schools, thus driving the current study on teacher retention for TFA teachers.

### **The Importance of Teacher Retention**

Teacher turnover is not only costly, but it is also detrimental in many other ways. Turnover certainly affects monetary expenditures, but the biggest damaging impact of teacher turnover is student academic inefficiency (Haynes, 2014). While family background and socioeconomic status are major factors for determining a student's success (Coleman, 1966),

teacher quality is recognized as an important school-based component in student learning or achievement (Ferguson, 1991; Haynes, 2014). Student success is a matter of “whether states have an educator workforce, or the capacity to produce one with the training and skills needed to ensure that students achieve the learning outcomes essential to succeed in school and beyond” (Haynes, 2014, p. 1). Thus, if students are to be ready for college and careers as required by the new Common Core Teaching Standards, highly qualified teachers are essential.

Moreover, having ineffective teachers for several years can be damaging for students (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). Continuously high rates of turnover make it hard for school systems to attract and develop quality teachers or an efficient teaching staff. Thus, high-poverty and minority students who attend these schools are too often taught by the least experienced, least effective teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008). This is undergirded by the fact that the turnover rate is nearly 50% higher in high-poverty schools than in wealthy schools (Ingersoll, 2001). High-poverty schools, which serve America’s neediest students, lose 20% of their teachers each year (Ingersoll, 2004), and many of these schools lose half of their overall staff every five years (Allensworth et al., 2009). If teachers take from three to seven years to become highly skilled as has been claimed (Haynes, 2014), those who leave the profession altogether do so before gaining the skills that increase their effectiveness.

Patterns of chronic turnover have instructional, financial, and organizational costs that negatively affect student learning (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010). When students are repeatedly instructed by new teachers, they often pay a heavy price in relation to the quality of instruction they receive. Furthermore, schools with high turnover must revise teaching assignments yearly to account for staff changes caused by transfers and new teachers (Simon & Johnson, 2013). Such a lack of instructional continuity results in weaker learning programs

(Guin, 2004). Continuous turnover, moreover, interrupts the type of continuity needed to build relationships between teachers, students, and families (Simon & Johnson, 2013).

Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2013) examined the instructional impact of teacher turnover by looking at how turnover affects student performance in specific courses. They concluded that students who experience high turnover in their teachers tend to score lower in English/Language Arts and math, and that these effects are more apparent in schools with large populations of low-performing students and Black students (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). As a result, high teacher turnover results in communities of poorly educated children, especially in high-poverty areas.

The importance of teacher retention is underscored by evidence that students and schools both suffer when teachers do not remain in their positions. Studying the teachers who do stay in their positions to understand their reasons for staying can provide valuable insight into this issue that educators can use to create better working conditions and promote teacher retention.

## **Teach For America**

### **Teach For America History and Training**

TFA is a non-profit organization that grew out of the undergraduate thesis of Wendy Knopp, a student at Princeton University in 1989. The organization began in 1990 with 500 members and a mission to “eliminate educational inequality” (TFA, 2016d, n.p.). TFA’s vision is that “One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education” (TFA, 2016a, n.p.). The organization works toward this goal by recruiting “the best and the brightest for hard-to-fill teaching positions in rural and urban locations around the country” (TFA, 2016d, n.p.). Since 1990, 33,000 people have participated in TFA after being recruited and selected by the organization for their track record of achievement. These recent

college graduates and other professionals then serve and teach in high-poverty urban and rural areas for a two-year, contracted assignment.

All TFA corps members, as they are called, attend a six-week stringent training session before beginning their assigned teaching experience (TFA, 2016a). The first week of training consists of a regional induction to the location of their assignment, followed by a five-week Summer Institute during which participants teach summer school to learn essential teaching frameworks, curricula, and lesson planning skills while building community and school relationships. For approximately two hours a day, participants are observed by experienced teachers as they lead classes and deliver small-group instruction; they also receive coaching from experienced teachers. Corps members additionally attend a lesson-planning clinic, during which they use objectives to develop plans for summer school lessons, select appropriate teaching methods to use in class, and plan tests and assessments. Components of the institute's training program include "Teaching as Leadership," "Instructional Planning and Delivery," "Investment, Classroom Management, and Culture," "Diversity, Community, and Achievement," and "Literacy Development." Accordingly, TFA assures, "By the end of the Institute, corps members have developed a foundation of knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to be effective beginning teachers" (TFA, 2016f, n.p.). Ongoing training during teachers' two-year service commitment consists of continued access to professional development and online resources, as well as mentoring (TFA, 2016a).

To supplement the general pay received from each state, TFA teachers may also qualify to be AmeriCorps members and receive benefits. These AmeriCorps benefits may be in the form of money to assist with federal school loans, regular payments, or education awards (TFA, 2016e). As AmeriCorps members, teachers can earn a maximum of \$5,645 per year, totaling

\$11,290 for the two years of service. These awards can only be used for repayment of their federal or state student loans, or for current or future education costs. Those who have already served in an AmeriCorps program and earned previous education awards may be ineligible for additional education awards; however, they may receive other awards. As an added benefit, several colleges and universities will match the AmeriCorps education award given to their undergraduate or graduate students. These financial benefits allow teachers to postpone student loan repayments while serving in AmeriCorps, and AmeriCorps will even pay 100% of any interest accrued on the loans while teachers are in the corps (TFA, 2016e).

### **Teach For America in Rural, Eastern North Carolina**

Since its inception in 1990, the TFA organization has existed in Eastern North Carolina (ENC); in fact, ENC was one of the original TFA sites (Packer, 2016). Also, many of North Carolina's counties have used TFA to fill vacancies for 26 years, almost three decades (TFA, 2016c, n.p.). The first ENC corps group consisted of 25 members. Currently, the entire corps consists of 8,600 members and 42,000 alumni members (Packer, 2016). The corps included 625 members in the state of North Carolina in 2015, with 250 of those members specifically in the eastern region (NCDPI, 2015; Packer, 2016). There are also 650 alumni and nine alumni leaders in the eastern region. Of the 625 TFA teachers employed in North Carolina in 2015, 205 (32.80%) left the profession (NCDPI, 2015). At the time of this research, 200 TFA teachers served 15,000 students in rural North Carolina communities (Packer, 2016).

Since its start, there have been many TFA members in North Carolina. An original data set revealed that, since 2003, 71 TFA teachers have been placed in Blue County. Of these, while 36 teachers left and did not stay a third year, 35 teachers remained for at least one more year following their two-year contract (Blue County Data Manager, personal communication,

November 3, 2014). From the 35 TFA teachers who remained in their role for an additional year, 11 teachers were qualified for the study and selected to participate in this research.

### **Research Questions**

With the issue of high teacher turnover and the detrimental effects it can have on student achievement, TFA is a valuable organization that can contribute much to the staffing needs of rural, high-poverty schools—a quality teacher, eager to fulfill TFA’s mission of ending educational inequality. However, if these teachers most often move on from TFA and to another school after their two-year contract ends, it can have a negative impact on students and schools. Even more, why do some teachers stay, while others leave? Understanding this may help educators create the environment needed to encourage teacher retention.

To address these concerns and gain insight on why some teachers choose to remain in their positions, the following research questions guided this study:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher’s decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?
2. Are there characteristics of the school at which they teach, the school system, or the county that influence a TFA teacher’s decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

### **Overview of Methodological Approach**

A qualitative explanatory case study was completed to discover the reasons why some TFA teachers remain in their teaching positions past the expiration of their two-year contracts. The research design included criterion sampling to properly identify those teachers who remained longer than their contracts required.

When considering how many people to interview, the literature is ambiguous, to say the least. Baker and Edwards (2012) assembled key researchers' views to determine how many qualitative interviews are sufficient. The answers, however, are many and varied. Howard Becker says that every experienced researcher knows there is no reasonable answer to the question, so the researcher must have enough interviews to say what s/he thinks is true while not saying what one does not have the numbers to claim; he suggests that a single interview may be sufficient, and only a few interviews may be needed to validate a case is complex. Adler likewise advised that a small number of cases are adequate for a research project, but he suggested having between six and 12 people. This is supported by Daniel Miller, who notes that six to 10 interviews are needed at minimum (Baker & Edwards, 2012).

Finally, others contend that a researcher should quit interviewing when there is data saturation, or when the interviews are yielding the same information. Still others say that the answer to the question depends on the study. Since this study is an exploratory case study seeking to find out why a few TFA teachers remained in their positions beyond the contracted two-year commitment, the limited number of stayers within Blue County were the criterion sampling pool from which this researcher had to choose. Thus, for this study, the current 11 alumni who remained in Blue County were interviewed toward the goal of data saturation. The motivation behind the research was to discover how to increase retention among TFA teachers, which remained the focus throughout the study.

To ascertain their rationales for remaining employed at the rural, high-poverty school where they were originally assigned by TFA, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews of approximately 60 minutes in length with 11 TFA teachers who stayed beyond the length of their contracts. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for basic themes.

## **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 introduces the study, discussing its purpose, brief background information, the necessity of the research, definitions of key terms, and research methods. Chapter 2 provides a literature review detailing the turnover phenomenon in Blue County and North Carolina, the TFA organization, and the conceptual framework of job embeddedness. The impact of turnover is also addressed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the research methodology utilized. Chapter 4 includes the data collected from participants and assesses the relevance of the study's findings to theory. Finally, Chapter 5 contains a summary of the study's results, providing conclusions as well as implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and further research.

### **Conceptual Framework: Job Embeddedness**

#### **Overview of Job Embeddedness**

The conceptual framework used for this study is based upon a concept called *job embeddedness* (JE), developed by Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, and Erez (2001), and is identified as “a key factor in understanding why people stay on their jobs” (p. 1102). The purpose of this research is to apply job embeddedness concepts to discover what factors contribute to TFA teachers wanting to stay after their two-year contracts expire.

The core of job embeddedness is based on an embedded test and a theory by Kurt Lewin (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). Embedded figures refer to how people are engulfed and inseparable from their backgrounds, and Lewin's 1951 theory suggests that people have lives where aspects are “represented and connected... [making job embeddedness] like a net or a web in which an individual can become ‘stuck’” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). More specifically, the concept of JE is divided into three components: 1) link, or “the extent to which employees

have links to other people, teams, groups and activities;” 2) fit, or “the extent to which their jobs and communities are similar to or ‘fit’ with the other aspects in their life spaces;” and 3) sacrifice,” or the ease with which links can be broken—what they would give up if they left, especially if they had to physically move to other cities or homes” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). These components are all applicable both on and off the job.

### **Elements of Job Embeddedness**

As discussed above, JE has three main elements: link, fit, and sacrifice. Per Mitchell et al. (2001), *links* are formal or informal discernible connections between a person and institutions or other people. The link portion of this theory suggests that there are many links “to an employee and his or her family in a social, psychological, and financial web that includes work and non-work friends, groups, the community and the physical environment in which he or she lives” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). Mitchell et al. (2001) further imply that “the higher the number of links between the employee and the web, the more an employee is tied to the job and the organization” (p. 1104). They maintain that some links may be more important than others, with variation between populations. Within the study, the researchers cite Abelson’s (1987) findings that being older, married, having more tenure, and having children who are childcare age are all related to an employees’ likelihood of staying (Mitchell et al., 2001). Mitchell et al. (2001) also name other factors that pertain to links, such as pressures related to “family, team members, and other colleagues” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). Community links may include items other than links with people such as home ownership or membership in an organization (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1108).

The second part of JE is *fit*. Mitchell et al. (2001) deem being fit as an employee’s “perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with his or her environment” (p.

1104). In other words, the employee must fit within the community and environment and with his/her immediate job culture in areas such as personal values, career goals, and plans (job knowledge, skills, and abilities). They propose that the higher the fit, the more likely the employee will be attached to the organization, and hence less likely to leave (Mitchell et al., 2001). As with the job, there are also aspects of the community that should be likeable, such as the weather and other cultural aspects; recreational activities; locale; political, religious, and education climates; and entertainment (Mitchell et al., 2001).

The last portion of the theory is *sacrifice*, or what one would give up on-the-job and within the community to leave a job. The report defines it as “the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving a job” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1105). The employee may lose friendships, coworkers, projects, and other benefits such as opportunities for advancement, a company vehicle, and pension plans. Of course, the more there is to give up, the harder it is to leave a job. Leaving a community involves making sacrifices as well, such as safety, respect, entertainment, commute time, or daycare (Mitchell et al., 2001). Researchers Mitchell et al. (2001) and Carruthers (2009) both note that the elements of employee embeddedness include links, fit, and sacrifice—both on-the-job and off-the-job.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study provides answers to why some TFA teachers chose to stay in a rural, high-poverty school in Blue County, North Carolina, past the terms of their original two-year, contracted commitment. With this knowledge, school leaders and county representatives can apply and create new strategies and conditions that may improve retention of TFA instructors and other teachers. The current study identifies reasons why these teachers chose to stay, and is the first of its kind for this county and region.

North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt, who has been called “the Education Governor,” and his colleague Thomas G. Carroll commented on the significance of high teacher turnover rates. Hunt and Carroll (2003) state, “No teacher supply strategy will ever keep our schools staffed with quality teachers unless we reverse debilitating turnover rates” (p. 10). Concurring with the value of this topic, Ferguson (1991) claims that quality teachers are the most vital school element for student learning. Particularly, this study is important for the thousands of academically impoverished students who deserve better chances at life, and for whom having consistent teachers that give them a good education may be the only hope of achieving their dreams. Simply put, if student learning is to increase, then teacher retention matters greatly.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*Job embeddedness:* A conceptual framework of key factors that influence people to stay in a certain job, including links to people and institutions related to the job, personal fit with the position, and sacrifices that would be made if they left (Mitchell et al., 2001).

*MindTools.com: Essential Skills for an Excellent Career:* A website that people may use to help to improve or increase their skills in the workplace, such as management, leadership, and personal excellence skills.

*Retention:* The act of keeping someone/something, in this case the act of keeping a teacher in his/her position year after year (*Merriam-Webster.com*, 2014).

*Teach For America (TFA):* A national teaching corps of leaders/college graduates who commit to teach in low-income schools (TFA, 2016a).

*Teacher turnover rate:* The rate at which personnel whose primary function is classroom teaching leave or separate from the district. Teachers on approved leave and teachers who moved from one school to another school within the LEA are not included in this rate. Calculations

include VIF teachers who are required to return to their home countries after three years, TFA teachers who are high-achieving recent college graduates and professionals enlisted to teach for at least two years in designated high-need communities, and teachers receiving financial assistance through the Troops-to-Teachers Program who agree to teach in their position for at least three years (NCDPI, 2015).

*Teacher attrition:* The occurrence of teachers leaving the occupation of teaching altogether (Ingersoll & Smith, 2013).

*Teacher migration:* The practice of teachers who transfer or move to different teaching jobs in other schools (Ingersoll & Smith, 2013).

*Poverty:* Refers to a single-family household earning at or below \$13,670 per year; a two-person household making at or below \$18,430 per year; a three-member household earning at or below \$23,190 per year; or a four-member household making at or below \$27,950 per year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

*High-poverty schools:* Schools with 76% to 100% of their students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

*Low-poverty schools.* Schools where less than 25% of students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

### **Chapter Summary and Dissertation Overview**

Chapter 1 has introduced the issue of teacher turnover addressed in the current study, along with the study's purpose. The organization TFA is also discussed, including its history, training practices, and presence in rural, Eastern North Carolina where the research was conducted. In addition, the conceptual framework of job embeddedness that was applied to this

study is described, the study's significance in adding to the extant body of research is discussed, and key terms are defined.

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature related to teacher turnover and TFA. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in the current study, and Chapter 4 details the findings. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the study's findings, including implications of the study for practice, policy, and further research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Chapter Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to uncover the factors that have contributed to Teach For America (TFA) teachers in a rural high-poverty county in North Carolina remaining in the school system once their contracts have ended. While also demonstrating the need for the current study, the following sections provide an overview of the extant literature on the criticality of the issue of teacher turnover, TFA and teacher turnover related to the program, and the conceptual framework of job embeddedness used in this research.

General academic and dissertation databases through the North Carolina State University libraries, as well as Google online searches, were used to access journals, research studies, reports, articles, and other literature in search of information on topics related to teacher turnover, teacher retention, TFA, student achievement, and job embeddedness. The search began with “teacher turnover” and was progressively narrowed down to the geographic region of study by revising it to “teacher turnover in North Carolina,” to “teacher turnover in rural counties in North Carolina,” and to “teacher turnover in rural counties in Eastern North Carolina.” The search was further expanded and honed by searching for alternate phrases related to the issue of teacher turnover and the current study, such as “TFA teacher turnover” and “the impact of turnover on student achievement.”

Of note was Dr. Richard M. Ingersoll, whose literature on teacher turnover includes many seminal works that delineate him as a recognized expert in the area. Early works from 20 years prior to this study focus on which teachers leave the profession and why they do so, and in these, Ingersoll (2001) provides a basis for research on teacher turnover. He extends his research by pioneering studies relating to the organizational conditions of the workplace that contribute to

teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2001). Indeed, it should be noted that other researchers examining the topic typically begin with Ingersoll's work, reference it, and then serve to extend it in multiple ways; for example, Ingersoll's (2001) "revolving door" (p. 499) analogy has been cited and paraphrased numerous times to summarize the teacher turnover phenomenon. Other key researchers in the field include Matthew Ronfeldt and James Hunt, Jr., both of whom have taken the general data further to quantify which students suffer the most due to teacher turnover.

### **Teacher Turnover**

The topic of teacher turnover has long been a researched phenomenon. Certainly, with teacher turnover on the rise nationally, the retention of teachers must be increased if the United States is to be globally competitive with other nations. Teacher attrition has increased 50% over the past 15 years, and the annual attrition rate for first-year teachers has increased by more than 40% within the past 20 years alone (Haynes, 2014; Kain, 2011). Nationally, teacher turnover is a major problem, especially since we rely on teachers to impart valuable knowledge and skills to the youth, our future leaders and citizens. During the 1990-1991 school year, 190,000 teachers joined the workforce, but 180,000 (91%) of those teachers left the profession in the next year. Then, approximately 193,000 new educators entered the profession in 1993-1994, but again, within just one year, 213,000 (110%) teachers left the profession. Blue County, where the current study was conducted, had an individual teacher attrition rate of more than 30% in 2015, more than twice that of the state's 14.84% turnover rate (Haynes, 2014; Weldon, 2016). This rate broke down to 30% in the elementary grades, 27% in the middle grades, and 36% in the high school grades (Weldon, 2016).

Overall, about 13% of the approximately 3.4 million-teacher American workforce moves (227,016) or leaves (230,122) their position each year (Haynes, 2014). In other words, nearly

half a million teachers leave their schools each year in the United States, with 40% leaving the profession (attrition) and 60% transferring to different schools (migration). In fact, 45% leave before their fifth year of teaching, the time that it usually takes a new teacher to be confident and proficient within the profession (Haynes, 2014).

Still, because of such large numbers of teachers going in and out of the profession, the “revolving door” analogy was created, in which Ingersoll (2001) defines the constant turnover situation as one “where large numbers of quality teachers depart their jobs for reasons other than retirement” (p. 501). Thomas Carrol (2007), President of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, similarly called the turnover problem “a bucket with holes in the bottom, and we keep pouring in teachers” (p. 13). Teachers leave for a variety of reasons, such as inadequate administrative support, isolated working conditions, poor student discipline, low salaries, lack of input for decisions, and retirement (Ingersoll, 2002). To address these pervasive teacher retention issues, we must better understand why they leave and consider various solutions, especially those that deal with organizational ills (Ingersoll, 2001).

### **Turnover in High-Poverty and Rural Areas**

Overall, teacher turnover is a big problem for many areas, but turnover within high-poverty areas is alarmingly significant. Nationally, while 10.5% of teachers leave low-poverty schools annually, 20% leave high-poverty schools—that is, 50% more teachers leave the poorer schools than the wealthier schools (Haynes, 2014; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002). Students at high-poverty schools are therefore more likely than those in richer schools to experience high turnover continuously, year after year, and as such are more likely to be taught by inexperienced new teachers (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Certainly, there are times when turnover is warranted, especially if a teacher is inefficient. But other times, these students suffer when

teachers leave their high-poverty schools (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010), because the experienced teachers who leave are often replaced by inexperienced first-year teachers who are less effective (Rockoff, 2004). Not only do these already high-poverty schools lose valuable teaching resources, but they also lose the money that they have invested in these individuals such as in staff development (Carrol, 2007). Thus, high turnover in these low-income rural areas erodes teacher quality and student achievement (Hunt & Carroll, 2003).

There are many reasons for the heavy turnover in rural areas. Rural administrators cite teacher retention as the main problem in their areas, and symptoms or conditions such as low salaries and poor community amenities contribute to recruitment problems (Miller, 2012). Another factor is that teachers with strong academic preparation are less likely to select rural areas; teachers also prefer less geographically and professionally isolated places, as well as rural communities with more shopping opportunities (Miller, 2012). The non-attractiveness of rural areas is furthered by their geographic and social isolation, lack of housing, and poor economy (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005). On the other hand, in urban areas, teacher turnover is more often related to student characteristics, especially race and achievement; urban schools with academically disadvantaged students have difficulty keeping teachers, regardless of the amount of a teacher's experience (Hanushek et al., 2004).

There are some who believe that teacher turnover is not as prevalent a problem when compared to that of other fields. In fact, Harris and Adams (2007) conducted a study that compared teacher turnover to turnover in fields such as nursing, social work, and accounting, and found the average teacher turnover rate was not higher than that of these other professions. Specifically, their data showed that teacher turnover was higher than turnover among nurses, lower than that of social workers, and slightly lower than accountant turnover. Teachers,

however, did have a higher rate of turnover among older professionals, likely due to early retirement (Harris & Adams, 2007). In North Carolina, 19.8% of the overall turnover related to retiring with full-benefits and 6.2% related to retiring with reduced benefits (NCDPI, 2015).

Harris and Adams (2007) acknowledge that their work differs from Ingersoll (2001), who focused on the organizational reasons for teacher turnover (low salaries, low administrative support, and student conflict), while they examined other factors. Also, contrary to Harris and Adams' (2007) findings, Ingersoll (2001) concluded that teacher turnover was higher than other professions, and that fewer teachers leave for retirement than for other reasons; due to this disparity in findings, Harris and Adams (2007) suggest that non-retiree teacher turnover should be further examined. Although Harris and Adams (2007) agree that Ingersoll's numbers are correct, they nonetheless maintain that teacher turnover compares favorably with other professions, with retirement playing a significant role.

### **Turnover in North Carolina**

In 2013-2014, 13,557 teachers in North Carolina left their local districts, an overall rate of 14.12% across the state; this number is just slightly down from 14.33% the previous year. Of a total of 402 TFA teachers employed, 167 teachers left their jobs (1.23%) (NCDPI, 2015). Teachers tended to leave for reasons related to job dissatisfaction, including insufficient administrative support, isolated working conditions, poor student discipline, low pay, and minimal teacher influence in schoolwide decisions (Haynes, 2014).

Blue County's teacher characteristics are furthermore revealing. Because of the high 2014-2015 turnover rates, the 2015-2016 staff consisted of 181 certified teachers, including 31.6% beginning teachers, 15.5% TFA teachers, 8.8%, lateral entry, and 5% Visiting International Faculty (Weldon, 2016). Of this 181-teacher workforce, 103 teachers had less than

five years of experience; 25 teachers had 6-10 years; 17 teachers had 11-15 years; 19 teachers had 16-20 years; and 15 teachers had 21 or more years of experience (Weldon, 2016). Notably, teacher experience has witnessed a drastic decline in the last few decades. In the 1987-1988 school year, the national average experience level was 15 years, yet just 10 years later in 2008, the average teacher was at a first-year experience level (Haynes, 2014). This is evident in Blue County, where many of the teachers are in their first year.

### **Why Turnover Matters**

As Haynes (2014) states, “Teaching quality is recognized as the most powerful school-based factor in student learning” (p. 1). Urban and high-poverty schools are more likely to hire teachers who are not certified to teach, giving these schools’ disadvantaged students only a 50% chance of being taught by qualified, certified math and science teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). Even in the high-poverty, low-performing schools, teachers do not have access to high-quality effective peers and mentors, and they get few chances for collaboration and feedback. Yet peer collaboration and feedback has been recognized as critical to the performance of teachers and, in turn, the performance of students, because “without opportunities to engage with others to improve instructional practices, teachers’ performance in high-poverty schools plateaus after a few years” (Haynes, 2014, p. 2). Additionally, morale and work environment suffer in these lowest-performing high schools, because hard-to-staff schools become known as “places to leave, not places in which to stay” (Haynes, 2014, p. 2).

The financial costs of teacher turnover are also of considerable concern. Ingersoll (2008) estimated that states spend about \$1 billion to \$2 billion annually on teacher turnover. School districts should be aware that studies “suggest that the price tag for recruitment and replacement seriously underestimates the cumulative costs of eroding the caliber and stability of the teacher

workforce, particularly in chronically under-performing schools serving the neediest students” (Haynes, 2014, p. 3). In fact, Ingersoll (2008) estimated that teacher attrition cost North Carolina between \$28,955,506 million and \$63,025,491 million in 2008-2009, when 6,634 of the state’s 96,047 teachers left their positions.

### **The Impact of Turnover**

Nearly half a million American teachers leave the profession yearly, costing the nation up to \$2.2 billion. The issue is so prevalent, in fact, that there are concerns whether states even have the skilled and trained educator manpower needed to teach students for success in school and after graduation (Haynes, 2014). States and schools pay monetarily through the expense of ongoing recruitment and replacement to address teacher turnover. Schools also lose professional development and other resource investments from high teacher turnover (Carrol, 2007). Schools, too, must continuously restructure their master schedules and assignments to constantly rebound from such heavy turnover year after year (Simon & Johnson, 2013), which is costly in both time and resources.

In addition to monetary effects, teacher turnover affects overall academic performance of the schools as well. At schools with high turnover, students tend to perform at lower levels, and the teachers then leave in greater numbers because of these low-achieving students as well as poor working conditions and negative school climates (Haynes, 2014). As a result, many school systems are forced to lower their standards and hire less qualified teachers, which only serves to create higher numbers of under-qualified, inexperienced teachers who are less effective—thus making for even higher numbers of low-achieving schools (Ingersoll, 2001; Rockoff, 2004).

The long-term consequences of having ineffective teachers over several years are detrimental to student learning (Nye et al., 2004). Rockoff (2004) completed a study on the

impact of individual teachers on student achievement, using panel data from New Jersey school districts to estimate teacher fixed effects. He found that an increase of one standard deviation in teacher quality raises test scores by approximately 0.1 deviation in reading and math on nationally standardized scales (Rockoff, 2004). Rockoff (2004) also claims, in terms of nationally standardized rates of achievement, that teaching experience does matter; for example, teaching experience raises test scores, especially in reading where scores of experienced teachers compared to beginning teachers differ by nearly 0.17 standard deviations.

Remaining teachers can also be affected by turnover. Teachers who stay are constantly forced to teach their new co-workers about the school, expectations, and other programs, which essentially means that schools are starting over again and again, rather than making progress (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Moreover, high teacher turnover leads to less high-performing, experienced teachers in the school, which results in diminished peer collaboration. Without access to experienced peers and mentors with whom they can collaborate and gain feedback, after a few years, stressful working conditions, low performance, and poor morale begin to halt the performance and growth of teachers who stay (Haynes, 2014).

Even when a teacher does not leave the field of education but simply switches grades, there is still an educational impact because the continuity of the instructional program is interrupted, and the teacher's knowledge of that specific grade or student capital is wasted (Guin, 2004). Ronfeldt et al. (2013) note that turnover has a negative effect on the "development and maintenance of social resources such as staff collegiality, community and trust" (p. 27). Turnover hinders the continuity needed to sustain trustful relationships between teachers, students, and families; these relationships, built over time to form a sense of community within the schools, help create norms for instructional quality and practices, professionalism, student

behavior, and parental involvement. Without such relationships, student achievement is affected (Simon & Johnson, 2013).

Ronfeldt et al. (2013) conclude that the unstable teaching culture in high-poverty and high-turnover schools has disruptive effects on all students, including students of teachers who remain employed within the school. However, it has been noted that the negative academic effects of turnover are greater for low-performing and Black students than for their counterparts (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). In a Tennessee study on the residual effects of teachers on academic achievement, students who had the least effective teachers three years in a row achieved 54% lower than those who had the most effective teachers (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Students in grade levels with higher turnover score lower on both English and math tests, but this low scoring is especially strong in schools with low-performing Black students. Thus, students and teachers are arguably the most hurt by the loss of human capital needed in so many hard-to-staff schools of poverty, where the students are mostly minorities from a low-income home. Schools with high turnover cannot attract the best teachers, and so low-income and minority students are often taught by the least experienced, least effective teachers (Simon & Johnson, 2013).

Ultimately, persistent teacher turnover negatively impacts instructional, financial, and organizational elements of schools to the degree that they become unstable and hurtful to student learning. Students who are taught by new teachers each year due to turnover pay for it with the quality of instruction that they receive (Simon & Johnson, 2013). Moreover, children of poverty often attend schools where leadership is poor, teacher skills are low, and instruction is weak and non-responsive to those who need it most. Thus, many of these students leave school without the necessary skills needed to earn a decent living for themselves and their children (Murnane, 2007). Again, as teachers have been recognized as one of the most powerful school-based forces

to help students of poverty conquer learning deficits, impoverished students who do not have effective teachers for several years are likely to suffer academically (Haynes, 2007).

Finally, Peske and Haycock (2006) suggest that poor and minority children underachieve in school because they enter schools that do not have the one resource they most need to reach their highest potential—high-quality teachers. They cite the results of a study in Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin regarding teacher inequality. In all three states, they found significant differences between the qualifications of teachers in the highest poverty and highest minority schools versus schools serving wealthier students (Peske & Haycock, 2006). They underscore that the students who need the strongest teachers are taught, on average, by teachers with less experience, education, and skill. Specifics for each state are given in their research, but conclusively, they found that poor and minority students have fewer high-quality teachers and are assigned to novice teachers twice as often as those in low-poverty schools. These researchers contend that we have a “caste system of public education that metes out educational opportunity based on wealth and privilege, rather than on student or community needs” (Peske & Haycock, 2006, p. 15). This is because low-achieving schools produce students who are largely unable to function in the economy due to low skills and high unemployment and incarceration rates (McKinsey & Company, 2009).

The harsh reality is that students of high teacher turnover in low-income, high-minority schools face the odds of being unsuccessful. As witnessed in many rural counties, these students are often taught all year by long-term substitutes who are unqualified to teach the subject matter. Without a proper education, students often do not graduate and do not achieve college entrance or the high-paying jobs necessary for success in life (Hunt & Carroll, 2003). Since low-income schools have a harder time attracting and retaining qualified and effective teachers (Donaldson,

2012), many counties rely on agencies and organizations such as Teach For America (TFA) to assist with supplying teachers.

### **Teach For America**

TFA is an organization that works to eliminate inequality in education, named as its main goal, by recruiting new college graduates with a track record of achievement to educate youth in high-poverty rural and urban areas for a two-year commitment. TFA is highly selective of their participants and has utilized top graduates to fill hard-to-staff positions, especially in rural districts. Districts that use TFA, such as Blue County, understand that, as Chingos and Peterson (2011) suggest, it is easier to select a good teacher than to train one to be highly effective. A study conducted through the Florida Department of Education concluded that teachers do become more effective after a few years of experience (Chingos & Peterson, 2011).

Since TFA's start in 1990 with 500 corps members, 33,000 people have participated in the organization. Interestingly, North Carolina, where the current study was conducted, was one of the first states to host TFA teachers. TFA has been active in various counties within the state since its inception, with Eastern North Carolina, where the current study's school is located, having its own division (TFA, 2016d).

### **Perspectives on Teach For America**

Though TFA has been arguably useful in the Blue County School system where the current study was conducted, still, there has been much debate about the organization's value. There are two views regarding the value of TFA. Those who support TFA praise the organization's ability to attract academically talented college students to a profession that they would ordinarily not choose (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). TFA has collected data and highlighted studies that support the work it does daily within schools. One of the main studies

TFA uses to support their work is from Mathematica Policy Research, which found that TFA students learned 2.6 months more mathematics in one year than students taught by traditionally prepared students (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004).

Another study by Clark et al. (2013) discovered that secondary TFA teachers were more effective than other secondary teachers in the same school; their results showed that students taught by TFA teachers scored 0.07 standard deviations higher on assessments than other students, which translates to 2.6 months of school for the average student. While TFA teachers have been found to have a positive impact on math scores, they did not have an impact on the average reading achievement, retention, discipline, attendance or behavior (Decker et al., 2004).

TFA uses a study conducted by Boyd et al. (2009) to support their success, which found that TFA teachers have stronger academic qualifications than math immersion teachers, and that math immersion teachers produce substantially smaller gains than TFA teachers. An earlier study by Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2006) found comparable results, as they agree, “TFA teachers have stronger math backgrounds than teachers from other pathways” (p. 212); they went on to state that “in some instances...TFA members provide higher student achievement” (p. 212). Further evidence of TFA’s value came from Xu, Hannaway, and Taylor’s (2007) study of North Carolina end-of-course tests scores for high school students, which concluded that TFA teachers in Algebra I and II, geometry, biology, chemistry, physics, physical science, and English had a positive effect on student scores in comparison to non-TFA teachers.

Another study examined the effects of TFA on student achievement in primary school. Instead of looking at the mean achievement level and impact of TFA, researchers conducting this study looked at the effect of having a TFA teacher across the achievement distribution for reading and math scores, using a fixed effects quantile regression (Antecol, Eren, & Ozbeklik,

2013). They found that TFA teachers in disadvantaged areas do not help or harm students' reading test scores, but they did note positive effects of TFA teachers on math scores for the sample studied (Antecol et al., 2013). Additionally, "significant heterogeneity" effects were noted for Hispanic and Black students and students taught by inexperienced teachers, with results remaining consistent for math achievement regardless of the teacher's certification type (Antecol et al., 2013, p. 113).

A 2014 analysis examined the effects of teacher preparation policies in North Carolina on student achievement. Researchers sought to examine how policy choices affect student achievement by comparing traditionally prepared teachers with those who are non-traditionally prepared, teachers who were prepared in-state with those prepared out-of-state, teachers with graduate degrees to those with undergraduate degrees, and teachers prepared at state versus private universities (Henry et al., 2014). For the purposes of the current study, the results relating to alternative licensure and TFA teachers were particularly noted. Teachers who enter the profession alternatively were found to be significantly less effective than those who were traditionally prepared, specifically in three of the eight categories (middle-grades math, high school math, and high school science). For the remaining five categories they examined, alternatively licensed teachers and TFA teachers performed similarly. These results, they claim, suggest that more prior preparation in stem subjects in secondary grades is beneficial. In comparing teachers' preparation, TFA teachers were furthermore found to be more effective than traditionally prepared teachers in six of the eight categories (elementary math and reading, middle-grades math, high school math, science, and English). Students of TFA teachers gained about 18, 11, and 73 days of additional learning in elementary math, reading, and middle-grades

math, respectively, with no difference noted in middle school reading or high school social studies (Henry et al., 2014).

Hansen and Sass (2015) also compared TFA teachers to non-TFA teachers, conducting a study with three areas of the Atlanta Metropolitan School Districts for the period spanning from 2005 to 2014. After examining standardized test data from these districts, they concluded that there were positive effects of hiring TFA teachers in comparison to non-TFA teachers. Test scores for students of TFA teachers on the state's end-of-grade competency tests for science and social studies indicated positive effects, as did end-of-course test scores in American Literature; no significant differences were noted in other subject areas (Hansen & Sass, 2015).

When determining teacher effectiveness and success, research studies often focus on test scores as with the findings discussed above. Backes and Hanson (2015) instead focused on the non-test benefits of TFA teachers. Their research used administrative information from the Miami-Dade Public Schools System in Florida to examine non-test-related student outcomes for students of TFA teachers. Elementary school students taught by TFA teachers had fewer absences, fewer suspensions, and higher GPAs. Similarly, those taught by TFA teachers in middle school were still less likely to have unexcused absences and suspensions, though GPAs were no longer found to be higher (Backes & Hansen, 2015).

Other arguments in favor of TFA relate to the service it provides to help both the college graduate and the student. Labaree (2010) suggests that TFA was ahead of its time by "making such an explicitly egalitarian appeal to use education to raise the academic achievement and social opportunities of the disadvantaged in the United States" (p. 49). As part of its appeal to attract teachers, TFA offers many perks for participation within the program, including a voucher for payment of student loans or money that may be banked for future education. As mentioned

earlier, these perks are related to membership in the AmeriCorps group, a civil society program for Americans of varying ages and backgrounds who use their skills and talents to unite with the goal of helping others in need by volunteering in communities. The organization, which was established in 1993, uses more than 80,000 people yearly, and mobilizes millions of volunteers (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2017).

More generally speaking, TFA allows college students to educate low-poverty students for two years as a type of Peace Corps, with the implied goal of increasing the participant's chance of doing well in their future search for top jobs by using their TFA service on their résumés (Labaree, 2010). After all, unlike typical teacher education programs, TFA offers the top 10% of Ivy League or college participants an opportunity to teach in a classroom without immediate sacrifices in preparation or a lengthy time commitment (Labaree, 2010).

Another argument in favor of TFA deals with the fact that, through marketing, TFA has brought much attention to the importance of the teaching profession, as their efforts have convinced people to teach who would otherwise never consider teaching (Labaree, 2010), many of whom were certainly good teachers. Moreover, TFA has provided education with added visibility to people who eventually find themselves in economic and political power—the TFA alumni who either remain in education or impact the field through professions as career educators, civil rights attorneys, technology entrepreneurs, and socially-conscious Chief Executive Officers (TFA, 2016b).

However, there is a community of those who are vocally against TFA, particularly the organization's high turnover rate. A study by Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, and Heilig (2005) that is often used in arguments against TFA found that students taught by certified teachers outperformed those taught by TFA in both reading and mathematics, adding further that

TFA had a negative impact on student performance. Speaking directly to the issue of high TFA turnover, Azimi (2007) reported:

Seventeen years after its inception, TFA has become the gold standard of public service, proof that teaching in public schools can be prestigious, even glamorous. However, in some circles, there is a perception that TFA's corps of teachers do not come back, that many of them view their teaching stint as résumé-burnishing pit stop before moving on to bigger things—that TFA stands for “Teach for A While.” (p. 110)

Azimi (2007) continues, citing some startling statistics about the organization's high rate of turnover:

More than a third leave after two years, and another 10 percent drop well before. TFA says that more than 60 percent of its alumni stay in education...In the organization's view, it takes allies in every field to close the achievement gap. TFA's sights are set on the boardroom and Capitol Hill. This is what it calls “the second half of the movement,” beyond the classroom. (p. 112)

Ultimately, the goal of this research was not to determine how effective TFA teachers are in instructing students, but instead the purpose was to determine what factors influence TFA teachers to remain past two years. Indeed, while most TFA teachers complete their two-year assignments, few stay after their contracted commitment expires. Only about 35% of teachers at the beginning of their second year were predicted to sign up to teach again by the start of the third year. When these teachers leave their high-poverty teaching assignments, the students suffer (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010).

## **The Problem of Teach For America Turnover**

Donaldson and Johnson (2010) looked at some of the numbers related to TFA teachers and their decisions to stay or leave their position, writing, “Approximately 50% of TFA teachers left their initial schools within a median lifetime of 1.86 years, with 44% of TFA teachers remaining in their initial placement schools after two years, when their commitment ended” (p. 308). Of those remaining, 19% are estimated to leave in the third year (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010), whether they transfer to a new school or leave teaching completely. It was also found that only 35% of those teachers who remained in their positions for the second year signed up to teach again by the beginning of their third year (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). Additionally, Donaldson and Johnson (2010) maintained that “an estimated 61% of their participants remained in the teaching profession more than two years and 50% stayed longer than 2.66 years” (p. 309).

Hansen, Backes, and Brady (2015) sought to identify the impact of movement of large clusters of TFA teachers in a limited number of low-performing schools within Florida’s Miami-Dade Public School system. They found that increased numbers of TFA teachers placed within schools was associated with a decrease of TFA movement across schools for the first year of service, but that the higher concentrations did not affect the overall retention of TFA teachers after their initial contractual commitment. Students, though, were affected by teachers who chose to stay, as those whose TFA teachers remained at the school beyond their two-year contracts performed better in math. Interestingly, the researchers also discovered that teachers who work at schools with higher numbers of TFA teachers are more likely to leave the district (Hansen et al., 2015). Thus, while TFA teachers are helpful in filling hard-to-staff schools, they can contribute to a culture of high turnover.

According to Kelly and Northrop (2015), TFA teachers, like other highly selective graduates, have problems adjusting early in their careers, and their attrition rates are higher. In fact, the largest difference between highly selective and less selective graduates are indicators of career satisfaction. TFA teachers, for example, claim to receive less support from administrators and other co-workers, and have low job satisfaction and higher burnout. Kelly and Northrop's (2015) study found that highly selective graduates are less likely to remain in teaching, and more likely to say that they would not select the profession of teaching again. The study also revealed that, over the first three years, 35.2% of less selective graduates departed the schools in which they began, while, comparatively, 41% of the highly selective teachers left. Additionally, 20.5% of highly selective teachers left the profession completely, compared to just 14% of less selective graduates. Most teachers arguably have some difficulty adjusting to their instructional role, but TFA teachers are 85% more likely to leave the profession within the first three years, possibly attributed to low job and career satisfaction (Kelly & Northrop, 2015).

In addition to studies focusing on TFA teachers' qualifications when they begin and their number of years in the role before leaving, research has examined teachers' credentialism and reasons for joining TFA as these may relate to their reasons for departing in a brief time. Maier (2012) examined the issue of credentialism at TFA, and concluded that TFA has increased its exchange value relative to other teacher preparation programs by offering such advantages as recruiting non-education majors from top universities, remaining selective, and offering many resources, social networks, career advances, and professional connections; that is, TFA teachers can exchange their experience for a well-paid career or graduate school entrance while other teachers cannot (Maier, 2012). Because TFA recruits the top college students, allows them to delay their careers, and only requires a two-year commitment, they attract those who may not

have thought of teaching before and would like to explore the profession (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998). Humphrey and Wechsler (2007), when studying alternative routes to teaching, found that 46% joined TFA to try teaching as a career, only 12% joined because they truly wanted to teach, and only 11% planned to teach for at least 10 years. Similarly, Stevens and Dial (1993) found that, out of 33 teachers, most joined because they were not sure about their next jobs. Thus, many TFA teachers teach because they are not sure of their plans, and they enter the teaching field before other career options arise and without having to complete long preparation (Maier, 2012).

Retention of teachers is as important as recruiting strong teaching candidates, and many studies chart the retention of TFA teachers. Donaldson (2008) found that of the 3,283 TFA teachers surveyed from 2000 to 2002, 43.6% claimed that they voluntarily remained in their initial setting past the expiration of their two-year contracts, but only 14.8% of them remained more than four years. In another study in Texas, 60% of TFA teachers left in comparison to 45% to 50% of other new teachers (Raymond & Fletcher, 2002). A few years later, Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2005) study in Texas found that 57% to 90% of TFA teachers left after two years, and 72% to 100% had left their position after three years; there are even some (10% to 15%) that leave before the two years are over (Boyd et al., 2006). A similar study in New York found that 90% of TFA teachers left by their fourth year, compared to 60% of uncertified teachers and 40% of certified teachers (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2006).

As stated earlier, experience matters in the realm of education—as teacher experience increases, so does their knowledge on pedagogy and practice. In turn, this newly gained knowledge impacts student achievement, teacher recruitment, and preparation costs (Center for Urban and Multicultural Education, 2009). As teachers continue teaching and gain experience,

they are usually offered professional development, and one study researched the effects of distinct types of continuing education on teachers' ability to promote student achievement. Harris and Sass (2006) found that content-focused professional development impacts productivity for middle school and high school math, and teachers with more experience seem more effective in elementary math and reading as well as middle school math. In fact, experience impacts teacher productivity at all grade levels in reading, and in both elementary and middle school math. The researchers recommend that schools improve the productivity of their teachers, especially at the secondary levels, by emphasizing pedagogically, content-focused training and professional development. Further, they argue that experience greatly improves the productivity of elementary and middle school teachers, and suggest policies aimed at retaining beginning teachers can have significant benefits beyond the costs of hiring new teachers (Harris & Sass, 2006).

There is clearly a problem with retention of TFA teachers within classrooms. This problem is not due to teacher shortages, but instead the result of keeping the same teacher within a school for a period of two years or more. Those against TFA argue that, by allowing only a two-year commitment and a five-week preservice training, the organization is undermining efforts to stabilize teacher retention in the “very schools most overwhelmed by teacher turnover and most in need of teacher consistency” (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011, p. 48). Looking at the high rate of turnover, the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education (2009) likewise questions the long-term benefits of TFA for urban and rural schools with students who face considerable daily challenges. In doing so, TFA has been said to minimize teaching as a profession by requiring only a few weeks of pre-service, thus presenting teaching as a pre-

profession to the careers that alumni move to after teaching, and thereby making TFA no more than a “résumé booster” (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011).

Donaldson and Johnson’s (2010) groundbreaking study focused on TFA teachers in low-income schools around the nation; they found that, generally, TFA teachers in more challenging teaching assignments, such as teaching split grades, more than one subject, or out of their major area, are more likely to leave their school than those who are assigned to one grade-level, one subject, or within their major. In fact, these teachers are more likely to leave during their first year. Specifically, elementary teachers assigned to multiple-grade classes early in their careers had a higher risk of leaving their initial, low-income schools than did their counterparts who taught just one grade level (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010). Likewise, secondary teachers assigned to teach more than one subject or to teach out of their field were found to be at greater risk of leaving the profession altogether than those assigned to teach one subject; also, math and social studies teachers who taught out of their field and lacked a major were more likely to resign than those who had majors in those areas. Interestingly, teachers who were assigned to instruct science without having that academic major were less likely to leave than those who did have a major in that area (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010).

Donaldson (2012) also discovered that older TFA teachers have a lower risk of leaving low-income schools, the teaching profession, or other educational roles than do their younger counterparts, with 61.3% of TFA teachers leaving the profession within three years. Even when older TFA participants left, they were more likely to cite family or health issues as reasons for leaving, and more likely to become specialists and administrators after teaching (Donaldson, 2012). Accordingly, older TFA entrants may prove more beneficial for low-income schools since

they have demonstrated greater dedication to these underprivileged schools and the teaching profession overall.

Research has furthermore found that TFA teachers who received more training stayed longer. Teachers with longer-term plans who had taken education courses in college seemed to remain longer, as did those who were successful (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). Notably, TFA teachers who were education majors (71.3%) taught longer than four years, while less than half (35.5%) of the entire sample of other study participants taught four years. Education majors seemed to be understandably more committed to remaining in the teaching position than others, though some other TFA participants do go on to choose teaching as a long-term career (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011).

Researchers question if TFA teachers treat their assignment as a quick way to enter a career or a “short-term voluntary experience” (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010, p. 309). Donaldson and Johnson (2011) conducted a study that found that few teachers remained in their initial placement or the profession more than five or six years; after the fourth year, only 14.8% continued to teach in the school of their original placement. Overall, 21% of teachers in high-poverty schools leave each year, compared to 14% of teachers in low-poverty schools; this constant turnover “leaves the very schools that most need stability and continuity perpetually searching for new teachers to replace those who leave” (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011).

Working to improve their services, TFA has two innovative programs to address training, marking the largest change in the organization’s philosophy since it began, as Sawchuk (2007) notes. TFA plans to provide a year-long, pre-service training for some of its teachers, on topics including learning theory, cultural competency, and work and classroom experience, and hopes to convince teachers to stay past the two-year commitment by extending the support it provides

for its alumni during their third through fifth years of teaching. Twelve of the 28 TFA regions have begun such retention strategies, and some regions had begun other campaigns even before the new initiatives. Matthew Kramer, TFA's Co-Chief Executive Officer, states that they have accomplished much, but must remain open to change that works to keep teachers in their positions past the two years, as this is most beneficial for the students (Sawchuk, 2014).

Alumni have also weighed in on the issue, according to Azimi (2007). One TFA alumni, Megan Hopkins, wrote a letter that included recommendations for the organization's improvement. She recommended that TFA extends its two-year program to three years, and that the organization grant incentives for those who stay longer. She also suggested that the organization add a year of residency in an experienced teacher's classroom to the TFA program, as well as help ease transitions into different school cultures by offering more diversity training (Azimi, 2007).

### **Views on Teach For America Turnover**

In terms of the high turnover among TFA participants, some believe that it is entirely unacceptable for TFA teachers to do the contracted two years and then leave the profession, while others feel that turnover is beneficial. Of those against TFA, Stephanie Rivera, co-founder of Students United for Public Education, contends, "Teach For America claims that they're really providing a solution to educational inequality, closing the achievement gap and what have you, but you can't do that while providing the highest need students with the least qualified and least trained educators" (Szteinbaum, 2014, n.p.). Rivera furthermore suggests that TFA teachers are sent to low-income areas for only two years because these students with high needs are already accustomed to high turnover. To this, Rivera remarked:

We believe the students, who are in the highest need, deserve teachers who are in this for the long run and who are going to be committed and have teaching as a lifelong profession, not something to just add onto their résumé. (Szteinbaum, 2014, n.p.)

Many states have mixed feelings about utilizing TFA, including Florida and Georgia. Stepzinski (2012) noted that the notably limited commitment of TFA teachers caused two counties to avoid TFA—Hillsborough County (Florida) and Cobb County (Georgia)—because the financial costs of recruitment, training, and replacement make the program impractical, especially since education receives little funding. However, Florida’s Duval County does use the program; of their 55 recruits in 2008, there were eight who remained in the public or charter schools, while 12 of the 2009 group continued teaching within the county. County officials have averred that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, but others maintain the opposite view. For example, a collaborative study conducted by the University of Texas and California State University found that school systems seeking high student achievement should look to programs other than TFA due to its high turnover rates (Stepzinski, 2012).

Some research has found that teacher effectiveness and student achievement improve as a teacher gains more experience (Boyd et al., 2006; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), so, likewise, TFA teachers are arguably more effective and yield better student results as they become more experienced. However, with only two years of service required, TFA teachers are not staying in the classrooms long enough to counter the deficits that they bring due to alternative certification and inexperience (Maier, 2012). It is furthermore thought that bringing in a TFA teacher for only two years does not aptly address the problems of struggling schools and students, especially since much money is spent on the cyclical hiring of beginning teachers who are more likely to leave (Center for Urban and Multicultural Education, 2009). Labaree (2010)

similarly registers the complaint that TFA worsens an existing problem by having the least experienced and most poorly trained teachers work with the neediest students and schools; he calls TFA's work a form of "slumming" and a "missionary effort" by the White middle class toward minorities and lower-income students through education (p. 52).

### **Job Embeddedness**

The previous section discusses teacher turnover and its impact, making this issue a logical concern for the quality of our nation's education. There are researchers and others who would agree that some turnover is beneficial to TFA because it rids the organization of teachers who do not fit or have perhaps chosen the wrong career (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). However, if we wish to take actions to improve teacher retention, there must be a consensus on what factors influence TFA teachers to stay. Furthermore, in rural, high-poverty counties, it has become the norm to rely upon organizations such as TFA; however, when teachers only stay two years, it creates a vicious cycle of turnover that negatively affects students and schools. Thus, it is contingent upon administrators and local school boards to create conditions that will help retain teachers. Ronfeldt et al. (2013) suggest the development of policies that would support creating grade-level teams and introducing incentives, as teachers who have experience and high-achieving students have been found less likely to leave.

In efforts to study teacher retention, job embeddedness (JE) was the conceptual lens used to analyze the data within this study. Interestingly, Mitchell et al. (2001) developed the theory of JE to explain why people stay or become embedded in their jobs after a conversation on employee turnover—they wondered whether it would be more beneficial to study why people stay instead of leaving their positions. With the significant amount of turnover from TFA

teachers, it is necessary to find out from the sources themselves why they have remained in their positions.

JE is like a net or a web of sorts, just as an individual who is stuck in his/her job is closely stuck in many ways (Mitchell et al., 2001). The concept of JE is divided into three components, all of which are applicable both on and off the job:

1. *Link*, or “the extent to which employees have links to other people, teams, groups and activities”
2. *Fit*, or “the extent to which their jobs and communities are similar to or ‘fit’ with the other aspects in their life spaces”
3. *Sacrifice*, or “the ease with which links can be broken—what they would give up if they left, especially if they had to physically move to other cities or homes” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104).

*Links* are formal and informal connections between a person, institutions, teams, or groups. The “embedded figures” test related to JE proclaims that embedded people are deeply rooted in their backgrounds and hard to separate from it, and that people have many or few aspects of their lives to which they are connected. Thus, like a web, the more links an employee has with his/her job or organization and the community at large, the more entangled s/he is to their job. Links with another employee or family may be social, psychological, or financial, and they can be shared with work or non-work friends, groups, community, and/or physical environment. The higher the number of links an employee has, the more s/he is tied to the organization; it should be noted that some links may be more important than others and can vary by population. An employee may have increased likelihood of staying in a position, for instance,

if they are older, married, or more tenured, or if they have children, attend church, or have hobbies (Mitchell et al., 2001).

*Fit* includes an individual's perception of their fit with the job, organization, and community, as well as how comfortable the individual is with his/her organization or environment (Mitchell et al., 2001). With the JE concept, an individual's values, career goals, and plans must fit with the company's culture and job demands—knowledge, skills, and abilities. An employee will determine how well s/he fits with the community and environment; the better the fit, the higher the probability that the employee will feel professionally and personally connected to the organization, and the greater the chance they will stay in their position. In line with this idea of fit, studies on voluntary turnover have found “misfits” resigned faster than “fits” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). Additionally, an individual's personal qualities, job choice, attachments, and community all relate to fit. Weather, community amenities, and culture of the job's location are examples of community fit. Specifically, outdoor activities, political and religious climates, entertainment possibilities all may relate to an employee's fit within a community, and certainly varies between communities. The elements of organizational fit and job fit function independently of each other, as a person may love the fit with one and hate the other. Moving or relocating for a position, as many TFA teachers do, requires an individual to restart or reset their fit, as travel may be involved with a new home, and normal patterns are destroyed if a teacher leaves (Mitchell et al., 2001).

*Sacrifice* is what people would give up, material or psychological, if they left a job. When one leaves a job, s/he may sacrifice personal friendships or colleagues, perks, salary, and especially costs of pension plans, health care, and other nontransferable benefits such as stocks (Mitchell et al., 2001). Stability and opportunities for advancement are also possible important

sacrifices that may be forfeited if one left a job (Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998.), and tenured individuals notably tend to have more advantages and perks like sabbaticals.

Relocation can notably affect JE. Community sacrifices, links, and fit are all problematic if one is forced to relocate, since leaving a comfortable, safe, and respectable community can be difficult. Even staying in the same area but changing jobs may result in longer commute times, increased daycare costs, and the loss of company vehicle (Mitchell et al., 2001), all of which can affect one's embeddedness in their job.

Regarding how JE relates to turnover, Mitchell et al. (2001) found that people who are embedded in their jobs have less intent to leave and do not do so as readily as those who are not embedded; they agree that new constructs are invented daily, and cite other studies on fit including Cable and Judge (1996) and Cable and Parsons (1999). They furthermore suggest socialization may be related to organizational fit, and that conscientiousness may determine embeddedness or turnover (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Ultimately, given the tremendous numbers who exit the teaching profession, retaining teachers must be considered critical. If a county is to rely heavily upon teachers who come from TFA or even Visiting International Faculty (VIF) or Educational Partners International (EPI), policies and working conditions to keep them satisfied and embedded in their job must be introduced. This chapter's literature review has provided a picture of the academic crisis currently upon rural high-poverty schools in America. Although multiple useful studies in the available research have been done on why TFA teachers leave, few of them address why TFA teachers stay. Hence, this study was necessary to find out why some TFA teachers choose to stay in their positions past their initial, contracted two years. Hawkins (2011) contends that TFA teachers leave for the very same reasons that non-TFA teachers stay or leave their positions, but

to the contrary, it is possible that teachers stay for reasons opposite to those for which other teachers leave. The current study sought to discover the answer.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 has provided a review of literature related to teacher turnover and the impact it has on student achievement. The conceptual framework of job embeddedness is also explained, and research on the TFA organization and issues of turnover related to it is highlighted. Chapter 3 follows with a description of the methodology used in this study, including procedures for data collection and analysis and efforts to ensure study validity.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study was conducted to discover what factors contribute to the retention of Teach For America (TFA) teachers who remained in North Carolina's Blue County schools after their two-year contracts expired. Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study along with pertinent background information, while Chapter 2 included an overview of the related literature. Chapter 3 follows to present information about the study county, a detailed explanation of the appropriateness of the research plan, data collection methods, and other issues associated with the current study.

### **About the Study County**

Blue County is a rural county situated in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. The United States Census Bureau (2014) estimated Blue County's population as approximately 20,575 (9,848,060 for the entire state). Only 14% of persons over the age of 25 had a Bachelor's degree or higher in 2008-2012, compared with 26.8%, statewide, and there were 254 non-farm establishments, compared to 217,404 statewide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

The Blue County Public Schools System is made up of eight schools and one charter school. Three elementary schools (Grades K-5) serve the county, as well as one middle school (Grades 6-8) and one evolving Grades K-8 school. High school students may select from a traditionally operated high school, an alternative high school operated on a performance-based style, and an early college that works in conjunction with the local community college. In the 2015-2016 school year, the school system consisted of 2,450 students and a faculty and staff of 177 teachers (Blue County Data Manager, personal communication, May 3, 2015). Of the 177 teachers, 35 were brand new TFA teachers. In 2016-2017, a total of 35 new teachers were hired, with 20 of those being TFA teachers; thus, of the new beginning teacher staff in Blue County,

approximately 57% are TFA teachers (Blue County Schools Human Resource Department Associate, personal communication, May 5, 2016). The county has utilized this method of filling positions since 1990. In fact, the Blue County Superintendent of 12 years says that TFA works to meet the needs of his students daily within the county; he states that the organization is no silver bullet, per se, but it does provide a resource of equity for the students and communities with the highest needs. He concludes by saying, “From where I sit, Teach For America hasn’t ‘run its course.’ It’s hitting its stride” (Mathews & Spain, 2013).

Certainly, the superintendent’s tenure will not end soon, nor will that of TFA. Thus, this study is necessary to learn conditions that may convince TFA teachers to stay longer, especially in the case of Blue County, with its more than 30% turnover rate, the eighth highest rate in the state of North Carolina. Specifically, 46 teachers (25.7%) left the county in the 2014-2015 school year. In fact, within the last five years, the rates have been: more than 30% (2014-2015); 18.34% (2013-2014); 25.7% (2012-2013); 12% (2011-2012); 20% (2010-2011) (NCDPI, 2015). Oddly, these data show that the turnover rate in Blue County increases every other year, which could be at least in part related to the two-year TFA contract agreement.

Blue County’s relatively high turnover rate is indicative of the state’s problem with teacher turnover, which is on the rise overall. Indeed, for the past five years, North Carolina’s teacher turnover rate has increased from 11.17% to 14.84%. Still, Blue County’s turnover rate in 2014-2015 was the highest of any other system within its district; it falls in the same region of the state as the county with the highest turnover rate, and is approximately 7% higher than the county with the closest rate (NCDPI, 2015). By all measures, both individually and when examined against the state’s overall numbers, Blue County is plagued with teacher turnover issues.

Across the state, turnover rates vary from district to district. North Carolina has invested much time and many resources to monitor the turnover trends across the state. Accordingly, North Carolina has been estimated to have spent between \$29 million and \$63 million (6,634 teachers) on turnover in the school year of 2008-2009 (Ingersoll, 2002). As discussed in Chapter 2, the effects of constant turnover are damaging; thus, conditions must be created that assist with teacher retention. Hence, this body of research on TFA teachers may be applied in efforts to discover solutions to address high turnover rates in Blue County.

### **Appropriateness of the Research Design**

The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions rather than to test a generated hypothesis as done in quantitative research. Hence, the most appropriate method for this type of research is qualitative. *Qualitative methodology* was selected because it allowed the researcher the opportunity to gain insight and learn about the lives of those involved in the TFA process. Through the tool of interviewing, I gained an opportunity to hear teachers' stories first-hand. Qualitative research was used to understand how the TFA teachers interpret their experiences, their world, their stay, and the meaning they attribute to their place as TFA alumni (Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative researchers seek to understand a phenomenon through the interrelationships of participants (Stake, 1995). This type of methodology allows a researcher not only the opportunity to be immersed in the realistic environment of his/her participants, but also provides a means to analyze the environments, events, and interviewee perceptions. As such, the phenomenon of TFA tenure can be studied in the natural school environment in efforts to interpret participants' perceptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The researcher gains the

opportunity to learn the perspectives of each participant or insider on the rarity of fulfilling their contracts and working beyond the expected time (Merriam, 2009).

Hence, qualitative research is especially suited to the current study's efforts to truly understand the dynamics of TFA teachers who remained in Blue County more than two years. Teachers in this study were first given a short written demographic questionnaire to complete (see Appendix E), and from the information collected within the questionnaire along with follow-up interviews, a research table was created to gain a full view of participant characteristics and motives, including pseudonyms to aid in participant anonymity. *Interviews* or *structured conversations* with participants are effective ways to gather first-hand information on this phenomenon; they are reflective ways of knowing the details of a person's experiences from beginning, middle, and end (Seidman, 2013). Specific relevant descriptions gained from interviews provided the details necessary for understanding the rationale behind their desired action of staying past their initial contracted agreements.

This was an *explanatory case study*. Case study research involves "the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bound system," such as a setting or a context (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The current study was bound by the setting of Blue County, and the context of TFA teachers who had remained within their original assignment at least a third year. A major factor in a case study is that it tries to highlight a decision or set of decisions, reasons as to why such decisions were made, actions that were taken, and what results evolved (Schramm, 1971). The case study method is used to "contribute to our knowledge of individual group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" (Yin, 2009, p. 4). The phenomenon of retention among TFA teachers was examined in the current study within the context of one rural school system that has experienced many changes, such as massive turnover of teachers and

principals, growth of the district system by adding schools, expansion of elementary schools to include middle grades, and conversion of traditional schools to year-round schedules.

An *explanatory case study* examines the data closely both at a surface and deep level to explain the phenomena found in the data, which can include asking participants their reasons for a certain behavior (Zaidah, 2003, 2007). Likewise, the participants in this study were asked to share their reasoning for staying in Blue County longer than the required two years. Explanatory cases are also useful for the investigation of certain phenomena in very complex, multivariate cases, which can be explained by knowledge-driven theory, problem-solving theory, or social-interaction theory (Zaidah, 2007). The current study worked with the goal of the knowledge-driven theory, hoping that eventual outcomes or products will result from the ideas and discoveries of this research (Yin & Moore, 1987).

This study's primary focus was to discover why TFA teachers continued to work in a rural, high-poverty county's school system once their two-year contracts have been expired, specifically their personal and school-related reasons. As such, this query may appropriately be researched through the case study method. Furthermore, according to Schramm (1971) and as stated previously, the purpose of a case study is to highlight decisions. Likewise, this case study sought to determine why some TFA teachers decided to stay past their two-year obligation.

The case study approach allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the teachers involved, as well as the chance to learn of contemporary events through direct observation and interviews with TFA teachers who remained in their positions past the expiration of their two-year contracts (Yin, 2009). Through interviews, an understanding of the phenomenon in question was gained. Additionally, participants detailed their experiences from beginning to end such that the researcher could better understand their experiences (Seidman, 2013). These data sources

provided a variety of information and a rich description of the reasons for retention among the participant TFA teachers (Yin, 2009). Moreover, the goal of this investigation was to determine “why” TFA teachers remained past their assigned two years, and to explain their decisions. Such “how” and “why” questions work to explain an issue; hence an explanatory case study was the best approach for the query at hand.

The current study offered a valuable opportunity to gather data in the school settings where some of these teachers work daily (Bhattacharya, 2008); this interaction within the participants' own environment allowed the researcher to be concerned with “understanding behavior from the informant's own frame of reference” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 2). Additionally, educational policy demands that either the quantity of teachers supplied be increased, or that the quantity demanded be decreased; since the supply leaves, work and policies must be created with the aim of keeping teachers for the “long-haul” (Ingersoll, 2001). As such, the information learned from this study can be used to help change policies and procedures relative to hiring practices, teacher contracts, licensure situations, and working conditions—thus affecting policy changes, which is a major goal of qualitative case study research (Merriam, 1998).

### **Research Questions**

The current study investigated the issue of teacher turnover. Following are the research questions that guided this study:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher’s decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

2. Are there characteristics of the school at which they teach, the school system, or the county that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

### **Data Collection and Research Procedures**

The goal of this study was to understand why these TFA teachers made the decision to remain in Blue County past their originally contracted period. Prior to the study, IRB permission was gained, and then TFA data were gathered to determine how many teachers fit the study. At the time of this research, there were 12 teachers within the district who fit the criteria for the study as TFA alumni who remained in the Blue County system for at least one additional year after their two-year contracts expired; however, one teacher declined to participate. Interviews conducted with the other 11 teachers were centered around retention of TFA teachers, with a few core questions guiding each session to allow the TFA teachers to discuss their rationale in their own words. The following sections provide additional details on the data collection and research procedures used in this study.

#### **Gaining Permission to Conduct the Study**

To begin, a letter describing the qualitative, explanatory case study and seeking permission to interview teachers within the school system was sent to the Blue County Board of Education and Superintendent (see Appendix A), as well as to the TFA organization (see Appendix B) via email. Blue County's Human Resource Director sent a return letter granting permission for the study on behalf of the district. TFA's Eastern District Director responded via email with the organization's official permission to conduct the study, and specifically assigned Blue County's TFA Alumni Director to assist the researcher as needed.

## **Sampling Strategy**

The researcher followed strict protocol for selecting participants for the study. Criterion sampling was used to identify the appropriate teachers needed for this study, as the researcher worked with the TFA Alumni Director for the Blue County district to find suitable candidates to survey for the study. Once the TFA Director had been fully informed about the criteria for the study eligibility, through email correspondence, the researcher requested the names and emails of those teachers working in the county at the time who had stayed in Blue County beyond their two-year contracts for at least one additional year. Via email, he supplied an initial list of 12 TFA teachers who remained in the county past their two-year contracts.

## **Recruitment Protocol**

With the emails and alumni information provided by TFA, the researcher sent a letter via email to each of the 12 teachers who fit the criteria for the study and requested their permission to participate. One person declined, but the other 11 teachers agreed to participate in the study. Through email, appointments were set up to interview each candidate.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected through 60-minute, in-depth interviews with selected TFA teachers who had remained employed within the selected school system for more than two years. Additionally, the use of open-ended questions offered flexibility to allow for stronger analysis (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Interviewees were given the opportunity to respond to each question, and if necessary, probing questions were asked to gain additional information.

Interviewing was the best method of investigating the educational phenomenon of retention of TFA teachers. In-depth interviewing, more specifically, provided a means for these TFA teachers to review their experiences and share them with others while showing how they

make meaning of their experiences. The interviews enabled the teachers to tell comprehensive stories with extensive details, and gave them a chance to reflect (Seidman, 2013). Thus, participants took part in a 60-minute, in-depth interview designed to give them the opportunity to share their personal stories and provide the information needed.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face; one interview was conducted via Skype. Interviews took place in the participant's classroom. All participants were asked the same open-ended questions, and as mentioned earlier, probing questions were used as necessary. Participants were afforded the opportunity to give their own answers to questions, without any answer choices being supplied. Questions were generated partially through the literature.

Nearly all the participants were relaxed and cooperative during their interview. Most were eager to give information and share their experiences, and, in fact, many seemed overjoyed for the opportunity to be heard as they expressed how they really felt about their experiences and day-to-day work. Talking to the researcher gave them the chance to vent and feel that their opinions and expertise mattered. Even at the end of the interview, when asked if there was anything else they wanted to share, many participants spoke candidly and frankly, without seeming to censor their words.

Interviews were recorded using an iPad and transcribed professionally. The initial two interviews were transcribed immediately to assure that questions were yielding the type of data needed (Yin, 2009). After they were completed, the rest of the interviews were also transcribed.

## Data Analysis

As required in qualitative studies, the data must be aligned with the theoretical framework information discussed, as well as with information found within the literature review (Yin, 2009). Thus, the transcribed interviews were read several times to search for repetitions, indigenous typologies, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, missing data, and theory-related material (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

For this study, the theory of job embeddedness (JE) was used as a framework through which to view the participants' responses to better understand their reasons for staying in their assigned TFA position after their two-year contract had been fulfilled. Processing techniques for the data included cutting and sorting, developing keyword lists and keywords in context, and creating lists of word collocations or word co-occurrences. Additionally, data were thoroughly analyzed for basic information and common similar themes. To add to current themes and identify new themes as they emerged from each interview, the interviews were reviewed multiple times by the researcher. According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), without thematic categories, there is nothing to compare, explain, or discuss. Themes were identified through an iterative process of coding and examination of emerging codes and themes. As theoretical constructs related to the primary research question emerge, they were compared with the literature to test their validity (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Although this research was based on a case study approach, methods from grounded theory were also used to understand the reasoning of TFA teachers who stay past their two-year contracts. Initial coding involved dissecting the interview data and comparing it for similarities and differences, which can help the researcher determine if more data is needed (Saldana, 2009). Data analysis also included *in vivo coding*, an identification of themes as stated by the

participant; *open coding/initial coding*, where the data is analyzed line by line; *constant comparison* of themes between narratives; and *axial coding*—all of which work to identify relationships between codes (Saldana, 2009). In vivo coding can “help to provide a crucial check on whether you have grasped what is significant” to the participant (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57; Saldana, 2009, p. 74). In performing in vivo coding (literal or verbatim coding), the researcher focused on words or short phrases within the data or interview transcript to assist with highlighting the participant’s voice (Saldana, 2009). While analytical memo-writing and second-cycle coding can also help to analyze research data (Saldana, 2009), in vivo coding was more appropriate since, as said by Strauss (1987), it can assist in illuminating “behaviors or processes which will explain to the analyst how the basic problem of the actors is resolved or processed” (p. 33).

Data gleaned from the method were themed; a theme is “an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection; a phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means” (Saldana, 2009, p. 139). Saldana (2009) maintains that the goal is to narrow down the number of themes and discover a main, “overarching” theme from the data or, in lieu of that, to create an “integrative theme” that connects all the varied themes together in a story (p. 140). In this study, themes were stated simply and generally for meaning, and then used to explain why TFA teachers stayed and what various actions or statements meant (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Themes were categorized by common topic, and ordered by “superordinate and subordinate” groupings such that relationships could be determined. Themes were also compared for similarities and differences as additional interviews took place, and various themes were expanded and condensed based on continuous attainment of data (Saldana, 2009). After the initial coding, to further help to explain why some TFA teachers stayed, a second analysis tier of

axial coding was used to continue to categorize and specify various components of larger themes or categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Finally, the literature review was used to help strengthen and apply the current study's findings to others TFA teachers by showing how the findings support what is already known within the research (Merriam, 2009). The literature review served to highlight how the current study's data "extend, modify, or contradict" (Merriam, 2009, p. 73) previous research information related to the topic, thus continuing to strengthen the study. With all the analysis, understanding was generated as to why TFA teachers remain in their positions after their two-year contract expires, with the hope that specific policies may be put in place and conditions created to later assist with the retention of teachers past this initial term.

### **Research Validity**

Blue County is a rural county with a high teacher turnover rate of more than 30% for the 2014-2015 school year (NCDPI, 2015), and it therefore relies heavily upon TFA to fill teacher vacancies. This study adds to the current body of literature on teacher retention since it looks at a rural Piedmont population in North Carolina using criteria that represent areas of little or no extant research.

As a researcher, the goal is to produce a research study that is valid, believable, and trustworthy, so it can be deemed effective (Merriam, 2009). *Validity* refers to the "goodness" or "soundness" of a study (Given, 2008, p. 909). In other words, a valid study should be trustworthy, credible, authentic, transferable, and plausible.

Through member checking, the validity of this study was enhanced by giving participants the opportunity of having two weeks to review the transcripts and certify that the information contained in them reflected what they intended and was stated in the proper way. Participants

were also allowed to edit their own responses as appropriate. Furthermore, internal validity was achieved through pattern-matching and explanation-building. Observances were coded and matched to theory, and constant occurrences were linked and matched (Yin, 2009). Observations that cannot be matched to literature were considered as outside of theory, noted as emerging, and monitored. The procedures of the study were coherent and clear, and conclusions evident and convincing (Given, 2008).

External validity, as with case studies, was generalized analytically, through theory. This study worked to find evidence that either supported, extended, or challenged the theory of the literature review (Yin, 2009). Specific data collection and analysis protocols were documented and followed. As data were collected through interviews, analysis began immediately.

The emerging data and analysis were then assessed against the literature. Themes and data collected were compared to the literature as answers to the research questions were found and more themes emerged (Given, 2008). As connections in the data answering the research questions emerged, the researcher returned to the literature to test and strengthen the applicability of findings to other TFA teachers. Support within the data and literature was used to support the applicability of the study's findings to other TFA teachers. The applicable method is generalizable to theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009). Focusing on JE and its components, theories found in the extant literature were used to aid in data analysis and help discover what "connected" these TFA teachers to their jobs and thereby created their desire to return and teach for another school year. The basic critical framework of JE provided a foundation for exploration within the data to explain why some TFA teachers remained for a third year.

## **Ethical Issues**

This study was reviewed and approved by the IRB at North Carolina State University before it was conducted. Permission was gained from Blue County's school board and superintendent, as well as the TFA organization, after they were sent a letter detailing the study's purpose, components, and requirements. Before the interview, participants signed a letter of consent agreeing to participate in the study.

Blue County is a small rural county where information travels swiftly; thus, confidentiality and anonymity were strong requirements for this study. Participants were assured that they need only share the information that they deem relevant, and that all information would remain confidential. Thus, pseudonyms were used to identify places or people instead of actual names, working to protect the identities of participants and other inhabitants of the county; these names were coded initially. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, information that could expose an interviewee was not revealed intentionally or accidentally (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008).

After each interview, data were examined for accidental identifiers and locked away securely where only the researcher had access. All documents with participant signatures were stored in a secure location with no access granted to anyone besides the researcher except in the case of legal subpoena (Seidman, 2013). Interviews were only shared with a professional transcriptionist as necessary, and even then, pseudonyms were used. Again, participants were asked to check their responses after they had been transcribed, and such member checking served to further support the study's validity.

Pseudonyms for participants were used for added confidentiality and anonymity. Data were coded and searched to assure that accidental identifiers were not present. Any identifying

information that could potentially reveal participants was locked in a different location where only the researcher has access. Hard copies of files and transcripts were locked away as well. Finally, when the analysis was complete, participant identities were masked to protect them and further ensure their confidential statements were not shared.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 has provided an overview of the methodological procedures used in the current study and their appropriateness for this research investigation. Data collection procedures were addressed, including recruitment, analysis, and actions taken to ensure the validity of the study's findings. Ethical considerations were also discussed. Chapter 4 follows with a presentation of the data collected in the study and an assessment of the relevance of the findings to theory.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

### **Chapter Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative explanatory case study was to uncover the factors that have contributed to Teach For America (TFA) teachers remaining in their positions in the rural, high-poverty Blue County, North Carolina once their contracts were completed. The TFA organization has been in existence in eastern North Carolina since the 1990s, recruiting college graduates to serve in rural counties with the mission of ending education inequality (TFA, 2016d, n.p.). Due to a high, constant teacher turnover rate, Blue County relies upon organizations like TFA to staff its schools, but many TFA corps members stay for only the required period before leaving for other positions. At the time of the study, Blue County had a group of teachers who had remained beyond the initial two-year contractual agreement. The current study sought to learn what incited these teachers to continue teaching in the rural, high-poverty setting after their initial terms expired.

The researcher used criterion sampling to select 11 TFA teachers who remained employed with Blue County past their contracted two-year agreements. Semi-structured, in-depth, 60-minute interviews were conducted with each of the 11 teachers. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Member-checking was used to enhance the validity of the study by giving participants the opportunity of two weeks to review and certify that the information contained in the transcripts was stated properly and reflected what they intended. Participants were also allowed to edit their own responses as appropriate. Interviews were later analyzed for common emergent themes.

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews conducted in this study, beginning with an overview of participant demographics. The data address and are organized according to the following research questions used in the current study:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?
2. Are there characteristics of the school at which they teach, the school system, or the county that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

Predominating themes emerged from analysis of the data using Mitchell et al.'s (2001) conceptual framework of job embeddedness along with other research highlighted in the literature review.

### **Participant Demographic Profile**

The sample size of the current study was representative of those TFA teachers within Blue County who have remained more than two years. Efforts were made to keep the identities of participants and counties concealed, including the use of pseudonyms and examination of the data for accidental identifiers. Table 4.1 below provides the demographics of the current study's participants.

**Table 4.1: Participant Demographics**

<u>No.</u>	<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Race/ Gender</u>	<u>Current Age</u>	<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>Joined TFA</u>	<u>Total Time in Blue County 3 years</u>	<u>Grade Level Taught</u>	<u>Subject(s) Taught</u>
1	Susan	W/F	22-26	Single	2014	3 years	High School	Math II, III, AFM
2	Betty	W/F	22-26	Single	2014	3 years	Elementary	Grade 3/Self-Contained
3	Rachel	W/F	27-30	Single	2012	5 years	High School	Math I, II, IV
4	Tracey	W/F	22-26	Single	2013	4 years	High School	Social Studies (World History, Civics, Economics)
5	Hannah	W/F	22-26	Single	2013	4 years	Middle School	ELA (Grades 6, 7, 8)
6	Melony	B/F	27-30	Single	2014s	3 years	Middle School	Consumer and Technical Education (CTE)
7	Shannon	W/F	31-34	Single	2011	5 years	High School	Math I, II, AFM/Admin.
8	Mary	W/F	22-26	Single	2013	4 years	High School	English (Grades 9, 11, 12)
9	Lena	B/F	22-26	Single	2014	3 years	High School	CTE (Business/Graphic Design)
10	Julia	W/F	22-26	Single	2012	5 years	Elementary School	EC – Self-Contained
11	Lucy	W/F	22-26	Single	2014	3 years	Middle School	Science (Grade 6)

Table 4.1 lists the pseudonym, gender, race, age, number years of service for each participant, as well as grade level and subject taught. All the participants were female, of which 82% were White and 18% were Black. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 34 years old, with eight (72.7%) between the ages of 22 and 26; two (18.2%) between the age of 27 and 30; and only one (9.1%) between 31 and 34. Data for these 11 participants show that five corps members (45%) stayed only one additional year, while three (27%) remained for four years and another three teachers (27%) taught for five years in Blue County before leaving.

### **Teacher Responses**

During the interviews, the teachers in the current study provided great insight into their reasoning for choosing to remain in their position in the rural, high-poverty Blue County after their initial contractual obligation had ended. The current study sought to uncover personal reasons as well as characteristics of the school and county where they taught that incited these teachers' decision to continue working in Blue County, as indicated by the research questions:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?
2. Are there characteristics of the school at which they teach, the school system, or the county that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

As was expected, each teacher's individual character and unique experiences resulted in a range of responses to the interview questions. There were also, however, some commonalities in both their personal reasons and school- and county-related reasons, from which several themes emerged.

## **Reasons for Joining Teach For America**

Before trying to understand why they decided to continue teaching in a rural, high-poverty school in Blue County past the terms of their contract, it seemed prudent to first find out why these teachers were drawn to accept the position with TFA in the first place. Thus, after beginning the interview by having them state their name, participants were asked to tell the researcher why they joined the TFA organization.

**Always wanted to teach.** Seven of the participants pointed to the fact that they always wanted to be a teacher, as their reason for choosing TFA. Susan happily recalled “that moment she wanted to be a teacher,” and Rachel said she knew as far back as high school that she wanted to be a teacher. Betty claimed she had “always wanted to be a teacher,” and Tracey elaborated on how the many teachers in her family affected her choice to join TFA:

Yeah, my parents actually discouraged me from teaching, so I didn't pursue it. And actually, it's interesting because I'm...I come from a family of teachers. All the women in my families are teachers in various levels. They all discouraged me from becoming a teacher, and I think joining TFA was my way to get back at them. But, for the good reasons because that is what I wanted to do anyways.

Shannon simply maintained, “I joined Teach For America because I wanted to be a teacher.” As an education major in college, Mary had also planned to be a teacher.

**Enjoyed tutoring/working with kids.** Shannon remembered gaining a passion for teaching during her time in the Peace Corps:

Prior to coming to Teach For America, I served in the Peace Corps, and my assignment was, uh, teaching middle school math. And I loved it so much that when I came back to,

uh, America, I really wanted to be a math teacher. And Teach For America was the fastest way to do it (laughs) and the cheapest way to do it.

Likewise, Julia had work experience prior to TFA that made her realize that teaching and working with kids made her happy; she stated, “I’ve always loved working with kids, and throughout college I held a few internships where I was working with kids.” Once Lucy realized that she “loved being a tutor,” she said that she had to “just let myself own up to the fact that I enjoyed doing that.”

**Sense of higher purpose or passion/drawn to TFA’s mission.** A couple of participants suggested they were pulled to serving TFA out of a sense of higher purpose. Melony confidently stated:

After several years of working in various organizations, I felt like, uh, teaching would be something that would be best suitable for my, I guess, personality, and for my, I guess, purpose. My godly purpose. So, I figured joining TFA would be the best bet.

In sharing how her time teaching for the Peace Corps organization led her to TFA, Shannon also suggests a similar sense of purpose behind her decision, and hints at a connection between her service for the Peace Corps and her service for TFA.

Pointing to a specific sense of purpose, all but four of the teachers interviewed in the current study cited being drawn to TFA’s mission to end inequality in education or to a chance to give to those in need. Betty and Lucy were both intrigued by TFA’s mission. Julia remembered feeling puzzled when she first learned of teenage illiteracy, and thus moved by TFA’s mission. She recalled:

I had never seen anything like that before [16- and 18-year-olds who could not read], and knew Teach For America's mission was all about closing this achievement gap, or just helping give every child access to quality education, so that...played an important role too. Much like Julia, Shannon noted that TFA “aligned with my belief system and my values in terms of its focus on equity,” and Lucy said, “I found that TFA aligned with my goals and identity.” Comparably, Rachel applied to TFA because she was “passionate about social justice and reform” and wanted to integrate these interests with her work as a teacher.

**Desire to give back to the community.** Although Hannah was in part also drawn to TFA’s mission against educational inequality, she cited a deeply personal rationale for joining TFA—wanting to give back to society:

I joined Teach For America because I wanted to be able to give, give back to students in a way that teachers had given to my sister...And I wanted to just kind of honor that and give back in...in counties where kids maybe weren't getting what they needed.

Not only did Hannah want to honor what teachers had done to help her sister, she specifically wanted to do so in a school where kids had high needs. Lena had similar goals:

One of my personal goals and goal of mine, for like a lifetime, has always been to give back to my community or have some sort of community involvement. And since I didn't know exactly how I wanted to do that, I talked to a recruiter, and they said, “Well, why don't you just go into the communities? And while there, you can get a feel of what you need and how you can be of help.” So, that's why I joined.

These teachers joined TFA to achieve an end in their personal quest to provide their services to benefit the community in some way.

**Alternative route to teaching licensure.** One prevailing reason the teachers cited for joining TFA related to attaining teaching licensure via an alternate route to majoring in education during college. Susan viewed joining TFA as a means for her to “go through the unofficial licensing process.” The college that Rachel attended “didn’t have a great teaching program,” which led her to major in political science and economics despite having always known she wanted to be a teacher; applying to TFA, then, was her way of working toward this goal after graduation. Similarly, Melony “didn’t really know how to go about being a teacher” using her chosen degree program, and so she decided that “Teach For America would be the best route” to obtaining teaching licensure following graduation. Shannon felt that TFA was the “fastest way” to becoming a teacher, as well as the “cheapest way to do it.” Much like these other participants, Julia also turned to TFA to help her earn a teaching license despite not majoring in education:

And when I thought more about what I wanted to do after college, I started thinking about teaching. But I was majoring in psychology and I wasn’t on the teaching track. I guess, sort of, by the time I thought of it, it was too late. So, that led me to look into, uh, alternative licensure programs, which led me to, uh, Teach For America.

One major draw to TFA, then, was that it served as an alternate route to obtaining a license to teach without first getting an education degree.

In addition to these common responses provided by the participants, there were other reasons for joining TFA cited by individual teachers in the current study. Betty brought up the appeal of getting TFA’s assistance to repay her student loans, and Lucy said it was TFA’s STEM initiative that attracted her. Lena admitted that she joined TFA due to a lack of direction, stating, “Initially, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do after graduation.”

Regardless of the reason, the teachers became TFA corps members who were contractually obligated to work for two years in an assigned high-poverty school. These teachers then had to decide whether to remain employed in Blue County once they had completed two years of service. The following section discusses their responses to the personal and school-related factors that affected their decision.

### **Personal Reasons for Staying in Blue County**

The first research question in this study addressed teachers' personal reasons for choosing to remain in Blue County after the terms of their TFA contract had passed:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

The next interview question addressed this by asking the teachers, "What factors influenced you to remain in the school system after the two-year initial contract?" The responses included personal factors individual to each teacher as well as factors related to the school where they taught that influenced the teachers' decision to retain their position in Blue County after their contract expired.

**Stable job and income while they did other things.** A few of the teachers indicated that they stayed in Blue County past the terms of their initial contract because it offered a stable income while they figured out the next step in their career. Hannah responded:

So, I stayed for a third year, because I kind of needed more time to figure out where I really felt I fit...But I didn't know where I needed to be, yet, in that. And, to be honest, you know, as someone who was drawing an income and had a job and had bills that I had to pay, I stayed in my job...I needed some time to figure out what that was gonna look like.

Wanting a stable job without relocating was also a motivating factor for Hannah, who stated:

I didn't want to move. I had just moved so much every year. I moved from Alabama in 2009 to Cincinnati for school. And then I had moved every year, and sometimes twice, while I was there. And I was just tired of moving. I wanted to feel like I had some consistency somewhere.

Lena recalled feeling comforted by the stability of her job amidst her uncertainty about what to do after the first two years passed; she stated, "I had other things that I wanted to do like career-wise, eventually, but it just wasn't the right time. And it's a stable job." Lena went on to add:

And I, I just didn't want to be so transitory. So, many people that come in to do Teach For America only stay for one year, or only stay for their two-year commitment, and then move onto the next thing. And I was just tired of moving on so frequently.

Rachel, too, admitted that keeping a stable position was her primary reason for remaining in Blue County:

Uh, so in the moment, the reason that I stayed was the fact that I applied for [a special program in Blue County] and was moved there. If I hadn't been transferred to the special program, I don't know if I would have stayed.

Lucy's reasons for staying were similarly related to her career; she wanted to complete her teaching certificate and was happy that she could grow in Blue County:

So, one thing I considered was that at the end of my three-years' time, that I would be able to have my teaching certificate...to be able to teach in North Carolina, and I knew that, that's what I wanted to do, after long thoughts about the pathways TFA offered. Because you could do many different licensure types. You could have coursework, Master's...they had many ways.

Lucy chose to stay in Blue County, like the others, because of the stability the position offered while she pursued her license to teach. While working as a teacher in Blue County, they had a stable job and could pursue other interests if they chose, inciting them to remain in the rural, high-poverty area past the terms of the original TFA contract.

**Personal commitment to teaching for TFA.** Another reason the participants cited for remaining in Blue County was based on a sense of commitment to TFA and the presumption that they would stay for longer than the required two years, some because of their love of teaching as their chosen profession. Rachel was resigned to remain in her position based on assumptions she made when she first joined:

When I joined Teach For America, I had read a really great article by Gary Rubinstein called, “Why I Did Teach For America and Why You Shouldn't,” and he talked about how your first year as a teacher, it doesn't count, like you're a first-year teacher. So he was saying if you do join Teach For America, you should commit to doing at least three years, if not more, and really, you know, give a two solid-year commitment. So, I joined kind of knowing that I wanted to do it more than two years.

Like Rachel, Betty also never viewed TFA as being only a two-year commitment, but she was specifically further incited to stay by her love of teaching:

When I joined TFA, I didn't think of it as a two-year commitment...I never thought of TFA as a two-year commitment because I have always wanted to be a teacher. And I knew. When I did my first year here, I loved teaching...I assumed that teaching is what I wanted to do, and that was confirmed when I did my first year here. I loved teaching. So, I think that that mindset made a big difference, and it made me more willing to stay.

Betty, then, came in with the assumption that she would stay longer than two years, but her affinity for teaching made her “willing to stay.” Melony, too, came into the program with the idea that she would stay longer because she wanted to teach:

What actually prompted me to stay—'cause again, most, uh, corps members leave after two years, but they usually go to like a, a graduate program or law school—but I had already done that. So, I actually came in with a Masters...So, going into Teach For America, I already knew that this was what I wanted to do is teach.

Susan mentioned her passion for teaching as a reason for her remaining in Blue County, and specifically called attention to her love of teaching mathematics:

I don't really think I was in a long-term mindset [at the beginning] (laughter). I didn't... Well, I didn't think I'd be teaching high school math either, which I think is kind of one of the biggest reasons... But, so yeah. teaching math has been quite the difference. But I don't... I don't ever think I thought I saw myself as a 30-year veteran teacher. But I think I did see it as a way to really do the things that I was passionate about.

Tracey talked about her inner commitment to teaching and to the Blue County school where TFA placed her:

I knew pretty quickly that I was gonna stay beyond my two-year commitment simply because I felt like I had made a commitment to the school and to my students, so it was more of, like, an internal--decision and, and an internal agreement that I had made with myself.

Arguably, the love of teaching that nearly all the participants expressed is what drew them to TFA in the first place, and it was likewise part of their reasoning for staying after the two years in their contract were completed. Lena said it perhaps most succinctly, declaring, “I enjoy what I

do, so I stay.” These participants all indicated that they remained in Blue County because they made a commitment to TFA and simply enjoyed teaching.

**Desire to fulfill TFA’s mission by being a better teacher.** Teacher cited their belief in the TFA mission of ending educational equality as a reason for initially joining TFA.

Interestingly, some of them continued to work in Blue County past their two-year contracts for the same reason that they said that they had joined—to fulfill the organization’s mission and to be a better teacher. Betty stated, “My determination to be a better teacher for my kids is what, you know, kind of kept me here for three years.” She continued to explain:

I needed to be a transformational teacher for transformational change to assist with TFA’s mission to end educational inequality. Needed to stay more than two years. Wanted better for the students. Students deserved me in the third or fourth year. And then when I think about, again, Teach For America's mission to end educational inequity, and you think about the type of teacher you need to be. One of our mentors in the program said, “Mediocre teachers don't create transformational change,” and I always felt like, within that first year, I was a mediocre teacher. My second year I, (laughs) personally I felt like I was less than mediocre teacher, and I felt like my kids deserved me in year three, four, or five, when you start to figure things out and you get better. And so I wanted to make sure that my kids got what they deserved.

Hannah shared Betty’s respect for TFA’s mission and the goal of being the best teacher she could for the sake of her students:

And then the longer that I spent in Teach For America and in this work to eradicate educational inequity, I realized that the law area was not where I wanted to be. So, I stayed for a third year because I kind of needed more time to figure out where I really felt I fit in

this mission. I was really passionate about kids having an equal opportunity for education and their access to being equal.

Mary, too, knew that it took a few years to become an effective teacher, and that being an effective teacher was necessary to truly fulfill TFA's mission, remarking, "As an education major, I knew that TFA was more impactful in the long term. Any teacher is more impactful in the long term, and so I knew I was gonna stay for longer than two." Lucy agreed with the other participants that it took several years of experience to hone one's teaching skills, and wanted to be a good teacher before leaving TFA:

I knew that the first year was hard, the second year was hard, the third year is still hard, and it's still gonna be hard to teach in North Carolina, and to teach at all, you know, in general. And it's particularly challenging...but, I knew, the third reason, that as a third-year teacher, it would be easier than the second and easier than the first. And I felt like the third year was gonna be my time to shine.

Supporting Lucy's point in her response, Shannon shared that the success she saw in her scores after teaching for two years encouraged her to keep teaching in Blue County:

[Teaching] was really hard (laughs). But my second year, by the time I kind of got the hang of it, was figuring it out, um, I had just fallen way too in love with it, and it felt too right to stop...but I also was feeling success. So, like, right when I got my EVAAS scores back, like they were really good. And so, I think, you know, when you feel success, you wanna keep doing something. Um, so I think that was, that was huge.

Thus, Shannon's desire to improve her teaching was a reason that influenced her to stay within the school system.

These teachers all had a firm belief in TFA's mission of eliminating educational inequality. Additionally, if they were to aid in furthering TFA's mission, each realized they needed to be effective, good teachers, which required them to teach for at least a few years. For this reason, they remained in their assigned position in Blue County past the two-year TFA contract.

**Reasons related to their personal life and support system.** Participants also named other personal factors such as romantic love and support from those in their personal lives that helped them stay. Romantic relationships affected two of the teachers' decision to stay. Lena mentioned her fiancé as a reason for her choice:

And so since he wasn't really stable on where his job was going to take him in the next six to eight months. It just made sense for me to stay until we had some sort of foundation, instead of just cutting off income.

Shannon beamed as she talked about her romantic interest, and she took their mutual situation into account when deciding to stay in Blue County:

In my second year, I met the love of my life, and he happens to be in Blue County...I was kind of trying to figure out, like, how am I gonna stay here and have a life? I had a previous relationship where they didn't wanna stay in Warren County and I did. And then, I mean, it kind of happened, and it was just perfect.

Betty, like Shannon, also had personal support from her family that allowed her to stay in Blue County, especially since she had "no responsibilities" to other family to consider:

You know, and so it is easier for me to make decisions for myself. I don't have to...I'm blessed, you know, my mom did get sick last year...Um, but my dad like handles all of it,

and I don't need to go home ...to help him. So, like I do have a really strong support system that allows me to be here on my own, and not have to consider outside factors.

While support from family was important to Betty's decision to stay, Mary fondly credits the friendly support she got from her roommate as a reason that she stayed in Blue County:

My roommate...who has also stayed as long as I have, she and I have been really, really helpful to each other, in that I think we both would say that if we hadn't had each other, we wouldn't have been able to stay. Because we've been through all the same things and, and she's helped me be able to stay here. Whereas, if I was on my own, I think I probably wouldn't have been able to do it. So that helped living with someone that has been through the same experience.

Melony noted the affordability of living in Blue County as a reason for her staying there. These teachers each expressed a range of personal reasons, specifically those related to their romantic relationships and personal support system of family and friends as influencing factors for their remaining in Blue County.

### **School- and County-Related Reasons for Staying in Blue County**

**Positive Relationships with Blue County students.** Nine teachers cited positive relationships with students as a factor that influenced them to remain in Blue County after the two-year TFA term expired. The students were particularly critical in swaying these teachers' decision. Susan's answer to the interview question of why she stayed in Blue County was simply "the relationship in the school with my kids," and Mary was also pleased to have formed "really close relationships with those kids and their families." Melony agreed, claiming that the students were what prompted her to continue teaching in the rural county. Tracey, who ultimately

remained in Blue County for a total of four years, adamantly pointed to the students as the driving force for her staying in the rural, high-poverty county:

Honestly, it was my relationship with my students. Had it not been for the positive relationships I had, I definitely think that I would've moved on to a different school, and one that's closer to where I live. So, I've actually been commuting for between, depending on where I've lived throughout the four years, anywhere from an hour-and-a-half to, right now, I'm at about an hour. Had it not been for those relationships, I think that I would've made a different decision a few years back. I love my kids.

Such strong affection for the students was exhibited by nearly all the teachers. Betty proclaimed, “I love the kids here,” and Lena excitedly expressed her affinity for the students in saying, “The kids—the kids are awesome. They're great. So, despite the politics of teaching, I wanted to stay for them.” Julia elaborated on why she liked the students so much:

When I was in the self-contained room, I had anywhere between 8 and 10 kids, and... They felt like my family. I just felt I didn't want to leave them. I loved being with them every day. So, my students played a huge role.

Similarly, Shannon valued her time with the students, noting, “Probably the most important reason [for staying in Blue County] was the kids. I just was, like, having a lot of fun, and I really enjoyed going to work every day.” Thus, the greatly valued, positive relationships they had with their students were a major factor that influenced the teachers in this study to remain in Blue County after having fulfilled their TFA contract, despite cited issues like office politics and lengthy commutes, as well as the budgetary and other problems that accompany teaching in a high-poverty school.

**Dedication to current Blue County students' success.** Many of the teachers in this study who taught in the high schools wanted to stay in Blue County so that they could see their students graduate. Considering the great affinity for the students that the teachers expressed during the interviews, this finding was not surprising. Hannah explained her reasoning for staying in Blue County for four years:

Um, I decided around the same time that I decided to stay for a third year to stay for a fourth year...As a freshman English teacher at that point, if I knew I was staying for three, I really wanted to see my kids graduate...If I was gonna be here for three [years], I might as well stay for four and...watch my babies graduate.

Here, Hannah tenderly refers to her students as her “babies,” again reflecting the great fondness these teachers had for their students. This affection can partly explain why the teachers would be willing to remain in Blue County after their obligation to do so had ended.

Like Hannah, Mary also wanted to stay with her initial student cohort until they graduated:

And then when I got here, the first set of kids that I had were in the ninth grade, and I taught ninth grade. And then in my second year, I was given the opportunity to teach 10th, 11th, and senior project. So, the kids that I had my first year then became the same kids that I taught every year. And so I've seen one group...I've had other groups come in as it changes, but the one group that I started with is now in their senior year...and I promised them that I wouldn't leave until their senior year. So that's this year. (laughs)

Tracey, too, explained that part of her reason for staying in Blue County for four years was to see her students through to graduation:

Um, and I also wanted to see my first class [of students] graduate. That was one of my goals from the very beginning, and they're seniors this year. So, I've done it. I've made it...And, yeah. I just wanted to, to be a part of their entire high school experience.

For these high school teachers, leaving their TFA-assigned position in a Blue County school after just two years would not allow them to complete the four-year experience with their students.

The teachers also addressed the effects that their longer-term teaching role had on their students. Lucy discussed the value that remaining longer had on her students' success:

The third-year option was an option, and I didn't at first think I was gonna do that, but the reason why I chose to do that...and I wanted to do that, is because I knew that I could devote my whole self to my students during my two-year, three-year time...You know, the time that I had with my students or the time that I will have with my students. Versus splitting myself between Master's degree coursework and my students and lesson plans, you know. And I, I just wanted to devote myself. I didn't feel like [leaving] was fair for myself, and fair for my students and the people around me.

Shannon too, agreed with Lucy, starting that "It would have been incomplete to have left at the end of my second year. Like, after two years, I hadn't seen it through yet." She elaborated on the sense of common purpose and community within the school as they all worked to make students more successful:

And then, like to become, uh, to be pulled into that community was really powerful. So, I just felt like a very strong sense of community with the other teachers at Blue County High School. Um, when I think about the end of my second year, I think going into the third year, I think that's what it was. A group of us [teachers] were meeting all summer long...and that was just so, that was just so cool to have that opportunity to...learn from

them and collaborate with them. And, and it was awesome. And like they even, just like that year of teaching felt so, it felt so positive to me and so good. And I think at the end of the year, Blue County High School I got a “C” on a report card. I remember-just being so proud of that, to be a part of that.

Julia recalled a similar experience in her school, where she felt all the teachers had “the same high expectations and vision for the kids” and were “working toward the same goal” of their success. This mutual dedication to student success and achievement made her feel driven to stay and see it through.

As these responses indicate, the teachers in this study seemed to be in part driven by a need to finish what they started by remaining with the students they cherished, so they could see their students succeed and eventually graduate.

**Supportive relationships with peers in the Blue County schools.** Another sentiment that surfaced among the teachers in answering why they stayed in Blue County past the required two years was love for the school where they taught and relationships they had with people there, such as other teachers, teacher assistants, and the principal. Betty in part credited the support of her colleagues for her longer-term stay in Blue County:

I love the teachers here, you know, I came down here from New York, and I didn't know anybody, and I always felt like I had somebody to lean on if I needed absolutely anything. People did take care of me like Ms. \_\_\_ Ms. \_\_\_ has my back (laughs). You know, Mrs. Y was here, like, they were – they became – my family. And, so because I had that, it was easy for me to say, “Yeah, let me keep, keep going in this.”

Later, Betty added more details about the support she got at the school:

And then professionally I felt like I had people within the school who believed in me who knew that I could be a better teacher and wanted to help me do that...I felt like I could excel here with them supporting me and helping me.

Much like Betty, Shannon benefited, too, from the people at her school and admitted that these relationships influenced her to remain past her contractual agreement:

Um, I think first and foremost were the people. So, I think at that time, we had a pretty awesome staff culture. Uh, and I remember having relationships with teachers that just weren't Teach For America teachers. And that made a big difference, I think, because it made me feel really connected to Blue County and Blue County High School. So, I think that was one big reason.

As she continued to describe the school-related support she received, Shannon acknowledged that it was a key factor in her decision to stay:

And the reason I felt success...was I had so many layers of support as a first year, second year teacher. So, I had, um, I had people from Teach For America. My, my direct manager and the manager above him was also really invested in Blue County, so I got a lot of help from them. I had \_\_\_ from DPI who was awesome. I had \_\_\_ my first year as a mentor, and she was really supportive. And then I had...others who were teachers with me on my hallway, who just also was there for every, like anything I needed. Right? And so just like really good veteran teachers I can go to...So, I think having so many mentors made a huge difference for me.

These relationships were crucial for Julia as well, who shared that her colleagues at the Blue County school became her family, which affected her decision to stay there:

Between [the other teachers] and my teaching assistant, they felt like my family. I just felt I didn't want to leave them. I would say my principal here, played a big role in it. Even like, the school system. I know Dr. \_\_\_ of Blue County is a proponent of Teach For America, so that makes it easier.

Julia commented on how others in the school seemed to value the presence of a Teach For America presence in their school:

Um, and I just feel, like, in general, people in the school were really welcoming. Because I'm sure, it is hard to, it's like a revolving door, too, sometimes. A lot of people leave...When I first came to [the school in 2012], they never had a Teach For America teacher here before.

Julia unknowingly uses Ingersoll's (2001) "revolving door" (p. 499) analogy here. Additionally, it should be noted that Julia said the school in which she began as a TFA teacher in 2012 had never had a teacher from the program before, which is surprising since TFA had been in Blue County since 1993. Hannah also described one person who especially supported her in the school:

So, there was a woman that I worked next door to my first and second year teaching...She and I became very close. Her kids call me "Aunt Hannah"...Some of the coaches and people, like [the lady next door] had just kind of opened their hearts, and homes, and communities to me...You know, I had become significant to people in their life and they had become really significant to me. And I just wanted to be able to kind of keep that—keep that relationship going.

Much as the others expressed, Hannah's close bonds with colleagues in the school made the choice of staying in Blue County much easier. Overall, the love these teachers grew to have for

the school where they were placed by TFA and their colleagues was an influencing factor in their decision to remain past their contract's end.

**Relationships with and support from the Blue County community.** Some of the Alumni Corps members shared a love for not only the schools and people they worked with there, but also mentioned the way they felt supported by them and the community. Lucy felt she could grow in Blue County, particularly because of the support she received there, remarking:

Um, and then the other part of that is that I knew that I was being developed, um, and grown here, by specific individuals that I knew that I wouldn't have if I chose to leave.

And I think that was a contributing factor.

Julia also talked about the strong relationships she had with the Blue County community and other TFA teachers:

I loved being with them every day...Students played a huge role...and...getting to know the community. Like, people in Blue County, I just feel like I have made really great relationships with people, and there's a lot of people that I love here, and didn't want to leave. I was really happy being here. And even some Teach For America friends, that also stayed a third year, um, were influential in that too.

She emphasized her point by sharing a story about a TFA teacher she knew who left her assigned TFA school in another county after the two-year period and chose to relocate in Blue County:

So, it was like, Blue County was the place to be...(laughs). The community's great, and even like, the school system...I remember talking to the second year Teach For America [teachers] at the time, and they were all like, "Oh, you're in Blue County, that's the best place, that's the best placement you could get." So...people talk really highly about the community here, outside of school.

Melony excitedly spoke of the people in Blue County and how they made her feel comfortable enough to call it home:

The relationships that I've built with the different teachers and just that community. Like, it was home to me. And um, I actually brought in one of my best friends from high school to actually move here and um, start teaching here as well at the neighboring elementary school, and so it really felt like a second home to me. So, when people say, "Are you going home," I'm like, "This is my home," because I have, I have a family here now. So, what prompted me to stay would be definitely the relationships that I've built here within the community, with like friends and just other teachers and uh, people from my childhood and um, the students...I would say majority of them are folks who are actually from Blue County.

Along with her desire to settle down in a smaller community, this made Blue County quickly feel like her home.

Though Melony explicitly stated that Blue County began to feel like home, all the teachers' personal reasons for staying suggested that the support and guidance they got in Blue County was a main factor in their choice to stay after their two-year contract ended. Like the others, Hannah developed relationships that made Blue County feel like home to her. She discussed her love for the people and the community as one of the reasons for her staying, noting, "Although not always happy in this job, like, I love the people that I've met and the community that I've built. And it just felt like somewhere I could stay a bit longer." Likewise, Rachel reported, "I like the community in Blue County and I've met some really nice people...So, it's definitely the people that have led me to stay this long." Tracey similarly noted the strength of the Blue County community:

I think coming in...they [TFA] stress the need to make community connections. I think that's something that's really important in such a small community...You know, we as teachers rely on not only community members, but you know, parents, and we kind of have to work cohesively and if we don't, it can make working in a small area really difficult.

But...I think knowing that there are people in the community who care just as much

Most of the teachers discussed the close relationships they formed with Blue County community as influential in their choice to stay. Shannon was another participant whose responses aligned with this theme of community relationships. She credited the relationships formed in Blue County as one reason for her staying after the initial TFA contract period:

I think I made a lot of friendships with people from Blue County who I still spend time with on the weekends, uh, and who I still spent time with when I have free time. So, I think, I mean I think just having people, um, that I cared a lot about and I know, knew who cared for me and that I could go to...on a personal basis, made a big difference.

Shannon continued to describe her close, almost familial relationship with one person in Blue County:

So, there's one person in particular who really sticks out to me. Um, she, she's a, she's a local Blue County native, does not work for the school system, uh-uh, and she's, she's 30 years older than me, (laughs), so she's 62 now...She calls herself "my black Momma." She is, uh, just this incredible person. I remember my second year being here and meeting her one time, and then another time I was just walking around in Blue County and she saw me...She just took me to her house, and she's just kind of been like my...I mean, she's been like a mother to me and like a Blue County guide, if you will.

As Shannon went on to explain, the value of this relationship in making her feel more at home in Blue County became clear:

So she's kind of like helped me learn more deeply about the history of Blue County, get a better understanding about the county itself, like what people have been through, and then has also just helped me understand, like perspectives that, like, as a White person I'll never understand the Black experience...And so she's really kind of guided me in how to be more, um, I guess culturally competent for...Black culture. So, like having, having her has been like a, a big deal for me. And I mean we still have monthly dinners now. And then like I've become really close to her husband now too and so, like, we all get together. It's been awesome. So, I'm really thankful for her.

Thus, this friendship gave Shannon, a White teacher, an inside glimpse into some of the issues her largely Black student population faced. This seems likely to have had further impact on Shannon's comfort in the rural, high-poverty, high-minority Blue County school she was assigned by TFA.

As seen in these responses, the interview participants named many factors related to Blue County schools that influenced them to remain there after their two-year contractual term ended. Many shared similar rationales and reasoning such as desire to see students graduate; positive relationships with students and their families; love for the school and people associated with it; and support received from the overall Blue County community. Blue County, it seemed, became a place where these teachers felt supported and needed, and they remained due to the relationships they built and the support they received from colleagues, administrators, and the community overall.

## **Feelings about Staying a Third Year or More**

Besides their reasons for staying in Blue County, it seemed pertinent to assess how the teachers in this study felt about their decision to remain in their TFA-assigned school past the two-year contractual commitment. Some stayed for only a third year, while others continued to teach in Blue County for longer. Overall, from their responses, the teachers seemed unanimously glad to have stayed. Susan simply answered, “I’m glad I stayed the third year,” while Melony expressed a sense of excitement about her decision:

I feel excited, because I know it's rare, and I think Teach For America are doing some things to make sure...corps members are staying longer, so they're kind of recruiting corps members who are actually from the area to kind of like, help out with the uh, retention. But, it's exciting to know that I'm, I'm not giving up on this county. It's exciting to know that, I'm teaching students who, in prior years, I've taught their siblings. It's exciting to know that, you know, people know who I am before they even enter my classroom.

Rachel noted the appreciation the students expressed for her willingness to stay and teach them for five years:

I mean, I feel good about it... But the fact that some of these kids have now known me for five years, like I feel very bad leaving them, um, and it was a really hard choice, but most of them haven't seen a young teacher stay that long...Some of the robotics kids, who I taught when they were in sixth grade, who are now in 10th grade, tell me, like, "Thank you for staying this long.”

Shannon, too, was glad about her choice, and elaborated on how it made her feel as though she had a place where she belonged:

More than anything I just feel incredibly grateful, to, um, to have found my place...I never thought I would find a place like this. So, I just, I guess just really grateful...How I feel about it, I feel excited, I feel empowered in a sense. I, I feel happy (laughter). like, this is where I'm supposed to be and, um, I love it here, and I feel like I belong here. And I got a lot of really good folks around me.

Like Shannon, Lucy expressed happiness when asked how she felt about her choice, particularly because of the benefits a longer-term teacher can have on students:

I feel good about it because I know that, working with children, having that passion for working with children, is something that I'm, you know, good at, but also something that I can see be fruitful, something that they see be fruitful in their own lives, doing what they're making success in, what their failures are, and those failures becoming success. I think that that value of seeing a goal and watching it build to fruition has led me to stay, and has made me happy.

Mary discussed how she felt about her ability to help her students succeed:

[I wanted to] make sure they get what they deserve, and I feel good about that. I feel like, in a lot of ways, I've been able to accomplish that. Like, last year my (test) scores were 15 percent above the state average. So, I can say for certain. That they got better than some kids. In a place that has so much more than they get. And that keeps me energized.

From happiness and excitement, to empowerment and energy, many of the teachers expressed positive feelings about their decision to stay in Blue County.

There were some, however, who expressed conflicting emotions. Lena, for example, shared some sense of frustration at not being able to help her students more, stating, "And so, being here and then not seeing the payoff sometimes is rough. But I think (sighs)...I mean, I feel okay...You

always just wish you could do more.” Betty, who stayed for three years, noted her feeling that it was wrong for teachers to expect accolades for persevering in their role, saying, “I don't feel like I deserve a big pat on the back for staying for three years.” Betty continued to explain, adamantly expressing that the students should come first:

I think that there are some TFA core members who are like waiting for their medal for staying for three years, and you don't deserve a medal, and you're not gonna get a medal. You know what I mean? Like, cause that's what our kids deserve...They deserve consistency for more than two years, you know what I mean? They deserve that...I don't feel like...that decision is something to be celebrated.

Mary felt “validated professionally” by her decision to stay in Blue County, but also pointed out that “there have been a lot of drawbacks.”

From these responses, we can learn the joys a TFA teacher may feel who stays past the first two years, as well as see some reasons why some corps members may choose to leave. Mary’s comment above about “drawbacks” is a reference to some of the obstacles she and the other teachers faced in Blue County, including issues with the administration, poor staff development, and personal matters. These obstacles are discussed in more detail in the next section.

### **Obstacles to Teaching in Blue County**

One interview question asked the teachers to discuss the obstacles they faced in Blue County. The responses to these questions provide valuable insight into the issues these TFA teachers had to overcome to make the decision to remain after the first two years. According to the literature, there are four major concerns for teachers in high-poverty school districts: (1) lower pay; (2) geographic and social isolation; (3) difficult working conditions (such as having to

teach classes in multiple subject areas); and (4) ESSA requirements, since many rural teachers need certification in multiple subject areas yet face few professional development opportunities (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

**Issues with school administration.** Several participants named the administration as a main obstacle, including their actions, disorganization and lack of communication, and poor staff development. Rachel simply commented that she felt “frustrations with administration, both in the building and at the district level,” but Susan went as far as to suggest that Blue County’s administration was behind that of other districts:

I think that as a unit, our, um, central office and our higher up administration was my biggest obstacle... I personally have felt things that are really not issues in other school systems are still issues here... I think also there have been moments of very real and genuine disrespect that I've felt from central office, is really the only way I know how to say it. I think that that was for me the biggest thing. I just couldn't imagine continuing to work in that environment. It felt like a kind of difficult work environment at times.

The disorganization and lack of communication of the Blue County administration was one specific issue cited by the interview participants. Susan remarked:

I think that there's a lot of just kind of disorganization. I think that...we definitely have holes in our communication. I think that from a top-down moment, there are a lot of things that should have been communicated a lot earlier on.... And I think that there are also a lot of things that aren't communicated that teachers get asked about, and we don't know the answers... and that needs to be solved with communication.

Rachel mentioned the administration’s failure to provide adequate professional development for teachers, stating, “We never really get quality professional development on instructional

practices...Or on curriculum design, even though we're expected to do it day by day.” Susan concurred, and again called out the lack of respect given to teachers by the administration, saying, “You know, professional development is not always in a very professional manner, um, or of a quality that's respectful to teachers.”

Though only two of the 12 teachers interviewed in this study mentioned the administration as a problem they faced, this provides valuable information about one obstacle to teachers' happiness in their position. Perhaps other TFA teachers not in this study, those who *did* leave after their contracted two years, were influenced to leave in part because of similar issues with the administration. These teachers' responses provide useful insight that the administration of Blue County may consider if it wants to work toward retaining TFA teachers and improving things throughout their schools.

**Lack of curricula and resources.** In part also related to the school administration, lack of a teaching curriculum and other necessary resources were obstacles two of the participants in this study faced as teachers. Rachel claimed that she was given no curriculum to use for her students:

This is my fifth year, and it's the fifth different curriculum I've taught that has nothing in place. So, I'm just like kind of burnt out right now...Having to write a curriculum, sometimes two curriculums, day by day as we go because nothing is provided.

Rachel's comment suggested additional work burden on her in having to design her own curriculum when she was provided nothing by the school administration. Though Lena only mentioned the lack of curriculum briefly, she provided some interesting insight on other resources that may be lacking in Blue County, specifically staff and technology:

The no curriculum thing was a huge, huge thing. Another thing...Our technology is old, so a lot of times, some of the stuff that I want to do, we can't really do with our systems. Like if things break, you know, we only have one IT guy in the county, and so like, getting him to come...is a little hard.

Her statement that a single technology aid serves the entire county is alarming in today's highly technological world. Lena also discussed the obstacles she faced when trying to teach students with the paucity of technology in Blue County. She said, "[At times] five computers don't work. But like, the kids need them, so, um, that's always been a thing I like...I want to do more things. But we don't have as many resources available."

While only a couple of the teachers talked about lack of curriculum and resources in Blue County as an obstacle they faced in the teaching profession, it is certainly an issue faced by many TFA teachers primarily assigned to work in high-poverty schools.

**Mental/emotional strain.** When asked about the obstacles they faced when remaining in the education profession, several of the TFA teachers shared the difficulty of mental and emotional strain they felt due to the demands and pressures of their job as educators. Shannon felt especially anxious about teaching in her first year due to a deep desire to do well for the kids, and the mental strain of wanting to get better was hard:

I guess one [obstacle] was just getting better. Uh, 'cause especially my first year, I definitely was not good enough to be in front of kids. Um, and then I still can name every kid from my fourth period...And I still feel terrible for not being the teacher that they deserved and needed desperately. Um, so I guess just like getting better.

Getting better was important to Betty as well, in particular because of the pressures associated with ensuring high student performance on standardized tests. Betty said:

I think that high-stakes testing really does weigh a lot on the teacher. And it...is exhausting, and it's mentally exhausting. And so, I had to decide, like, is it worth it to try again another year to get better at this?... Or, for like my own mental health and my own sanity...That was the biggest piece of reflection I had to do over the summer; like, am I gonna be able handle another year?

Hannah, too, acknowledged that teaching was a challenge for her. She talked about the emotional weight of wanting to succeed in helping her students, yet not always being able to do so:

I have done a lot of failing. And as someone who is used to being successful, doing a lot of failing is very hard. And so, like, emotionally that's probably been the biggest struggle...I was choosing to, to continue to do something that I knew I wasn't very good at, and was going to struggle a lot in getting better...Really, really difficult emotional, and psychological...I was making really tough emotional and psychological choices. Like, this wasn't gonna be easy for me to stay, but I wanted to stay for my kids 'cause I love them.

Like Hannah, Melony struggled with her classes, but she also experienced some significant tragedies during her first year in Blue County that caused her much emotional suffering:

Like I said, my first year was a, a difficult year for me. That year, first of all, I came in not knowing anyone and also, I was teaching a subject that I was not familiar with. And then also, during that year, I had two of my students pass away, so it was very difficult. Those are some obstacles that, after my first year, I really had to reflect to realize, like, is this something that I want? Like, is this normal?

As these comments make clear, the mental and emotional strain that teachers face when working to help students succeed is considerable, particularly for TFA teachers who are often displaced from home in a rural county for minimal pay. Certainly, such strain may lead some

TFA teachers to leave after two years, and others may even depart from the profession altogether.

**Being away from family.** A more personal obstacle named by the participants in this study was the difficulty of choosing to be away from their family and friends for even longer when they decided to stay past their contracted two-year TFA agreement. Mary simply noted that “being away from family is hard,” but Hannah claimed it was keeping her from starting a family. She recalled, “I knew when I chose to stay for a third and a fourth year that I was choosing to, like, not potentially put myself somewhere where I could move on with a family.” For Lucy, living away from home in Blue County was the biggest obstacle:

I went through a lot of obstacles. It's really difficult to, number one, be apart from your family, no matter where you are. Um, 'cause I have zero...I have zero family here...that's a challenge. Um, but I am fortunate enough to have my family that resides in North Carolina. I don't have to take a plane. I am fortunate in that, that aspect.

Even living in her home state, it was hard for Lucy to reside in Blue County where she was a long drive from loved ones, but she and the others did it for TFA.

Several TFA corps members in this study shared stories of how missing home and family was an obstacle to their position as a TFA teacher in Blue County. Due to the nature of TFA’s mission and model of service, it is probable that nearly all corps members must relocate to the area of their TFA-assigned school, many of which are in high-poverty areas, both rural and urban.

Other obstacles cited by individual participants were Blue County’s location in a very rural area, low wages, and the challenges of teaching multiple levels of a course due to the lack of a certified teacher. Personal challenges including dating and housing were also named.

## **Emergent Themes**

From the responses and analysis of the findings on personal and school-related factors cited by the teachers, four common themes emerged to explain why these TFA teachers stayed in Blue County past the initial two years they were obligated to complete. These include strong relationships in Blue County, the Blue County community being welcoming and making the place feel like home, support of school colleagues and administrators, and a personal commitment to teaching and supporting TFA's mission.

### **Job Embeddedness Concepts: Link and Sacrifice**

At least five of the participants emphatically discussed the relationships that they had built with others in Blue County, both at their school and in the community. They referenced their school colleagues, neighborhood friends, and the general community, suggesting that Blue County feeling "like home" had a major influence on their choice to stay past their contractual agreements. These factors fall under the JE concepts of both link and sacrifice, as these teachers felt linked to the school and the community and would have to give up their important new relationships and relocate if they chose to leave.

The high amount of support these teachers felt from their colleagues, but especially the school administrators, was another theme that emerged in their reasons for staying to continue working in Blue County. These reasons can be associated with the JE concepts of link and sacrifice, as they felt connected to the people in the school where they worked and would have to give up the supportive work environment if they chose to leave Blue County.

**Strong relationships in Blue County school and community.** Relationships with school colleagues as well as the Blue County community were clearly valuable to these teachers, and their love for the area influenced them to stay. Betty once stated that she "loved the kids" at

her school, and later added, “I love the community,” showing that both relationships were important to her choice to remain in Blue County. Melony credited the community with being “what prompted me to stay,” and went on to say Blue County and her school felt like “home” in a way. She added the claim that “the characteristics of the school” and the relationships made it “like a family.” When asked why she stayed in the Blue County TFA position, Tracey similarly said, “I just really love being around kids, and want what's best for them.”

Likewise reflecting a love for the Blue County community where she worked, Julia named the students at the school as well as “getting to know the community” as both having “played a huge role” in her decision to stay, summing it up by simply stating, “I really think it's just the relationships with people that I've made.” Hannah summarized her strong relationships at both the school and the greater Blue County community, stating, “I had built some really strong relationships with parents, and coaches, and school staff, and community members, that I just wanted...I really wasn't ready to let go of yet and wasn't ready to move on.” Hannah went on to say that she felt many people leave their TFA positions because “they can't find anything that really sustains them past the [TFA] people...and if they haven't built relationships with those people [within the community], then there's nothing really holding them to this place.”

Mary commented on her relationships with students as one of the reasons that she stayed, and later suggested the community made her feel comfortable. Susan summed up her reason for staying when she remarked, “I think it was really the relationships in the school with my kids,” which she said made it “a really good place to work.” She added the point that she felt a “very strong sense of community with the other teachers,” because they all seemed to be working for the kids’ best interests. Also, Shannon cited her close relationships with students at school as well as people she met in the community as key in providing her with perspective and reasoning

for her decision to continue teaching in the area. From the interviews, then, relationships—with students and colleagues at school as well as the overall Blue County community—emerged as a theme seen across the teachers’ responses.

**Support of teacher colleagues.** Susan claimed that the support of others in the school who believed in her made her feel she could be a “better teacher” who “could excel here with them supporting me and helping me.” Betty noted that she was paired with a “veteran teacher” who was able to support her and motivated her to “be a better teacher every day.” Lucy named one person who had “shaped” her by assisting her through the new teachers' program, and Rachel pointed out that the small school and community made it so that “everyone knows each other” and helps out. The relationships that the TFA teachers had with their colleagues at school emerged as a key factor influencing their decision to remain in Blue County past the terms of their contract.

**Support of administrators.** Susan unequivocally said she was “supported by [her] administrators,” and added that having a “supportive principal who cared about the kids in a way that drove our focus” was critical to her affinity for the school. Susan also said having the “principal and the majority of your coworkers agree on what it means to support and educate students was very important” to her. Betty pointed to her “exceptional instructional coach” as providing the support she needed by observing her classroom and giving feedback that she valued. The support that Shannon received made her feel like she was “part of something bigger” than herself and gave her “a great amount of hope about our school getting better for kids.” Tracey also cited her administration’s support as valuable, along with the autonomy they gave her. Arguably, without such supports in place, these TFA teachers may have been more likely to leave their Blue County school assignment as soon as their two-year term had passed. But with

the full support and backing of the other teachers, mentors, and principals, they felt empowered to make a difference, which in turn, could have influenced them to stay longer.

### **Job Embeddedness Concept: Fit**

Several participants mentioned their personal love of teaching and their dedication to aiding TFA's mission of ending educational equality as reasons for their stay in Blue County. These reasons align with the JE concept of fit, as the position suited the teachers' personal goals and beliefs, and it is uncertain that they would find the same fit in another school.

**Personal commitment to teaching and supporting TFA's mission.** Betty said that she "never thought of TFA as a two-year commitment" since she had always "wanted to be a teacher," a mindset that made her "more willing to stay." Part of these teachers' personal commitment to teaching was the goal of staying long enough to see they had made a difference by, as Betty said, being a "transformational teacher for transformational change to assist with TFA's mission to end educational inequality," and most agreed that it took more than two years to become an effective teacher capable of affecting real change. Hannah said it plainly, "I think the biggest reason that I've stayed in education thus far is my belief that America can provide kids with a better education than they currently are [receiving]." Part of this goal included getting past the first couple of years of teaching to improve enough to make a difference, which nearly all the participants understood was necessary.

Additionally, these teachers' personal commitment to their students getting a quality education included a desire to stick with them for a while, even a presumption that they would. Many of the high school teachers, for example, wanted to stay with their first cohort of students until graduation. During this time, the teachers would have more opportunity to improve their own instructional skills, develop stronger relationships with the students, and show the

students—who Hannah noted “know you're leaving because they're so used to how much turnover has happened”—that they matter.

### **Job Embeddedness Concepts: Fit and Sacrifice**

In addition to the relationships participants built with people in the Blue County community, several of the teachers noted one personal reason for staying was the highly welcoming nature of the Blue County community, which allowed them to make Blue County “feel like home.” The affinity and comfort the teachers felt in Blue County as their new home aligns with the JE concept of fit, because the area suited them. In addition, it aligns with the JE concept of sacrifice, since, if they left the district, they would have to relocate and thus sacrifice the things they liked about Blue County.

**Highly welcoming nature of Blue County community.** Melony said she even invited her childhood friends and family to visit her in Blue County; having them “be a part of this community” that included her local fiancé and his family, she shared, helped her decide to stay. Melony added:

Like, you leave, and you go to the local um, grocery store, and you're seeing, constantly seeing, your students. You're constantly seeing the teachers and the staff, and so I would say one of the characteristics is that close knit, uh, bond, and that connection.

Mary agreed by stating more simply, “And I like living in Blue County. I like the people...I like the place.” She went on to add, “I think the community makes Blue County unique. I think there are, um...there are many people in the county that are in the school or outside the school, that want to see the school succeed,” and she did not believe the community would be the same in other places. Hannah also discussed how Blue County began to feel like her home after a while as she described “one of the beautiful things” about it:

The way people here define “family” is very fluid. And so even as an outsider, I got to be family. And people wanted me around and they wanted, you know, like, I felt valued and cherished, and I really just wasn't ready to let all that go.

For Hannah, the people are “what makes Blue County so unique.” Like Mary and Hannah, Shannon also pointed to the unique qualities of the county’s people, stating, “I don't think you find people so passionate about the place they grew up in and the place that they're from like, like you do in Blue County. I think it's kind of a unique thing to Blue County.” Betty, too, noted that she had tried to “become more integrated into the community to make this place my home as opposed to like a transplant here.” Betty described Blue County’s familial environment as one where people want to “support and love each other,” and stated she had sensed that in the county, both at the school and outside of the school. Susan, too, noted that Blue County felt “very homey,” and called it an “incredible place” that made her feel “very welcomed” right away. Betty admitted that she worked to become “more integrated into the community to make this place my home as opposed to like a transplant here.”

Adding to this theme were the responses that suggested romantic relationships influenced the teachers to stay in Blue County, as these would also contribute to the area feeling like home. Shannon alluded to her fiancé, who is from Blue County, as part of her reason for staying. Similarly, Lena pointed to her fiancé as affecting her decision to continue working in Blue County.

Thus, these teachers were highly influenced to stay past their TFA contract because they were able to successfully develop close relationships in the Blue County school where they taught as well as in the community where they lived, even those which were romantic in nature—all of which made it feel like home. Shannon perhaps summed it up most aptly in

saying, “There's just something about Blue County. Right? There's, um, the place itself is just so special.”

### **Summary of Findings**

In their responses, the participants fully addressed both research questions that were used to guide this study:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher’s decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?
2. Are there characteristics of the school at which they teach, the school system, or the county that influence a TFA teacher’s decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

Addressing the first research question, preliminary data revealed that these TFA members remained in Blue County for the following personal reasons: stable job and income while they did other things, a personal commitment to teaching for TFA, a desire to fulfill TFA’s mission by being a better teacher, and other reasons related to their personal life and support system.

For the second research question, the researcher wanted to uncover characteristics of the school, school system, and county that influenced these teachers to stay in Blue County longer than their two-year contract required. Participants answered this by revealing several factors related to Blue County schools that inspired them to stay, including: positive relationships with Blue County students and a dedication to seeing their success, supportive relationships with peers in the Blue County school where they taught, and relationships with and support from the Blue County community. After findings were analyzed, themes emerged from the responses that indicate several key factors that influenced the teachers to stay: (1) strong relationships in Blue County; (2) the Blue County community being welcoming and making it feel like home to the

teachers; (3) the support of school colleagues and administrators; and (4) a personal commitment to teaching and supporting TFA's mission. Thus, the study succeeded in offering some insight on the things that can affect a teacher's decision to stay in the job or the field of education. Moreover, the reasons supplied by the teachers each fell within one or more of the three components of the JE conceptual framework, link, fit, and/or sacrifice.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 has provided the results of the current study examining reasons why TFA teachers chose to stay in a rural, high-poverty Blue County past the initial two-year term to which they were obligated by contract. Results indicated a range of personal and school-related factors that influenced these teachers' decision to remain in Blue County, answering the study's two research questions. Other statements made by the teachers during the interviews also illuminated their reasons for joining TFA in the first place, as well as their feelings about having chosen to stay and the obstacles they faced in the county.

Chapter 5 follows with a discussion of the findings and the knowledge gap they fill, providing valuable insight into the motivations for TFA teachers who stay beyond the two years to which they are contractually bound. Besides the themes which arose from the participants' answers to the research questions, implications for practice, policy, and further research are shared.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this qualitative explanatory case study was to discover the reasons why some Teach For America (TFA) teachers remained in their teaching positions within a rural, high-poverty school system past their two-year contracts. Eleven teachers from Blue County who matched the study criteria were interviewed. The interview protocol focused on two research questions:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?
2. Are there characteristics of the school at which they teach, the school system, or the county that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

The data were gathered, transcribed, and analyzed to locate themes. Common themes related to each research question were identified via analysis and discussed in Chapter 4.

Job embeddedness is the theoretical lens through which data were primarily analyzed (Mitchell et al., 2001). Chapter 5 follows with a discussion of the data findings, implications, and conclusions. Research from the literature review will be applied to support occurring themes.

### **Research Questions**

The following were the driving research questions of this study:

1. Are there any personal characteristics that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?
2. Are there characteristics of the school at which they teach, the school system, or the county that influence a TFA teacher's decision to remain in Blue County schools after their two-year commitment has expired?

The interview questions were designed to uncover what personal or school-related factors influenced teachers to remain in Blue County.

### **Review of Job Embeddedness Conceptual Framework**

Specifically, the concept of *job embeddedness* (JE), used as the conceptual framework for this study, is divided into three components:

1. Link, or “the extent to which employees have links to other people, teams, groups, and activities”
2. Fit, or “the extent to which their jobs and communities are similar to or ‘fit’ with the other aspects in their life spaces”
3. Sacrifice, or “the ease with which links can be broken—what they would give up if they left, especially if they had to physically move to other cities or homes” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104)

These factors are all applicable both on and off the job. According to Mitchell et al. (2001), *links* are formal or informal discernible connections between a person and institutions, other people, teams, or groups. The link portion of this theory suggests that there are many links “to an employee and his or her family in a social, psychological, and financial web that includes work and non-work friends, groups, the community, and the physical environment in which he or she lives” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). Mitchell et al. (2001) further state that “the higher the number of links between the employee and the web, the more an employee is tied to the job and the organization” (p. 1104). They also conclude that there are links which may be more important than others, with some varying from population to population. Within the study, the researchers cite Abelson’s (1987) findings that being older, married, having more tenure, and having children who are childcare age are all related to an employees’ likelihood of staying

(Mitchell et al., 2001). Other factors are considered links as well, such as pressures related to “family, team members, and other colleagues” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). Community links may include items other than links with people such as home ownership or membership in an organization (Mitchell et al., 2001). The embedded figures test related to JE proclaims that embedded people, or linked people, are deeply rooted in their backgrounds and hard to separate from it, and that people have many or few aspects of their lives in which they are connected. Thus, like a web, the more links an employee has with his job or organization and the community at large, the more entangled s/he is to their job, and the more likely they are to stay.

The second part of JE is *fit*, or an employee’s “perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with his or her environment” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). In other words, the employee must fit within the community and environment and with his/her immediate job culture, in areas such as personal values, career goals, and plans (job knowledge, skills, and abilities) to feel comfortable. The higher the fit, the more likely the employee will be attached to the organization, and hence less likely to leave (Mitchell et al., 2001). As with the job, there are also aspects of the community that should be likeable, such as the weather and other cultural aspects; recreational activities; locale, political, religious, and education climates; and entertainment (Mitchell et al., 2001). Specifically, outdoor activities, political and religious climates, and entertainment possibilities all may relate to an employee’s fit within a community, and certainly vary between communities. Additionally, the elements of organizational fit and job fit function independently of each other; a person may, for example, love the fit with the job but hate the fit with the organization, or vice versa. In line with this idea of fit, studies on voluntary turnover have found “misfits” resigned from their positions faster than “fits” (Mitchell et al., 2001).

The last portion of the JE theory is *sacrifice*, or what one would give up on-the-job and within the community to leave a job. The report defines it as “the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving a job” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1105). The employee may lose friendships, coworkers, projects, salary and other benefits such as opportunities for advancement, a company vehicle, pension plans, healthcare, and other nontransferable benefits like stocks. Stability and opportunities for advancement are also possible important sacrifices that may be forfeited if one leaves a job (Shaw et al., 1998.), and tenured individuals notably tend to have more advantages with perks like sabbaticals to consider.

Community sacrifices, community links, and community fit are problematic if one is forced to relocate, since leaving a comfortable, safe, and respectable community can be difficult. Of course, the more there is to give up, the harder it is to leave a job. Leaving a community involves other sacrifices as well, such as safety, respect, entertainment, commute time, or day care, and loss of the company vehicle, all of which can affect fit (Mitchell et al., 2001).

### **Discussion of Findings**

For this study, 11 participants were selected based on the criterion of having stayed within the county past their original two-year contractual agreements. There were nine White female teachers and two Black female teachers who participated in the study interviews, all of whom were single at the time of the study. Findings in this study aligned with the conceptual framework of job embeddedness (JE) and with the extant literature.

### **Reasons for Joining Teach For America**

While this study sought to discover why teachers stayed within their TFA-assigned teaching positions in Blue County, it was also important to ascertain why the corps members joined TFA in the first place. Their rationale for the decision to join TFA and work in Blue

County may have had some impact on why they stayed. When looking at reasons the teachers initially joined TFA, five major themes arose from the participants' statements:

1. Always wanted to teach
2. Enjoyed tutoring/working with kids
3. Sense of higher purpose/connection to TFA's mission to end educational inequality
4. Desire to give back to the community
5. Alternative route to teaching licensure

Notably, while these themes emerged from several participants' responses, there were some other reasons for joining TFA cited by individual corps members, including the need to pay for student loans; aligning with the common career of teaching in their family; uncertainty about their future or career path after college; and TFA's focus on STEM initiatives.

These rationales for joining TFA echoed the reasoning that surfaced within the literature review. Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) studied alternative routes to teaching like TFA and found that 46% joined TFA to try teaching as a career, only 12% joined because they truly wanted to teach, and only 11% planned to teach for at least 10 years. Similarly, Stevens and Dial (1993) found that, out of 33 teachers, most joined TFA because they were not sure about their next jobs. Thus, many TFA teachers teach because they are not sure of their plans, causing them to enter the teaching field before other career options arise, without having to complete long preparation (Maier, 2012). All those rationales surfaced within the participants' responses.

### **Job Embeddedness and Reasons for Staying in Blue County**

The responses in this study highlighted TFA teachers' reasons for staying in Blue County past their first, obligated two years, and the findings correlate with the JE conceptual framework. Reviewing the data through the lens of the conceptual framework of JE, the teachers' responses

in this study resulted in four main themes, and portions of each of these align with the three components of JE that Mitchell et al. (2001) suggest influence a person to stay in their job: link, fit, and sacrifice.

**Link.** The JE concept of *link*, or the extent to which an employee has a link to other people and activities in a job (Mitchell et al., 2001), was found to be pivotal in this study, and can be aligned with participants' rationales for staying such as the love of teaching, connection with the Blue County students and their school colleagues, and affinity for the Blue County community. Teachers clearly must feel connected to students and the people with whom they work daily. Those who did felt obligated to stay to see their students graduate. Additionally, the school staff and school culture are important; teachers must support one another to create an environment where teachers feel linked to the school. Relationships with staff and students must be built and nurtured to create cohesive work environments that foster both student and teacher success. This includes relationships with the school principal, as this study's findings indicated that teachers desire instructional leaders who are not merely building managers but also offer help, advice, and assistance with the teachers' growth and the students' success. The support of the district superintendent can also strengthen a TFA teacher's link to the school and the county. It became clear from this study, then, that the school itself plays a vital role in whether a teacher stays; after all, the school is where the teacher works daily for eight hours or more, and hence it must offer a happy, supportive environment to encourage teachers to continue working there.

Other reasons related to link that were cited by the study participants include supportive friendships with their school colleagues and people in the community. Indeed, the creation of a support system outside of TFA was a bold statement made by many of the cohort members in this study. Hannah clearly stated that the TFA members she sees stay and continue working are

those who become friends with local people rather than just isolating or separating themselves with solely TFA members. They worshipped at local churches, enjoyed life on the lake with Blue County residents, joined book clubs, and visited and enjoyed local restaurants. Those who left after two years or even before, she claimed, were those who affiliated only with TFA. Thus, to encourage them to feel the link necessary to continue teaching past their two-year contracts, TFA teachers must do more than teach—they must enjoy life in their assigned area and bond with their colleagues and the local community.

**Fit.** For a person to stay in their position, the theory of JE says they must feel that the job and the community is a *fit* match for their personal needs and other aspects of their lives (Mitchell et al., 2001), and the findings in the current study support this notion. One participant stated that Blue County is the “place to be for TFA placement,” and others seemed to feel the same way as well. In fact, an affinity for the Blue County area emerged in most of the participants’ responses. These findings align with common claims by rural administrators that teacher recruitment and retention is affected by poor community amenities (Miller, 2012). The teachers in the current study liked Blue County, which they cited as a main reason for their choice to stay with TFA past the initial two-year term. Many discussed the fact that “it felt like home” and that its people were welcoming and hospitable to them.

The literature also suggests that teachers also prefer less geographically and professionally isolated places, as well as rural communities with more shopping opportunities (Miller, 2012)—here, they will feel more fit, according to Mitchell et al. (2001). The non-attractiveness of rural areas can be furthered by the geographic and social isolation, lack of housing, and poor economy within the rural locations of the schools (Hammer et al., 2005). However, despite Blue County’s rural locale, the teachers in this study noted that it was located

close enough to the larger cities to provide shopping facilities and other amenities. The link these teachers felt with the students, their colleagues, and the Blue County community was strong. Thus, for these teachers, Blue County began to feel like home despite its rural nature, which made it easier to stay there. The study suggested that Blue County is a special place for many of the corps members, as in interview after interview, the participants talked about the strong relationships and the kindness of the people there. These TFA corps members seemed to feel welcomed and at home in the way that they were welcomed into Blue County and the lives of its citizens. Essentially, corps members went to the next level and began to call Blue County “home.”

Another aspect of these teachers’ rationales that relates to the JE concept of fit is their claim that TFA’s mission to end educational inequality drove them to stay in Blue County longer. Many of the teachers interviewed in this study felt a strong personal mission to be transformational teachers, which made them feel valued in their work and helped them fit with the Blue County school environment. They all wanted to give more to the students and to become better at their jobs so that, in turn, their students could do better.

**Sacrifice.** The third element of Mitchell et al.’s (2001) theory of job embeddedness is *sacrifice*, which is what the employee would be forced to give up if they did break their links and leave a job. To leave after the second year, the teachers in this study noted they would have had to sacrifice the TFA mission to end educational inequality, a mission they all seemed to hold strongly as a driving purpose. Additionally, they would have to sacrifice a steady income, the opportunity to earn a clear teaching license, and even the links they had made with new friends and colleagues in Blue County. A strong bond with their students was also mentioned by several

participants as a reason for their staying after two years, and some specifically felt they would be sacrificing the chance to see their students through the four years to graduation if they had left.

These findings align with the literature, which identifies four major concerns for teachers in high-poverty school districts: (1) lower pay; (2) geographic and social isolation; (3) difficult working conditions, such as having to teach classes in multiple subject areas; and (4) ESSA requirements (McClure & Reeves, 2004). However, what is interesting is that the interviews in this study did not reveal many elements related to sacrifice among the participants. Thus, it seems theoretically and practically that these teachers would not be sacrificing much to leave their TFA-assigned position in Blue County, and so their choice to stay was primarily motivated more by the other factors they cited than by any concern for what they would be giving up, as it seems that what they would be giving up could be either maintained, such as friendships with people in the community, or found elsewhere. No tie or link seemed strong enough to keep them in Blue County.

**Other Job Embeddedness-related reasons cited.** It should be noted here that a couple of the participants in this study suggested other factors that played into their decision to stay. Melony was an older member who had just completed her degree prior to enrolling in TFA, and due to her age, she never felt the need to leave for graduate school. Shannon had become very enveloped into the Blue County community, and even fell in love and planned to get married to someone from the area. While these factors were not themes found among many participants, the findings align with the literature on JE. Abelson (1987) found that being older and married are both factors which relate to an employee's likelihood of staying in a job (as cited in Mitchell et al., 2001). Donaldson (2012) added to this with his finding that older TFA teachers have a lower risk of leaving low-income schools, the teaching profession, or other education-related roles than

do their younger counterparts, with 61.3% of TFA teachers leaving the profession within three years. Even when older TFA participants left, they were more likely to cite family or health issues as reasons for their departure, and more likely to stay in the education field as a specialist or administrator after teaching (Donaldson, 2012). Accordingly, older TFA entrants may prove more beneficial for low-income schools since they have demonstrated greater dedication to these underprivileged schools and the teaching profession overall (Donaldson, 2012). Indeed, the two older corps members or alumni were administrators and working toward that goal.

While some of the “other” reasons for staying have been mentioned elsewhere previously, a couple of these rationales are worth noting again. It is important and advantageous as a new cohort member of TFA to think of it not as a two-year commitment; such open-mindedness fosters the possibility that the teacher may just enjoy their job enough to continue to stay on in the position. Further, the thought and possibilities open venues for growth and maturation in the education field.

Two outliers seemed to not fit in the theoretical feedback. One participant initially stated that the reason that she joined TFA and wanted to continue teaching was revenge; the concept of revenge did not exactly fit into the framework. However, the teacher went on to clarify that she really enjoyed teaching, tying the comment into the JE theory of fit. Another participant mentioned her love for the district’s STEM program as a reason for staying in Blue County, but this fits with the JE concept of fit because her love of STEM came from her love of science and mathematics and her values.

### **Obstacles to Remaining in the Profession**

When asked about the obstacles they had to overcome when remaining in the profession, the teachers in this study cited many factors, including school-related issues and personal matters

such as issues with the administration, resources, and mental strain. While examining the obstacles that these teachers had to overcome to remain in the county does not directly address the two initial research questions, it is still imperative that stakeholders know that issues like these must be dealt with if the county truly desires to retain teachers.

Several of the obstacles the teachers named related to the school administration. Perhaps the most glaring and troubling of these was the claim of feeling disrespected by members of the administration on more than one occasion. Other administration-related obstacles included disorganization, lack of communication, absence of a curriculum, and poor staff professional development. Regarding the claim of feeling disrespected, the idea of an administrator being disrespectful to any teacher is alarming and should be addressed. There must be a drive to ensure respect is afforded to all employees. Disorganization and a lack of communication are also traits that the school system can and should address. Schools should make expectations of its teachers more coherent, as well as put systems of organization in place. Moreover, quality professional development is a sign to the teacher that the school system cares enough for them to assist with his/her growth and, in turn, maximize student learning. Staff development is vital for teachers to improve their pedagogy and instructional behaviors, and thus Blue County must prioritize its teachers and its students by making quality professional development available and ensuring the calendar of offerings is communicated clearly and widely early in the year.

Lack of teaching resources and of an established curriculum were also named by participants as obstacles to their work as teachers. As a rural, high-poverty school system, one may argue that Blue County does not have access to the best or most resources. However, quality instructional resources are vital for student learning, so funds should be channeled to ensure that teachers have the basics they need to deliver the best instruction possible to students. Providing

students with a good education also requires the development of a structured curriculum or pacing guides for teachers to use; therefore, Blue County must take immediate action to establish curricula for all its courses if it wants to enable successful learning.

The participants also cited mental and emotional strain as an obstacle to remaining in the teaching profession. Teaching is quite difficult, to say the least, especially when combined with the other issues the participants discussed, such as lack of curricula and resources. Many of the participants in the study found the challenges of teaching to be particularly difficult when dealing with the emotional disappointment that comes when students are not successful. As noted by one participant, the pressures of standardized, high-stakes testing add to this mental and emotional strain. The TFA teachers in this study stayed in Blue County past their two-year contract despite these stresses, but certainly many of those who did not must have felt similarly.

Several teachers in this study talked about the difficulty of being away from family and living in Blue County, yet another source of emotional strain with which they had to deal to continue teaching there. Teachers who have strong academic preparation, as do many TFA teachers, are less likely to select rural areas and tend to prefer less geographically isolated places (Miller, 2012). As such, being away from their families amidst this geographic and social isolation made Blue County unappealing to these teachers in many ways (Hammer et al., 2005). However, the welcoming Blue County community became like home to many of the teachers in this study, one of them even calling it a kind of family. From responses throughout the interviews, it seems these determined teachers may have combatted the loneliness of missing their families by traveling to nearby big cities and getting heavily involved with the local people of Blue County. Participating in things such as Friday night athletics, book clubs, lake activities,

and dining at area restaurants with new local friends also may have helped, as well as bonding with other staff members at school as many described.

Without access to experienced peers and mentors with whom they can collaborate and get feedback, highly stressful working conditions, low performance, and poor morale can begin to halt teachers' performance and growth after a few years (Haynes, 2014). According to Kelly and Northrop (2015), TFA teachers claim to receive less support from administrators and other co-workers and have low job satisfaction and higher burnout. Their study found that highly selective graduates were less likely to remain in teaching, and more likely to go as far as to say that they would not select the profession of teaching again (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). The participants in this study credited peers and mentors with helping them to feel comfortable and succeed in Blue County, thus strengthening their link to the job and encouraging them to stay on after their initial two years. To address these issues in the interest of teacher retention, the county can learn from this study's findings and provide its teachers with additional psychological support such as, for example, peer counseling or professional therapy.

Teacher retention is a leading problem in rural areas, and recruitment is hindered by factors that can be found in Blue County such as low salaries and poor community amenities (Miller, 2012). Yet despite the obstacles they faced, the TFA teachers in this study remained in Blue County longer than they were contractually obligated to stay. The results of the study suggest that this was in part due to their resilience and adaptability, as they adjusted to their new home and were determined to continue in their TFA mission—notably, for the sake of the students, as nearly every teacher voiced at some point during their interview.

## Implications of the Study

### Implications for Education Practice

Through the responses gained in this study, Blue County, the TFA organization, and the teaching profession can learn a great deal. If we wish to take actions to improve teacher turnover rates and student learning, there must be a consensus on what factors influence TFA teachers to stay. Rural, high-poverty counties have come to rely upon organizations such as TFA to fill some of its teaching positions, making the program an asset in many ways. When teachers only stay two years, though, it creates a cycle of turnover that negatively affects students and schools. Thus, it is contingent upon the TFA organization, administrators, schools, and local school boards to create conditions that will help retain teachers. Ronfeldt et al. (2013) suggest the development of policies that would support creating grade-level teams and introducing incentives, as teachers who have experience and high-achieving students have been found to be less likely to transfer. Teachers have been found to remain in schools where conditions are suitable for effective performance (Allensworth et al., 2009). Thus, to address this dilemma of such unfavorable conditions for teachers, Johnson (2016) contends that policies must be created to improve working conditions for new and veteran teachers in North Carolina. Based on the current study's findings, the following are recommendations for practice in education that can have a positive effect on teacher retention.

**Teach For America.** As an organization, TFA should continue to support teachers' success throughout their time with the program. Even more, when a high percentage of TFA corps members leave the assigned school after their obligatory two years of service, students suffer, and its mission to end educational inequality is slowed. Following are suggestions for TFA based on this study's findings:

- **Selection of corps members.** TFA would do well to select first those candidates who have majored in education, are interested in teaching, have family members who are teachers, and understand what teaching involves. While these are not the only people to select, or may not even be the top choices to select, data does show that, in terms of remaining in education, these candidates are more likely to remain in teaching. Even soliciting older candidates may have its advantages for TFA, as research shows they tend to stay in positions longer.
- **Stipend during summer training.** It would be advantageous for TFA to begin issuing payments or stipends during summer training, especially to attract those members who fall in lower income brackets and may suffer great hardship if they had to sacrifice income during that time.
- **Encourage active involvement in school's local community.** TFA's role should continue to include providing guidance and resources that will help teachers feel comfortable in their new location and roles. In this study, teachers specifically mentioned that becoming involved within the local church, book clubs, and young professionals' events in the county helped them feel at home there. This increased their link and fit in Blue County, which, in turn, helped to influence their choice to continue teaching after their contract expired. With these findings in mind, TFA and the Blue County school system could initiate meet-and-greets, social programs, area tours, and other ongoing activities to introduce and socialize teachers to the local community, and vice versa.

**Blue County School System and Schools.** The Blue County School System can gain some insights from the findings of this study that it can use to improve teacher retention rates. The teachers reported many specific concerns related to the school administration, including a lack of course curricula. Based on the study's findings, the following activities may prove advantageous in encouraging teachers to stay and continue to teach in the county:

- Plan activities that foster workplace relationships and even relationships that extend beyond the workplace.
- Continue to foster events within the county that welcome new teachers and those that provide a venue for socialization of the entire community.
- Encourage socializing at work and after work, including celebrating birthdays, holding social events, and honoring achievements (Mind Tools, n.d.).
- Foster team-building activities that increase trust and bonds among staff, and provide coaching and mentoring. (Mind Tools, n.d.).
- Hire principals who are effective instructional leaders and coaches who understand how to assist teachers with growth; these administrators must be effective coaches, too, and recognize that becoming a teacher is a “journey.”
- Properly assign roles that suit teachers' strength and skills and those that are valuable (Mind Tools, n.d.).
- Be concerned with placement of teachers, and not assume that they can teach multiple levels and subjects within their first year; plan for success for these new teachers instead of setting them up for failure.

- Provide high-quality professional development for staff, delivered by content experts, and monitor offerings yearly to enlist feedback and use the information received to make improvements to professional development calendars.
- Demonstrate teacher appreciation by having administration engage in discussions with teachers to listen to their challenges and needs, show sincere appreciation, and let them know that their professional views are valued.
- Foster an overall environment of mutual respect at all the county schools and at the school system or county administration levels.
- Distribute well-developed and planned instructional and/or pacing guides so that first-year teachers can target and pace their pedagogy, save time, and focus on improving as teachers.
- Increase technology and resources and training, and replace non-working technology, especially for courses where technology or computers are the main tools for instruction.
- Increase effective communication and prioritize planning via yearly meetings and professional development calendars.
- Give teachers a voice through a teacher council that interacts with school boards, the Blue County Superintendent, and/or other policymaking entities, during which teachers can provide valuable insight from their daily interactions with students and their keen understanding of what students need.
- Design, market, and publicize social events and community-building activities, using the school system's website and staff email as a means of communication.

- Plan, promote, and hold local recreational events such as lake activities, gyms, theaters, musical shows/concerts, and other events that may attract teachers and allow more socialization to occur.
- Promote a culture of teacher appreciation and work ethics among students and people within the community, as teachers must be appreciated for their dedication and service.
- Locate young people early on and recruit them to be teachers.

**North Carolina Public School System.** The North Carolina Public School System, in conjunction with Blue County, must offer incentives and benefits to discourage teachers from sacrificing what they have gained to go elsewhere. From the analysis of teacher responses in this study, the JE concept of sacrifice was the most lacking. Below are some implications of the insights gained in this study for the North Carolina Public School System:

- Provide incentives for teachers to stay, such as reinstating tenure and providing increased pay for teachers with Masters' degrees.
- Offer yearly pay increases as an incentive for teachers to stay in their role for a longer term.
- Increase technology training, resources, and funding for school districts, especially poverty areas for which this could help with educational equality.

Changes are needed in our education system if we want to see less teacher turnover and, in turn, improve student performance. Although many teachers feel they are continuing to fulfill TFA's mission when they complete graduate school and enter the policy side of education, more teachers need to feel that they would give up a tremendous amount and lose opportunities if they leave. Based on this study's findings, the suggestions above offer educators some actions they

can take to entice TFA teachers and possibly even other teachers to remain in the positions for longer than the required two years.

### **Implications for Education Policy**

Policies must be created on all levels to govern and protect teachers and, ultimately, students. To assist with reducing teacher turnover, federal, state, and local policymakers should consider enacting laws that address pay and tenure, working conditions, support, and professional development for teachers. Many understand teachers are not paid enough for the invaluable service they provide in educating our youth, to say the least. Policymakers should be working to raise teacher pay collectively across the nation. In addition, just as professionals in other fields receive yearly reviews and opportunity for a raise in pay, teachers should be afforded the same benefit. As a teacher's experience increases, so should his/her compensation, which would also encourage teachers to remain in their positions longer. Discontinuing tenure has also affected teacher retention, and policymakers should consider reinstating it wherever it has been removed.

Policies should also be made to guard and improve teachers' working conditions. One example is that teachers should not be assigned more than one subject and school level to instruct; not only is this not helpful for the teacher, it is also not in the best interests of the students' learning. To assist teachers in continually honing their instructional skills and pedagogy, teachers should be provided with mentors, as well as required to develop ongoing improvement plans monitored by the principal. Staff professional development calendars should be created and approved yearly, including quality courses, training, and tools. Pacing guides should be created for each subject by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction or individual school districts.

## **Implications for Further Research**

The current study included 11 TFA corps members who had chosen to continue teaching in their assigned rural, high-poverty school district after their contracted obligation had been fulfilled. The participants in this study were all females, and none of them were married. For further research, one might consider replicating the study but including a larger database of cohort members for a different region in eastern North Carolina or for the entire state of North Carolina for example. Additional studies on this topic could also utilize focus groups rather than individual interviews, which would allow the researcher to capitalize on the interactions between participants for better insights.

One might also consider doing a comparative study of TFA and the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program. The two programs are selective in choosing their members, and both are committed to providing teachers to serve for a specified amount of time. Specifically, the researcher could look at characteristics, training, and retention in each program's participants.

Additionally, the varying rationales for the increase in teacher retention may be studied as well. Clearly, there is a teacher retention problem within Blue County. The most recent report on teacher turnover, completed in November 2016, cites that overall turnover in North Carolina is down to 9.04%. This drastic decrease from the prior year's 14.84% (NCDPI, 2016) is not reflective of the trend toward increased teacher turnover seen in the state in the last five years, and research needs be done to investigate the causes for the difference. Even still, within Blue County, the turnover rate for 2015-2016 is approximately 18%—nearly double the most recently reported rate for the state, and considerably higher (21.2%) than even the reduced rate in 2014-2015 (NCDPI, 2016). Research could be done to address the drastic drop in the rate last year.

## Chapter Summary

Teachers must feel linked with the people, the school, and the community where they work, and they must “fit” within the environment. Moreover, these links and fits must be so strong and many that it becomes a *bigger sacrifice* to leave than to stay. While the teachers in this study had remained in their TFA position for at least a third year, unfortunately, all the participants left their positions in Blue County by the fifth year (at the end of this study). With the insights from this study, rural, high-poverty counties like Blue County can begin to make changes designed to improve teacher retention rates, as well as help TFA and other teachers build links and a stronger fit to the school, school system, and community. This, in effect, will enable teachers to become embedded in the job in a way that will sway them to stay and teach even after their contract is fulfilled—which, after all, is first and foremost in the best interests of the students.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Request for Permission to Conduct Study (Blue County)

### North Carolina State University

[Blue County Superintendent] and the Board of Education  
Address  
XXXXXX, North Carolina

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_ and Members of the Board of Education:

I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at North Carolina State University. I am in the process of designing the research protocol for my qualitative dissertation on what factors contribute to Teach For America (TFA) Teachers remaining past their two-year contracts.

Participants in the study will need to be TFA participants who are in their third year or more of teaching or in another leadership role within the district. Interview questions will be focused on why they remained in the county past their two-year contracts. These responses will be collected and analyzed with the hopes of learning vital information regarding for conditions that may be created to help TFA teachers remain teaching longer.

I am seeking permission to conduct my research study. While many participants may have moved on and will be contacted via the TFA Alumni Database, some of the personnel may still be within the county and thus will need to be interviewed. Participant names will remain anonymous for privacy and the county itself will be given a pseudonym for confidentiality. Once permission is granted, please share this information with all district-wide principals, informing them of the study and of my goals.

After completion of my study, I would be more than happy to share my results with you concerning why some TFA teachers choose to stay more than two years.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to advance the current knowledge on TFA teachers. Should you have any questions, feel free to contact me directly at XXX-XXX-XXXX or via my email [ahrichar@XXX.edu](mailto:ahrichar@XXX.edu).

Please forward me permission to conduct this study within the county by returning a simple letter of permission to me as soon as possible. I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your convenience.

Thank you,  
Angela H. Richardson  
Graduate Student  
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
North Carolina State University

## **Appendix B: Request for Permission to Conduct Study (Teach For America)**

### **North Carolina State University**

Andrew Lakis, Executive Director of Eastern North Carolina  
Teach For America of Eastern North Carolina  
Raleigh, North Carolina

Dear Mr. Lakis:

I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at North Carolina State University. I am in the process of designing the research protocol for my qualitative dissertation on what factors contribute to Teach For America (TFA) Teachers remaining past their two-year contracts.

Participants in the study will need to be TFA participants who are in their third year or more of teaching, in another leadership role within the district, who those who continued teaching/working within [Blue] County after their contract with TFA ended. Interview questions will be focused on why they remained in the county past their two-year contracts. These responses will be collected and analyzed with the hopes of learning vital information regarding conditions that may be created to help TFA teachers and others to remain teaching longer.

I am seeking permission to conduct my research study and to enlist your support with locating the sampling of participants needed for this study. I will need access to or information from the TFA Alumni Database as I will need to conduct an in-depth interview. I realize that some of the personnel may still be within the county, but many have move on to other counties and positions. Participant names will remain anonymous for privacy and the county itself will be given a pseudonym for confidentiality. Once permission is granted, please share this information with all alumni, informing them of the study, my goals, and my aim to contact them for a short interview. After completion of my study, I would be more than happy to share my results with you concerning why some TFA teachers choose to stay more than two years.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to advance the current knowledge on TFA teachers. Should you have any questions, feel free to contact me directly at XXX-XXX-XXXX or via my email: [ahrichar@XXX.edu](mailto:ahrichar@XXX.edu).

Please forward me permission to conduct this study by returning a simple letter of permission to me as soon as possible. Additionally, I will need the best possible name of contact of the person who will be most instrumental in granting me names and contact information for those alumni who stayed in [Blue] County] past their two-year contracts. Additionally, I will need some historical information on the organization's history in [Blue] County. I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your convenience.

Thank you,  
Angela H. Richardson, Graduate Student  
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
North Carolina State University

## Appendix C: Informational Letter to Potential Teacher Participants

### North Carolina State University

Teacher's Name  
Street  
City, State, Zip

Date

Dear (Teacher's Name),

I am currently a doctoral student in the department of Educational Leadership at North Carolina State University. I am in the process of planning research for my qualitative dissertation on what factors contribute to Teach For America (TFA) teachers remaining past their two-year contracts.

Those teacher participants in the study will be TFA and in their third year or more of teaching or in another leadership role. Interview questions for the participants will be focused on why they remained in the county past their two-year contracts. These responses will be collected and analyzed with the hopes of learning vital information for conditions that may be created to help TFA teachers remain teaching longer.

You are one of the teachers who fit the criteria of my study. Soon, I will contact you via phone or email to request and to schedule an interview with you in reference to you as a TFA teacher who stayed beyond the two years.

After completion of the interview, I will share the interview transcript with you to verify accuracy. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity and to assure confidentiality of the information given.

Thank you tremendously for allowing me the opportunity to interview you for this study that will generate important information for teacher retention.

Thank you,

Angela H. Richardson  
Graduate Student  
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
North Carolina State University

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form for Research

### North Carolina State University

Please carefully read the following Informed Consent specifications and sign this form if you fully give your permission to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your personal records.

**Researcher:** Angela Harris Richardson  
Graduate Student, Educational Administration and Supervision  
North Carolina State University  
XXX-XXX-XXXX (Cell)

**Dissertation Title:** A Qualitative Exploration of Factors Contributing to Teach For America Teachers Remaining in a Rural, High-Poverty School System Beyond Their Two-Year Contracts

**Request for Participation:** This letter requests your voluntary participation in this study. Your participation is voluntary; you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Also, you have the right to deny use of your words at any time. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. If you do not understand something in this form, you may ask the researcher for an explanation or for more information. A copy of this research form will be provided to you. If you have questions about your participation, please ask the researcher above.

**What is the purpose of this study?** The purpose of this study is to understand what factors influenced TFA teachers to remain in their rural high-poverty school system more than two years.

**What will happen if I participate in this study? What is the research method?** If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief biographical questionnaire before the interview. The questionnaire will be emailed to you.

Each participant will take part in an in-depth 60-minute interview. Those that can be completed face-to-face will be done so; others will be conducted and recorded digitally, utilizing an iPad and an iPhone application called FaceTime. I will interview you and other TFA teachers who have worked past their two-year contracts. Questions will be related to your experiences and will be aimed at determining why you stayed past the two-year contract. Data collected will be transcribed and analyzed for common themes that are original and for those that are represented in the literature. The researcher requests that the interview be held in a quiet location in order to ensure that the data is collected properly. As necessary, as researcher, I would like the right to have a follow-up interview if necessary. Again, the data will be transcribed and sent to or given to you to check for accuracy; you may make revisions, as necessary.

**Benefits:** The information gained from this study will be utilized to designate those factors that are beneficial for convincing teachers to remain past their two-year contracts. New policies and working environments may be enhanced utilizing the information gained from this study.

**Confidentiality:** Your name will not be used within any of the identifying data—interview, transcript, or within the actual paper. All identifying information will be secured. Data will be stored securely within locked and pass-word protected storage where only the researcher has the password. Papers will be held securely under lock and key. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity, the school district, and any other information. Pseudonyms will be given, and interview information encrypted for protection. A table will be created to assist with the identification and protection of participants.

**Method of Recording the Interview:** I will digitally record the interview to ensure accuracy of information. The interview will be transcribed and information secured.

**Right of Refusal/Right to Withdraw:** You may refuse to participate in the study and to withdraw from this study at any time. You may also elect the non-use of your words at any time.

**Compensation:** You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study. Participation is strictly voluntary.

**Feedback and Benefits:** The research will be available if you wish to review it. Your input within this study will help local schools, TFA officials, and other stakeholders to learn the conditions that have contributed to TFA teachers remaining in a school system past their two-year contract. The information may help county officials to create better conditions for TFA and other teachers such that retention will improve. Teacher retention can help to improve the academics of students, morale, and much time and money can be saved.

**Copy and Consent:** You will receive a copy of this Informed Consent form that you may keep for your records.

**Permission to Quote:** Although pseudonyms will be used to hide your identity, your words may be used in the final research report to highlight key issues or to support findings that may be new or supported in current literature.

**Consent to Participant:** “I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.”

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Voluntary Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix E: Participant Biographical Questionnaire

### North Carolina State University

**Investigator:** Angela H. Richardson, [ahrichar@XXX.edu](mailto:ahrichar@XXX.edu), (XXX) XXX-XXXX

**Research Title:** A Qualitative Exploration of Factors Contributing to Teach For America Teachers Remaining in a Rural, High-Poverty School System Beyond Their Two-Year Contracts

#### I. Demographic Information

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym Name Given (Researcher Use Only): \_\_\_\_\_

##### Age:

- \_\_\_ 22-26
- \_\_\_ 27-30
- \_\_\_ 31-34
- \_\_\_ 35 and above

##### Marital Status

- \_\_\_ Single
- \_\_\_ Married
- \_\_\_ Divorced
- \_\_\_ Widowed

#### II. General Questions

1. What is your current employment?
2. When/In what year did you join TFA? How old were you?
3. What was your undergraduate degree?
4. What was your initial assignment?
5. How long did you remain in your original assignment?
6. How long did you remain in the county?
7. What other positions did you hold within the school system?

## Appendix F: Interview Protocol

### North Carolina State University

**Research Title:** A Qualitative Exploration of Factors Contributing to Teach For America Teachers Remaining in a Rural, High-Poverty School System Beyond Their Two-Year Contracts

#### Interview Protocol:

1. Introduce the study and welcome participant: Hello (Name of TFA teacher). My name is Angela Richardson, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration and Supervision program at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC. Under the supervision of Dr. Lisa Bass, I am conducting a study on the factors that contribute to TFA teachers staying past their two-year contracts in a rural high-poverty school system. You are one of those teachers who qualify for this study because you remained in your original county/position past the two-year contract in [Blue] County. Thank you tremendously for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary.
  - a. Would you like to continue participation? (If no, the interview will be ended.)
  - b. Thank you. As you participate, you will need to complete an Informed Consent form.
  - c. The purpose of this research is to learn the reasons why some TFA teachers stayed past their two-year contracts. All the information learned from this study will be collected and analyzed for common themes. The data will be used in my dissertation, and your name will remain anonymous. This interview should only take about sixty minutes. You will be asked to complete the Informed consent form, the brief biographical information sheet, and one digitally recorded interview. You will be given the opportunity later to review the interview and provide any feedback or make any corrections. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity, the school district, and any other identifying information.
  - d. All identifying information will be kept confidential. Data will be securely locked and password protected so that the researcher only has access. A table will be created in order to assist with the anonymity of participants and with the analysis of data.
  - e. Should you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or by email at [ahrichar@ncsu.edu](mailto:ahrichar@ncsu.edu). Or you can contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Lisa Bass, at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or at [lrbass@ncsu.edu](mailto:lrbass@ncsu.edu).
  - f. Again, thank you for participating in the study.
2. Ask the participant to sign the consent form.
3. Begin the interview.

## Appendix G: Interview Questions

1. State your name.
2. Tell me why you joined TFA.
3. When did you join TFA?
4. What was your initial assignment?
5. Where was your initial assignment?
6. How long did you stay in your initial placement?
7. How long did you stay within the same county?
8. If you moved within the county, did you select the new assignment?
9. What factors influenced you to remain in the school system after the two-year initial contract with TFA ended?
10. Are there any distinct personal reasons that influenced you to remain in the county as long as you did?
11. Are there characteristics of the school that influenced you to stay past your two years?
12. Are there any other things/reasons that influenced you to remain within the county?
13. Are there characteristics within the county that influenced you to remain within the county?
14. What factors were important to you when deciding to remain in the educational profession?
15. What obstacles did you have to overcome when you decided to remain in the profession?
16. If you have worked elsewhere, what makes [Blue] County unique?
17. What local factors contributed to or made your decision to stay easier?
18. What value do you attribute to having stayed more than two years; or how do you feel about the fact that you stayed more than the two-year requirement?
19. Are there any additional questions? [Stop recording]

Thank you for your participation. I will transcribe this interview and provide you an opportunity to check all statements.