BEGINNING TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON MENTORING PROGRAMS
IN RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

by
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(Under the Direction of Jo Blase)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore beginning teachers’ perspectives on mentoring programs in rural elementary schools. Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical framework of the study, and the methodology was grounded theory. Face-to-face interviews were the primary data source. Constant comparative analysis was used to analyze the data and to generate theory grounded in the data.

Mentoring programs were found to be a supportive practice involving the beginning teachers and mentors. The beginning teachers formed positive relationships with their mentors and interacted with them through the mentoring program. These interactions consisted primarily of the mentors providing support for the beginning teachers in the areas of curriculum, instruction, classroom management, and parent interactions. Personal and emotional support was an additional area in which the beginning teachers received mentor support. Furthermore, the interactions between the beginning teachers and the mentors and the outcomes of these interactions positively affected beginning teacher morale, classroom instruction, conflict resolution management, and self-confidence.
Five theoretical meta-themes are discussed: (a) When beginning teachers are given support in implementing curriculum and instructional support, student achievement is enhanced; (b) when mentors make themselves accessible to beginning teachers, the beginning teachers are more likely to reach out to their mentors for advice and support; (c) when beginning teachers feel their mentors are personally and emotionally supporting them, they view the mentor as more than a peer; (d) when mentors help beginning teachers learn to deal with extreme behavior problems, the teachers gain confidence in their abilities to resolve them; (e) when administrators do not offer full support to the mentoring program, the quality of the program is diminished. Implications for future research, practitioners, and higher education programs are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Rural beginning teachers, Mentoring programs, Mentors
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study examined beginning teachers’ perspectives on a mentoring program designed for elementary teachers in a rural setting. The first section of this introduction presents an overview of the literature on mentoring programs for beginning teachers. The second section provides a description of the study, including the purpose of the study and guiding research questions, site and sample selection, and research design. The third section discusses the theoretical and practical significance of the study, and the fourth section addresses the strengths and limitations of the study.

Overview of the Literature

Huling-Austin (1990) described the first years of teaching—teacher induction—as part of the teacher education process, which includes preservice, induction, and inservice. Since the 1980s, induction programs that provide support for teachers during their first year of teaching have developed rapidly across the United States. Today, there is a renewed interest in these programs due to the current problems of the distribution of quality teachers and the high rates of teacher attrition in the early years (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Obviously, there are other factors besides the quality of mentorship programs that contribute to a teacher’s decision to leave the profession. However, the retention of promising beginning teachers during the first year is an important goal. Support for and assistance to beginning teachers are needed to change the tradition of “isolation, survival, and trial-and-error learning” (Wildman, Niles, Magliaro, & McLaughlin, 1989). Because new teachers tend to work
in isolation, they often resort to learning by trial and error (Lortie, 1975) and to developing coping strategies that help them to survive in the classroom.

A case study conducted by Huling-Austin, Barnes, and Smith (1985) described a coping strategy developed by one beginning teacher who was experiencing difficulty controlling her students during class discussions. They found that the teacher’s method of dealing with the situation was simply to eliminate class discussions from her repertoire of teaching strategies. Case study examples such as this one lend support to the idea of providing beginning teachers with assistance during their early years. This assistance enables the beginning teacher to develop initial coping strategies that can develop into appropriate teaching styles to be used throughout the teacher’s career (Huling-Austin et al., 1985).

Problems and issues faced by beginning teachers have been a topic of studies for more than half a century. Findings from these studies indicate that the problems and issues faced by first year teachers are “perennial” (Zepeda & Mayers, 2001). According to Brock and Grady (2001), “Teaching is one of the few careers in which the least experienced members face the greatest challenge and most responsibilities” (p. 16). Beginning teachers too often go from the highly supervised situation of student teaching to one with little or no supervision. This change, coupled with the shock of facing their first job, adds stress, anxiety, isolation, and frustration to the new teacher’s professional and personal lives (David, 2000).

The challenge is a critical one; the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (1998) reported that across the nation, 9.3% of public school teachers leave before they complete their first year in the classroom and over one-fifth of public school teachers leave their positions within the first three years of teaching. In addition, nearly 30% of teachers leave the profession
within five years of entry, and even higher attrition rates exist in more disadvantaged schools, such as those often found in rural areas (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

While a mentoring program is only one facet of a successful induction program, it is by far the most publicized and popular. Mentoring is intended to influence beginning teachers’ beliefs and practices, to improve the instruction of beginning teachers, and to increase teacher retention (Odell, 1986, 1990; Schaffer, Stringfield, & Wolfe, 1992). Nationwide, mentoring programs are receiving a great deal of energy and are thought to be a source of hope for solving the problems beginning teachers face and for reducing the attrition rate of new teachers (Certo & Fox, 2001).

There are no studies that have focused on mentoring programs for beginning elementary teachers in rural settings. The need for more in-depth and theoretical research in this area is apparent. More than one-third of America’s school children are enrolled in rural and small town schools in the United States. Of these 14 million children, almost a quarter of them (21%) attend school in places with fewer than 2,500 people. Nearly a third (31.3%) of public schools are found in areas with populations of fewer than 2,500 people (Beeson & Strange, 2003). In twelve states, Vermont, Maine, South Dakota, Wyoming, West Virginia, Alaska, Arkansas, Kentucky, Iowa, North Carolina, New Hampshire, and Nebraska, rural and small town children comprise a majority in the public elementary and secondary school population (NCES, 2000).

Nearly 75% of rural schools are small, enrolling fewer than 400 students, and about 20% of them enroll fewer than 100 students. Most rural districts, although geographically dispersed, are also small, serving relatively small numbers of students. The exception is the Southeast, where, depending on the state, between 25 and 62% of districts enroll over 2,500 students (Stern, 1994).
Rural Americans are generally poorer than their urban and suburban counterparts as rural earnings are 71% of urban earnings. In 2000, the percentage of families living in poverty in rural areas was 13.4 compared to 10.8 in metropolitan areas. Of the 200 consistently poor counties in the United States, 195 (97.5%) are rural. Of the 66 poorest counties, 59 (89.4%) are rural. Child poverty rates in these counties run two to three times higher than the national average (Beeson & Strange, 2003).

Rural schools are greatly disadvantaged by the inequities inherent in current school funding strategies. A number of states rely heavily on local property taxes to supplement state and federal funding. Because rural communities tend to have higher poverty rates, lower property values, and less economic development, they are unable to raise adequate resources through this means. For example, North Carolina’s ten most affluent counties have over $877,000 in taxable real estate per public school student, compared to only $208,000 per student in the ten poorest counties (Public School Forum of North Carolina [PSFNC], 2001). This disparity in property wealth and school funding translates into inadequate school facilities and narrower curricular and extra-curricular offerings. Equally important, it greatly restricts the ability of rural schools to compete for a shrinking supply of qualified teachers. Unfortunately, the inequities caused by state school finance systems deny many rural students high-quality instruction, access to educational programs and services that might address the achievement gap, and equal educational opportunities (PSFNC, 2001).

This study explored rural elementary beginning teachers’ perspectives on their mentoring program and developed a theoretical analysis of these perspectives. The findings of this study should broaden the current understanding of beginning teacher mentoring programs in rural settings.
Description of the Study

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore beginning teachers’ perspectives on mentoring programs in rural elementary schools. This study was conducted in elementary schools in three north Georgia counties. Each of the elementary schools had a mentoring program in which the mentors had received training through the North Georgia Regional Education Services Agency.

The research questions that guided this study were open-ended and were typical of grounded theory research. Initial guiding questions included (a) What were the beginning teachers’ experiences in their respective mentoring programs? and (b) What did these experiences mean to the beginning teachers?

Site and Sample Selection

The sites for the study were selected because they provided an opportunity for purposeful sampling. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) described *purposeful sampling* as a sampling process that includes participants because “they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (p. 65). Those chosen to participate in the study were beginning teachers. The three participating school systems were purposefully selected based on their formal implementation of a mentorship program for which training had been provided by the North Georgia Regional Educational Services Agency. A rural geographical location was the second criteria for the school systems selected for this study; all three systems were located in a rural region of north Georgia.

Research Design and Methods

Beginning teachers’ perspectives on a mentoring program in a rural elementary school was the focus of this qualitative study. Grounded theory methods guided the entire research
process from the initial collection of data to the final writing (Glaser, 1978). A key component of a grounded theory study is that theory evolves during actual research. This evolution occurs through an ongoing interplay between analysis and data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In a grounded theory study, the researcher is continually involved in the process of data collection, data coding, and data analysis. Through the ongoing process of analyzing the data, the researcher can discover gaps in the data that need to be filled. This process, known as constant comparative analysis, was used to collect data, to analyze data, and to generate theory concerning beginning teachers’ perspectives of mentoring programs.

The specific data collection instrument used in this study was the interview. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) described an interview as “a purposeful conversation” (p. 95) used to generate descriptive data about how participants perceive and interpret their world. All interviews were audio taped with the participants’ permission so that the contents could be transcribed. A research journal was also maintained to record researcher notes, memos, and reflections. Data was analyzed by searching through the interview transcripts line-by-line for incidents of beginning teachers’ perspectives of their mentors. Similar incidents were grouped together into themes and categories, which became more dense as more data was collected. As relationships among the themes and categories became apparent, working theoretical ideas emerged.

Significance of the Study

An in-depth review of the literature revealed that while mentoring studies usually provide overviews of mentorship and its management, only one examined or analyzed mentoring programs implemented in rural areas. Because of the limited amount of research on mentoring programs for beginning teachers in rural areas, the results of this study have theoretical, practical, and methodological significance. On a theoretical level, the results of this study
contribute to the knowledge base of mentoring programs designed for beginning teachers. This study provides unique findings because it explored in-depth the experiences of beginning teachers in rural elementary schools. On a practical level, the results have significance for teachers and administrators in rural elementary schools by providing them with knowledge concerning their existing mentoring programs. They also provide knowledge for practitioners to resource in designing new mentoring programs in rural settings.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this study is its focus on beginning teacher mentoring programs in rural elementary schools. The findings of this study represent the perspectives on beginning elementary teachers in rural settings in three counties in North Georgia. The limitation of this study is its representativeness. These demographics will not be representative of other rural schools in the state or country. As a means of minimizing this limitation, the study focused on providing an in-depth holistic look at beginning teacher mentoring programs in this particular research setting.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 2 of this prospectus provides a thorough review of the relevant literature. Chapter 3 presents an overview and discussion of the methodology that was used in this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this research study, and Chapter 5 summarizes the study, discusses the findings, and presents the implications for future research, for practitioners, and for institutions of higher education.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter 2 reviews literature addressing mentoring programs for beginning teachers and describes theories and research findings that build a foundation for this study of beginning teachers’ perspectives on mentoring programs. The first section of this chapter summarizes the historical and theoretical development of mentoring programs. The second section focuses on the increasing demand for new teachers in the United States. The third section discusses the challenges faced by beginning teachers. The fourth section focuses on the emergence of mentoring programs designed for beginning teachers and examines the characteristics of effective mentoring programs and mentors, criteria for matching mentors with beginning teachers, and methods of mentor preparation. The fifth section describes the implications for school administrators of their role in mentoring of beginning teachers. The sixth section discusses related studies on mentoring programs in rural schools.

Historical and Theoretical Development of Mentoring Programs

Historically, little attention has been paid to the need to provide assistance, especially the need to provide mentoring, for new teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2000). The traditional method of launching a teacher’s career rests on the myth that graduates of teacher preparation programs are prepared to teach unassisted in a classroom. In spite of how adequate their teacher preparation has been, teachers in their first classroom face a tremendous number of complex and sometimes overwhelming problems. These issues must often be dealt with quickly and, in the traditional system, without anyone to turn to for advice. Working in isolation, new teachers must navigate a
slow and painful learning curve. When faced with a multitude of problems and a lack of support, too many new teachers become disillusioned (Feiman-Nemser, 2000).

Every September, eager new teachers in rural schools across the United States begin their first year of teaching. Full of hope and anticipation, they spend hours and hours during the summer months decorating their classrooms, designing interesting lessons for their students, and making sure that everything will be picture perfect for the first day of school. During this time, these beginning teachers are in the stage of early idealism (Maynard & Furlong, 1995). When the first day of school arrives, however, reality sets in, and these teachers soon become consumed by the day-to-day routine demands of teaching. Within the first weeks of school, their optimism begins to dwindle. By Christmas, many of them are in what Maynard and Furlong (1995) refer to as the stage of survival. Then, as springtime and standardized test scores approach, these once-eager teachers often experience great anxiety as they realize that they will be evaluated based upon their students’ test performance.

Unfortunately, by June, many of these teachers will seriously reconsider their career choice. A few who have grown extremely disillusioned will turn in their letters of resignation. In a study of beginning teachers in rural South Carolina, Gratch (2001) wrote of one teacher who described her first year of teaching as a roller coast ride filled with terror. While her roller coaster ride did let her get off at the end, she opted not to take another ride and left teaching after only one year. Of those who decide to remain in the field, many do so because of their limited career options. Frequently, even in these cases, little or no structured support has been provided to assist these beginning teachers during the critical first year of teaching.
Demand for Beginning Teachers

This lack of structured support produces even greater concern given that in the next 10 years, America’s classrooms will become awash with inexperienced teachers as they begin their teaching careers. The U.S. Department of Education has estimated that the nation will need more than two million new teachers by the year 2010 (Moir & Gless, 2001). In addition to rising enrollment and normal teacher attrition, the three factors driving this tremendous demand for beginning teachers are class size reduction, a demographic bulge of teachers approaching retirement, and an attrition rate among these beginning teachers that ranges from 35 to 50% nationwide during the first five years of their careers (Feiman-Nemser, 2000). With the ever-increasing need for additional teachers in the future, what steps can be taken to encourage these teachers to remain in the classroom? Moreover, what can be done to ensure that the critical first year of teaching is one of structured and enhanced professional growth and development?

Research on the effectiveness of mentoring provided for beginning teachers has documented the fact that these teachers do profit from assistance and that mentors are an important factor in that assistance (Hale, 1992). Freiberg’s (1994) study of beginning teachers and their perceptions of how their mentor teachers affected them during their first year of teaching elicited strong and emotionally-charged comments from many who insisted that they would have quit or lost their sanity without their mentors.

Challenges Faced by Beginning Teachers

The challenges faced by these beginning teachers are often greater than those encountered by experienced teachers. While it would be unreasonable to expect a doctor fresh out of medical school to perform intricate, risky operations, beginning teachers are often expected to achieve the equivalent. Many of these teachers begin their careers after experiencing
as little as one semester of student teaching. Minimal or no support is provided other than what they obtain for themselves. Supervision is often sporadic, and in most cases, beginning teachers are evaluated according to the same criteria as their veteran colleagues (Van Zant, Razska, & Kutzner, 2001). When compared to fields such as medicine and law, which recognize the support needs of new professionals more fully, some observers have dubbed education as “the profession that eats its young” (Halford, 1998). According to Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (1998), “Teaching has been a career in which the greatest challenge and most difficult responsibilities are faced by those with the least experience” (p. 21). With nearly two million teachers projected to enter schools in the U.S. in the next decade, the challenge of supporting them effectively has become a critical issue (Halford, 1998).

Typically, these first-year teachers begin their careers equipped with “book” knowledge of their subject matter, a few teaching strategies that they have practiced, and limited planning skills. With these limited resources, they experience an odyssey of emotions that include exhilaration, frustration, uncertainty, confusion, and isolation (Zepeda & Mayers, 2001). In some not uncommon instances, beginning teachers are assigned heavier workloads than their veteran colleagues (Glickman et al., 1998). However, most new teachers are limited in their repertoire of instructional strategies. Many of these new teachers enter the teaching field directly from university teacher preparation programs possessing mastery of minimal pedagogical knowledge or skills (Freiberg, 2002). Some teachers enter the field with almost no formal teacher training via alternative certification programs, such as the 2001 “Teach for Georgia” plan. College graduates with a 2.5 or higher grade point average participating in this plan can earn certification to teach in only 30 days.
Veenman’s (1984) international review of perceived problems among beginning teachers in a variety of educational systems found several remarkable consistencies. Among the greatest challenges perceived by new teachers were motivating students, classroom management, dealing with the individual differences among students, assessing student work, and maintaining relationships with parents. New teachers also need help setting up a classroom for the first time, teaching with limited resources (DePaul, 2000), understanding new state and district standards and assessments, and seeing how those standards affect teaching strategies. The development of organizational and time management skills and connecting theories and teaching methods learned in college to classroom practice are also critical areas of need for beginning teachers (Brock & Grady, 1998).

A study of 62 first-year teachers in three suburban high schools in Illinois conducted by Zepeda and Ponticell (1997) examined these teachers’ struggles with learning (a) the organizational context of their individual schools; (b) the culture and climate of their schools; and (c) the politics of the human relationships among teachers, administrators, parents, and students in the schools. Data in this study were obtained in two ways. Participants first responded in writing to open-ended questions regarding (a) activities that made them feel part of the school, (b) factors that contributed to their success at the school, (c) stumbling blocks they had encountered, (d) the most troublesome problems and the factors that enabled them to overcome those problems, (e) personnel providing assistance and the strategies used, (f) advice for incoming first-year teachers, and (g) recommendations for administrators for support activities to help first-year teachers. Focus group discussions were then held with groups of beginning teachers.
Results from Zepeda and Ponticell’s (1997) study indicated that the activities that made these beginning teachers feel part of the school were those that occurred before the beginning of the school year. In addition, the ongoing induction efforts and the personnel associated with these efforts had the most prominent effect on making them feel part of their respective schools. When the beginning teachers in this study were asked to identify what factors had contributed to their success at their respective schools, the majority of the teachers in two of the schools indicated a strong support base and a sense of “connectedness” with their colleagues, mentors, department chairs, and administrators. These teachers cited on-going dialogue as critical in assisting them in their acclimation. Teachers at the third school in the study indicated that their own personal drive and determination to succeed had enabled them to survive the year (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997).

When Zepeda and Ponticell (1997) asked the beginning teachers to identify the obstacles they had encountered outside of their classroom, three themes emerged: (a) developing and maintaining relationships with coworkers; (b) difficulty in getting a definite answer from coworkers; and (c) decoding “mixed” messages sent to them by administrators, colleagues, and support staff. Responses from the beginning teachers indicated that conflicts within departments often made it difficult to develop relationships with their colleagues. Sometimes, it seemed, experienced teachers tried to protect the status quo. As Zepeda and Ponticell stated, the novices had to “do battle” as they tried to negotiate their own places in the school environment (p. 13).

When asked to identify the most troublesome problems and the factors that enabled them to overcome those problems, an overwhelming number of participants in the study indicated they had difficulties understanding the complexities of working with a variety of people, including fellow teachers, staff, administrators, department chairs, students, parents, and central office
administrators (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997). Interactions with colleagues also presented problems for the beginning teachers. While networks of support had apparently been established, these networks were complex. In addition, there appeared to be a distinct pecking order within these networks. Numerous respondents in this study also indicated that they had difficulties knowing the “correct” way to interact with fellow teachers. Transitioning from the world of being a student to that of professional teacher forced the novices to recognize the need to learn how to talk and interact with fellow teachers (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997).

All three of the schools in this study had formalized induction programs that included a mentoring component. Beginning teachers in two of the schools consulted not only with their mentor but also with a wide variety of people. In these schools, the principals utilized the strengths and areas of expertise of a variety of people to provide support for the novice teacher. These people, viewed as a team of human resource available for consultation, were part of the induction program and participated in the activities of the program (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997). The beginning teachers in this study found the team approach to solving problems to be quite helpful. Zepeda and Ponticell (1997) learned that the most common processes for solving problems included dialogue and discussion. Also helpful to the teachers in the study were the processes of brainstorming, making lists of potential solutions, being affirmed and encouraged, and being provided with critical information such as which channels to follow and which outside agencies to ask for assistance.

Advice from the majority of this group of beginning teachers to incoming first-year teachers emphasized becoming involved in the school and creating networks with fellow teachers, administrators, and other local staff members who could provide assistance (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997). Other advice included becoming actively involved in school-related activities,
asking many questions, getting to know the people in your department, and collaborating with fellow teachers. Teachers in one of the schools indicated that first-year teachers should not trust the system and should not openly communicate with faculty members for fear of retribution.

When asked what recommendations these teachers would make for support activities for first-year teachers, participants in all three schools focused on the themes of decision making and empowerment, as well as affirmation and increased supervision by department heads and administrators (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997). One of the participants stated,

“I need acknowledgement, guidance, and evaluation of my current progress both positive and negative. As a new teacher, I cannot grow without criticism. Constructive advice on how to improve could possibly enable me to drop what wasn’t working or refine and expand upon what was working.” (p. 19)

Morgan and Ashbaker (2000) stated that in order to provide support effectively for beginning teachers entering the profession, principals, teachers, and others must recognize the importance of several key issues:

1. Providing basic organizational information for the new teacher. This information could be provided in a small handbook or in a binder that could be regularly updated. Included should be a map of the school; where and how to get supplies, policies and procedures with regard to school-wide discipline or sending home a student who is sick, a list of the names and phone numbers of faculty and staff, the daily schedule, and a list of the school’s pullout programs and the persons responsible for each program.

2. Facilitating effective communication among administrators and teachers, the new teacher, and other faculty and staff. Select someone to introduce the new teacher to
faculty and staff, especially those who will be working in the teacher’s classroom or with his or her students. Written notes and memos, along with other faculty members, can remind the beginning teacher of scheduled events or procedures.

3. Providing time for the new teacher and any other adults working in the classroom to become acquainted, to clarify roles and expectations, and to plan together. Essential to teambuilding and requiring as little as 30 minutes per week, this collaboration will improve the effectiveness of this instructional team. By focusing on the same curricular and behavioral goals, they will be more likely to consider themselves as a classroom team.

Unfortunately, first-year teachers generally do not seek help from colleagues except indirectly through social conversations. Surrounded by a structured, systematic induction program, beginning teachers receive assistance in improving instructional performance and student achievement through modeling by experienced colleagues. Huling-Austin (1989) described the first year of teaching as a “sink or swim” experience and also stated that novice teachers must be taken out of this predicament and inducted into the profession in a responsible manner (p. 5). At a time when education reform efforts have captured the nation’s attention, the quality of staff-development programs for teachers—especially beginning teachers—is a rational concern. These staff-development programs for new teachers are most effective when the new teacher is assigned a mentor who will help guide him/her through the maze of that first challenging year (Huling-Austin, 1989).

The challenges faced by beginning teachers are oftentimes overwhelming, yet traditionally there has been little support provided to them. A review of the literature on the growth of beginning teacher mentoring programs provides a context for examining the impact of
these types of programs on the professional growth of new teachers, for whom they are designed; such an examination remains a serious need.

Emergence of Teacher Mentoring Programs

A few years ago, mentoring was not a commonplace feature of educational practice in the United States (Davis, 2001). Individual teachers and administrators sometimes used the term; however, mentoring relationships, when they existed, were usually few in number. In most of these cases, educators recognized mentorship as a special, personal, and usually unproductive relationship established between an experienced teacher and one new to the profession or the individual school (Davis, 2001). Davis wrote that when first-year teachers joined a school’s faculty, the principal and the experienced teachers would welcome the newcomers with a round of introductions at the first faculty meeting of pre-planning. In a few rare instances, there would be a social meeting to greet these new teachers. Then, as Davis pointed out, in isolation, the new teachers would begin their work. Veteran teachers who occupied the classrooms across and down the hall would usually smile and greet the new teachers. A few veterans might tell the newcomers about those unstated but important systems or local conventions of practice and propriety. Even fewer of these veterans would become close friends with the new teachers.

Typically, new teachers found themselves alone and lonely behind their closed doors, unable to obtain that “professional passport” to some significant information and understandings about their particular school, the system as a whole, and most unfortunately, their profession (Davis, 2001, p. 1).

Fortunately, times have changed since policies to establish teacher-mentoring programs began sweeping the nation. Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia have instituted some kind of mentoring program. The mentoring programs offered by these states vary widely
in both the level of financial support for new teachers and the percentage of new teachers served
(Halford, 1998). Some states have pushed their mentoring programs to even higher levels by
having the state department of education specify the services of a mentor as part of licensing
requirements for beginning teachers. In August 2004, school districts in Wisconsin were
required to provide a qualified, trained mentor for at least one year to every teacher who receives
the newly created Initial Educator License (Ganser, 2002).

Data from the U.S. Department of Education confirms this increased national interest in
providing mentoring for new teachers. Their findings have shown that 58% of public
schoolteachers with three or fewer years of experience reported that they had been mentored by
another teacher in a formal relationship. Among those who participated in a mentor activity at
least once a week, 70% indicated that the mentoring activities had considerably improved their
teaching. (Certo, 2002). As a favored strategy in U.S. policy initiatives focused on teacher
induction, the mentoring relationship not only offers new career opportunities for veteran
teachers but also mitigates the stressful transition into the teaching profession for a novice
teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 1996).

While this literature on the emergence of teacher mentoring programs indicates an
increased interest in providing support for new teachers, there also exists an increased need to
maximize the funding, talents, and assistance necessary for these programs to be effective in
meeting the needs of the new teachers.

Characteristics of Effective Mentoring Programs

Of course, no single mentoring program design meets the needs of every district in every
situation. Rural schools, for example, often encounter challenges different from those faced by
urban schools. Districts with a large number of newly hired teachers or those experiencing
difficulty in recruiting may wish to structure their mentor programs differently from districts where wide turnover is less of an issue.

Therefore, as Moir and Gless (2001) pointed out, the goal of induction programs must be not only to retain teachers but also to encourage ambitious levels of classroom instruction that will help all students achieve success. The induction experiences of the new teachers of today have the potential to frame the future of the teaching profession as it will be practiced for the next thirty years (Moir & Gless, 2001). As the classroom teacher is widely considered to be the essential ingredient for student learning and educational reform, so too is the new teacher mentor widely considered to be the most important feature of any high quality induction program. No technology, no curriculum, no standardized structures can substitute for the power of a knowledgeable and skillful veteran in providing the impetus to move a novice teacher to ambitious levels of teaching. Quality mentoring, therefore, requires careful selection, training, and on-going support (Moir & Gless, 2001).

The California Formative Assessment and Support System for Teachers (CFASST) provides trained mentors to work with novice teachers in planning lessons, to assist them in gathering information about best practices, to observe the new teachers’ classes, and to provide feedback (Holloway, 2001). The novice teachers reflect on their practice and apply what they have learned to future lessons. According to feedback from most of these novice teachers, mentoring has played a significant role in their professional growth and development. Holloway (2001) also wrote that the design of this program helps new teachers improve their practice and reflect on the effectiveness of their instruction.

Another district that has taken an aggressive course of action in the area of new teacher mentoring is Baltimore County Public Schools (Ganser, Marchione, & Fleischmann, 1999).
From 1996-1999, more than 2,500 new teachers, approximately one-third of the entire teaching force, were hired by this district due to population growth and teacher attrition. To address both the huge influx of new, inexperienced teachers and low student achievement, the district established the Teacher Mentor Program. Through this program, mentors provide support for teachers who are new to the district; have five or fewer years of experience; and are assigned to schools with low student achievement, a history of high teacher attrition, and a significant percentage of students participating in the free or reduced-price meal programs (Ganser et al., 1999).

Through this program, according to Ganser et al. (1999), new teachers in the Baltimore County Public Schools are provided with intensive on-site assistance from full-time mentors in the areas of effective instruction, assessment, behavior management, and interpersonal communication. This program uses a rigorous application and interview process to select mentors. Those selected are instructional generalists who do not participate in the appraisal process. Mentors accompany the administrators in observing the new teacher during instruction and are trained in giving the new teachers instructional feedback (Ganser et al., 1999).

Mentors also work with the new teachers to break down the Baltimore County Public Schools Essential Curriculum into meaningful daily instruction and to select appropriate assessment to drive that instruction. Ganser et al. (1999) also reported that the mentors frequently model lessons and assist the new teachers in planning and analyzing lessons as well as implementing best practice. Their study also revealed that behavior management is another area in which the mentors in this program provide support for the new teachers. Through workshops and grade-level and faculty meetings, mentors further enhance teachers’ understanding of data analysis, performance-based instruction and assessment, and curriculum. The underlying belief
of Baltimore’s Teacher Mentor Program is that educational reform must occur in schools in one classroom at a time and with one teacher at a time (Ganser et al., 1999).

In each of these programs, as well as in other successful mentoring programs, much emphasis must be placed on four key elements:

1. Quality training and support for mentors must be provided (Weiss & Weiss, 1999). Not all effective teachers make effective mentors. Even effective teachers need help in developing the skills necessary to build a successful mentoring relationship. Therefore, mentor training should include program goals and purposes, district philosophies, methods of observing and providing feedback to mentees (Halford, 1999), adult learning theories, and the integration of subject matter into discussions with novice teachers (Huling-Austin, 1990).

2. Mentors should be financially compensated, given release time, or otherwise rewarded for participating in the program. Halford (1999) stated that this compensation makes the experience less burdensome on the mentor and lets mentees feel better about taking up their mentor’s time.

3. Mentoring programs should have administrative support, adequate funding, and clear leadership (Halford, 1999). Mentors should not be expected to replace administration or to replace the important role principals play in guiding and assisting new teachers.

4. Regular times for mentors and mentees to meet should be built into the school schedule (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). In a study conducted by Zepeda and Ponticell (1997), a beginning teacher described the first year of teaching as “being stuck in a revolving door” (p. 13). The mentor was usually not available, so the new teacher
sought advice from an assistant principal. The assistant principal then told the new teacher to see the department chair.

Without a foundation of focus and structure, such incidents could become commonplace in a beginning teacher mentoring program. Establishing a mentoring program and selecting mentors can be an overwhelming responsibility. Remaining focused on the underlying belief of Baltimore’s Teacher Mentor Program that educational reform must take place in schools in one classroom at a time and with one teacher at a time (Ganser et al., 1999) can provide meaning and direction for those involved in establishing mentoring programs.

**Characteristics of Effective Mentors**

Cosgrove (2002) summarized several key attributes of a mentor. Data for this article were collected from interviews with people who have had the opportunity to learn from a mentor. The characteristics found to be most desired in a mentor were authenticity, gentleness, patience, consistency, positive attitude, teachability, and enthusiasm. Denmark and Pods (2000) stated that in order for a teaching novice to feel success and for the teaching mentor to grow professionally, the latter should be able to perform competently in seven ways:

1. Understand the mentoring role: Teacher mentors must have an understanding of the mentoring role and be committed to acquiring the appropriate knowledge and skills necessary.
2. Initiate the relationship: Mentors need to take the first step in developing a collaborative, colleague-to-colleague learning relationship.
3. Establish a climate of peer support: Mentors can assist first-year teachers in gaining a better understanding of what is expected of them as professionals and as faculty members and offer insight into how to meet those expectations.
4. Model reflective teaching practices: Mentors can assist novices in translating content knowledge and skills into successful classroom practices. The mentor can most effectively accomplish this goal by demonstrating a reflective approach to teaching, self-evaluation, and implementation of new ideas.

5. Apply and share effective classroom management strategies: Mentors can help reduce the high level of dread and anxiety many new teachers associate with classroom management. This goal can be accomplished by encouraging ongoing dialogue, sharing classroom management strategies, and modeling appropriate student-teacher relationships.

6. Encourage and nurture an appreciation of diversity: Mentors can help novices, as well as themselves, develop in this area by sharing in the effort to examine their personal beliefs and biases concerning diversity issues.

7. Embrace mentoring as an investment in professional development: In order for the mentoring relationship to be effective, mentors need to possess an attitude of being lifelong learners and must understand that mentoring is an opportunity to develop leadership skills in themselves and in those they mentor.

In a critical review of literature and research on mentoring, Feiman-Nemser (1996) noted that in effective mentoring programs, the mentor teacher should have classroom competence and have a minimum of three to five years experience. Willingness on the part of the teacher to be a mentor and to put forth the extra time and energy commitment is also considered a key component. Other characteristics that Feiman-Nemser (1996) felt a mentor should possess include confidence, integrity, and the ability to establish empathetic relationships with other teachers.
Based on his decade of experience in helping school districts design mentor-based, entry-year programs, Rowley (1999) identified six basic but essential qualities of a “good mentor.” The first quality is commitment to the role of mentoring. Rowley (1999) described this characteristic simply by saying that committed mentors “show up for, and stay on, the job” (p. 22). They have realized that persistence is as important in mentoring as it is in classroom teaching. Rowley also wrote that a good mentor recognizes the power of accepting the beginning teacher as a developing professional and person. A third quality of a good mentor is the ability to provide instructional support. Through the mentoring relationship, a good mentor is willing to coach beginning teachers to improve their performance regardless of their skill level. Another characteristic that Rowley deemed necessary for a good mentor is the ability to be effective in different interpersonal contexts by recognizing that each mentoring relationship is unique and occurs in a unique context. A good mentor communicates hope and optimism by capitalizing on opportunities to affirm the potential of their mentees both in private conversations and in public settings. The primary role of the mentor teacher should be that of a support provider rather than a formal evaluator.

Matching Mentors with Beginning Teachers

Fideler and Haselkorn (1999) stressed the importance of the mentor and beginning teacher teaching the same subject and sharing similar ideologies about teaching, classroom management, and discipline. Another consideration is that they possess similar personalities and educational philosophies (Gordon & Maxey, 2000). This need for personal and philosophical compatibility suggests that opportunities for informal interaction between mentors and beginning teachers should be provided before mentoring assignments are made. Gordon and Maxey also suggested that the preferences of mentors and beginning teachers should be considered (p. 45).
When pairing new teachers with mentors, the new teachers should not work with their department chair or other immediate supervisor. The more closely the mentoring relationship is tied to evaluation, the less willing many new teachers are to ask questions and take risks (Brock & Grady, 1998). Other considerations to make when pairing new teachers with mentors include the following:

1. Match new teachers with mentors who have similar interests and outlooks on teaching (DePaul, 2000). Pairing a new teacher with a mentor who has dramatically different beliefs is unlikely to produce an effective match.

2. Proximity will enable the mentor teacher and the new teacher to maintain contact on a more frequent and less structured basis (Janas, 1996). However, this informal contact should not replace the scheduled meetings and discussions between the mentor and the mentee.

Other variables that are worthy of consideration are sex, age, and teaching assignment. Typically, the most effective matches between new teachers and mentors are made when both are of the same sex, teach the same grade or subject matter, and have an age difference of 8 to 15 years (Gordon, 1990).

**Mentor Preparation**

Once the mentors have been selected, the next step is to prepare them to be effective. In a study conducted by Smithey and Evertson (as cited in Wang & Odell, 2002), the effects of a mentor preparation workshop on mentors’ skills and techniques were documented. Data from 20 post-baccalaureate preservice teachers and 35 mentor teachers from 2 teacher certification programs were collected using paper-and-pencil tests, observations, and interviews. Each of the mentor teachers was involved in a mentor preparation workshop. The data in Smithey and
Evertson’s study were collected over a one-year period, and they assessed both the short-term and the long-term effects of the workshops. The focus of mentor training in the workshops was to assist the mentors in identifying the novices’ needs and problems, to develop trusting relationships with the novices, and to observe and analyze the novices’ teaching. On paper-and-pencil tests administered to the mentors immediately after the workshops, the researchers found that the mentor preparation substantially increased the mentors’ scores. The workshops also assisted the mentors in using those skills in their mentoring practice.

Wang and Odell (2002) reviewed three basic models of mentor preparation: the knowledge transmission model, the theory-and-practice connection model, and the collaborative inquiry model. They examined each of these models in terms of its focus on standards-based teaching and teacher mentoring that supports standards-based teaching.

Knowledge Transmission Model

The knowledge transmission model for mentor preparation has been the most widely used model in both preservice and induction programs (Wang & Odell, 2002). In this program, the preparation for mentors usually consists of workshops before mentors move into their mentoring role. As Wang and Odell pointed out, the workshops focus on developing mentoring skills and knowledge about mentoring. When a mentor has completed the workshop, the mentor must then apply the knowledge and skills in their mentoring practice. The assumption of the knowledge transmission model is that knowledge of mentoring should come from research rather than from mentors’ own experiences and practice. This model also assumes that the knowledge can be transmitted to mentors in the form of discrete concepts, skills, and techniques. However, the integration of that knowledge into mentoring practices is left to the individual mentors without ongoing support (Wang & Odell, 2002). As Wang and Odell reported, the research on the
knowledge transmission model suggests that it can substantially influence mentors’ knowledge of particular mentoring techniques and skills and shape their mentoring practice at both the preservice and induction levels. However, the “evidence is mixed with regard to whether such training actually influences novices’ techniques and skills” (p. 516).

The knowledge transmission model for mentor preparation is popular because it can disseminate research-based information about mentoring to a large number of mentors in a short period of time. In their evaluation of this model, Wang and Odell (2002) identified several potential problems. Because this model focuses only on mentoring skills and techniques, it does not automatically help mentor teachers develop mentoring practices necessary for supporting new teachers and challenging them to learn to teach in ways that support standards-based teaching. Another potential problem of this model is that the mentoring skills and knowledge about mentoring that are the focus of the workshops may not fit various situations of teaching and mentoring. A third potential problem of this model is the sometimes unavoidable conflict between the assumptions about learning to mentor that underlie this model and the assumptions about learning to teach that underlie what mentors need to impart to their novices. Wang and Odell described this conflict as the inconsistency between the knowledge transmission model of learning to mentor and the knowledge transformation model of learning to teach that mentors need to learn and help novices to learn. Findings by Feiman-Nemser (2001) describe the process of learning to mentor as a process of knowledge transformation in which the mentors need to integrate and articulate their personal practical knowledge through collaboration and experimentation in a professional learning community in their role as a mentor.
Theory and Practice Connection Model

This model of mentoring assumes that mentors should be actively involved in constructing mentoring skills and knowledge of mentoring. These skills and knowledge should then be modified through integration of their practical knowledge of teaching and learning with the support of staff developers and university teacher educators (Wang & Odell, 2002). Novices in this model are constantly reconstructing, modifying, and advancing their knowledge through the application of what they have learned in practice and through constant dialogue with the staff developers and teacher educators (Wang & Odell, 2002). Staff developers and teacher educators in this model do not directly observe mentoring practices. As Wang and Odell pointed out, using the information provided by the mentors, the teacher educators function as sounding boards for the mentors as they learn and practice their mentoring roles. Wang and Odell also pointed out that the theory and practice connection model influences mentors’ commitment to helping the new teachers succeed, increases their sensitivity to the needs and problems of the new teachers, and affects their interactions with the new teachers. This model also promotes reflective skills that allow the mentors to provide support to novices learning to teach.

Collaborative Inquiry Model

The collaborative inquiry model and the theory and practice connection model are similar in that they both stress (a) mentors’ active construction of mentoring knowledge through the integration of their practical knowledge of teaching and experience of learning, (b) applying what they have learned in practice, and (c) the need for constant dialogue with staff developers and teacher educators (Wang & Odell, 2002). The two models differ in that the collaborative inquiry model recommends that staff developers and teacher educators work with mentors and their novices side by side in the context of teaching and mentored learning to teach. In the
collaborative inquiry model, the assumption is that a relationship exists between mentor preparation, mentoring, and learning to teach in the school context. This model is a multi-layered, inquiry-based process of professional development that has the potential to benefit all parties involved in the mentoring process (Wang & Odell, 2002).

Implications for School Administrators

A major goal of administrators and veteran teachers should be to help teachers entering the profession remain in the profession. That goal can best be achieved through administrators, experienced teachers, and beginning teachers all working together (Johnson, 2001). Brock and Grady (2001) wrote that a supportive administration is an essential element of a successful teacher-mentor program. All levels of the administrative team, from the school board to the principals, need to be involved and supportive. While school boards and superintendents are not likely to be involved in the day-to-day operations of a mentoring program, they must allocate adequate resources and publicly promote the importance of the mentorship program (Heller & Sindelar, 1991).

Frequently, principals are the first to recognize the need for a support system for beginning teachers. They realize that no matter how effective the new teacher’s teacher education and student teaching have been, the first year of teaching can leave a new teacher feeling isolated and unequipped to handle the many unexpected issues that arise both inside and outside the classroom (Monsour, 2000). In reflecting back on their own first years of teaching, many administrators recall them as being some of the most stressful times of their professional lives. By grounding themselves in a place of empathy and support for new teachers, building administrators can help new teachers both survive and thrive through these challenging and often quite lonely times (Davis & Brock, 1998).
Typically, the principal is the key figure in planning and implementing a mentorship program (Brock & Grady, 2001). He or she must participate in every aspect of designing the mentorship and induction programs. Should the mentorship or induction program be guided by a committee that oversees it, the principal should help select the members as well as define the role and responsibilities of the committee (Brock & Grady, 2001).

School administrators can provide support for the mentoring program by making a clear distinction between a mentor’s function to provide the new teacher with descriptive, non-judgmental feedback on the aspects of the new teacher’s performance and the administration’s responsibility to draw conclusions about the worth of that teacher’s performance (Zuckerman, 2001). If these two conceptions of evaluation remain separate, trust between the mentor and the new teacher can develop more easily. When a mentoring program has been established, new relationships between mentors, the principal, and beginning teachers are created. Setting clearly defined guidelines should map out the responsibilities of each and should address the nature of communication between them. Brock and Grady (2001) shared the experiences of a beginning teacher who wrote about her concerns:

“I liked and trusted my mentor until today when she reported to me that the principal had told her that she should help me organize my opening exercises. The principal often stops in my room and has never mentioned any problem to me. I don’t know if he is really upset about my teaching and is using my mentor as his messenger, or if my mentor is concerned about my teaching and is discussing it with the principal. Anyway, I’m not sure that I can trust either of them at this point.” (p. 83)

Next, school administrators can promote these collaborative relationships (a) by giving beginning teachers a reasonable teaching assignment instead of assigning them the most
undesirable teaching situations (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997) and (b) by matching them with an accessible mentor who shares a similar teaching assignment and schedule. This consideration would allow the mentor and the beginning teacher opportunities and common ground for frequent informal kinds of communication (Zuckerman, 2001). Administrators also need to recruit as mentors veteran teachers who have the capacity to establish a collaborative relationship. These veteran teachers need to possess the ability to communicate effectively (Zuckerman, 2001), the personal confidence to accept the risks that will be a part of this relationship (Halford, 1998), and the belief that pedagogical knowledge and teaching skills can be shared.

As Feiman-Nemser (2003) pointed out, the art of mentoring is an unnatural activity for teachers in many ways. While good classroom teachers can be very effective in pulling off a polished performance, monitoring the understanding of their students, and engaging students in important ideas, they may not know how to make their thinking visible, explain the principles that drive their practice, or break down complex teaching strategies into components that would be understandable to a beginning teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Therefore, the administrator must provide quality training and support for mentors. The administrator must keep in mind that not all effective teachers make effective mentors. Even effective teachers need help in developing the skills necessary to build a successful mentoring relationship. Mentor training should include program goals and purposes, district philosophies, methods of observing and providing feedback to mentees (Halford, 1998), adult learning theories, and the integration of subject matter into discussions with novice teachers (Huling-Austin, 1990).

Sweeny (2001) cautioned administrators to be aware of several key lessons when supporting mentors. Through his experience, he has learned that “some support activities always
work well, some work well only when done in specific ways, and some support activities are not really supportive at all” (p. 53). The challenge lies in the fact that mentor support is generally provided by non-mentors and is typically based on the administrator’s perception of what mentors seem to need. While some activities are framed as providing mentor support, they actually address program needs and not mentor needs, thus providing little support for mentors (Sweeny, 2001).

Other factors, according to Sweeny (2001), that should be considered by administrators when providing support for mentors include the following:

1. Substantial initial mentor training, consisting of two or three days, that focused primarily on effective mentoring strategies would require only one additional full training session to focus on coaching models and skills. Peer support groups for mentors could probably address other mentor leaning needs.

2. If the initial and ongoing mentor training were intensive, periodic mentor support groups designed for mentors could be held approximately once a quarter. Sweeny (2001) stated that more frequent meetings are “really not all that helpful and can even interfere with mentoring time to some extent” (p. 53).

3. The practices of periodic mentor support group meetings could prove to be helpful not only for developing the mentors but also for serving valued organizational needs. Through these meetings, the mentors would be held accountable for their commitments to each other and to the expectations of the program.

4. Training and support activities for both the new teacher and the mentor should make available multiple opportunities for teachers to develop and nurture supportive relationships with their peers.
In Brock and Grady’s (1998) study involving 56 elementary and high school principals from public and non-public schools in Nebraska, these principals reported that providing mentors and having personal interactions with the beginning teachers were the most useful induction strategies they had used. However, these principals also reported much variance in the selection, assignment, and training of the mentors. The criteria used by many of these principals for the selection of mentors included being on the same grade level and close in age, recognition as master teachers, and being a good listener, capable, knowledgeable, and friendly. A few principals had teachers volunteer to be mentors, randomly selected teachers to be mentors, or simply assigned teachers to be mentors (Brock & Grady, 1998). Twenty-nine percent of the principals indicated that they were part of an area or system-wide mentorship program that selected, assigned, and provided training for mentors. Surprisingly, 71% of the principals reported that they had no formal program and no training for mentors (Brock & Grady, 1998).

Administrators need to build into the school schedule regular times for mentors and mentees to meet (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). The issues of proximity and time are essential to creating a close working relationship between the mentor and the new teacher (Brock & Grady, 2001). Principals can encourage this relationship by arranging for the mentor and the new teacher to have classrooms in close proximity or to have common lunch and planning periods. Scheduling release time for mentors and beginning teachers to work together would be the ideal solution (Brock & Grady, 2001). At Pottstown Senior High School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, the principal meets monthly with new teachers to provide them with the opportunity to talk, vent, and seek guidance (Allen, 2000). The impact of a visible and attentive principal can promote successful behaviors and help to correct minor problems before they have the chance to become destructive to the mentoring program (Heller & Sindelar, 1991).
While the future for teacher mentoring programs seems bright, effective administrators still need to be aware that in spite of their commitment to fostering new teachers through teacher mentoring programs, they can anticipate the following obstacles (Monsour, 2000):

1. Mentor recruitment can be difficult. Unfortunately, the most logical mentor candidates, those teachers who are experienced and highly respected, are likely to be overextended with other responsibilities both inside and outside the classroom.

2. Time and money are major factors to be considered in establishing and supporting mentor relationships. Taking into consideration the huge demands on classroom teachers, it will be necessary for the administrator to arrange for release time or another form of compensation for both the mentors and the new teachers.

3. Unexpected changes will take place in the mentoring schedule. The resignation or transfer of a mentor or the late hiring of a new teacher will require flexibility and adaptability from the administration.

4. The development of a philosophy that supports mentoring can prove to be challenging. In order for the relationship to succeed, both the mentor and the new teacher must be familiar with and committed to the concept of mentoring.

5. Regardless of how much effort is made to match mentors with new teachers, personality conflicts will sometimes arise.

6. Role confusion can totally undermine the purpose of the mentoring program, which is more likely to happen when mentors confuse their role with that of an evaluator or when schools place the mentors in dual roles of being a mentor as well as an evaluator.
Administrators need to provide mentors with the training necessary for them to build their own useful models of a collaborative professional relationship and the ongoing support to deal with the stresses of their continually changing but ill-defined role as a mentor (Zuckerman, 2001). Administrators need to understand that providing support to a mentoring program that allows experienced teachers to work with novice teachers will ultimately benefit the students of both the novice and the mentor. As a result, the overall organization will be stronger through the increased capacity of veteran teachers serving as mentors (Huling & Resta, 2001).

Related Studies on Mentoring Programs in Rural Schools

Despite the increased focus on mentoring programs for beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Huling-Austin, 1989; Morgan & Ashbaker, 2000; Sweeny, 2001; Zepeda & Ponticell, 1997), only one doctoral study exists that focuses on mentoring programs in rural schools. In this study, Simon (1991) looked at the effectiveness of a mentoring program for beginning vocational agriculture teachers in rural schools. He utilized quantitative and qualitative research techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of a mentor program developed to provide experienced teachers as mentors to help beginning teachers transition into the first year of teaching.

The mentors in this study provided personal and psychological support (Simon, 1991). Areas in which they provided help for the beginning teacher included dealing with problem students, learning professional responsibilities, and communicating with administrators. Mentor support was also provided to help the beginning teachers manage the Future Farmers of America (FFA) organization, select teaching materials, and plan curriculum, and learn school policies and the standard operating procedures and politics of the school.
Simon found that the mentored teachers experienced significantly fewer problems in classroom management and instruction, developing rules and procedures, and monitoring and managing student discipline than did the nonmentored teachers in the study. At the end of their first year of teaching, the mentored teachers in the study had significantly better attitudes and personal perceptions toward teaching. Following their first year of teaching, four of the nonmentored teachers either quit teaching or accepted positions teaching in other schools. While two of the mentored teachers accepted other teaching positions, none quit teaching altogether. Both the mentored and nonmentored teachers in this study, however, expressed low levels of satisfaction toward teaching (Simon, 1991).

Harmon, Howley, and Sanders (1996) also conducted a review of related literature resumes in the ERIC database, which revealed that despite the increased interest in rural education research, no one had yet surveyed doctoral research in rural education. The field of rural education lacked any report of the scope of relevant doctoral inquiry.

A more recent study conducted in Canada by Goddard and Habermann (2001) focused on the establishment of a formal mentoring program within a rural school division in Alberta. In their study, five beginning teachers were paired with five veteran teachers in a rural school district in Alberta, Canada. The special circumstances involved in working in a wholly rural environment, as argued by Goddard and Habermann, created particular stresses and influences on the professional practices of beginning teachers. They also stated the importance of understanding that educators in rural schools experienced a more intensively scrutinized professional life than their urban counterparts. As Goddard and Haberman wrote, in a small rural community every action was “noted, discussed, and analyzed” (p. 92). Rural teachers seldom experienced the urban anonymity of living in an area distant from the school in which they
taught, nor did they have access to a wider social group of professional colleagues with whom concerns might be shared. Often, their peer group was limited to those who were experiencing similar problems in the same setting with the same people. This type of “professional inbreeding” (p. 93) tended to exacerbate and intensify the issue at hand and sometimes proved more of a hindrance than a help to creative problem solving (Goddard & Habermann, 2001).

Data in Goddard and Habermann’s study were collected between September and December 2000. Participants were asked to complete a survey questionnaire, and selected participants were interviewed. A follow-up survey questionnaire was administered at the end of the school year. In addition, the participants were asked to provide a final reflection consisting of short-written responses to ten questions.

Seven themes emerged from Goddard and Habermann’s study (2001). First, the respondents discussed their personal history and its impact on their professional lives. Sub-themes that emerged described their love of children and of the subjects they taught. The respondents recounted previous positive school experiences from their own childhoods. A second theme in the study concerned issues of support—moral, parental, administrative, and curricular. The mentors were able to provide this support in a nonjudgmental way. The beginning teachers in this study appeared to welcome this opportunity to share their frustrations and concerns with their mentors (Goddard & Habermann, 2001).

The opportunity to clarify roles is the third theme that emerged (Goddard & Habermann, 2001). The mentors in the study provided the beginning teachers with information on the roles of teachers, administrators, and other constituent groups within the school. They also helped to clarify their role of mentor as someone who was a supportive, nonjudgmental associate. The fourth theme elaborated upon this supportive, nonjudgmental associate relationship for its
immediacy. The beginning teachers welcomed the immediacy of the relationship that was present when mentors were from the same school or from the same grade level (Goddard & Habermann, 2001).

The fifth theme indicates that the beginning teachers welcomed the opportunity to have someone to talk to and someone with whom to share their thoughts concerning professional practice (Goddard & Habermann, 2001). The chance meeting of the mentor and the beginning teacher in the hallway or staff area added to the strength of their relationship.

Concerns about the organizational specifics of their school, about classroom management and student behavior, and about the appropriate level of extra curricular “volunteering” by a new teacher constituted the sixth theme (Goddard & Habermann, 2001, p. 96). These concerns were reminiscent of difficulties faced by many beginning teachers, as reported by Veenman (1984). Emerging as the seventh and final theme were the mentor and beginning teacher responses to the program itself (Goddard & Habermann, 2001). The respondents in the program considered it successful and were adamant that it be continued. They recommended that funding resources be made available so that the benefits of the mentoring program could be offered in the future.

Summary

This review of literature clearly indicates that the need to provide support for beginning teachers is critical. With more than two million new teachers needed in classrooms across the United States by the year 2010 and with the new teacher attrition rate hovering between 35 and 50% nationwide, careful attention and planning must be given to taking the steps necessary to keep these new teachers in their classrooms (Feiman-Nemser, 2000). Providing mentoring programs for these beginning teachers is only one facet of a successful new teacher induction program. Yet it is by far the most publicized and popular. Across the United States, mentoring
programs are being viewed as a helpful way to assist new teachers in solving the problems they face and reduce their high attrition rate (Certo & Fox, 2001).

The present study expands the knowledge base on mentoring programs for beginning teachers. Because so little research is available on mentoring programs for beginning teachers in rural settings, this study expands the limited body of literature on this form of beginning teacher support. The study provides useful data regarding the impact of the mentoring program on the beginning teachers, thus providing practical benefit as well as theoretical significance.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter on the methodology of the study includes six sections. The first section presents an overview of symbolic interactionism, the theoretical perspective on which the study was designed and by which interpretations of findings were guided. The second section describes the processes of site and sample selection. The third section discusses the data collection and analysis procedures. Presented in the fourth section is an in-depth view of grounded theory methodology and of constant comparative analysis. The fifth section discusses techniques for data management. The sixth section presents an overview of the credibility criteria used for the study, and the final section of the chapter is a subjectivity statement.

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical framework for this study on mentoring programs for new teachers in rural elementary schools. Blumer (1969) defined symbolic interactionism as “activity in which humans interpret each other’s gestures and act on the basis of meaning yielded by interpretation” (pp. 65-66). The focus of symbolic interactionism is the nature of social interaction. Charon (1995) wrote that symbolic interactionists believe that individuals act based on their interactions with others, as well as their interactions within themselves. The following section discusses the background, framework, and methodologies of symbolic interactionism.
Symbolic interactionism originated as a theory in the works of John Dewey, Charles Horton Cooley, Robert Park, W. I. Thomas, and George Herbert Mead. The focus of symbolic interactionism is the study of the functional relationship between how one sees oneself (self-definition), how one sees others (interpersonal perceptions), and how one thinks others see oneself (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). While there continues to be differing opinions among its followers as to the meaning and importance of various concepts related to symbolic interactionism, Mead’s work *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934) presents the most comprehensive and least controversial presentation of the perspective (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Mead was a university professor whose teaching career spanned almost forty years. Much of this time was spent at the University of Chicago, where, following his death in 1931, grateful students began to compile a collection of Mead’s papers and lecture notes. Primarily through the efforts of one student in particular, Herbert Blumer, many of Mead’s ideas were translated into sociological theory (Crotty, 1998).

Mead’s theory was derived from his belief that human beings are active in interpreting all things in their environment. Through defining the world around them, individuals define reality (Crotty, 1998, p. 74). Mead (1934) also believed that human beings constantly test knowledge and judge knowledge by its usefulness; facts, perceptions, definitions, and ideas are used and remembered based on their applicability. This belief also encompasses the idea that objects are defined according to their use, and because some objects have a multitude of uses, they can be defined in many ways. Through one’s actions, Mead believed, one is best understood. Furthermore, since actions are not always physical or observable, one should also study humans through what they think and what they do.
Framework of Symbolic Interactionism

The sociological theory of symbolic interactionism consists of three basic assumptions: (a) humans act toward objects on the basis of the meaning that these things have for them; (b) the meaning of such objects is derived from, and arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others; and (c) these meanings are handled or modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters (Crotty, 1998, p. 72).

Blumer’s (1969) reasoning for the first assumption was based on his belief that individuals are not passive, merely responding to environmental stimuli. Instead, they are active and purposeful, and they act with plans and purposes because of the meanings that objects hold for them.

The second assumption of symbolic interactionism states that individuals develop meanings for objects through their interactions. Because the objects do not have intrinsic meaning, they are given meaning based on the uses that the individual has for those objects (Blumer, 1969). Charon (1995) stated that objects are called “social objects” by symbolic interactionists because individuals come to know about these objects through social interaction. A social object can be defined as any object in a given situation that is useful to individuals in that situation. Social objects can be a number of things, including physical objects, animals, human-made objects, other people, ourselves, symbols, ideas, perspectives, and emotions (Charon, 1995).

The third assumption, according to Blumer (1969), states that individuals use an interpretive process to make sense of the meanings of social objects. How individuals interpret meanings is influenced by their social interaction with others; they engage in a two-step interpretive process. In the first step, the individual communicates with himself to identify which objects have meaning. The second step consists of the individual selecting, checking,
suspending, regrouping, and transforming these meanings based on the current situation in which he is placed. As individuals move from one situation to another, they constantly interpret meanings. As a result, meanings are not static but change in light of new situations (Blumer, 1969).

The theorists who embrace these assumptions view people as being constantly in a process of interpretation and definition as they move from one situation to another. While some situations are familiar, such as one’s home, place of work, or school, other situations are less familiar (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In all situations, there is the actor, other people and their actions, and physical objects. Only through people’s interpretations and definitions of a situation does it gain meaning; furthermore, their actions stem from this meaning. Therefore, according to Bogdan and Taylor (1975), the process of interpretation acts as the intermediary between any predisposition to act and the action itself.

Methodologies of Symbolic Interactionism

The methodologies most often used by symbolic interactionists are ethnography and grounded theory. Ethnography, a methodology that is derived from anthropology and anthropological theory, has been adopted by symbolic interactionism and adapted for its own purposes (Crotty, 1998, p. 4). Grounded theory can be viewed as a specific form of ethnographic inquiry (Merriam, 2002). Through a series of carefully planned steps, grounded theory develops theoretical ideas. Throughout this process, it seeks to ensure that the emerging theory arises from the data and not from some other source. Grounded theory is a process of inductive theory building based totally on observation of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

When collecting data using the grounded theory method, the researcher immerses himself in the environment. Initial observations allow the researcher to describe the social structure,
observe patterns of behavior, and begin to understand the environment (Merriam, 2002). In addition to more formal observations, interviews, usually informal in nature, are conducted. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) described a good interview as one that produces “rich data” (p. 96) and helps reveal the perspective of the interviewee.

Other sources of data used by grounded researchers include information obtained from records, policy documents, newspaper and television coverage, and fictional descriptions that help to expand and further clarify the database. Glaser and Strauss (1999) referred to these various forms of data as “slices of data” that insure density and provide different perspectives for understanding social phenomena (p. 66).

Site and Sample Selection

In this section, the rationale for site and sample selection is discussed. The sites of the study were selected based on the opportunity they provided for purposeful sampling. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) described purposeful sampling as a sampling process that includes participants because “they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (p. 65). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the purpose of sampling is to allow the researcher to maximize information collection from information-rich data sources about the study topic. Therefore, the sites in rural north Georgia selected for this study of beginning teachers’ perspectives on their experiences in the mentoring program had available data sources that were information-rich.

Site Selection

Lincoln’s and Guba’s (1985) explication of the purpose of sampling guided selection of the research site. The study was conducted in rural elementary schools, and the following specific criteria were used to identify the appropriate schools:

1. The schools were located in rural areas of northeast Georgia.
2. The schools provided mentoring programs for their beginning teachers.

3. Training for mentors in the mentoring programs was provided through the Northeast Georgia Regional Educational Services Agency.

4. The schools were located within 60 miles of the researcher’s home, making them feasible sites in terms of proximity.

Sample Selection

The ten research participants in the proposed study were chosen in accordance with grounded theory methodology, using theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). In this sampling method, participants were selected based on their ability to provide theoretical insight into the topic under study, and the total sample was not specified ahead of data collection.

Glaser and Strauss (1999) described theoretical sampling as “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (p. 45). Therefore, after decisions are made regarding the initial collection of data, it is not appropriate to participate in advance planning of data collection. Instead, “emerging theory points to the next steps—the sociologist does not know them until he is guided by emerging gaps in his theory and by research questions suggested by previous answers” (p. 47). As a result, theoretical sampling, based on criteria of “theoretical purpose and relevance,” is essential in grounded theory research (p. 48).

The participants in this study were first-year, elementary teachers in Pickens, Gilmer, and Fannin counties in rural north Georgia. Each of the participants had been assigned a mentor in their respective school’s beginning teacher mentoring program. Participants in the study were provided with information about the study, including information about authorization, purpose,
duration, participant responsibilities, and participant anonymity issues. The participants were
given the opportunity to participate or to decline to participate. Those who agreed to participate
were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and their role in it. All participants
provided informed written consent.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this section, the rationale for data collection and analysis procedures is given, and
specific data collection and analysis procedures are discussed. Because of the type of data
required for this study, specifically the perspectives of beginning teachers in rural elementary
schools, interviews were the primary source of data. A researcher journal, consisting of
researcher reflections, field notes, and memos, was used as a secondary source of data. Constant
comparative analysis was selected as the procedure for data analysis because of its link to
grounded theory method and because of its role in the emergence of theory.

Interviews

Interviews provided the primary data for this study. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) defined
*interview* as a conversation with a purpose. Kvale (1996) argued that interviews are “particularly
suited for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their
experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their
lived world” (p. 105). Kvale’s argument illuminates the suitability of interviews to the subject
matter and purpose of this study.

The initial interviews with the ten participants, conducted in April and May 2004, for the
study were relatively unstructured, allowing the beginning teachers to share their perspectives on
their individual experiences in the mentoring program. As data were analyzed and categories
emerged, the follow-up interviews, conducted in August 2004, were more structured to provide
additional detail about emerging theoretical ideas. The practice of progressive interview questions is consistent with grounded theory methodology and constant comparative analysis. All interviews in the proposed study were audiotaped, with participant permission, and the researcher generated typed transcripts as soon as possible after the interviews. Analysis of interviews kept pace with data collection, which allowed analytic interpretations and discoveries to guide the collection of additional data (Glaser, 1994). Participants were asked the following questions: (a) What were your experiences in the mentoring program? and (b) What did these experiences mean to you?

**Researcher Journal**

The researcher maintained a journal to record memos, field notes, and reflections. Charmaz (1994) wrote that memos are of particular importance during the research process, as they “represent the development of codes from which they are derived” (p. 106). By making memos systematically while coding, the researcher filled out and built the categories (Charmaz, 1994). Field notes were made by the researcher during or immediately after the field experience to capture and “represent the interactions and activities of the researcher and the people studied” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 224).

**Methodology of Grounded Theory**

Taylor and Bogdan (1998) stated that methodology refers to “the way in which we approach problems and seek answers” (p. 3). As noted, the methodology for this study of beginning teachers’ perspectives on mentoring programs was grounded theory. *Grounded theory*, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), is “a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during
actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (p. 273).

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) defined theories as “statements about how things are connected. Their purpose is to explain why things happen as they do” (p. 118). The use of grounded theory methodology leads to the purposeful discovery of metathemes derived directly from the data. Grounded theory methodology emphasizes the emergence and development of that theory, rather than relying on deductive reasoning based on prior theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 1994). Since grounded theory is derived from “an initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research, it results in theory that will ‘fit and work’” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 3). Glaser and Strauss went on to state, “Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research” (p. 6).

Charmaz (1994) suggested that emergence of theory grounded in data is facilitated by the use of several different strategies. First, as the researcher collects data, the researcher analyzes data, allowing the researcher to shape future data collection based on his or her interpretations of and discoveries in previous data. Second, unlike research that is based on fitting data into logically deduced theoretical frameworks, grounded theory processes and products are shaped from the data. Third, verification is not treated as a necessary separate step in grounded theory. Instead, systematic checking of data and refining of categories is an on-going part of the methodology. Fourth, grounded theory focuses on process rather than on seeking to make a final interpretation.

A key component of grounded theory methodology is constant comparative analysis, “a strategic method for generating theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 21) and a form of data
analysis based on constant comparison of new data to previously received and analyzed data. In constant comparative analysis, data are analyzed as they are received, thus allowing categories to emerge. As new data are collected, they are compared to existing categories in an on-going process that helps to inform future data collection, thus insuring further thorough examination of emerging theoretical ideas. Strauss and Corbin (1998) described this process of constant comparison of data as “continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (p. 273), and through this process, a theory, substantive or formal, emerges.

Coding, the initial phase of analysis, is simply the process of “categorizing and sorting data. Codes then serve as shorthand devices to label, separate, compile, and organize data” (Charmaz, 1994, p. 97). In constant comparative analysis, there are two phases of the coding: open coding and selective coding. Glaser (1992) defined open coding as “the initial stage of constant comparative analysis, before delimiting the coding to a core category and its properties – or selective coding” (p. 38). During the open coding phase, the researcher is open to all codes, having no preconceived ones, and attempts to discover leads, issues, and ideas in the data. This discovery is accomplished by engaging in a line-by-line review and coding of the data. The second phase, focused coding, is the selective and conceptual phase of the coding process. According to Glaser (1992), to code selectively means to “cease open coding and to delimit coding to only those variables that relate to the core variable, in sufficiently significant ways to be used in a parsimonious theory” (p. 75). The phase of selective coding begins after the researcher has found a core category, or a central category, that includes all other categories (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

During the coding phase, the researcher develops in vivo categories, categories taken from the natural language of participants, or categories from the researcher’s own analytic
interest. According to Charmaz (1994), the purpose of focused coding is “to build and clarify a category by examining all the data it covers and variations from it” (p. 103). Charmaz described the value of focused coding: “By showing relationships between categories in ways that explain the issues and events studied, focused coding helps to provide the groundwork for developing explanations and predictions” (p. 104). Two kinds of “middle-range” theory, substantive and formal, can be generated through constant comparative analysis. Substantive theory refers to theory developed for an empirical area of sociological inquiry. Formal theory refers to theory developed for a conceptual area of sociological inquiry (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 32).

**Relationship of Symbolic Interactionism to this Study**

The symbolic interactionist framework guided this study. Because the purpose of this study was to describe beginning teachers’ perspectives on mentoring programs in rural, elementary schools and because this research explored the meaning the new teacher mentoring program had for those teachers, symbolic interactionism was an appropriate theoretical framework.

**Four Stages of Constant Comparative Analysis**

The four stages of constant comparative analysis, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1999), are (a) comparing incidents, (b) integrating categories and their properties, (c) delimiting the theory, and (d) writing the theory. As the researcher systematically worked through the stages, theory grounded in data emerged. This section describes the four stages in more detail.

**Stage One: Comparing Incidents**

The first step in constant comparative analysis was to compare incidents applicable to each category. Incidents are small units of data that tell what is happening in the research setting (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). This step consisted of the researcher coding each incident into as many
different categories as possible and simultaneously comparing incidents “with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 106). The generation of theoretical properties of a category is the result of such constant comparison of incidents. As similar data were grouped together, categories emerged and were labeled. There were two types of categories, categories constructed by the researcher and in vivo categories, which are based on the direct language of the participants.

During the course of coding, the researcher wrote memos to record her ideas and notes. Charmaz (1994) described memos as “written elaborations of ideas about the data and the coded categories” (p. 106). Through memos, the researcher explored ideas related to the data, documented her thoughts about the data and categories, planned future data collection, and expanded categories. Memo writing, according to Charmaz, “connects the barebones analytic framework that coding provides with the polished ideas developed in the finished draft” (p. 106).

Through constant comparison of incidents in the data, the researcher developed a working hypothesis related to the emerging categories. A working hypothesis resulted when the researcher could make preliminary connections between incidents based on relationships. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that each incident will eventually be connected to a category by a working hypothesis.

Stage Two: Integrating Categories and Their Properties

The second stage of constant comparative analysis was to integrate categories and their properties. In this stage, the researcher identified properties of the categories that resulted in the first stage of incident comparison and discovered the relationships between those properties and other categories. Glaser and Strauss (1999) described this integration: “Constant comparison causes the accumulated knowledge pertaining to a property of the category to readily start to
become integrated; this is, related in many different ways, resulting in a unified whole” (p. 109).
The theory develops as “different categories and their properties tend to become integrated through constant comparisons that force the analyst to make some related theoretical sense of each comparison” (Glaser, 1994, p. 189).

Stage Three: Delimiting the Theory

The third stage of constant comparative analysis was delimiting the theory. During this stage, the metathemes solidified, and modifications were made to streamline the theory and categories. In an effort to discover uniformities, the researcher reviewed the original categories and their properties, combined similar or overlapping categories, and removed nonrelevant properties of categories in a process known as reduction. Categories that no longer fit within the parameters of the emerging theory were withdrawn. Also in this stage, the researcher became more selective or focused in coding and analyzing incidents and gave more time to the constant comparison of incidents within the smaller sets of categories (Glaser, 1994).

Stage Four: Writing the Theory

In order to write theory, in this stage, the researcher collates all memos on each category, further analyzing the memos and creating an analytic framework. When the researcher becomes convinced that the analytic framework forms a systematic substantive theory, that the theory is a reasonably accurate statement of the items studied, and that it is in a form that others going into the same field could use, the results can be published with confidence (Glaser, 1994, p. 192)

Four Components of Constant Comparative Analysis

Four necessary components of constant comparative analysis, according to Glaser and Strauss (1999), are theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and theoretical pacing. Working together, these components result in integrated and dense theory.
Glaser (1992) defined *theoretical sensitivity* as “an ability to generate concepts from data and to relate them according to the normal models of theory in general, and theory development in sociology, in particular” (p. 27). Theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher’s intuitive ability to understand and analyze data, to conceptualize substantive, grounded categories, and to render them into theory. Continually developing in the researcher, theoretical sensitivity involves the researcher’s personal and temperamental inclinations, as well as his or her ability to have and to synthesize theoretical insights.

*Theoretical sampling*, according to Glaser and Strauss (1999), is the “process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (p. 45). The process of theoretical sampling continually guides data collection on the basis of emerging theory. When new categories failed to emerge from the data and when new data failed to provide new insight to an existing category, theoretical sampling of a category ended. As Glaser (1978) wrote, “Theoretical saturation of a category occurs when in coding and analyzing both no new properties emerge and the same properties continually emerge as one goes through the full extent of the data” (p. 53). *Theoretical pacing* refers to the pace at which the research is conducted. This pace was determined by the researcher’s balancing and scheduling of the various activities that were required by theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis. Theoretical pacing involved the conscious effort of the researcher to code and analyze the data collection at a constant pace.

**Data Management**

In-depth interviews with ten beginning teachers in rural elementary schools were the primary source of data for this study and were tape-recorded with participant permission.
Despite the researcher’s use of probes and other interviewing techniques, the participants’ responses were impacted by the elements of professional experience and career exposure. These recordings were transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews. The tape and transcriptions were labeled with the participant’s pseudonym and the date of the interview. The interview transcriptions were then read by the researcher line-by-line. Incidents were highlighted and assigned preliminary labels, which were recorded in the margin of the transcribed page on which they appeared. Each of the incidents was entered into a computer file, which was coded according to its source by its page and/or line number. The comparison of new incidents to previous incidents occurred, and similar incidents were grouped together into categories. A label was assigned to each category. Incidents capable of fitting into multiple categories were recorded more than once.

Researcher notes, including memos, were also used as a data source. As categories emerged, they were analyzed, and the researcher’s thoughts were documented in the form of memos. These memos, kept in the researcher’s journal, were used to document connections and relationships between data and categories, to elaborate on hypotheses, and to track the evolving theory. In the final stage, the researcher wrote the meta-themes, using specific incidents in the raw data to illustrate them.

Credibility

Generally speaking, *credibility* refers to trustworthiness and believability. When specifically applied to research, it refers to the degree to which the research process is trustworthy and to which the theory generated from it can be trusted and believed. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued, the test of credibility lies in whether the findings represent the realities of the participants. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that “the real merit of a substantive theory
lies in its ability to speak specifically for the populations from which it was derived and to apply back to them” (p. 267).

Credibility Criteria

Glaser and Strauss (1999) stated four specific criteria for judging grounded theory: fit, work, relevance, and modifiability. They explained the meaning of fit in grounded theory in the following way: “By ‘fit’ we mean that the categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study” (p. 3). Categories must derive directly from the data to insure their fit with the data. Glaser and Strauss further argued that “the theory should fit the data” (p. 261). Therefore, the theory must flow directly from the data instead of the data being forced to fit into the theory. Work, as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1999), means that the categories “must be meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behavior under study” (p. 3). They suggested that grounded theory, through its creation of an “initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research” (p. 3), insures that the theory that has been generated will work. Relevance can be defined as the degree to which the categories are pertinent to and applicable in the specific research setting under study. As argued by Glaser (1978), “grounded theory arrives at relevance, because it allows core problems and processes to emerge” (p. 5). As applied to grounded theory, modifiability refers to the fact that, as Glaser (1978) stated, “generation is an ever modifying process and nothing is sacred if the analyst is dedicated to giving priority attention to the data” (p. 5). A criterion of malleability, modifiability requires that theory be recast as analyses of new data dictate.

Credibility Techniques

To enhance the credibility, or trustworthiness, of this study and its findings, the researcher employed several techniques, all of which are discussed in the following subsections.
Prolonged Engagement

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified prolonged engagement as the amount of time the researcher is engaged in the research setting sufficient to provide scope and depth to the study. In this study, the researcher spent time in the setting over a period of several months (March 2004 through September 2004) and engaged in various methods of data collection, thus adding scope and depth to the study.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing refers to maintaining an external check on the research process by communicating with peers to assist the researcher in clearing his or her mind of “emotions and feelings that may be clouding good judgment or preventing emergence of sensible next steps” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Through peer debriefing, the researcher could better follow methodological procedures, avoid bias contamination, and work through interpretations. This researcher relied on a research advisor for peer debriefing.

Thick Description

As a credibility technique, thick description helps others understand the findings in the study and assess of the transferability of the findings to other situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Typically, thick description refers to the scope and depth of the description of site and sample selection, of research settings and participants, and of data collection and analysis procedures. The researcher provided thick description of all of these aspects of the research process in this study.

Subjectivity Statement

There were three main sources of subjectivity that formed the basis of my interest in the topic of new teacher mentoring; these sources are intricately interwoven into the tapestry of my
past, present, and future. From my past, I brought my subjectivity as a first year teacher who some twenty years ago walked into her very first classroom and experienced an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness. There was no formal mentoring program to assist me in making the transition during that first year of teaching. None of the other teachers at my school offered me any assistance or guidance. (To this day, I wonder if perhaps these other teachers did not truly realize because of my age that I was indeed a rookie teacher.) The administrative team assigned to assist me in my professional growth (i.e., survival) during that first year provided little support.

I had chosen to return to the undergraduate program to complete my certification in early childhood education at the age of 29, when my children were 2 years old and 2 months old. For two years, my children, my husband, and I made extreme sacrifices in order for me to complete the requirements of the degree program. Soon after I entered that first year of teaching, I began to experience a feeling of hopelessness. I felt extreme guilt over not loving a career for which I had so diligently prepared and for which my family had made such huge sacrifices. However, the truth was that I was miserable. With no experience in classroom management, I was faced each school day with new challenges I was not prepared to confront. Twenty-five first graders whose teacher had left mid-year to join her husband at the location of his new job surrounded me. Having known that she would be leaving the area as soon as their house sold, this teacher, I later learned, had not taken the time to establish a behavior management system in her classroom. So for the first half of the school year, these twenty-five students had grown accustomed to having little structure or limits provided. I needed support to face this challenge with more confidence.
From the present, I brought my role as an administrator determined not to allow herself to become so caught up in the day-to-day tasks of “administrivia” that she failed to remain focused on providing opportunities for support, growth, and enjoyment for beginning teachers in my school. From my future, I brought the commitment that as my administrative career expands, so would my determination to provide quality mentoring programs for all first year teachers within my county and, ideally, within my state.

Summary

Chapter 3 presented an overview and discussion of the methodology that was used in this dissertation study. The theoretical framework was symbolic interactionism, and the methodology was grounded theory. Constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling were used to develop a grounded theory.
The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to explore beginning teachers’ experiences in their respective mentoring programs and (b) to investigate what these experiences meant to the beginning teachers. To achieve the purposes of the study and to arrive at theory grounded in the data, the researcher analyzed the interview responses of ten participants about their individual perspectives on mentoring programs and identified common themes and categories among them. Using grounded theory methodology, the researcher identified the theoretical ideas that emerged from analysis and interpretation of the collected data.

There are two major sections in this chapter. The first section provides an introduction of the individual participants in the study, and the second section provides a review of common topics. The topics are organized, in accordance with the taxonomy shown in Table 4.1, into three main themes and eleven categories.

Individual Participants

This section of Chapter 4 provides a description of each participant. The description introduces the participant and offers general information related to her individual experiences with her mentor. The next section adds detail to these individual portraits, and as each one adds color to the painting of beginning teachers’ experiences in rural north Georgia, a collage of the participants in their respective mentoring programs is unveiled.
Mia Lauren

Mia Lauren was a beginning teacher at Blandy Elementary School in rural Mills County. A native of the county, Mia Lauren had worked as a paraprofessional at Blandy for eighteen years before moving into her first teaching position. At the time the study was conducted, she was teaching third grade. A graduate of a small, private university, Mia Lauren had worked full-time as a paraprofessional while working toward her educational degree. She obtained a bachelor’s degree in education in May before beginning her teaching career in August at Blandy. Mia Lauren described the experiences she had with her mentor as “wonderful.” She had known her mentor for several years and they attended the same church. However, Mia Lauren said they “don’t discuss school at church.”

Diane

Diane taught kindergarten at North Ridge Primary School, also in Mills County. Diane had lived in this rural north Georgia county since her marriage twenty-two years earlier. Like Mia Lauren, her educational career included several years of paraprofessional experience. Diane graduated from a small, private university in early December and was offered the position at North Ridge to fill a vacancy created when a kindergarten teacher’s husband was transferred to Florida. Diane shared the following feelings about her experiences with her mentor: “I have a lot of respect for her. I know that she’s got a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge as far as the whole program and what we’re supposed to be doing and how we’re going to do things.”

Abby

Abby began her teaching career at North Ridge Elementary School four weeks after the start of school as the number of students in second grade continued to grow to the point of exceeding the maximum class size allowed. Abby was hired for the position of “overflow
classroom teacher” on Thursday and met her second grade students for the first time the following Monday. A native of a neighboring rural county, Abby was a graduate of a small university in a nearby town. Abby described the experiences she had with her mentor as “very positive.”

Denise

Denise taught fourth graders at Taylors Elementary School in rural Taylor County and commuted each day from the nearby metropolitan area where she lived. Denise described herself as a “nontraditional college student” who had worked as a restaurant server in the evenings to supplement her family’s income while enrolled in educational classes during the day at a nearby private college. She received her degree in education in May before beginning her teaching career in August at Taylors. Denise shared these feelings about her experiences with her mentor:

I have always felt very comfortable with my mentor and that my opinion is valued. I don’t feel like I was looked upon by anybody that I was new and didn’t know what I was doing, especially with my mentor. It has always been a very warming feeling that I have here and with her.

Lynn

Lynn taught second grade at Centerville, the same elementary school that she had attended, and she seemed pleased her two elementary-age sons were also attending Centerville. A native of Taylor County, Lynn had recently moved back “home” after living away since 1986. Lynn graduated from a large state university with a degree in merchandising in 1990 and pursued a product design career in manufacturing for the next decade. While working in manufacturing, Lynn began tutoring elementary students through a community involvement program sponsored by her company. Lynn felt she was “making a difference in the students’ lives” and decided to enroll in classes at a nearby private university to work toward a degree in education. Lynn’s
initial mentor was an administrator whose job demands allowed little time to devote to Lynn in a mentoring role. Lynn described her experiences with her mentor by saying,

She was just very, very busy with all that she had to do. There just wasn’t time for her to spend with me. It wasn’t her fault that she couldn’t make it to meetings we had scheduled. Something would always come up, or she would get called away at the last minute. She really felt badly about this and finally came to me and said she couldn’t serve as my mentor. So after about three months, I was assigned to a new mentor who immediately jumped in and began to instruct me on policies and procedures and a variety of things I’d heard nothing about.

Katie

A first grade teacher at Mountain View Elementary School, also in Taylor County, Katie was a graduate of a nearby state university. Katie had spent her entire life in this county and was excited to be teaching so close to her home. Katie had been assigned a mentor during preplanning, and she and her mentor had worked together to set up Katie’s classroom. Soon after school began, Katie’s mentor experienced some health issues involving an extended absence from school and asked to be relieved of her mentoring responsibilities. The administrators in Katie’s school did not assign Katie another mentor, leaving her without mentor support for the first few weeks of school. A veteran teacher already assigned as a mentor to another beginning teacher became aware of Katie’s situation and, as Katie stated, “just basically came and opened up her arms and asked if I would like some help. She has been very available anytime.”

Jennifer

Jennifer began her teaching career at Mountain View Elementary in January by filling the vacancy created when a kindergarten teacher moved to Florida. Jennifer was a native of a neighboring county and was a December graduate of a nearby state university with a degree in education. She had previously worked in a mental health counseling center for children and
adolescents. The first day she reported to work at Mountain View was a teacher workday, and Jennifer “went right to find out who my mentor was so that I knew who to run to.” By the time this study was conducted, Jennifer and her mentor had formed a “comfortable relationship” that included observations and frequent conversations with open, honest communication. Jennifer shared the following about her experiences with her mentor:

We are completely open with each other, and people tell you all the time, no question is a dumb question, but I really feel that way with her. If there is something I want to ask, I am not ashamed to tell her I have no idea how to do this. With some people, I would probably feel uncomfortable. But she just makes me feel so comfortable and that everything is normal and what I am going through that she did that, too. We are just very comfortable with each other.

_Terry_

Terry taught first graders at Mountain View and was neither a native nor a resident of Taylor County. She lived about forty minutes from school and had learned of the position at Mountain View through the “TeachGeorgia.org” website. A graduate of a state university in middle Georgia, Terry was the only participant who had enrolled in graduate school for the upcoming school year. She planned to continue teaching while pursuing a Master’s degree in Early Childhood Education at a nearby state university. Terry had met her mentor during her first visit to Mountain View: “When I came into the school, I walked around and she was the first person I met. She has been an excellent person to work with.”

_Grace_

Grace was a fourth-grade teacher at Pinnacle Elementary School in Edward County. Born in the same rural county in which she taught, Grace was a graduate of a state university located in a neighboring county. Grace’s mentor was not located in her school and as a result, Grace communicated with her mentor via email with questions or concerns. Grace shared that her mentor “was always real upbeat and very positive and always very encouraging.”
Michelle

Michelle taught first grade at Pinnacle Elementary and was a native of Edward County. A May graduate of a nearby private college, Michelle had worked at Pinnacle as a paraprofessional in her mentor’s classroom while completing her degree requirements. Michelle and her mentor had developed a friendship during the time they had spent together, and Michelle placed a lot of confidence in her mentor. Michelle described the experiences they shared in the following way:

I had enough confidence in this particular lady that I felt that I could go ask her questions, and as the year progressed, I seemed to have more questions about things I wasn’t sure about, and she just was there, always there, and gave me good clear answers. Not anything that I didn’t need and was always helpful and wasn’t critical of me needing help. I felt that I could approach her and not feel like I was needy. She was very helpful.

Common Themes and Categories

Three major themes and eleven categories emerged from the data analysis to explicate the participants’ perspectives on mentoring programs. According to the participants in this study, they formed relationships and interacted with their mentors through the mentoring program. The beginning teachers also experienced many outcomes from these relationships and interactions. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the themes and categories discussed by the participants. As shown, each theme serves as an umbrella for the categories related to it. In the following sections of this chapter, each theme and category significant to the participants’ perspectives on relationships with their mentors is discussed. Excerpts from the participant transcripts are used to support the findings and to illuminate the participants’ perspectives.

In the following sections of this chapter, each theme significant to the participants’ perspectives on the experiences in their respective mentoring programs is discussed. Excerpts from the participant transcripts are used to support the findings and to illuminate the participants’ perspectives.
Table 4.1

Themes, Categories, and Sub-Categories Related to the Beginning Teachers’ Perspectives of Their Mentoring Programs

Theme 1: Relationships

Category 1: Having Accessibility to Mentor

Sub-category 1: Making initial contact

Sub-category 2: Maintaining frequent contact

Sub-category 3: Being in close proximity

Category 2: Receiving Personal and Emotional Support from Mentor

Sub-category 1: Receiving nurturing, acceptance, and caring

Sub-category 2: Receiving support in times of conflict

Theme 2: Interactions

Category 1: Receiving Support with Curriculum

Sub-category 1: Understanding the curriculum

Sub-category 2: Maintaining curriculum pacing

Sub-category 3: Sharing materials and resources

Category 2: Receiving Support with Instruction

Sub-category 1: Implementing instructional programs

Sub-category 2: Learning new instructional strategies

Sub-category 3: Observing and being observed

Category 3: Receiving Support with Classroom Management

Sub-category 1: Managing time

Sub-category 2: Managing space
Table 4.1 (continued)

*Themes, Categories, and Sub-Categories Related to the Beginning Teachers’ Perspectives of Their Mentoring Programs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-category 3: Managing student behavior</th>
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<td>Sub-category 1: Sharing strategies for parent conferences</td>
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**Theme 3: Outcomes**

<table>
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<th>Category 1: Improved Teacher Morale</th>
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<td>Category 2: Improved Classroom Instruction</td>
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<td>Sub-category 1: Learning to plan better</td>
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<td>Sub-category 3: Implementing programs more effectively</td>
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<td>Category 4: Dealing with Mentoring Program Challenges</td>
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<td>Sub-category 1: Experiencing a lack of program organization</td>
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<td>Category 5: Experiencing Growth in Self-Confidence</td>
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</tbody>
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**Theme 1: Relationships**

*Theme 1: Relationships* is a broad conceptual theme that captures the participants’ perspectives of the experiences they shared with their mentors. As the findings reveal, relationships developed between the beginning teacher and her mentor through their experiences...
in a variety of ways. Nine of the participants in the study described being in a positive relationship with their mentor. Through their interviews, they identified two aspects of these relationships as being most important in developing a positive relationship with their mentor. The participants identified these as having accessibility to their mentor and receiving personal and emotional support from their mentor. In the following sections, each category is defined and described, and examples are presented to illustrate it.

**Category 1: Having Accessibility to Mentor**

*Having accessibility to mentor* refers to the mentor being available to provide support when the beginning teacher needed assistance. In talking about accessibility to their mentor, participants discussed three sub-categories: (a) making initial contact, (b) maintaining frequent contact, and (c) being in close proximity.

Seven of the beginning teachers felt the relationship they had developed with their mentor was enhanced by the accessibility of their mentor. In this study, the term *accessibility* is defined as being available when needed and is not solely measured in terms of physical proximity. The beginning teachers experienced this accessibility to their mentors when the mentor assisted them with the myriad types of information disseminated in a new employee induction meeting or offered to help them transition into an established classroom. The participants also experienced accessibility to their mentors when the mentor maintained frequent contact on a regular basis. While close physical proximity was not a criterion for mentor accessibility, several beginning teachers felt that having classrooms adjacent to or near their mentors’ classrooms enhanced their relationship.
Sub-category 1: Making initial contact with mentor.

Making initial contact refers to the moment when the mentor assumed the role by offering support to the beginning teacher. It was through this initial contact that the beginning teacher gained insight into the role her mentor would fill during the course of their relationship.

On her first visit to Mountain View after accepting the position as a first-grade teacher, Terry met her mentor. As Terry recalled,

She was the first person I met when I came to visit Mountain View after accepting the job here. She was here and showed me around the school to help me become familiar with it. She told me that she would be here for me and that she looked forward to getting to know me and working with me.

When Terry left Mountain View that day, she felt “even more excited” about beginning her first year of teaching. She continued by saying,

I’d heard in college about mentors and how they could help you, but I had no idea that I would have one. It wasn’t mentioned in my job interview, and I didn’t think to ask if they had a mentoring program. She was so nice and friendly and made me feel so welcome that I couldn’t wait for preplanning to begin so that I could get to know her better and work with her.

Mia Lauren had been employed as a paraprofessional working alongside her mentor at Blandy for a number of years prior to transitioning into the role of teacher. In spite of her familiarity with the school system, she still felt overwhelmed by the volume of material covered during the system’s orientation meeting for new teachers. When Mia Lauren brought up the topic of accessibility to her mentor, she emphasized how calming it was when her mentor was with her at the county’s new teacher orientation session: “They were going over all the rules, what’s expected, insurance, salary, all that type stuff that beginning teachers are not familiar with and my mentor was there. She got with me and sat with me that day and she said, ‘I’ll explain all this to you if you have a question.’” This accessibility to her mentor enabled Mia Lauren to be more relaxed not only during the meeting but also throughout the school year, knowing that
her mentor was available to answer her questions and address her concerns: “From my standpoint, I didn’t want to appear like I was dumb, and I knew that she would have never made me feel that way. When you come into a new job that you haven’t done before, you don’t know everything, and so having her to go to was wonderful.” Mia Lauren knew that during her first year in the classroom, questions would arise that her lack of experience would prevent her from answering. Mia Lauren felt assured that her mentor would be available to answer these questions in a manner that would allow her self-esteem to remain intact.

Like Mia Lauren, Diane had also worked as a paraprofessional in the same system in which she taught. Diane was offered a teaching position at North Ridge prior to the completion of her student teaching and made several visits to the school to observe her new students, to learn more about the curriculum, and to determine the availability of learning materials needed to support the curriculum. It was during one of Diane’s first visits to North Ridge that her mentor met with Diane and introduced herself: “She came to me whenever I would go by and visit before I actually started and told me that she was going to be my mentor. She was very warm and was willing to do all she could to help me get off to a good start with my class.” Diane continued by sharing the outcome of a meeting she had with her mentor prior to her first day at North Ridge: “Before I came, I met with my mentor and we sat down and looked at the schedule the other teacher had designed and saw things weren’t where they should be. So we redesigned the schedule. This allowed for more instructional time for the children.” Because of the accessibility to her mentor she experienced through these initial contacts, Diane shared that she felt more “comfortable and confident” when she walked into her kindergarten classroom to begin her teaching career.
Sub-category 2: Maintaining frequent contact.

Maintaining frequent contact refers to providing opportunities for the beginning teacher and her mentor to communicate both formally and informally about concerns and issues on a frequent basis. The beginning teachers found this frequent contact beneficial in seeking input from their mentors as well as in sharing with their mentor concerns or issues that developed.

Terry and her mentor shared lunch in Terry’s classroom almost daily. This one-on-one time between Terry and her mentor provided Terry with frequent opportunities to talk about concerns that emerged during her first year of teaching: “She will come in here during lunch and will sit and we’ll talk about the day and about what’s happening. She’ll ask if I need any help or if I have any questions about anything that’s going on.” In addition to their lunchtime conversations, Terry would often call her mentor in the middle of the day and ask if they could meet after school or at some other time during the day. Terry also commented on her mentor’s accessibility:

I think it impacted me tremendously for her to be so available, especially as far as getting started and some of the techniques of things I had trouble with or I needed more knowledge about. Being there and having that experience to share is definitely something that is the key to helping other people and helping the kids to succeed.

Terry recognized that the potential of her mentor’s help was based on her mentor’s years of experience in the classroom. She also recognized the benefit of having a mentor who was “so available” to her performance in the classroom.

When Jennifer accepted the teaching position at her school, she immediately asked her principal, “Who is my mentor?” As Jennifer explained, she wanted to “know who to run to” with her questions or concerns. Jennifer’s mentor fulfilled this need by making herself easily accessible to Jennifer, as she described:
I didn’t have to go to her for help. She approached me. She would stop by my room everyday. She would ask if there was anything I needed or if there was anything she could do. I’d never taught the DI reading, and she was available for me to come into her classroom and observe her. She walked me through the GKAP manuals, which is one of our assessments. When we were doing the Basic Literacy Tests last year, she walked me through that and showed me how to do everything. When I have a question or the things I am trying are not working with a student, she will give me more ideas, and she will keep filling me in with ideas until we find something that works.

Jennifer seemed appreciative that her mentor checked with her often to see if she needed materials or assistance: “She was there every time I needed her. That way I didn’t always feel like I was running to her and bothering her.”

Mia Lauren and her mentor taught on the same grade level, and their classrooms were located on the same hall. As a result, they had frequent opportunities throughout the day to communicate, as Mia Lauren shared:

Even though I saw her a lot throughout the day, we were usually so busy getting our kids where they needed to be or checking on them that we didn’t have time to talk about anything else. So she would stop by my classroom if there was something she thought of or if she thought I needed something. She would just stick her head in the door and remind me or check with me. But if there was something I needed help with that would take some time to talk about, we would find a time in the afternoon or during lunch or exploratory class to talk.

Unlike Mia Lauren and her mentor, Denise and her mentor taught on different grade levels in different parts of the building. Yet Denise still had numerous opportunities to seek help from her mentor during the day:

At the beginning of the school year, my mentor was there all the time and was available for questions all the time. She would come by in the morning before school to see if I needed anything. Then she would drop by during her planning period, during her lunch, and again at the end of the day.

The accessibility of Denise’s mentor was not limited to the school day, and there were several occasions when Denise phoned her mentor at home in the evenings:

I knew that I could call her anytime at home, and I did call her at home with questions and she would help me work through them: maybe about grades, putting grades in, how
to do stuff with report cards, proper steps to take on getting stuff filed in permanent records.

Sub-category 3: Being in close proximity.

Being in close proximity refers to the classrooms of the beginning teacher and her mentor being physically located near each other. Michelle, Diane, and Lynn felt they experienced enhanced accessibility to their mentors because their classrooms were located on the same hall as their mentors’ classrooms. These teachers felt comfortable entering their mentors’ classrooms and approaching them with questions or concerns as the need arose throughout the day. This close proximity provided Michelle with several opportunities to seek help from her mentor during the day:

Her room is right across the hall, so we see each other all through the day. As I would need help, I felt that I could go ask her questions. As the year progressed, I seemed to have more questions about things I wasn’t sure about. She just was always there and gave me good, clear answers. She was always helpful and wasn’t critical of me needing help. She was always available, and I could call her at home. She was fine with that, very gracious and always cordial, which I always made sure that if I did call her at home it was something I felt that merited a call home. I tried to always talk to her at school, but if there was something that came up in the evening, if a parent had called or something, I didn’t mind calling her.

Michelle appreciated knowing her mentor was so accessible, and her questions or concerns would be answered or addressed in a manner that she found to be timely and professional. She also appreciated knowing she could phone her mentor at home and be greeted in a “very gracious and cordial” manner.

The reading program used in Diane’s school was a direct instruction program in which the instruction was centered around the role of the teacher. When teaching a reading lesson in this program, the teacher used a highly scripted instructional format. As questions or concerns arose while Diane was providing her students with reading instruction, her close physical proximity to her mentor enabled her to seek assistance: “If it’s in the middle of the day, and I’m
teaching a DI lesson, and I don’t recognize the sound that the letter is making, I can just step right out and ask her for help, instead of having to go to another hall.” This accessibility to her mentor when she had questions about how to instruct her students gave Diane the reassurance of knowing she had provided the instruction appropriately. In addition to the times Diane went to her mentor for help, there were other times throughout the day when her mentor came to her. Diane’s mentor also checked to see whether Diane needed help during their shared recess and “specials” time. Diane said, “If I had a question or she had an idea that she thought I could benefit from, we would get together at those times, too.”

Like Diane, Lynn’s classroom was located in close proximity to her mentor’s classroom. As a result, Lynn found herself going to her mentor for help frequently: “Any questions that I had that would pop up and not necessarily huge questions, it could be anything that I didn’t know because I was new in the school system, I would go to her for answers. I felt that if she had not been so close, it might not have been so easy.” Lynn shared that both she and her mentor were “extremely busy” with little time for formal meetings during the school day. Yet they found that they communicated often because of the close proximity of their classrooms.

Participants indicated that the accessibility of their mentor enabled them to communicate more openly and more frequently on those issues that required immediate attention. They also expressed a sense of relief in knowing their mentor was readily available.

Category 2: Receiving Personal and Emotional Support from Mentor

Receiving personal and emotional support from mentor refers to the mentor providing support through nurturing the beginning teacher in her new role, accepting the beginning teacher as a peer regardless of her limited experience and expertise, and caring for the beginning teacher as she faced the challenges of her new role. Eight of the ten beginning teachers in the study
mentioned occasions when their mentor had provided them with personal and emotional support. Five of the teachers also shared experiences in which their mentor had provided them with personal and emotional support when they found themselves in the midst of conflict. It was through these experiences that the beginning teacher and mentor developed a relationship built on the foundation of support. In sharing these experiences, the participants discussed two sub-categories: receiving nurturing, acceptance, and caring, and receiving support in times of conflict.

**Sub-category 1: Receiving nurturing, acceptance, and caring.**

*Receiving nurturing, acceptance, and caring* refers to experiences in which the beginning teacher received support that nurtured her toward personal and professional growth and made her feel accepted as someone capable of making contributions. A third component of this relationship is the mentor’s caring attitude toward the beginning teacher as she experienced her first year in the classroom.

Denise was one of only two beginning teachers in the study who did not live in the county in which she taught. As a result, she was unfamiliar with the school system as well as with the county, and prior to being hired for her position, had experienced contact with only the building principal who interviewed her. While her mentor was not a native of the county, she had spent most of her adult life there and had formed positive relationships with many people throughout both the county and the school system. Denise’s mentor worked closely with her to assist her in becoming acclimated to the county and in feeling welcomed and accepted in her school. This comfortable, personal relationship shared by Denise and her mentor enabled Denise to feel “at home” in both a new school and county in which she had previously known no one:

*It was very good, very comfortable, and very open. Loving on a degree. It wasn’t just coworkers. We were able to get on a personal level. It was definitely more personal and*
very comfortable. Thanks to her, I felt like I belonged here and that my opinion was valued.

Michelle’s situation was much different from Denise’s in that she and her mentor had already developed a positive relationship when Michelle began her first year of teaching:

She was the last teacher I worked with as a parapro before I came into the classroom, so we had developed a friendship. She brings things down on my level. She makes me feel comfortable because she doesn’t try to talk above my head or anything like that. She was good that way and always made me feel comfortable. She was always there and was consistent or being sincere. She always gave me enough information, but she wasn’t in my face everyday. She was there for me when I needed her.

According to Michelle, the fact that she and her mentor had previously worked together enabled her mentor to communicate with her in a manner that was comfortable. As a result, Michelle did not feel intimidated by her mentor but felt accepted and at ease approaching her about issues or concerns with which she felt she needed assistance.

Like Michelle, Mia Lauren had also worked alongside her mentor as her paraprofessional in the same grade level in which they were currently teaching. Because of their previous experiences together, Mia Lauren’s mentor had valuable insight into how to make Mia Lauren feel accepted and how to maximize the effectiveness of the mentoring assistance she offered her.

Mia Lauren shared the following about their “successful” relationship:

When you have someone that you can go to, talk with, and help you, then if you are really wanting to do well, you’re going to be successful. I feel this way because of the way she helped me. It helped me do a better job because I knew what I was expected to do and was helped and encouraged along the way. She was very approachable and took the initiative to keep me aware of things that would be useful for me to know about.

While Mia Lauren had known her mentor for a number of years, Lynn had met her newly assigned mentor in October. The mentor that had been assigned to work with Lynn asked to be relieved of her mentoring role when the responsibilities of her administrative position caused her to be unable to fulfill the commitment. Lynn’s new mentor “immediately jumped in and began...
to instruct me on policies, certain reading tests, and other things she felt I needed to know.”

Even though Lynn and her mentor worked together for a shorter period than most of the beginning teachers worked with their mentors, they still developed what Lynn described as “a trusting relationship” in which she felt accepted: “It wasn’t personal enough to be a close friend. But she is someone that I can trust. Someone that I can go to and ask a question to and know that they are going to give me an honest answer.”

Diane met her mentor in late November when she was hired to replace a kindergarten teacher who had moved, and during the remaining months of the school year, she and her mentor developed a close, personal relationship. Diane described their relationship as “sisterhood” based on the level of acceptance she felt her mentor offered her:

“It’s been almost like a sisterhood because I feel like she understands me so well. It’s been kind of nice, kind of a comfort to know that somebody’s there and that’s what she’s there for. She just makes me feel comfortable by talking to her and coming to her with anything.

Like Diane, Grace also felt accepted by her mentor, and this feeling of acceptance formed the basis of the friendship she developed with her mentor: “I felt like I could go to her and ask her any type of questions or any questions that I had and she was always willing to answer those questions and help me to sort through all that.”

Terry, a first grade teacher, developed a “positive and trusting” relationship with her mentor. As their relationship grew and Terry began to set professional goals, they worked together to implement strategies to enable Terry to reach her goals:

She was there for me and she was someone I could rely on. When I can trust someone, I rely on them knowing that they are going to be there to help me or guide me through. By being positive, she always helped me to try to reach those goals of things that I wanted to do in the classroom or areas that I needed help in. She tried to achieve them with me.
Because of the positive guidance and support Terry received through the relationship, she later shared with her mentor that she felt more confident in “trying new things on my own.”

Jennifer’s mentor felt that building a personal relationship through experiences not limited to school would enhance her level of influence in assisting Jennifer in her professional development. Through these experiences, Jennifer came to view her mentor as her friend as well as her colleague:

My mentor and I are friends. We also think it is important that the whole kindergarten team be friends, and we think it is important that we are friends outside of school. So last year, we got together and went to my mentor’s house. She had a swimming pool and we all went swimming to celebrate the end of the year. We have all been karaokeing together. We try to do things that build a relationship outside of just teachers.

*Sub-category 2: Receiving support in times of conflict.*

*Receiving support in times of conflict* refers to the beginning teacher receiving personal and emotional support from her mentor when the beginning teacher is involved in a situation of conflict. As the data revealed, the beginning teachers received ongoing personal and emotional support from their mentors on a frequent basis. Especially in times of conflict, this support became more valuable to five of the beginning teachers who shared these experiences.

Conflict between the teachers on her grade level prompted Michelle to seek the support of her mentor. The year before, Michelle had worked as a paraprofessional on the same grade level on which she was now a teacher. Michelle described this transition as “kind of awkward in being a teacher after being a parapro.” Michelle shared her feelings about being in that “awkward” transitional period:

There were a couple of times that within our grade level, there were little issues that came up, and being a first year teacher, I didn’t feel comfortable saying anything to the rest of my grade level. I was able to go to her and know with confidence she wouldn’t go running and telling anyone. I knew if I was frustrated with something, I could go to her.
Frustration was also the impetus for Abby seeking support from her mentor when she was “a little flustered” in maintaining balance in her professional and personal life:

There were a couple of times I went to her a little flustered because I felt like when I was at home, all I was doing was work. She told me you have to remember, “Work is work, and home is home.” She also told me she understood how I felt, and she sometimes felt the same way I did.

Abby went on to say that after talking with her mentor about this concern, she felt “relieved knowing my mentor felt the same way sometimes.” Abby also shared that because of the support she received from her mentor during their conversations, she could now “leave work at work on most days.”

When Jennifer began her first year of teaching in December, she replaced a teacher who had moved. As a result, her experience with teaching kindergarteners encompassed the last half of the school year. When school started the following year, Jennifer had no experience in assessing where her kindergarteners should be. All she knew was that the current year’s class seemed to be much less advanced than her previous year’s class was when she became their teacher:

They didn’t know letters or anything. I would go home and say to myself that something must be wrong with these kids because they don’t know anything. She knew I was stressed about that and said that she does that too every year and it was a completely normal feeling for a kindergarten teacher. She just calmed me down.

When Jennifer received reassurance about her students’ abilities, she was ready to focus on how best to plan and implement instruction for her students. As she said, “Once I realized my kids were not so far behind where they were supposed to be, I was able to relax and figure out how to teach them.”

Like Jennifer, Terry sought the support of her mentor about her concern for students in her class. Terry had several students who chose to display chronically inappropriate behavior,
and she and her mentor had developed strategies to promote appropriate behavior from these students. However, when the strategies failed to work, Terry expressed to her mentor the sense of hopelessness she was feeling:

My class had several continuous behavior problems that I worked with, and she helped me on. One time, I just broke down, and I was just like, “I don’t know what to do!” and she just lifted me up and helped me to think positively about different items or aspects that we can do so that it would not be so overwhelming for me.

Because of the support she received from her mentor in dealing with this conflict, Terry was able to reexamine the situation with her students and to generate additional strategies to assist her in working with them.

Denise reached out to her mentor following an SST meeting that one child’s mother dominated with graphic information about the child’s alleged sexual behaviors. Denise shared the following about the experience:

We had a very disturbing SST meeting, and I was able to go into her room and vent and cry and she just listened. I was so glad I was able to go to her and let that go before I went home, instead of carrying it as much on my shoulders. I still carried it home on my shoulders, but I was able to leave a little bit here.

Denise went on to say that she was “totally caught off-guard” by the mother’s allegations and had difficulty remaining seated and listening to them. Feeling completely overwhelmed, she went to her mentor, on whom she “unloaded all my frustration before going home and taking it out on my family.”

In summary, the participants were provided with personal and emotional support as they encountered experiences during their first year of teaching. This support included the mentor enabling the beginning teacher to feel accepted. By working closely with the beginning teachers to provide this type of support, even when the teachers were involved in conflict, the mentors strengthened the closeness of the relationship that was forming between them and the teachers.
Theme 2: Interactions

Theme 2: Interactions is a conceptual theme that encompasses the participant’s perspectives on what “getting help from their mentors” meant. As the findings reveal, the participants shared many interactions with their mentors and that through these interactions, information, ideas, and opinions were exchanged. According to the data, nine of the beginning teachers and their mentors discussed those activities the beginning teachers engaged in related to their classroom instruction, including the need for support in the areas of curriculum, instruction, classroom management, and parent interactions. Through their interviews, the participants identified four areas in which they received support through interactions with their mentors: (a) receiving support with curriculum, (b) receiving support with instruction, (c) receiving support with classroom management, and (d) receiving support with parent interactions. In the following sections, these categories are defined and described, and examples are presented to illustrate each of them.

Category 1: Receiving Support with Curriculum

Receiving support with curriculum refers to the beginning teacher receiving mentor support with performing the necessary function of preparing the curriculum and support materials for delivery to students. Six of the beginning teachers in the study received curriculum support from their mentors, including assistance in understanding of the curriculum, developing strategies to maintain curriculum pacing, and gathering materials and resources designed to enhance curriculum.

Sub-category 1: Understanding the curriculum.

Understanding the curriculum refers to the mentor working with the beginning teacher to learn ways to present the curriculum as it was designed to be presented. Understanding the
curriculum requires a better understanding of the scope and sequence of the curriculum as well as strategies to enhance implementation.

Lynn received support from her mentor with understanding her school’s Direct Instruction reading curriculum. Lynn described the support given by her mentor:

We are all on the same reading curriculum. It’s DI, and how to intermingle other ways to teach reading with DI. That was a big one. Just being able to confer with her about different ways to style reading and how to pull in different curriculum ideas has definitely helped my students.

Like Lynn, Terry reached out to her mentor for support with understanding the Direct Instruction reading curriculum she was required to teach to her first graders. Terry’s mentor, also a first-grade teacher, shared with Terry the curriculum techniques and procedures she had designed and implemented as a result of her own experience with the DI program. Terry said, “I think her help impacted me tremendously as far as getting started with DI. I used some of her techniques with my students, and they worked really well. I’m still not completely comfortable with DI, but I do feel like I understand it better now, thanks to her.”

Abby shared that when she first examined the math curriculum designed for her second graders, she “wondered how I would even begin to teach all of it to my students.” The terminology used in the math curriculum was unlike any that she had seen, and the order in which the curriculum objectives were presented appeared to be disorganized and random. When she approached her mentor with her concerns, Abby “felt much better”:

Well, for one thing she had taught second grade for several years and knew the math curriculum really well. She assured me that the kids would quickly pick up the math terminology since they’d had some of it in first grade, too. She also shared with me a curriculum map for math the grade level had created that showed exactly when a particular math objective was to be taught.
Sub-category 2: Maintaining curriculum pacing.

Maintaining curriculum pacing refers to assisting the beginning teacher in the process of determining the rate at which the curriculum objectives need to be taught in order to assure that the students have exposure to all of the objectives during the year. Another driving factor for maintaining curriculum pacing is the need to expose students to all of the curriculum objectives prior to standardized testing. Since this testing generally takes place approximately six weeks before the end of the school year, the need for maintaining curriculum pacing throughout the year is critical.

The prospect of standardized testing encompassing the entire curriculum prompted Mia Lauren to seek the advice of her mentor. When she shared with her mentor her concern about covering the entire third grade curriculum in preparation for the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests in the spring, her mentor helped her to prepare a calendar that included “checkpoints” to assist Mia Lauren in this endeavor. Mia Lauren explained,

Each month we are supposed to be at a certain level. I was given a calendar, and by the end of September, I should have taught this certain thing. By October, I should have had other things I had taught. So it was just a timeline to give you a basis for what, or to let you know you are or where you should be in the curriculum.

In addition to helping her devise the curriculum-pacing calendar, her mentor also provided her with ongoing pacing support by “always coming to me and telling me to prepare and look for what might be up ahead.”

When Jennifer reviewed the kindergarten curriculum, she became concerned about the “amount of curriculum that kindergarten students are expected to do before they pass.” She shared these concerns with her mentor, who spent several afternoons after school helping Jennifer create a timeline for introducing and implementing the curriculum in her classroom. By following this timeline, Jennifer was able to maintain focus on the curriculum she was currently
teaching to her students without feeling overwhelmed by the volume of curriculum yet to be taught.

*Sub-category 3: Sharing materials and resources.*

*Sharing materials and resources* refers to assisting the beginning teacher with curriculum by making available to her materials and resources designed to enhance the curriculum. Several of the mentors of participants in the study shared from their personal stores of materials and resources, while others provided the participants with materials and resources purchased by the school.

Diane’s mentor assisted her by sharing with her many of her own materials designed to support the curriculum:

We would get together when we would plan our lessons, something we have carried over to this year. Not just she and I but the whole group of teachers on the same hall. That helped me get files of activities together from December, when I started teaching, to the end of the year with the specific letters we worked on each week. She would share from her files color pages or handwriting pages and stuff like that. That was a big help.

Abby’s mentor, as well, shared with Abby her own materials designed to support the curriculum. As Abby explained, “Being a first year teacher, I don’t have much of the materials that I need, so I’ll go and ask her if I can borrow hers.” Abby continued by saying, “She always lets me borrow her things. She’s loaned me her unifix cubes and her pattern blocks for helping my kids with math. She’s also given me copies of worksheets she has that go along with our second grade curriculum.”

In summary, the beginning teachers in the study interacted with their mentors by receiving information and ideas designed to support the curriculum. This support enhanced the beginning teachers’ understanding of the curriculum, assisted them in maintaining curriculum
pacing, and provided them with materials and resources to reinforce the curriculum. It also added another element to the relationship between the beginning teacher and her mentor.

**Category 2: Receiving Support with Instruction**

*Receiving support with instruction* refers to the mentor and beginning teacher engaging in interactions for purposes related to instruction. Throughout the participants’ discussions of the instructional support they received from their mentors, there were three recurring sub-categories: (a) *implementing instructional programs*, (b) *learning new instructional strategies*, and (c) *observing and being observed*. According to the data, eight of the beginning teachers received mentor support with ways to implement and enhance student instruction, as well as to understand the connection between instruction and student achievement. The participants often initiated the interactions by asking questions, and the most frequently discussed instructional areas were reading and math.

**Sub-category 1: Implementing instructional programs.**

*Implementing instructional programs* refers to the assistance provided the participants in carrying out the instructional programs selected for their students. The mentors provided assistance in accessing and utilizing the various components of the instructional programs, managing the record keeping of students’ progress through the instructional programs, and motivating the students to reach higher levels of achievement.

Grace sought insight from her mentor in the area of reading. Grace had student taught in eighth grade, so when she accepted the fourth grade teaching position, she had concerns about teaching reading to students who, as she described them, “were still learning to read.” Her mentor, who served as the reading consultant for the system, provided a great deal of instructional support for her. Grace described this support:
In regards to reading, I was totally new to the reading program Direct Instruction. That was completely new for me. So I had many questions about that how to manage my group, how to manage the paper work, and how to really motivate the kids so that they would want to participate in DI because it is so repetitive that it can get boring. Ways to motivate them so they would want to strive to read 85%, preferably 90% accuracy. I just had so many questions about that. I would email her, and she was great about giving me responses about reading. She knew that forward and backwards. She had all these different strategies that I could use.

Grace incorporated much of the information and ideas recommended by her mentor into the reading instruction she planned for her students. According to Grace, using these ideas “helped to alleviate some of the stress that I was feeling in the beginning of the year in reading.”

The reading program presented a challenge for Lynn, who was not familiar with the Direct Instruction method used in her school. As she said, “Teaching DI and how to intermingle other ways to teach reading with DI was a big challenge.” Lynn’s mentor had taught the DI method for several years and was able to share her insight into how Lynn could accomplish her goal. Lynn continued by saying, “In reading, my students have definitely benefited because I’ve been able to confer with her about different ways to style reading. This has allowed them to achieve mastery during the DI checkouts when the coaches come to evaluate them.”

**Sub-category 2: Learning new instructional strategies.**

*Learning new instructional strategies* refers to learning ways to enhance opportunities for the students to reach the goals of the instructional program. The beginning teachers most often sought the support of their mentor to learn new instructional strategies in the areas of language arts and math.

The language arts program was an area in which Michelle became concerned when her students were mastering the language arts concepts when taught in isolation but were experiencing difficulty in transferring the concepts into other areas. Michelle shared with her mentor her concerns: “I felt like I needed to extend the language arts lessons because it seems
not to transfer. They can label the sentences fine but when you go to do something else, you want them to be able to sort it out. They just weren’t doing as well as I wanted them to.” Her mentor had experienced the same concerns with her students in the past and had developed a series of lessons designed to foster the transfer of the concepts into other areas. She shared these lessons with Michelle, who used them to support the language arts instruction in her classroom. As a result, Michelle’s students began to demonstrate the language arts concepts into their writing in other areas of the curriculum.

Jennifer approached her mentor for instructional support in math when some of her kindergarteners were experiencing problems in identifying numbers. Her mentor suggested she incorporate a tactile approach into her math instruction, which Jennifer used: “She brought in Touch Math and taught me how to teach that to those that were having trouble. That was very helpful at the beginning of the year when I was trying to figure out how to teach them so they would understand.” Because of this experience, Jennifer realized that her students learned in a number of different ways and that to promote student achievement, she had to be willing to utilize a number of instructional methods.

Like Jennifer, Abby sought her mentor’s help in teaching math to her students. Her mentor shared with Abby an instructional strategy used in teaching a challenging math concept to her second grade students. Abby explained, “I went to her about subtracting double digits. Because it’s such a hard concept, she would tell me how to approach it. My students benefited from her explanation.” Abby later shared that the majority of her students continued to show mastery of this concept throughout the year as opportunities for maintaining the skill of subtracting double digits reappeared periodically throughout the math textbook: “Whenever there was a skill practice in the math book on subtracting double digits my kids would do really
well. They still remembered the steps in doing this. Now, if they will only remember this when the CRCT rolls around their scores will be great.”

*Sub-category 3: Observing and being observed.*

*Observing and being observed* refers to the beginning teacher observing the mentor present an instructional lesson to understand better how the lesson is designed to be taught as well as how the materials contained in the lesson are to be utilized. The *being observed* component of this sub-category refers to the mentor observing the beginning teacher as she teaches a lesson and providing feedback following the observation.

Reading instruction prompted Denise to seek the help of her mentor, who came into Denise’s classroom and modeled a reading lesson while Denise observed. As Denise explained,

> We decided since she taught a lower grade, it would be best if she came in and taught my reading class for me so that I could observe her, because I was having such a problem with reading the first month of school. That really helped me a lot because I was very frustrated with the whole reading program and reaching the kids in the group that I had. She came in and taught a whole lesson for me, and I sat in the back and watched. That helped a lot.

Denise admitted she had been somewhat hesitant about asking her mentor to come into her classroom and model a reading lesson with her class because as she said, “It put pressure on me to be able to supply the same type of instruction for my students as she did.” Her mentor reassured her by reminding her that the main purpose for the modeling was for Denise to observe the use of the grade-level reading materials and the way in which the lesson should flow.

Jennifer also observed her mentor, another kindergarten teacher, model a reading lesson using the instructional materials and strategies associated with one of the kindergarten reading programs in use in her school. After observing her mentor instruct her students, Jennifer expressed reassurance at “knowing how it worked” and gained confidence in moving ahead with the reading program.
Both Jennifer and Terry invited their mentors to observe them teaching a lesson and to provide feedback from their observation. Jennifer asked her mentor to come into her classroom and observe her teaching a reading lesson to her kindergarteners. After this observation, Jennifer’s mentor discussed with Jennifer her “strengths” and “growths” as observed in the reading lesson:

One of my growths was I needed to verify when I said a sound or that I needed to repeat the sound back to them when they said it. When our DI reading coach came in, she said, “You’re doing a good job in verifying the sounds.” So the things she was telling me in my growths were beneficial.

Terry’s mentor also observed Terry teaching a reading lesson and provided Terry with a list of instructional strategies that would enhance the reading instruction and encourage student achievement. Terry shared the following about the observation made by her mentor: “She watched me as I did the lesson and later pointed out things that maybe I need to work on to help benefit my students more. She also showed me some new techniques and ideas that will further the children’s learning.”

The discussion of Category 2 focused on how eight of the participants in the study engaged in interactions with their mentors for purposes related to instruction. As a result of instructional support from their mentors, the participants in the study improved implementation of the instructional programs, learned new instructional strategies, and benefited from observing and being observed. Through these interactions, the beginning teacher and her mentor worked toward a common goal of enhancing instruction for students and, ultimately, improving student achievement.

Category 3: Receiving Support with Classroom Management

Receiving support with classroom management refers to receiving help from suggestions and strategies offered by the mentor to improve management of time, space, and student
behavior. The participants’ discussion centered on three recurring sub-categories: (a) managing time, (b) managing space, and (3) managing student behavior. Six of the participants shared experiences in which they had received mentor support with classroom management.

Sub-category 1: Managing time.

Managing time refers to the challenges of incorporating instructional time into a schedule that also contains lunch, recess, restroom breaks, and exploratory class. The beginning teachers approached their mentors to learn ways to manage all of the demands on their time.

Diane’s mentor assisted her in managing the instructional time in her classroom by replacing unstructured play centers with math, handwriting, and manipulative centers:

Before I came in, I met with my mentor, and we sat down, looked at the schedule, and saw things weren’t where they should be, and we redesigned the schedule. The other teacher, I hate to keep talking about her, but she had play centers such as housekeeping. While those are good, I just couldn’t find the time, so we incorporated learning centers.

As a result of working with her mentor, Diane maximized the instructional time by planning activities related to the curriculum into the learning centers in her classroom.

Soon after the school year began, Lynn began to feel overwhelmed by the amount of time spent daily in collecting and grading her students’ work, so she went to her mentor for some advice on how to manage these classroom procedures more efficiently:

I would say her advice has definitely been an advantage just in the way that I run my classroom in ways of how to collect and grade papers in a timely manner without a parapro. She’s really helped me with those types of procedures or drills on how to do things in a quick, efficient manner.

This advice enabled Lynn to minimize the amount of time spent daily on collecting and grading her students’ work and proved “helpful” in allowing Lynn to provide her students with graded feedback in a timelier manner.
Sub-category 2: Managing space.

Managing space refers to the challenge of designing a classroom to incorporate areas for individual as well as group activities. Essential to success in managing space is an understanding of student movement patterns throughout the classroom and the incorporation of architectural features such as doors and windows into the design arrangement of the classroom.

The management of classroom space prompted Michelle to seek her mentor’s advice when she wanted to arrange her small, windowless classroom in a manner that would make room for areas for learning centers and collaborative activities. Working with her mentor, Michelle designed a room that provided space for both the learning centers as well as the collaborative activities. Michelle shared how her mentor provided assistance in helping her manage the space in her classroom: “Classroom setup was a big one. I have had to experiment and come up with ways that work for me. She was very helpful in centers and collaborative atmosphere type situations.” Michelle credited her mentor with assisting her in creating the classroom design that fit perfectly with the types of instructional opportunities she provided for her students.

While Michelle was faced with the challenge of maximizing the space in her small classroom, Terry was faced with the challenge of creating a warm, inviting atmosphere in a large, cavernous room. Three days before the start of school, Terry learned that her first grade classroom would be in a very large room that was formerly the school’s music room. Terry went to her mentor for support in dealing with this challenge:

At the beginning, just coming into this huge space that I am in, it was the music room so it definitely had to be transformed. She helped me try to build a warm, inviting room inside this huge space and helped me decide different things that would help to compliment the kids coming into this new environment. Just really transforming different things that she could see, helping me find chairs for my students, and a teacher desk, and suggesting that we use the bookshelf for book bags.
Working together, Terry and her mentor managed to create a first-grader friendly environment in the large space to which she had been assigned.

*Sub-category 3: Managing student behavior.*

*Managing student behavior* refers to developing strategies to encourage appropriate behavior from all students. Another facet of this sub-category is developing strategies to use when a student chooses to display inappropriate behavior.

When Diane approached her mentor with her concerns about one particular student who was causing disruption in her classroom, her mentor led her through an analysis of the behavior intervention strategies Diane was using and helped her discern why they were not solving the problem: “She said to me, ‘What are you doing?’ After I’d told her what I was doing to try to deal with his behavior, she asked me, ‘Why do you think this isn’t working?’” Then, as Diane said, they would analyze the strategies being used and discuss alternative behavior intervention strategies. Diane would leave the discussion with several new strategies to try with this student.

Like Diane, Terry had concerns about a behavior issue with one of her students, so her mentor offered to come into her classroom and observe how Terry interacted with the student:

Last year, I had a lot of behavioral issues in my classroom, and some of them I wasn’t sure how to deal with, so she helped me a lot in that area. For instance, one time she came in and just observed just to see how the kids were reacting to me and the whole issue what I would do in that instance to work with the kids and try to keep it managed in the classroom but keep on task with everybody else and not be too distracting. She came in and just gave me tips and pointers and helped me with giving a small little incentive chart for that one person that no one else would know about and having a small reward for them to keep them on task and do what they need to do so that they are not disrupting all the other children.

Terry’s mentor helped her recognize that an essential component of managing classroom behavior was being able to create and implement an individual behavior incentive plan for those students requiring additional assistance in maintaining appropriate behavior.
Like Terry, Mia Lauren approached her mentor for assistance in managing the behavior of two students. She described her class as “a wonderful class, except for two students.” Mia Lauren’s mentor assisted her in developing strategies to encourage appropriate behavior from these students:

She helped me to place them in a seating arrangement in which they would not be close to each other. I also had several parent conferences with these children and let the parents know. My mentor suggested that I make sure that they understood that their academic progress was due mainly to their behavior and not that they couldn’t do it.

Early in the school year, Michelle’s mentor observed the procedures and practices Michelle was implementing to assist in the management of student behavior. She felt that Michelle’s approaches should work successfully and encouraged Michelle by saying, “‘You seem to be doing everything. Just continue to do that and keep your consistency. Maybe in a few weeks or even in a week or two they will conform to what you’re trying to do.’” Michelle learned from her mentor’s feedback the importance of consistency and that sometimes “you have to give things time to work” when implementing new procedures and practices with her students.

When Jennifer experienced consistent problems in managing the behavior of one of her kindergarten students, she made a referral to her school’s Student Support Team. Prior to the SST meeting, Jennifer’s mentor advised Jennifer to document the student’s behavior with a behavior log, which she recorded on her computer. The behavior log included the date of the behavior, described the student’s behavior, and noted what Jennifer did in response to the behavior and how the student reacted to Jennifer’s response. The purpose of the data in the log was to assist Jennifer and her mentor in analyzing the student’s behavior and exploring options for managing the behavior:

I started doing that, and sure enough, in the SST meeting, Mr. Smith (the principal) said, “It’s good you have been documenting this child’s behavior.” At first, when she suggested I document his behavior, I would have never thought to document what I did in
response to the behavior and what the child did in response to my consequence. I did not think to do that, but that played a big role in helping with the SST and determining how we could help manage this student’s behavior.

Jennifer learned from this experience the importance of maintaining current and accurate documentation when observing student behavior. Had Jennifer not maintained current and accurate behavior documentation, she realized, “it would have been just me saying I remember this one time, and then there was another time.”

Category 3 focused on ways in which the mentors assisted the beginning teachers in creating strategies to manage the demands of time and space. The mentors also provided the beginning teachers with strategies designed for managing student behavior and for dealing with inappropriate behavior.

Category 4: Receiving Support with Parent Interactions

Receiving support with parent interactions refers to assistance with communication between the beginning teacher and the parents of her students. Five of the beginning teachers shared experiences in which their mentor had provided support in this area. This category has two sub-categories: sharing strategies for parent conferences and sharing strategies for dealing with parents in difficult situations.

Sub-category 1: Sharing strategies for parent conferences.

Sharing strategies for parent conferences refers to assisting the beginning teacher in planning for parent conferences by first helping her determine what she hopes to accomplish during the conference. The mentor then helps her determine what information she wants to share with the parent and what problems need solving.

When one of Michelle’s students was having trouble in the reading program, she sought the help of her mentor for assistance in communicating with the student’s parent:
We have the Direct Instruction reading program in our school, and in that program, the children have to meet mastery. So they take timed reading tests, and this particular child was taking home 100’s every week in daily average. His test grades and his timed readings, he was failing them. That mother had come in several times. So I went to my mentor and asked her what she would advise me to do. So I did go into the meeting and explain the reading program to the parent and let her look at it, and then from there out, I sent home the timed reading scores and the mastery test scores because we had not been doing that.

Michelle continued, “My mentor gave me the advice to give a little more information on the program and then to give a little more information on justifying the grade and the reason for the child being backed up into a lower group.” Michelle learned the importance of keeping parents informed of all grades earned by the student. The advice of her mentor to send home the timed reading scores and the mastery test scores, the two areas in which the child was failing, allowed the parent to gain a sharper insight into why Michelle had recommended that her child be remediated.

Abby’s mentor provided support when a parent who was concerned about her child not being challenged in the classroom confronted Abby. The student had transferred from another school system, which “was different from our school system,” and the parent was “having difficulties understanding why her child wasn’t being challenged.” When Abby approached her mentor about the situation,

She seemed very understanding. She helped me realize that it wasn’t anything that we were doing. The parent had just come from a different school system, and it was different from our school system. She just helped me say that we can only do so much and that we can try and gave me some ideas on how to challenge the student and how to talk with the parent. That was very beneficial because I have never dealt with anyone like that. Being from around here, most people are not that way. They are not that straight forward. And she just helped me to see that some people were different. We worked out some things for the boy to do. She was very helpful.
Sub-category 2: Sharing strategies for dealing with parents in difficult situations.

Sharing strategies for dealing with parents in difficult situations refers to assisting the beginning teacher with ways to communicate with parents when either they or the parent have an issue or concern to discuss. These strategies included encouraging the participant to remain objective when discussing difficult situations with parents.

A disturbing SST meeting in which a parent discussed some shocking and alarming behavior that she believed her child had engaged in compelled Denise to seek her mentor’s help in handling future interactions with the parent:

Following the SST meeting, this parent would call me at home several times a week and go on and on for thirty- to forty-five minutes in very graphic detail about the alleged behavior of her son, Bob. Then I would get all upset worrying about Bob and wouldn’t be able to go to sleep. While I was concerned about Bob, I also knew nothing about how to treat these behaviors and began to feel like I was just a “vent” for the parent.

Denise’s mentor advised her to meet with the parent and share with the parent that she, too, was very concerned about Bob and would be willing to do all she could to help him feel supported and encouraged at school. Her mentor also advised her to say that because she lacked psychological training, she felt inadequate to assess and offer advice in dealing with his behaviors and that she would therefore appreciate the parent refraining from calling her to discuss Bob’s behaviors unless they were related to school.

Just as Denise’s mentor had helped her with a difficult parent situation, Diane’s mentor also helped her in dealing with another difficult parent situation that arose when Diane felt one of her kindergarten students should be retained:

I had a child that really needed to be retained. His mother would come in every single morning and we would do letters and numbers and such, and he wouldn’t know it. And then every morning, she would say he knows “blah” and he worked on it last night. I would sit down with him during our lesson time, and he wouldn’t know it. I just felt like I was hitting my head up against a brick wall because I couldn’t get through to her and I couldn’t get through to him.
Diane continued in her efforts to convince the parent that it would be in the best interest of her son to repeat kindergarten. She also continued to share with her mentor her concerns about the boy’s academic progress: “I just kept talking to my mentor and she kept saying, ‘You can’t save all of them. You just do the best you can do and plead your case to her. But if she is that way about it, there is nothing you can really do to keep him back.’”

Category 4 focused on the support mentors provided to the participants in the area of parent interactions. This support included sharing strategies for implementing successful parent conferences as well as for dealing with parents in difficult situations. As shown by the data, the support provided by the mentors enabled the teachers to interact with their students’ parents in an effective, professional manner. They were able to communicate with their students’ parents in this manner even in situations in which the parent chose not to accept the teacher’s opinion and input.

Theme 2 addressed how the mentors interacted with the beginning teachers in providing support with the curriculum and instruction as well as support with classroom management and parent communication. The relationships that had developed between the participants and their mentors provided the foundation for these interactions to occur.

Theme 3: Outcomes

Theme 3: Outcomes is a broad conceptual theme that addresses the participants’ perspectives on the outcomes of the relationship they shared with their mentor. The participants described many outcomes of their relationships and interactions with their mentors. These outcomes of mentoring programs provide evidence of what nine of the participants valued and what they found to be most significant. Through their conversation, five categories emerged: (a) improved teacher morale, (b) improved classroom instruction, (c) improved conflict resolution
management, and (d) dealing with mentoring program challenges, and (e) experiencing growth in self-confidence. Each of these areas are discussed in detail using the words of the teachers.

**Category 1: Improved Teacher Morale**

*Improved teacher morale* was an outcome of encouragement for the beginning teachers as they experienced the many challenges that accompany the first year of teaching. Five of the participants shared experiences in which the encouragement provided them by their mentors had positively affected them. Through ongoing encouragement, the teachers experienced improved morale.

Mia Lauren described her mentor’s encouraging manner as being “positive and upbeat.” She continued by saying that her mentor “made me feel really good and gave me the assurance that I didn’t have to get bogged down. I could always come to her, and she would help me or anything that I needed.”

“Upbeat” was also how Grace described the encouragement provided by her mentor: “She was always real upbeat and very positive and always very encouraging. She would tell me that I was doing a great job, and that helped to build up my confidence so that I felt better in the program.” The program Grace referred to in this statement was the DI reading program that Grace had experienced problems implementing. Grace shared that after hearing her mentor make this comment, she felt ready to “face the next reading lesson with a smile on my face.”

When Denise’s grade level was experiencing some problems working together, she felt unable to talk with them about some of her concerns she had about the curriculum and some of her students. Her mentor had heard about the grade-level problems and reassured Denise she would always be available. Denise shared how this assurance made her feel: “I didn’t feel left out anymore. I felt like I had an outlet instead of it weighing down on me and me getting
miserable about something. So I didn’t feel like I really got weighted down last year because I could always go to her and talk to her about things.”

When one of Jennifer’s kindergarten students was experiencing some major problems in reading, she turned to her mentor for guidance:

She was one of the ones who was not reading yet, but she only knew the sound for a and the sound for m, and this was in March. I had been working with her one-on-one everyday, so I was pulling my hair out. I mean I had just been to college for five years. I should know what to do with a student. I didn’t want to ask my mentor at first because I thought I should know. I wanted to have confidence in myself. I should know what to do. I had already SSTed the child, but when I went to my mentor, she told me that some children will just have to be tested for services and this may be one of those especially since I’d done tons of one-on-one.

Jennifer felt relieved knowing she was not the source of the child’s learning problems. Jennifer shared that later that year, the student was “tested” and qualified for special education services.

Category 1 focused on ways in which the support of the mentor had a positive impact on the morale of the beginning teacher. This support was provided in a variety of situations and was a positive outcome of the interactions between the beginning teacher and her mentor.

Category 2: Improved Classroom Instruction

Improved classroom instruction refers to the way that working with mentors helped them improve the instruction they provided to their students in a number of ways. Through discussions of their interactions with their mentors, three sub-categories emerged: (a) learning to plan better, (b) experimenting with new ideas, and (c) implementing programs more effectively.

Sub-category 1: Learning to plan better.

Learning to plan better was an outcome that several participants believed had resulted from their interactions with their mentor. As a result of this outcome, the participants felt more capable of planning instructional opportunities for their students.
When Abby felt uncertain about the way in which she was planning instruction for her students, she sought advice from her mentor. Her mentor carefully listened to Abby’s concerns and then provided Abby with the reassurance she needed to plan effective instruction for her students. Abby said, “I am one of those people that I want to make sure that I am doing the right thing, and I would just need more or less reassurance that I was going down the right path in planning instruction for my kids.” This reassurance provided by her mentor affirmed Abby in her ability to plan effective instruction. It also allowed her to move forward confidently in planning future effective instructional opportunities for her students.

Jennifer was another beginning teacher who had sought reassurance from her mentor in planning instruction for her students. When Jennifer received materials for the reading program she was to use with her kindergarten students, she noticed there were four instructional manuals. Feeling somewhat overwhelmed, she approached her mentor and asked for guidance in structuring and planning reading lessons for her students:

There were four manuals last year to the reading program. I wasn’t exactly sure how to structure it. I knew what to do, but I didn’t know how. Five days a week—what should I do on Monday? Is there something I need to do before they do this page of Jack and Jilly? How many times do I need to go over the sight words before I let them try to beat Hop and Bop? I just didn’t know how to structure it, and she showed me her lesson plans and said, “This is how I do it.” She is always telling me if something works better for you, you make sure and do it your way. But you can try it this way and tweak it to fit your needs.

Jennifer’s mentor, also a kindergarten teacher, responded by sharing with Jennifer her own reading lesson plans. Once Jennifer had the opportunity to observe how her mentor had planned reading instruction, she felt confident in using her mentor’s plans as a model for managing and planning reading instruction for her own students.
Sub-category 2: Experimenting with new ideas.

Experimenting with new ideas describes how the beginning teacher seeks to enhance classroom instruction by incorporating new strategies into the instruction. The desire to incorporate these new strategies into instruction results from the need to generate student interest in a particular subject area or the need to implement a different instructional strategy to test its effectiveness.

Reading instruction concerned Michelle, who felt the need to experiment with new ideas in teaching Direct Instruction reading to her students:

My students were getting really beaten down after three times of starting the DI program over. So my parapro and I started sending books home with them, and if they read it, they had a chance to read it to me or my parapro. They loved that they were getting stars and checks for every book they read. We also did a game with DI, a baseball game. One day when baseball season was getting started, I’d say we have got five words here. You can get one run, two runs, or three runs for words. I’d say, “Jack gets to first base.” Then we’d get to run and the last word would be a home run. They would all get a point if they did it correctly. They needed something more than what we were doing in DI.

As a result of incorporating these new ideas, Michelle felt that both she and her students benefited as they both shared renewed interest in the reading instruction she provided for her students.

When Diane felt the pressure of providing quality instruction to the four reading groups in her kindergarten classroom, she decided that her paraprofessional would provide instruction for the “Jack and Jilly” group:

I was overwhelmed with having four reading groups in my class. I just didn’t have time to do all of them. I only had 40 minutes with each group, and I just could not master what I needed them to master. My teacher’s assistant is very well trained, so I talked with my mentor about giving Jack and Jilly to her. My mentor agreed that by having my teacher’s assistant provide instruction to the Jack and Jilly group, they would receive a better quality of instruction than if I had to try to continue meeting with all four groups. I still observe and see their scores, and I will do a little at my table with this group to make sure that I agree with what scoring numbers she says they are on.
Through this experience, Diane grew in her ability to manage instruction for her students as well as in her ability to maximize the talents and time of resource personnel in providing quality instruction for all of the students in her classroom.

Sub-category 3: Implementing programs more effectively.

Implementing programs more effectively refers to how teachers felt they had improved their classroom instruction through better implementation of the instructional programs. This outcome was achieved as a result of earlier interactions when the mentor had provided instructional support to the beginning teacher.

Denise did not particularly like the DI program used by her school for reading instruction to all students. When she shared her feelings with her mentor, her mentor provided her with some professional advice:

I am not real fond of the DI program being used with the higher kids. I like the idea of using it with the lower kids but feel the higher kids might find it to be boring. My mentor advised me by saying, “You have to stay positive about it, even though you’re in a rut sometimes.” She would just tell me to stay positive because how you act about the program is going to reflect on them.

It was through this advice to “stay positive” that Denise learned a very important lesson about implementing instructional programs with students. As Denise said, “I never really thought about how much my attitude toward the program impacted my students’ attitudes. It really does filter down to them, doesn’t it?”

Terry had several conversations with her mentor about how to implement and maintain the pace of the reading program with her students effectively. While she felt the pressure to adhere to the guidelines set forth by the reading program, she also experienced concern when her students were unable to grasp the material being taught. As a result, Terry reached the following conclusion:
I decided it was more important that my students understand the reading concepts instead of just rushing through something and hurrying or pressing forward if I really needed to split up the reading. If I need to do half of the reading one day and then the next day do the other half that is fine. Just don’t rush through something so that your kids are falling behind when you are thinking you’re still moving ahead with them.

Supported by their mentors, beginning teachers in the study found that they were able to provide better instruction for their students. The teachers were also inspired to think of additional ways to reach their students through new instructional strategies and ideas.

Category 2 focused on methods employed by the beginning teacher to improve classroom instruction. Through their interactions with their mentors, the beginning teachers successfully learned ways to plan instructional opportunities for their students, felt confident experimenting with new ideas, and were capable of implementing programs more effectively.

Category 3: Improved Conflict Resolution Management

Improved conflict resolution management was an outcome of the beginning teachers working closely with their mentors to develop their skills in resolving and managing conflict. In this study, conflict resolution management involves those skills necessary to deescalate conflict, including disruptive student behavior. Three of the participants described improvement in the area of dealing with conflict.

Jennifer was experiencing problems on the playground with several of her students who frequently displayed inappropriate behavior. A student had just come running up to tell her he had heard one of the aforementioned students call another an inappropriate name. As her eyes scanned the playground, Jennifer noticed that most of her students were playing together nicely on the swings and monkey bars. Several students sat quietly on the bench sharing a bag of chips. Jennifer suddenly realized,

I spent most of my time and energy on the kids that misbehave. It dawned on me that the kids that don’t misbehave almost feel like they are never noticed because you are
constantly looking for the bad behaviors in the room. You are always calling their names and always talking to them, and the kids that are not a problem, it’s almost as if they are not in the room.

Later that day she shared these reflections with her mentor, who guided her to the understanding that sometimes the students who frequently display inappropriate behavior are simply seeking attention. Unfortunately, as Jennifer continued, “some of these kids don’t know how to seek positive attention, so they try to get attention any way they can.” The choice was hers both to ignore the inappropriate behavior and to give praise when appropriate behavior was displayed or to continue giving attention to behaviors that were inappropriate. Jennifer chose to focus on the appropriate behavior and had begun to feel she was giving all of her students equal amounts of her attention.

Michelle and her mentor had several conversations about a particular student who had very limited social skills. Michelle explained the concerns she shared with her mentor about this student:

He wanted to be friends with all the kids in the classroom, but he just didn’t have the social skills to really fit in. From their point of view, he was bothering them; he was bugging them, following them around and trying to do things so they would think he was cool.

Her mentor had known the student for a few years, as his reputation was well known. Her mentor had also observed how this student was treated by other teachers. Michelle’s mentor listened and observed as Michelle struggled aloud to select the best strategy for use with this student. Finally, as Michelle shared, “I came to the realization that I had to do something about the situation, so I sat down with my mentor, and we came up with some things I can use with him.” Michelle continued by saying,

One of the things we’re doing is working with him on his social skills. I have lunch with him once each week, and we use that time to work on table manners and what’s
appropriate to talk about at the table. He really seems to enjoy having that one-on-one time with me.

In Category 3, the beginning teachers shared their experiences in learning ways to manage conflict involving their students. The strategies learned by the participants enabled them to deescalate conflict before it became a major issue.

Category 4: Dealing with Mentoring Program Challenges

Dealing with mentoring program challenges was another outcome revealed by the data in which several underlying problems within the programs were discovered. These problems limited both the effectiveness of the program and the effectiveness of the relationships between the participants and their mentors. Two sub-categories emerged from the data: experiencing a lack of program organization and experiencing limited access to mentor.

Sub-category 1: Experiencing a lack of program organization.

Experiencing a lack of program organization was one of the outcomes revealed that interfered with the success of the mentoring program. This lack of program organization included situations in which the mentor’s other responsibilities made it difficult for her to provide adequate mentoring support for the beginning teacher.

Grace found herself in this position when she was assigned to a mentor who was also the county’s reading support specialist. Her principal introduced Grace to her mentor during preplanning:

It was very informal when the principal introduced us. She said they had a mentoring program and that this person was going to be my mentor. There was never any formal time set aside for us to sit down and discuss what we were going to be doing or what I expected to get from the mentor program or even how she could further help me or anything like that. That would have been nice if I could have had that.

Since their introduction, Grace’s mentor had dropped by to see Grace a few times when she was in the building for meetings. She suggested to Grace that they communicate with each other by
email, and Grace had emailed her mentor with questions or concerns several times. When asked how long it took her mentor to reply, Grace’s response was “about an hour.”

A lack of organization of the mentoring program also affected Lynn at the beginning of the year as she was assigned to a mentor who was too busy to work with her. In addition to struggling in the classroom without a mentor to assist with academics and classroom management during those first few weeks of school, Lynn also experienced problems in knowing what she called “the little things,” such as knowing where to park or knowing where she had to sign in and out each day or even knowing that she had to sign in and out each day. Like Grace, Lynn also tried emailing her mentor with her questions or concerns. When asked how long it took her mentor to reply, Lynn’s reply was “about a day or two.”

Sub-category 2: Experiencing limited access to mentor.

Experiencing limited access to mentor was another outcome that interfered with the success of the mentoring program. Several of the participants felt they had missed many opportunities to meet with their mentor because of differing schedules, not being in close proximity to their mentor, or not having the time to meet with their mentor during or after school.

Abby shared the following about the lack of opportunities to meet with her mentor: “I don’t get to see her as much as I wish I could because we have different schedules, and she’s a little further down the hall, so we have a little bit harder time to meet. But that’s not her fault.” Abby continued by saying,

It’s hard to find time because of the time limits. We have so much to do that that’s the only problem I have is that I don’t have much time to meet with her and she’s busy planning and doing things, too. It’s not her fault, and it’s not necessarily mine. It’s just getting that extra time in there.
Lynn and her mentor examined their schedules and located a forty-minute block of time each week to meet during the school day. Lynn’s mentor approached their administrator with their plan:

She did actually go to our administration and ask for permission for us to meet. She was willing to share her parapro, combine our classes, and maybe do a creative activity with the kids where they would be combined so that she and I could meet. However, the administration was not willing to let us do that. Therefore, that put a damper, I believe, on our meeting schedules.

While Abby and Lynn experienced problems finding time to meet with their mentors, Katie spent her first year in the classroom without a mentor. Katie met her mentor during preplanning when her mentor came to Katie’s room to help her arrange her classroom. They talked about a convenient scheduled meeting day each week and what they wanted to accomplish during the year, and her mentor showed Katie all the textbooks and where they were stored. Soon after this meeting, her mentor experienced some health issues and asked the administrators to relieve her of her mentoring responsibilities. At this point, the administrator could be expected to locate another mentor for Katie. However, this event did not occur, and Katie was left without a mentor. Several months later, a teacher who had previously taught on Katie’s grade level became aware of her plight and immediately volunteered to be Katie's mentor.

Category 4 showed both the positive and negative outcomes of the beginning teachers’ experiences in their respective mentoring programs. The beginning teachers experienced improved morale, enhanced classroom instruction skills, and strategies to assist them in managing conflict. In addition, several of the beginning teachers suffered negative consequences because of the lack of organization of their mentoring program and because of limited access to their mentors.
Category 5: Experiencing Growth in Teacher Self-Confidence

Category 5: Experiencing growth in teacher self-confidence was identified as the underlying theme of the participant’s experiences in their mentoring programs. Teachers felt confident in planning and implementing instruction, interacting with their peers, and managing their classrooms. The concept of teacher self-confidence is discussed as it relates to this study.

The idea of self-confidence is typically associated with a belief in oneself and in one’s abilities. This idea fits with the findings of this study, for the beginning teachers had gained an understanding of their abilities and strengths and had begun to build confidence in their abilities and strengths through practice. The support of their mentor had been instrumental in achieving this level of self-confidence.

The beginning teachers in this study felt confident designing and implementing learning opportunities for their students. They acknowledged areas of need for their students and sought resources in those areas. Diane shared that her mentor’s words of advice kept coming back to her: “Why don’t you try this and if that’s not working, try this.” Diane continued by saying, “It is just the experience of constantly determining and locating what’s going to work with your students.” According to Mia Lauren, “If you feel more confident with what you are doing and that you are doing the right thing, then you feel better about your teaching.”

The beginning teachers in this study felt confident in being received as a contributing member of their school’s faculty. Michelle’s transition from paraprofessional to teacher in the same school made her wonder how she would be received by other members of the faculty. Her mentor provided the encouragement needed to make this transition successfully and to feel valued as a member of the teaching staff. Denise, too, felt valued as a member of the teaching staff at her school and felt that her experiences with her mentor had helped her become more
confident. She no longer felt like the “low man on the totem pole who doesn’t know what you’re doing.”

According to this study, beginning teachers felt more confident about beginning the next school year even without the support of a mentor. Terry observed that she was more prepared and organized when preparing for the new school year. She had implemented some of the strategies in behavior management and reading lessons learned from her mentor. Organization and time management are other areas in which she felt she was building from last year’s experience. Terry commented, “I have noticed a lot of things we did last year have really come alive this year and I am really trying to make them work and keep working on them.”

Chapter 4 has presented the findings of this study. Three major themes and eleven categories, which represent the recurring ideas in the beginning teachers’ perspectives on their mentoring programs in Taylor, Mills, and Edward counties in rural north Georgia, were defined, described, and illustrated. In the next chapter, the research is summarized, the findings are discussed, and the implications of the research are set forth.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the perspectives of ten beginning teachers in mentoring programs in rural elementary schools in Georgia. In this chapter, the research study is summarized; the findings are discussed; and the implications for future research, for practitioners, and for institutions of higher education are presented.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to explore beginning teachers’ perspectives on their mentoring programs and to propose theoretical ideas, grounded in the data, to explain their perspectives. The research was guided by two research questions: (a) What are the beginning teachers’ experiences in their respective mentoring programs? and (b) What do these experiences mean to the beginning teachers? This study was conducted in elementary schools in three rural counties where beginning teacher mentoring programs were both promoted and facilitated.

The research design used in the study was grounded theory. In accordance with grounded theory methodology, purposeful sampling was used to select the participants, and in-depth, face-to-face interviews and follow-up interviews were conducted with ten participants during the spring and summer of 2004. Constant comparative analysis was used to collect, code, and analyze the data, which included interview responses and researcher’s memos. Recurring ideas in participants’ responses were identified and organized into three main themes and eleven categories, and theoretical meta-themes grounded in the data emerged from on-going analysis and interpretation of the data. Despite the researcher’s use of probes and other interviewing
techniques, the participants’ responses were impacted by the elements of professional experience and career exposure.

The results of this study suggest that beginning teachers form relationships with their mentors based on accessibility of the mentor and personal and emotional support from the mentor. Beginning teachers and mentors take initiative in forming these relationships. This study also reveals that beginning teachers interact with mentors in a variety of ways. These interactions include curriculum support, instructional support, classroom management support, and parental problem support. The data in this study demonstrate that beginning teachers’ relationships and interactions with mentors result in several outcomes. These shared outcomes include improvements in teacher morale, teacher instruction, and conflict resolution management. Teachers also identified several challenges in the mentoring programs.

Discussion

The findings of this study were presented in Chapter 4. The purpose of this section is to present a thorough discussion of the major findings from this study, specifically how these findings are significant in relation to existing literature on beginning teachers’ experiences in mentoring programs. In the second section, the metathemes that emerged from the findings are discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Discussion of Beginning Teachers’ Experiences in Mentoring Programs

In a time when high attrition rates among beginning teachers have placed renewed emphasis on providing mentoring programs for all beginning teachers, an in-depth study of beginning teachers’ experiences in their respective mentoring programs in rural elementary schools is important. This study shows that, under the umbrella of their respective mentoring programs, the participating beginning teachers formed relationships with their mentors. These
relationships resulted from experiences shared with the mentor and were supportive, not evaluative. These findings are consistent with the teacher mentoring literature that emphasizes the importance of relationships and teacher mentoring. Rowley (1999) wrote, “The primary role of the mentor teacher should be that of a support provider rather than a formal evaluator.”

This study demonstrated that accessibility of the mentor enhanced the relationship between the beginning teacher and the mentor. When mentors were accessible, beginning teachers sought assistance from their mentors more frequently and more openly. These findings are consistent with Certo’s (2002) view that accessibility of the mentor enables the mentor teacher and the beginning teacher to maintain contact on a more frequent and less structured basis.

Consistent with the literature (Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2002), this study found that personal and emotional support provided the beginning teachers by their mentors was an important part of the mentoring relationship. This personal and emotional support included positive encouragement and caring and strengthened the relationship between the beginning teachers and their mentors. The formation of these relationships provided the foundation for interactions to take place.

This study found that the beginning teachers shared many interactions with their mentors; through these interactions, information, ideas, and opinions were exchanged in a wide array of areas. Mentors in this study interacted with the beginning teachers by assisting them in their understanding and implementation of the curriculum. This finding is consistent with the mentoring literature that emphasizes the importance of mentors partnering with beginning teachers to understand, make meaning of, and use the various curriculum frameworks (Moir & Gless, 2001).
This study also found that the beginning teachers received instructional support from their mentors, including learning new ways to teach their students and new ways to implement instructional programs. As Rowley (1999) stated, “A quality of a good mentor is the ability to provide instructional support. Through the mentoring relationship, a good mentor is willing to coach beginning teachers to improve their performance regardless of their skill level.”

Another finding of this study was that beginning teachers received classroom management support from their mentors, including the management of time, space, and student behavior. As argued by Brock and Grady (1998), in the area of classroom management, mentors can help reduce the high levels of dread and anxiety experienced by most beginning teachers by encouraging ongoing dialogue, sharing classroom management strategies, and modeling appropriate teacher-student relationships.

Beginning teachers in this study received support from their mentors in dealing with parental problems, including communicating with parents about issues related to instruction and curriculum, as well as situations in which the parent and teacher had reached an impasse. Brock and Grady (1998) recommended that the beginning teacher be provided support in preparing for parent-teacher conferences and conferences requested by the beginning teacher or parents to discuss special problems.

This study found that the beginning teachers experienced improved morale because of the experiences and interactions they shared with their mentor. Weiss and Weiss (1999) stated that new teachers who spend their first year in mentoring relationships are likely to have higher morale, have a stronger commitment to teaching, and remain in the profession.

Beginning teachers revealed that working with mentors helped them improve the instruction they provided to their students in a number of ways. Through interactions with their
mentors, the teachers improved their classroom instruction by learning to plan better, experimenting with new ideas, and implementing programs more effectively. Schaffer et al. (1992) found that helping teachers focus on instructional issues can help increase academic time and lower time spent on organizational issues and behavior problems.

Beginning teachers in this study improved their conflict resolution management through working with their mentors to minimize the opportunities for undesirable behaviors to manifest themselves. Spivak and Prothorow-Smith (2001) stated that the prevention of certain undesirable behaviors involves limiting the factors that encourage these behaviors.

Two challenges to the success of mentoring programs were revealed in this study. Limited access to the mentor because of inadequate time and lack of proximity was one of those challenges. Brewster and Railsback (2001) warned that administrators need to build into the school schedule regular times for mentors and mentees to meet. Brock and Grady (2001) argued for the importance of proximity in creating a close working relationship between the mentor and the new teacher. Another challenge to the mentoring program’s success was the lack of support from administrators. Brock and Grady (2001) stated that principals often play a make-or-break role in the success of teacher mentoring programs and that any endeavor that requires teachers, both new and experienced, to take on additional responsibilities requires full administrative support. Zimmerman and Stansbury (2000) explained the role of a mentor in the growth of a beginning teacher’s confidence:

Support providers must recognize the importance of helping beginners identify and understand their teaching strengths. Recognizing and understanding their successes not only provides an enormous boost in confidence, but also helps beginning teachers build on those strengths.
Discussion of Metathemes

Five metathemes emerged from the data collected in this study. In this section, these metathemes are presented and discussed in relation to relevant research on mentoring support, mentor and beginning teacher relationships, administrator’s level of involvement with the mentoring program, and beginning teacher self-confidence.

First, as the results of the study indicate, when beginning teachers are given support in implementing curriculum and instructional support, student achievement is enhanced. Results of this study show that mentors supported new teachers in their implementation of the curriculum. In her study of beginning teachers in a mentoring program, Certo (2002) found that among those teachers who participated in a mentor activity at least once a week, 70% indicated that the mentoring activities had considerably improved their teaching. Teachers in this study desired to improve their instruction in language arts and math to enhance the achievement of their students and sought support from their mentors to accomplish this goal. Teachers also wanted to learn how to implement the Direct Instruction curriculum better to maximize its potential to improve their students’ reading ability. Finally, teachers sought alternate methods of instruction to reach those students who were struggling with traditional methods.

Second, when mentors make themselves accessible to beginning teachers, the beginning teachers are more likely to reach out to their mentors for advice and support. This study demonstrated the importance of mentor availability to the beginning teacher on a frequent basis. Zimmerman and Stansbury (2000) stressed the importance of frequent visits from the mentor as a way to minimize the teacher’s sense of isolation, of showing supportiveness, and of providing a forum for discussing issues teachers are facing before they become overwhelming. Mentors of teachers in the present study made frequent visits to the teachers’ classrooms to answer
questions, offer advice, and provide materials. Mountain View Elementary, a rural school with 750 students in grades K-5, was the largest school in the study. Most of the other rural schools in this study had 500 or fewer students in grades K-5. In these smaller rural schools the accessibility of the mentor was enhanced because of the smaller physical plan and the lower number of teachers and staff members. In addition to visits to the teachers’ classrooms, mentors also consulted with the teachers during lunch, recess, or other periods during the day when they were together. Mentors also encouraged the teachers to phone them at home in the evenings if the need arose.

Third, when beginning teachers feel their mentors are personally and emotionally supporting them, they view the mentor as more than a peer. Wildman, Magliaro, Niles, and Niles (1992) described the personal and emotional support provided to beginning teachers as positive encouragement and caring. In this study, teachers viewed their mentors as friends, sisters, and mothers because of the personal and emotional support provided to them. In several instances, the mentors and beginning teachers had previously worked together while the teacher was completing her degree coursework. In other instances, as often found in rural areas, the mentors and beginning teachers either lived in the same community or had already established a relationship prior to their engagement in the mentoring program. Mentors provided positive encouragement and caring for the teachers and invested time and energy in nurturing the relationships with the teachers. Mentors also maintained confidentiality, which afforded the teachers the freedom to share their concerns, frustrations, and anger with their mentor. The first year of teaching is especially stressful due to the effort required to plan every lesson, teach with unfamiliar materials, and, often, teach at an unfamiliar grade level. Mentors can serve as a sounding board and assure beginning teachers that their experience is normal, offer sympathy
and perspective, and provide advice to help reduce the inevitable stress. While such support does little to improve teaching performance directly, it improves the likelihood that teachers will remain in the teaching profession long enough to have the opportunity to become effective practitioners.

Fourth, the study reveals that when mentors help beginning teachers learn to deal with extreme behavior problems, the teachers gain confidence in their abilities to handle behaviors of these types. Brock and Grady (2001) stated that classroom discipline problems have a negative effect on teacher effectiveness, satisfaction, and longevity. When the high levels of enthusiasm and effort of a beginning teacher are met with disruptive student behaviors, enthusiasm wanes. Levine and Nolan (2000) reported that the time and energy devoted to disruptions lead to emotional exhaustion and feelings of failure and are a major reason that beginning teachers sometimes leave the profession. In this study, mentors assisted teachers in managing student behavior by helping the teacher analyze the behavior intervention strategies being used in the classroom and helping the teacher discern why they were not effective. Mentors also visited the teachers’ classrooms to observe how the teacher interacted with the student when he displayed inappropriate behavior. Following the visit, notes from the observation were shared with the teacher, and the mentor worked with the teacher to analyze the impact the interactions had on the student’s behavior. Mentors helped teachers create and implement an individual incentive plan for those students requiring additional assistance in maintaining appropriate behavior. Documenting the student’s inappropriate behavior with a behavior log was another way in which mentors helped teachers deal with extreme behavior problems.

Fifth, the findings from the study indicate that when administrators do not offer full support to the mentoring program, the quality of the program is diminished. A major goal of
administrators and veteran teachers should be to help teachers entering the profession remain in the profession. This study found that administrators had limited involvement in the mentoring programs in their schools, based on the finding that one beginning teacher was without a mentor for the entire year while another beginning teacher was not assigned a mentor until several months of the school year had passed. This finding confirmed the conclusion of a study conducted by Hughes (1994) that principals have a tacit understanding of the role they have in working with beginning teachers. While they have clear beliefs and values concerning their responsibility to assist the beginning teacher, they seldom execute that role in administrative practice. Brock and Grady (2001) declared that administrators could promote a successful mentoring relationship by matching beginning teachers with an accessible mentor who shares a similar teaching assignment and schedule. This coordination would allow the mentor and the beginning teacher opportunities and common ground for frequent informal kinds of communication. Further evidence of administrator’s limited involvement were the situation in which one beginning teacher had been assigned to a mentor who was not at her school and two beginning teachers had been assigned to mentors whose classrooms were located in distant parts of the building from their classroom. Brock and Grady (2001) recommended that release time should be scheduled for mentors and beginning teachers to work together. When one of the mentors devised a plan to enable her to meet with her mentor for forty minutes each week during the school day, she approached her administrator expecting full agreement. However, the administrator did not accept the mentor’s plan, nor did he assist her in devising another plan to allow release time to work with her teacher.
Summarizing, the findings of this study contribute to the body of existing literature on beginning teacher mentoring programs, rural schools, and beginning teacher and mentor relationships. Most notably,

1. This study was different from previous studies of beginning teacher mentoring programs because it focused on the experiences of beginning teachers in mentoring programs in rural elementary schools and provided an in-depth look at the relationships that developed between the beginning teachers and their mentors.

2. This study found that through their interactions, the relationships that developed between the beginning teacher and her mentor were of a closer, more personal nature than relationships described in other mentoring studies.

In conclusion, the data from this study indicate that the experiences of the beginning teachers in their mentoring programs in Taylor, Mills, and Edward counties in rural north Georgia facilitated a positive, successful first year. Engagement in the mentoring relationship led to supportive interactions, which provided the means for positive outcomes and the strength to overcome the challenges identified by the beginning teachers.

Implications

In this section, the implications of the findings of this study are discussed. Implications for further research are followed by implications for practitioners and implications for colleges and universities.

Implications for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate the beginning teachers’ perspectives on their experiences in their respective mentoring programs. The mentoring programs in Taylor, Mills,
and Edward counties were largely effective in providing support for beginning teachers and affecting classroom instruction in positive ways.

In the current era of educational reform, further in-depth study of effective mentoring programs and of the strategies used in these programs is warranted for two reasons. First, the No Child Left Behind Act makes the effectiveness of instruction a major concern for every school in the nation. This study has established that the mentoring practices associated with the relationship between the beginning teacher and her mentor improved the effectiveness of classroom instruction, making further study of mentoring practices a worthy pursuit. Second, this study has demonstrated that the mentoring relationship added an additional level of support for beginning teachers, enabling them to reach new levels of self-confidence. This finding supports the need for further study of mentoring programs and mentoring relationships, especially with the current focus on nationwide teacher recruitment and retention problems. Therefore, in-depth studies of mentoring programs and mentoring relationships in high schools, middle schools, and other elementary schools would be fruitful, as would comparative studies at each school level and across school levels.

Additional studies of mentoring programs in rural areas at the high school, middle school, and elementary school levels would also be beneficial. These studies would add to the small database of information about beginning teachers in rural schools. The recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools is an area in which little research has been completed (Harmon et al., 1996). The anticipated nationwide teacher shortage will have an impact on rural areas, especially as they struggle to attract and retain highly qualified teachers in the areas of math, science, and special education.
The beginning teachers in this study indicated several ways students benefited from the mentoring program. Teachers mentioned that students received better instruction and achieved some academic gains. A goal of additional research would be to investigate the following question: Do the students of beginning teachers in mentoring programs make greater academic gains than do the students of beginning teachers not in mentoring programs?

Few research studies exist that have tracked teachers longitudinally in order to add to the knowledge of how teachers develop over time, as most studies on learning to teach are conducted during the first year of teaching. Additional longitudinal research involving teachers who have participated in a mentoring program would provide insight into how the mentoring program has affected their development as a teacher as well as their decision to remain in the profession.

**Implications for K-12 Mentoring Programs**

Mentors in this study received training in preparation for working with the beginning teachers. They attended fifty hours of class where they reviewed the literature on beginning teacher mentoring programs, created a resource notebook with information about the school and community, role-played various beginning teacher-mentor scenarios, discussed ways to initiate and maintain good relationships with the beginning teachers, and familiarized themselves with the Georgia teacher evaluation program. This training provided them with a set of skills and resources to use in mentoring a beginning teacher. The word *mentor* can be a title, or it can refer to an influential professional capable of establishing a personal relationship with a new teacher in need of guidance. Effective training can make the difference.

Schools considering establishing a mentoring program should implement similar training for the mentors. The majority of this training needs to be completed prior to the mentor working with the beginning teacher; additional opportunities to meet with other mentors and program
administrators throughout the year should be provided (Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2002). Mentors should be paid, given release time, or otherwise rewarded for participating in the program. Certo (2002) asserted that these benefits make the experience less burdensome on the mentor and let the beginning teacher feel more comfortable taking up the mentor’s time.

This study revealed that when administrators are not fully supportive of the mentoring program, the quality of the program is diminished. When establishing a mentoring program, the role of the administrator should be clearly defined with well-established expectations for how the administrator can provide this much-needed support. Chester (1992) concluded that principals could positively affect the success of beginning teachers by promoting opportunities for adult collaboration, as found in the mentoring program, and by providing administrator attention to the beginning teacher.

Activities designed to welcome beginning teachers into the school and to assist them in becoming acclimated to the school environment should occur prior to the beginning of the school year. Zepeda and Ponticell’s (1997) findings indicate that the activities that made beginning teachers feel part of the school were those that occurred before the beginning of the school year. In addition, ongoing induction efforts and the personnel associated with these efforts had the most prominent effect on making them feel part of their respective schools.

**Implications for Colleges and Universities**

First, institutions of higher learning could collaborate with K-12 schools to develop several methods to support new teachers. Although the types of partnerships that could be developed would depend largely on the school’s proximity to a university education program, not all collaborations would require that schools and colleges be located in the same town. Videoconferencing, email, and Internet software could be used to facilitate communication with
college faculty members and other participating schools. Joint efforts to support new teachers would include school leaders and education professors working together to develop mentoring and induction programs. College faculty members could be available to problem solve and discuss concerns with beginning teachers (DePaul, 2000), could be invited to lead seminars on topics of importance for new teachers, or could train mentor teachers (Schaffer et al., 1992). Schools in rural areas could hold these workshops online or through videoconferencing.

Second, graduate programs in education should include coursework that provides a curriculum similar to the curriculum on which the Teacher Support Specialist program is based. The course outline should include a review of the research on beginning teacher mentoring programs and the role of the mentor, the creation of a resource notebook with information about the school and community, and the opportunity to role-play various beginning teacher-mentor scenarios. In addition, the course should include discussions about how to initiate and maintain good relationships with beginning teachers and provide the opportunity to become familiar with and be able to explain to a beginning teacher the components of the Georgia teacher evaluation program.

This chapter has provided a summary of the study and a detailed discussion of the findings as they relate to relevant literature. Implications of the study’s findings for further research, for K-12 mentoring programs, and for colleges and universities were presented and discussed. Perhaps the most effective way to conclude this study is to use the words of Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) that describe the ultimate goal of teacher mentoring programs: “The goal is not to create high-quality mentor programs as ends in themselves, but rather to incorporate mentoring as part and parcel of transforming teaching into a true learning profession” (p. 56).
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

BEGINNING TEACHER STUDY DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Pseudonym: ____________________________

Age: ________

How do you describe yourself?

______ American Indian or Alaskan Native
______ Asian
______ Black or African American
______ Hispanic or Latino
______ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
______ White, non-Hispanic, non-Latino
______ Other

Did you participate in a student-teaching experience? __________
If so, in what school did this student-teaching experience take place?

________________________________________________________________________

What grade are you currently teaching? ________

Number of students in your class? ________

Number of teachers at your grade level? ________

Highest degree (Beside the highest degree you have earned, list the institution from which it was obtained.):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors degree:</td>
<td>__________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters degree:</td>
<td>__________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed. S.:</td>
<td>__________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate:</td>
<td>__________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (Specify):</td>
<td>__________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

BEGINNING TEACHER STUDY CONSENT FORM

An examination of beginning teachers’ perspectives of mentoring programs in rural elementary schools

Consent Form
I agree to take part in a research study titled Beginning teachers’ perspectives of mentoring programs in rural elementary schools conducted by Deborah Longshore (XXX-XXX-XXX) from the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Georgia under the direction of Dr. Jo Blase, Department of Educational Leadership (XXX-XXX-XXX). I do not have to be in this study if I do not want to be; I can stop taking part at any time without giving reason and without penalty. I can ask to have information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- The purpose of this study is to explore beginning teachers’ experiences in mentoring programs in rural elementary schools.
- There may be some benefit to me for agreeing to take part. I will be given an opportunity to reflect orally on my experiences as a first year teacher. This may lead to the development and/or expansion of mentoring programs designed for first year teachers.
- If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following:
  Participate in two interviews (approximately 45 minutes in length) with the researcher. Both of the interviews will be scheduled within an approximate three-month period and will be held at a time and place agreeable to both the researcher and myself. The interviews will be tape-recorded.
  After the interviews, the tapes will be made into written records that use made-up names. If I request it, I will receive a written copy of the interviews.
- No discomfort or stress is anticipated during the interviews.
- No risks are expected.
- Any information obtained about me as a participant in this study, including my identity, will be held confidential except as required by law. My identity will be protected with a made-up name, and all data, including audiotapes, will be kept in a secured, limited access location for the duration of the study. The audiotapes will be erased by December 2004. My identity will not be revealed in any publication of the results of this study.
- The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project. The researcher, Deborah Longshore, can be reached at XXX-XXX-XXXX or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.
Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D., Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu