Mentoring has been defined as a “nurturing process in which a skilled or more experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter’s professional and/or personal development” (Anderson & Shannon, 1988, p. 40). Given the complex challenges facing beginning teachers, mentoring is an effective element in teacher induction programs (Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003). By helping increase early-career teachers’ satisfaction and self-confidence, mentoring can help reduce attrition (Whitaker, 2001).

This article demonstrates 20 ways to strengthen the mentoring process by providing practical suggestions for mentors and mentees about how to be successful as they work together.

Get Ready for Your Mentor–Mentee Relationship

For the Mentor: Get Ready to Be an Effective Mentor. To prepare yourself for a successful relationship with your mentee, consider the traits of your most effective working relationships with other colleagues. Think about those traits and how they can be used to forge your mentor–mentee relationship. Check the strengths and weaknesses in your teaching skills, classroom and behavior management, personal communication, and professional ethics. In addition, determine what supports you have to do this job (e.g., principal’s support, release time to observe and conference with a mentee). Look for ways to build the relationship in comfortable and trustful ways. Be excited about the opportunity to help a beginning teacher settle into his or her first job, hone professional skills, and gain greater confidence as a teacher.
For the Mentee: Get Ready to Be an Effective Mentee. First of all, it is important to understand that asking for advice, support, and encouragement does not mean that you are not a good teacher! Instead, it will help you be more successful and more confident sooner. To ensure the mentoring relationship will provide the help you need, ask yourself a few questions in advance. Be prepared to tell your mentor about yourself and what you’d like to gain through the relationship. For example, you might ask your mentor about how he or she manages time to meet all professional responsibilities, where to obtain information about the school system, and where and how to get instructional materials and resources. Think about how having a mentor will be helpful. Acknowledge how it will be a relationship that is different from your relationships with other colleagues. Compare your communication styles and professional ethics with those of your mentor.

For the Mentor: Share Your Professional Vision. Based on your knowledge and experience, create a vision statement for yourself and share it with your mentee. Encourage your mentee to do the same. Identify current or future goals related to your vision about school, your role, and student outcomes. In conversations with your mentee, try to focus on refining and enhancing skills and expectations. Share with your mentee how you shaped your philosophy through beliefs, conflicts about your role and relationships with others, and the process of addressing those conflicts. Develop resources that will help your mentee refine his or her vision, such as reference books, Web sites, journal articles, and conversations with other colleagues who can share strategies and classroom success stories.

For the Mentee: Explore and Cultivate Your Professional Expectations. Think about your beliefs about teaching before you became a teacher. What have you learned thus far? Identify gaps between previous expectations and the realities you face. Prepare questions for your mentor about how to narrow these gaps (e.g., What are appropriate and realistic expectations for school and student outcomes? What was the most challenging conflict that you experienced? How did you manage the conflict? What is the first step in shaping my own philosophy?). As you work with your mentor to create your own vision and teaching goals for the year, make a checklist to monitor your daily attitudes and activities to reach these objectives.

Cultivate Effective and Ongoing Communication

For the Mentor: Embrace Your Ability to Communicate. Open communication is one of the most important aspects in developing interpersonal and professional trust with your mentee. Communication includes verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as digital or handwritten notes of encouragement. Supportiveness, personal engagement, well-chosen words, confidence, integrity, and credibility are integral aspects to consider when you communicate with your mentee.

Another component is effective listening. Your ability to be an empathetic and focused listener is a key factor in your success as a mentor. Your ability to listen and learn about your mentee’s interests, needs, and goals will help you facilitate trust, openness, and willingness to investigate multiple points of view. It will also
help you work together toward common goals related to your mentee’s professional development, effective day-to-day classroom management, and successful student outcomes.

For the Mentee: Embrace Your Ability to Communicate. As a mentee, it is important to remember that open communication should always occur within a context. Although it is important to “own” your feelings and talk candidly about your frustrations with your mentor, your ability to describe issues and concerns as objectively as possible will facilitate more effective problem solving and communication skill development. The mentor’s role is to help you understand your own role and responsibilities, learn to find solutions effectively, and expand your array of skills required to handle various situations that you will encounter throughout your career. Although listening openly to your mentor’s suggestions and feedback is an important dimension of this relationship, it is also essential to keep in mind what you know. Your understanding of research-based strategies, your enthusiasm, and your fresh perspectives are powerful tools. In conversations with your mentor, be willing to share your point of view, even if it differs from that of your mentor, and take the time to resolve conflicts that may arise. Be prepared, ask good questions, and hold high expectations that your work together will be enriching experiences for both of you.

Plan, Organize, and Manage

For the Mentor: Plan for Daily Activities, Lessons, and Classroom Management. Planning, organizing, and managing daily routines, lesson plans, classroom environment, and student needs are challenging activities for even the most experienced teacher. Help your mentee create a schedule that will maximize students’ learning and involvement in the curriculum without his or her repeating material and feeling ineffective. Assist your mentee in developing daily and weekly schedules that meet students’ learning needs and are doable. When creating a schedule together, look closely at students’ individual needs and consider lunchtime and special class periods, as well as the times students will be leaving to receive various services. Share helpful tips and strategies that make planning and organizing simpler. Provide information and ideas you and your colleagues find effective. Arrange for your mentee to discuss various classroom concerns with the local experts, and, if possible, cover your mentee’s class to facilitate observation of effective teacher models in the school.

For the Mentee: Plan for Daily Activities, Lessons, and Classroom Management. Accept assistance in daily planning strategies. The first weeks of school are often overwhelming. Learning how to create lesson plans that match your principal’s expectations, developing schedules and routines that maximize student learning, and managing daily events can be rewarding and frustrating. Share your concerns, and do not be afraid to ask for help. Some suggestions offered by your mentor may not work the first time or may need some modification to ensure a good fit with your own personal or professional style. Ask to see examples of lesson plans and weekly schedules. Be open to meeting and discussing some of your concerns with your mentor before the students arrive the first day. This will ease many frustrations as the year progresses.
For the Mentor: Create a Network of Support. Building relationships with others in the school and the school district is crucial to the success of early-career teachers. New teachers need to know whom to contact for immediate help (e.g., classroom maintenance and emergencies) and for ongoing assistance (e.g., supplies, equipment checkout, and technology support). Districts often have different policies on checking out materials and supplies. Policies may even vary from school to school. And although some schools have a technology person in the building, often there can be a staff that services the whole district. It is important to share the best way to make contact and leave messages to receive assistance.

In addition, new teachers need to learn about family and community resources and support, as well as procedures for accessing available services. For example, local businesses in the community may be willing to contribute to schools and classrooms; individuals may be willing to donate time or supplies; and community doctors, firefighters, or grocery clerks may be willing to add their knowledge to thematic units or donate supplies to classroom projects. Share resource information with your mentee and introduce him or her to school community supporters.

For the Mentee: Create a Network of Support. Building relationships and finding supplies often can be frustrating for new teachers. Getting acquainted with other educators and the staff in your building, as well as the district, should take place at the beginning of the school year. Meeting others will help you locate needed resources in a timely manner, which allows more time to focus on high-priority teaching responsibilities. Ask your mentor where supplies are located and whom to contact for specific resources. If your school district offers orientation for new teachers, take notes on how to access the supplies you need. Also, note how to contact someone for such things as technical support. The school should have access to family and community resources. Learn what support is available and the procedures for making help available for students and their families.

Share Professional Knowledge With Each Other

For the Mentor: Share Information and Knowledge. Research has shown that many new teachers are reluctant to seek help from experienced teachers and that veteran teachers are disinclined to offer support to novice teachers for fear they will be intruding (Glidewell, Tucker, Todt, & Cox, 1983; Lortie, 1975; Whitaker, 2001). Effective mentoring allows you to reach out to your mentee in non-threatening ways. Modeling a process of systematic sharing is an invitation to the process of giving and receiving that occurs among colleagues. As a mentor, ask if your mentee can
assist you by, for example, recommending Web sites on a content area or helping on an intervention. In turn, you can ask if your mentee would like information on materials or ideas from you.

**For the Mentee: Share Information and Knowledge.** Participate in sharing opportunities, information, and ideas with veteran colleagues. Do not underestimate your professional knowledge. You may be more familiar with cutting-edge, research-based interventions, Web sites, or instructional methods, such as positive behavior supports, than they are. Remember that you have a lot of information, knowledge, and enthusiasm that you can offer to your mentor in return for the support you receive. Intervention readings from your teacher education classes, instructional materials, and other professional development handouts are all tangible assets you can share with colleagues. This process will help build your support network and enhance your credibility.

**Engage in Collaborative Problem Solving**

**For the Mentor: Solve, Resolve, and Evolve.** Continue to remind your mentee that conflicts and stressful situations are bound to occur within any school environment. Assist your mentee in identifying the roots of problems that emerge and help him or her hone problem-solving skills. Stress the importance of approaching situations calmly and with a positive attitude. Help your mentee stay focused on the resolution rather than on the problem. Create a relaxed and unbiased climate that allows the mentee to evolve or move forward with a plan of action. Help and support your mentee’s efforts to implement solutions, monitor progress, and make modifications as appropriate to build confidence and ensure success.

**For the Mentee: Solve, Resolve, and Evolve.** When school conflicts arise, confront problems professionally. Whenever necessary, consult with your mentor and talk about your feelings and concerns. Be honest in your self-assessment. Generate solutions and make a list of advantages and disadvantages of each. Then determine which solutions will produce the best resolutions. Make your best decision and evolve or advance toward making the stressful situation better. Remember to be open-minded to other points of view and be willing to collaborate, cooperate, and compromise. Keep in mind that to achieve successful outcomes, modifications may be required over time.

**Strengthen Your Interpersonal Communication Skills**

**For the Mentor: Create a Repertoire of Effective Consultation Skills.** Write a diary related to your problem-solving process; it will help you remember issues you encountered and how you solved them. Share these experiences with your mentee. Guide your mentee to clarify his or her problems by asking questions and provide consultation accordingly. Prepare a list of questions to guide the conversation before you meet, including What were the most difficult tasks that you did in school and class? Were there any students or teachers with whom you have troublesome relationships? How did you deal with the problem? Did it work? Last, but not least, be sensitive to the emotional needs of your mentee and provide emotional support with your guidance. Emotional support is one of the best indicators of effective mentoring (Whitaker, 2000). A few
words that show your understanding of your mentee’s conflicts can be powerful support (e.g., Say, “I know this is a challenging situation for you. Let us look at some ways to ease the frustration together.”). By allowing the mentee to see a positive attitude toward dealing with the problem and the way to work through the situation, you will help him or her gain the courage to face it again.

**For the Mentee: Create a Repertoire of Effective Consultation Skills.** Define your problems and prepare detailed questions for your mentor. The more you prepare, the better your mentor can assist you. To clarify your problems, weaknesses, and strengths, write a daily reflection diary and share your problems, issues, and ideas for improvement with your mentee. Set regular weekly meeting times with your mentor. In between these sessions, develop other communication channels, such as e-mail, phone, message board, and informal meetings (e.g., after-school “walk and talk” sessions).

**Provide Caring and Constructive Feedback**

**For the Mentor: Consider How You Want to Be Treated.** Effective feedback is closely tied to open communication. An important consideration is the context in which constructive feedback is offered. For example, as a mentor you may provide direct verbal or written feedback based on a review of a lesson you observed. Some key points to remember include the following: Always start with positive comments, provide a general description of the observation, analyze the mentee’s strengths and weaknesses, provide suggestions for further improvement, and end with a positive statement, such as “Thanks, Tracey, for letting me observe; I really enjoyed watching you in action and look forward to our next observation.” Remember that maintaining a sense of humor is always a plus in the mentor–mentee relationship. Consider the manner you expect to be treated when receiving feedback from others (parents, building administrators, and other faculty members), and employ these same principles when sharing with your mentee. This can lead to a greater collaborative experience.

**For the Mentee: Consider How You Want to Be Treated.** Fear not. As a mentee, providing constructive feedback to your mentor can be difficult, because you may perceive that your mentor holds power over you and your future. However, if your mentor has established a trusting climate, your constructive comments will help him or her become a better mentor. Some key points to remember include the following: Always start with positive comments, provide a general description of how you believe the observation went, analyze your strengths and weaknesses, and provide solutions of how you can improve. For example, you might ask, “At times I think I move around too much. The next time you observe, would you look for my movement around the classroom?” Always try to end with a positive statement, such as “Thank you, Jerry, for observing me and providing excellent feedback and suggestions.” Or consider using “I” statements: “I appreciate your taking the time to come in and observe me and providing the behavioral strategies. However, I have already tried this strategy and it didn’t work. Could you give me another possible solution?” Finally, remember that maintaining a sense of humor is always a plus in the mentor–mentee relationship.
**Strive for Balance in Your Relationship**

**For the Mentor: Strike a Balance.**
To be an effective mentor, strike a balance in your relationship with your mentee so that you avoid abusing your authority as a mentor. Create a checklist to help you monitor this balance. For example, do you strike a balance between

- providing advice for your mentee and listening to what he or she really needs?
- providing support for your mentee and empowering him or her to make good decisions?
- relying on your own professional knowledge and confidence and being flexible in accepting new ideas from your mentee?

**For the Mentee: Strike a Balance.**
Monitor how you adjust to the new work environment and relationships in school so you can have good work habits for your long-term career; that is, maintain a balance between your personal and professional life. Also strive to have a reciprocal relationship with your mentor—share your enthusiasm, new ideas, and appreciation for your mentor’s support. Beginning your teaching career is hard; spend time with positive colleagues who enjoy their work. Strive to maintain a balance between healthy optimism and effective problem solving. Create a checklist that includes questions that monitor your balance. For instance, do you strike a balance between

- working hard and managing time and energy effectively?
- depending on your mentor and being independent and proactive?
- being optimistic and realistic about professional challenges you face?

Ask your mentor’s advice about striking a balance and what kinds of questions to add to your checklists for monitoring your balance.

This article has provided practical suggestions to help strengthen relationships between mentors and mentees. For these relationships to be successful, they need a foundation of effective communication, mutual respect and trust, and genuine cooperation. When these ingredients are present, positive outcomes are possible for mentees and mentors.

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