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# A Teacher's Journey: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experience of Beginning Teachers

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A Teacher's Journey: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experience of  
Beginning Teachers

By  
Wanda Margarette Brubaker

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2016

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Wanda Margarette Brubaker under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## **Abstract**

A Teacher's Journey: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Beginning Teachers. Brubaker, Wanda Margarete, 2016: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Reflection/Challenges/Beginning Teachers/Retention/Classroom Management/Preparedness

This study was concerned with the challenges beginning teachers face when they enter the field of education. Through the use of reflective practice, beginning teacher personal reflections of experience were recorded and analyzed to discern particular experiences that present as the most challenging to these novice educators.

Reflective practice and experiential learning theories are used in this qualitative phenomenological study. This study includes reflective practice as first introduced by master theorist John Dewey, considered by many to be the father of reflection in education, and theorist Donald Schon. Dewey (1944) recognized reflection as an active and intentional action and further that even a minute amount of experience is better than an abundance of theory, because it is through experience that theory has significance. Theorist Donald Schon (1983) expanded on Dewey's work in developing types of reflection: reflection-in-action in which reflection occurs during the event and reflection-on-action occurring after the event. Kolb (1984) introduced experience as the main source of learning and contended that experiential learning is a combination of experience, perception, cognition, and behavior and is a holistic and integrative perspective in the cycle of learning.

In this qualitative study, the experiences of purposefully chosen candidates in their first 3 years of teaching were analyzed. The research method of interpretive phenomenology was used to analyze teacher reflections for the purpose of obtaining a better understanding of the experiences beginning teachers deem as most challenging and if these challenges include differentiation of instruction, classroom management, and the unexpected expectations required of the teaching profession. These three primary themes are identified in the literature.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The field of education, and especially the role of classroom teacher, brings with it a host of challenges unknown to other professions. The majority of teachers enter the field knowing that the pay they will receive is subpar to many other professions; but for their own personal reasons, individuals continue to choose teaching as a life profession. Perhaps the lure of offering support to young learners is the overarching appeal; however, the difficulties faced in providing support to diverse learners, a lack of adequate training in classroom management, and in dealing with the unrealized expectations the teaching profession holds often lead to a desire to leave the field of education. As the attrition rates in the state of North Carolina continue to rise, considerations as to the specific challenges beginning teachers face that may lead to their decision to leave education warrant consideration (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014).

### **Statement of the Problem**

While the demand for quality teachers across our nation increases, the state of North Carolina attrition rates are at the highest recorded within the past 5 years (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014). The 2013-2014 North Carolina Department of Education Annual Report on Teachers Leaving the Profession, prepared by Educator Effectiveness Division Financial Business Services, reported that there were “15,552 beginning teachers employed statewide in 2013 and 3,143 (23.18%) were reported as turnover” (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, p. 4). In other words, over 3,000 beginning teachers left their teaching positions.

There is a plethora of reasons beginning teachers choose to leave their positions. A lack of preparedness, inadequate support from administration, poor working conditions, and the inability to obtain professional autonomy in the choices they make in



their classrooms are just a few (Balls, Eury, & King, 2011; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005; Ingersoll, 2000).

According to a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, of the 3,377,900 public school teachers employed in 2011-2012 nationwide, 8% left the teaching profession. The report further indicated that among teachers with 1-3 years of teaching experience, 7% left the teaching profession in the 2012-2013 school year. Balls et al. (2011) reported that teacher turnover rates are high and costly. They further looked to the Alliance for Excellent Education Research which indicated, “For every school day across the country nearly a thousand teachers leave the field of teaching and another thousand teachers change schools, many in pursuit of better working conditions” (Balls et al., 2011, p. 221). The chapter further cited the primary reasons for the high attrition rates as lack of or insufficient planning time, problematic student behavior, and a lack of influence over school policy. It stated that nearly 50% of all teachers who enter the profession leave it within 5 years. In exit interviews, departing teachers consistently cite lack of support from the administration and poor working conditions as the primary factors for their resignation (Balls et al., 2011, p. 221).

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) stated that the current teaching force in the United States is aging, causing concern that our future will witness a teacher shortage. DuFour et al. further contended that attracting people into education as a career choice is not the problem. Instead, the problem is retaining them (DuFour et al., 2008). The authors further stated that over half of beginning teachers leave the teaching profession after their first 5 years in the classroom (DuFour et al., 2008). The authors contended that the solution to this potential shortage in teachers is not so much a lack of teachers as it is a need to make teaching a rewarding profession and schools more inviting to work in

where “ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 87).

Voke (2002) reported an increase in the number of students enrolling in our schools, the legal demand for smaller class sizes, and the large number of persons retiring in the United States would require attracting and hiring more teachers in the coming decade. Voke went on to say, however, that the shortage, while not as dire as originally projected, was not in the number of qualified candidates to fill the positions but rather in the distribution of teachers; and according to Ingersoll (2000), in the high rates of teacher turnover. The National Association of State Boards of Education (1998) stated, “Most states do not need to recruit more candidates into teacher preparation programs” (p. 13) or “to attract higher quality candidates to teaching. What states do need . . . are targeted programs that attract candidates who are willing . . . to meet the needs of the schools in which they will be asked to teach” (p. 13).

### **Current Support Programs Available to Beginning Teachers**

**Induction programs.** With nearly 25%, or approximately 22,000, of North Carolina’s teachers in their first 3 years of teaching, quality induction and mentoring programs are essential for beginning and first-year teachers in assuring that our state will have quality and effective master teachers in every classroom (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2010). New teacher induction programs have been around for decades in the United States. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities reported that while states mandate and provide funding for induction and mentoring programs, there is a lack of consistency across districts and states (Russell, 2006). The author further contended that if teachers are to become skilled in their professions, there is a substantial need to expand and improve current teacher induction programs (Russell,

2006). Russell stated that all too often induction programs have consisted of a one-on-one mentoring program lacking the ongoing and extended support beginning teachers need. Induction programs provide support and guidance to beginning teachers and are designed to assist teachers as they develop the skills they need to become effective in their classrooms (Russell, 2006). Beginning teacher induction programs fall primarily into two categories of support: (1) instruction-related support or pedagogy and (2) psychological support (Gold, 1996). Instruction-related support is provided to beginning teachers as they learn specific subject matter, classroom management skills, and classroom strategies. Psychological support involves assisting new teachers with their self-defined needs and concerns as well as offering emotional and mental support in times of job-related stress (Scherer, 1999).

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, as reported by Headden (2014), listed the following attributes as a guideline for a quality and effective induction program:

Comprehensive induction is not . . .

- A crash course in teaching
- An orientation session that tells teachers where the copy machine is
- A stand-alone mentoring program
- A string of disconnected one-day workshops
- A top-down one-directional approach in which teachers are passive recipients
- Only a benefit to beginners
- A way to help teachers cope with a dysfunctional school

Comprehensive induction is . . .

- High quality mentoring by trained mentors
- Common planning time
- Ongoing professional development
- External networks of teachers
- Standards-based evaluation
- Dedicated resources
- An adequate and stable source of funding. (p. 14)

According to Headden, the best induction programs are those targeted at addressing individual teacher needs, growth, and instructional needs by well-trained mentors who are free of instructional commitments and available for “common teacher planning time” (p. 14).

**Mentoring programs.** Mentoring is viewed as a one-to-one assistance provided by an experienced teacher who may be undertrained and overextended (Russell, 2006). According to Darling-Hammond (2010), teachers in the United States frequently enter the profession with a lack of support through mentoring, coaching while on-the-job, or professional learning that could be available to them in most communities. Darling-Hammond (2010) further contended that while mentoring programs are becoming more common, only half of beginning teachers receive the services of a mentor in their own field of teaching, and many beginning teachers do not have a common time to work collaboratively with other teachers. Public Schools of North Carolina (2010) stated the following:

If the beginning teachers of North Carolina are going to be able to meet the state’s professional teaching standards, impact the learning of all students in

distinguished ways, choose to remain in the profession and become future master teachers, teacher leaders and skilled administrators and superintendents, then a quality induction program to support the instructional growth of beginning teachers must be in place in each of the 115 school districts in the state. (p. 19)

Drago-Severson (2009) included mentoring as one of four pillar practices that support adult learning and growth. She contended that mentoring is one of the oldest forms of adult support, that adults need more than one source of support for professional learning and organizational growth to take place, and that mentoring is crucial for adult learning and development. She further stated that mentors are guides, and their primary task is to help mentees work to become successful in their careers (Drago-Severson, 2009). The state of North Carolina has developed Mentor Standards aligned with the State's Professional Teaching Standards and focused on knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for beginning teachers. The five standards further address how mentors can best help beginning teachers attain these skills and become highly qualified in the field of education. Public Schools of North Carolina (2010) Mentor Standards are

Mentor Standard 1: Mentors support beginning teachers to demonstrate leadership.

Mentor Standard 2: Mentors support beginning teachers to establish a respectful environment for a diverse population of students.

Mentor Standard 3: Mentors support beginning teachers to know the content they teach.

Mentor Standard 4: Mentors support beginning teachers to facilitate learning for their students.

Mentor Standard 5: Mentors support beginning teachers to reflect on their

practice. (n.p.)

Danielson (2006) stated that mentoring is not simply a buddy system and that mentors and coaches should receive a considerable amount of training that sufficiently prepares them to support beginning teachers in a nonjudgmental and supportive manner.

**Beginning teachers' preparedness to differentiate instruction.** Balls et al. (2011) stated that too often teachers are ill prepared for the challenges that await them when they enter the classroom. The authors listed three key challenges new teachers face due to unpreparedness: teacher expectations, the inability to differentiate instruction for diverse learners, and a lack of classroom management skills.

Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) stated that teaching is complex; and in order for beginning teachers to teach effectively, they need to acquire skills or knowledge in three general areas. The areas are knowledge of learners, subject matter, and teaching content with an in-depth understanding of themselves as teachers and of their learners in a productive and positive environment. Beginning teachers further need to understand the constructive nature of knowing, cognitive processing, metacognition, and motivation skills of learners (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005).

According to Tomlinson (1999), when beginning teachers transition from that of the student teacher into the role of teacher, they lack preparation to adequately deliver differentiated instruction. Tomlinson (1999) shared what she felt were the characteristics present in a differentiated classroom as,

- Teachers begin where the students are.
- Teachers engage students in instruction through different learning modalities.
- A student competes more against himself or herself than others.

- Teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn.
- Teachers use classroom time flexibly.
- Teachers are diagnosticians, prescribing the best possible instruction for each student. (p. 2)

**Beginning teachers' preparedness in classroom management.** Tucker (2014) contended that school boards often elect to place beginning teachers, or new recruits, with very little classroom experience in the toughest of situations. The theory being that one teacher is just as good as the next regardless of experience and skill level (Tucker, 2014). Many teachers are simply “unprepared to meet the challenges they face” when entering the classroom (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005, p. 1). Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) contended that many beginning teachers are some of the least-prepared professionals in our society and do not receive the rigorous training and clinical experience necessary to prepare them successfully as classroom teachers. Beginning teachers, especially, should be suitably and sufficiently trained in the subject and content area for which they are assigned to teach and further placed in a school and assignment that is appropriate for their level of experience and skill. According to Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden, beginning teachers vary greatly in their formal preparation and in the skills and expertise they bring to the classroom. Tucker asked, “What would accountability look like if we actually regarded our teachers as professionals doing professional work, instead of interchangeable blue-collar workers doing blue-collar work?” (p. 9). Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden stated that we do not, as a society, invest in the lives our children when we place our least-prepared teachers with poor children and children of color. Many states actually compromise their

licensing standards and entry requirements, especially when teachers are needed in poor and minority settings (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden further stated that teaching is viewed by society as simplistic in nature and merely a form of transmitting curriculum from teacher to student; when, in fact, successful teaching is a challenging, difficult, and rigorous job that requires specific and specialized training (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005).

Teaching effectively requires teachers to have the skills and knowledge base to engage their students in active and authentic learning experiences and to manage classrooms that function well where students work productively (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). Teacher qualifications have a direct impact on student learning. According to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), teachers who understand child learning and development and those who have had professional training in the developmental stages of students are more capable and prepared in guiding and developing the learning process, maintaining children's motivation to learn, and managing a classroom and, thus, are more likely to remain in the field of education (Darling Hammond & Bransford, 2005). According to Voke (2002) in her report based on information from the 1996 National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), teacher experience is the most crucial contributing factor in the achievement level and learning of our students. Voke's findings further show that the quality of instruction has a long-lasting effect on student achievement, especially for at-risk students.

Balls et al. (2011) contended that teacher preparedness occurs at two levels. Teachers first receive training during their college preparation programs and second through professional development opportunities throughout their teaching careers (Balls



et al., 2011). Balls et al. stated that professional development is not simply a fun activity in which teachers participate voluntarily but rather a “must do requirement to retain ones position” (p. 260).

According to Tucker (2014), top-performing countries around the world have put into place “policies designed to compensate, recruit, educate, train and manage their teachers in ways that are very similar to the ways in which they compensate, recruit, educate, train and manage their doctors, accountants, attorneys, architects and other high status professionals” (p. 1).

**Unrealized expectations of the teaching profession.** Teaching in general is a stressful, rigorous, and demanding profession. Teachers often report a feeling of sink-or-swim when describing their first years in the classroom (Goodwin & Miller, 2013). Smith (2004) suggested that one of the greatest sources of stress for teachers is the unrealistic expectations they place on themselves in the first few years in the classroom. For beginning teachers especially, the stress associated with these expectations, both job-related expectations and expectations beginning teachers place on themselves, is at times overwhelming. Smith described the responsibilities of teaching as “infinite,” and quite often teachers describe a feeling of “incompleteness” in their work performance (p. 45). Smith further stated that while many successful teachers learn to become one step ahead in their planning and juggling of requirements, their first years are often described as “wobbly” and “robotic” (pp. 46-47). Smith further suggested that beginning teachers should slow down, focus less of their own performance, and pay close attention to strategies that prove successful; through this process, beginning teachers can improve their overall teaching experience.

**Purpose of the Study**

While much research has been conducted into the reasons why teachers leave the field of education, there is less research based on the challenging experiences of beginning teachers told through reflection. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences viewed as most challenging for beginning teachers and the possible impact these challenges have on beginning teachers' willingness to remain in the teaching profession. This research further examined teacher perceptions as to their level of preparedness and confidence when they enter the classroom to meet the needs of diverse learners. This study will provide insight and shed light into the challenges beginning teachers feel they have to deal with: diverse learners, managing classroom behavioral challenges, and the expectations required daily. This investigation focused on the real-life, day-to-day accounts experienced and told by teachers in their own words through reflection. This researcher sought to understand how beginning teachers experience these challenges and the impact these challenges present to their overall wellbeing as educators.

**Research Questions**

This research study was designed as an instrument to examine the daily lived experiences of beginning teachers in the form of reflective practice. As a guide to this research the following questions were used.

1. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to preparedness to differentiate instruction be characterized?
2. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to difficulties in classroom management be characterized?
3. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to

unrealized expectations of the teaching profession be characterized?

The goal of this researcher in answering these research questions was a deeper understanding for beginning teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators of the challenges that new teachers confront when entering the classroom in differentiation of instruction, classroom management, and in dealing with the enormous amount of unexpected job-related obligations of the teaching profession. It is this researcher's intent that if the challenges that are most prevalent in the lives of beginning teachers are better understood, perhaps more effort will be placed on preparing preservice teachers at the university level and professional development opportunities will be offered in these three challenging areas to assist beginning teachers prior to their entry into the classroom environment.

### **Researcher's Interest in Topic**

This researcher has been a classroom teacher providing instruction to hundreds of students throughout the many years spent in the field of education. This researcher has acted as a mentor and coach to an abundant pool of beginning teachers. Throughout the years spent in the field of education, this researcher has witnessed the devastation and utter dismay felt by beginning teachers as they try desperately to find a balance between managing a classroom of seemingly out-of-control students while also trying to plan instruction that is diverse yet challenging.

This researcher, in essence, has lived the experience of being a beginning teacher, assisted beginning teachers as they find their way in the field, and witnessed firsthand the challenges so many teachers face when transitioning from student teacher to teacher entering the classroom for the first time. This researcher is "intensely interested in understanding" what beginning teachers deem as most challenging (Moustakas, 1994, p.

107) and perhaps through this exploration will provide insight that will aide in the reduction of beginning teachers who choose to leave the field of teaching.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This phenomenological research was based on two theories of study. Reflective practice is a process in which new teachers are supported as they reflect on and interpret their experiences in order to expand their repertoire as educators (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Experiential learning theory states that the cycle of learning is a continuous process based on reflection which occurs before, during, and after the experience (Kolb, 1984). According to Moustakas (1984), phenomenology “begins with things themselves” and attempts to eliminate prejudgment and presuppositions to reach a state of unprejudiced openness to see an unfettered way of reflecting on everyday experience (p. 41). Phenomenology further attempts to find a synchronizing of the researcher’s past and present experience and that of the participants (Creswell, 1998).

**Reflective practice.** John Dewey (1944), considered by many to be the father of reflection, believed that we learn just as much from our failures in life as we do from our successes. Dewey (1944) stated that experience without reflection does not constitute learning or meaningful change. According to Dewey (1944), reflection is an active and intentional action, and to learn from an experience is to make a connection through reflecting on that which is both forward and backward in the experience.

An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory (or intellectual content), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as theory. It tends to become a mere verbal formula, a set

of catchwords used to render thinking, or genuine theorizing, unnecessary and impossible. (Dewey, 1944, p. 144)

Dewey provided the foundation for the concept of reflective practice, expanded on by Donald Schon (1983) in *The Reflective Practitioner*. Schon further developed what he referred to as reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action occurs when one reflects on what they are doing in the process of doing it. Reflection-on-action is referred to as reflection that occurs after the action has occurred. This process contributes to a cycle of continuous improvement and growth. Schon wrote,

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (p. 68)

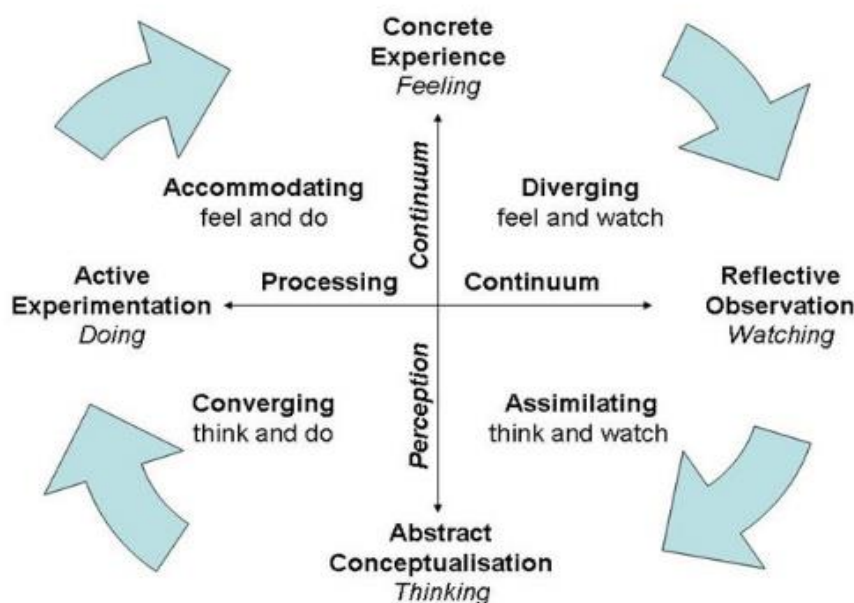
Beginning teachers need support in a variety of ways in their first years in the field of education. One such area is in reflective practice. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002) included reflection, stating teachers should “reflect on and evaluate” their experiences in order to expand their repertoire as educators, improve instruction, and “to seek out opportunities to grow professionally” (p. 21). The North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards (NCPTS, 2011) Standard 5 stated that “teachers are reflective in their practice” (pp. 2, 7). Moustakas (1994) contended that reflection occurs throughout a phenomenological research approach and it provides the researcher with “a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (p. 47). Moustakas quoted Husserl as defining reflection as the process of which “stream of

experience with all its manifold events can be grasped and analyzed in the light of its own evidence” (p. 47).

According to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000), active learning takes place when people reflect on their understanding and are able to recognize when they need more information. Balls et al. (2011) added to this statement by saying, “Learning how to reflect on one’s performance is key at all levels of experience” (p. 102). Balls et al. contended that Dewey saw reflection as preceding intelligence and included consistent consideration of one’s beliefs in reflecting. The authors further stated that through “personal inspection of their teaching and learning,” 21st century educators model reflective practice (Balls et al., 2011, p. 131). Through the engagement of reflective practice, teachers are able to think and reflect on an experience or event, learn from the experience, plan or change direction accordingly, and ultimately advance in their learning and improve instructional practices (Drago-Severson, 2009). Drago-Severson (2009) contended that engaging in reflective practice is essential in supporting “personal and professional learning and growth” (p. 155). Further, Drago-Severson stated, “reflective practice and collegial inquiry need to become a part of the fabric of that school’s culture” (p. 155). Dewey (1944) stated, “All that the wisest man can do is to observe what is going on more widely and more minutely and then select more carefully from what is noted just those factors which point to something to happen” (p. 146). Accordingly, Jung (1961) is quoted as saying, “The life of man is a dubious experiment . . . outward circumstances are no substitute for inner experiences . . . I can understand myself only in the light of inner happenings” (pp. 4-5).

**Experiential learning theory.** As Elliot, Hodgson, and Mairret (1942) so eloquently stated in their poem, *The Gidding*, “We shall not cease from exploration, and

the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time” (Kolb, 1984, p. 20). Kolb (1984) introduced experience as the main source of learning which, according to Kolb, occurs in cycles. Kolb contended that experiential learning is a combination of experience, perception, cognition, and behavior and is a “holistic integrative perspective on learning” (p. 21). Kolb allowed that the term experiential was used for two reasons: one as a way to tie it into the intellectual work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget; and two, to clearly “emphasize the central role experience plays in the learning process” (p. 20). Kolb contended that learning is a process and should not be considered in terms of outcomes which he considers nonlearning. Kolb stated that learning is “an emergent process whose outcomes represent only historical record, not knowledge of the future,” and further that concepts of learning are “derived from and continuously modified by experience” (p. 26). The cycle of learning, according to Kolb, is a continuous process based on reflection which occurs before, during, and after the experience.



*Figure.* Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development (Kolb, 1984, p. 21).

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### Summary of Methodology

This qualitative, inquiry-based, interpretive phenomenological research study includes an in-depth analysis of reported experiences told to, or shared with, this researcher in the form of interviews and journal entries. More specifically, this research utilizes interpretative phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of the participants. This research project included four participants, all of whom were in their first 3 years of teaching.

Phenomenological research describes the true events and perspectives of individuals as they occur in everyday life (Welman & Kruger, 1999). Groenewald (2004) contended that phenomenology is based on the perspective and experiences of people as they are lived. Creswell (1998) described phenomenology as “the meaning of the lived



experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 10).

Phenomenological analysis, according to Brocki and Wearden (2004), is a means in which participants in a study explore and make sense of their experiences. The authors further stated that “human beings are not passive perceivers of an objective reality, but . . . come to interpret and understand their world by formulating their own biographical stories into a form that makes sense to them” (Brocki & Wearden, 2004, p. 88).

The reflections written by the beginning teachers, identifying their own unique experiences, were analyzed through repeated readings in an effort to ascertain deeper understanding of the teachers’ experiences as they reflected on the process of differentiation in classroom instruction, classroom management, and unrealized job embedded expectations.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Attrition.** The reduction in the number of employees or participants that occurs when people leave due to resignation, retirement, etc.

**Beginning teacher.** Teachers in their first, second, and third years of teaching.

**Classroom management.** “A set of behaviors and activities by which the teacher organizes and maintains classroom conditions that bring about effective and efficient instruction” (McEwan, 2001, p. 49). Classroom management further involves everything that a teacher must do to fulfill his/her teaching objectives. These objectives might include preparation of instructional materials, planning of instruction, and structuring of activities and student involvement. Classroom management further includes adequate control of the whole classroom and individual student behavior.

**Differentiation.** According to Sands and Barker (2004), and for the purpose of this research, differentiation is defined as “Differentiating instruction is a way of thinking

about and approaching the planning and implementation of curriculum and instruction with an understanding that learners differ in important ways” (p. 1). Tomlinson and Allan (2000) defined differentiation as a response and attention provided by the teacher to address the academic needs of individual learners.

**Disillusionment.** A feeling or understanding that what one first believed to be true is revealed as something less than first expected.

**Expectations.** For this study, the term expectations will primarily address the assumed expectations beginning teachers have of themselves and of the job-embedded expectations for the teaching profession.

**Experiential.** Meaning which is derived from experience and observation. The term experiential will “emphasize the central role experience plays in the learning process” (Kolb, 1984, p. 20).

**Gatekeeper.** Used to identify a member of the school community who assisted this researcher in recruiting volunteers for the study.

**Induction.** Induction refers to the support and guidance provided to new or beginning teachers.

**Mentor.** One who provides counseling or advice to another of less experience. Someone who teaches or gives help to a less-experienced and often younger person (Merriam-Webster, 2015b).

**Mentee.** Someone who receives mentoring or professional support. A protégé. One who is being mentored (Merriam-Webster, 2015a).

**Metacognition.** The ability one has to predict their own performance on a variety of tasks; to monitor their level of mastery and understanding of the tasks (Bransford et al., 2000).

**Professional autonomy.** The professional independence of teachers to make decisions about what they teach and how they teach it.

**Professional development.** Continued learning opportunities focusing on academic, mentoring, reflective practice, consultation, classroom management, and technical assistance.

**Professional learning communities.** Collaborative learning among colleagues who work together. In this dissertation the term is specific to teachers working in collaborative learning groups.

**Reflection.** A meditative and experiential form of viewing oneself in the process of learning. For this dissertation reflection was a self-imposed process of recording day-to-day events in the form of written or spoken dialogue between the researcher and participants.

**Reflective practice.** The capacity with which one reflects on an action or experience which leads to continuous learning.

**Retention.** Refers to the act of keeping or sustaining. In the case of this research, it refers primarily to the sustaining of teachers.

## **Conclusion**

The field of teaching has changed dramatically in the past decade; and among these changes, the role of the classroom teacher has undertaken a perceptible shift. One such change is the enormous amount of responsibilities a teacher takes on in the role as the sole provider of instruction in a classroom. In modern classrooms, teachers must be prepared to meet the needs of a variety of learning styles, develop curriculum that is both engaging and reflects common state standards, and ensure that all students are receiving instruction that is differentiated to meet their particular learning needs—all of this while

managing student behaviors and juggling the enormity of various other job-related requirements.

This qualitative, inquiry-based, phenomenological research study includes an in-depth analysis of experiences reported to this researcher in the form of interviews, emails, or journal entrees. This phenomenological study sheds light on the challenges beginning teachers report as most challenging as they begin their careers in the field of education and, more specifically, if these reported challenges correlate with the current research findings that the most prevalent challenges these novice educators face are reported as difficulties in classroom management, differentiation of instruction for diverse learners, and handling unrealized job-embedded expectations.

Through the use of reflective journaling, beginning teachers shared their daily lived experiences as these documented accounts are relative to understanding the complexities of the challenges that led so many beginning teachers to the decision to leave the teaching profession. Teachers were further asked to participate in an interview with this researcher referred to by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and reported by Morris (2015) as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 69).

A qualitative approach in the form of phenomenology was chosen by this researcher due primarily to the facet of obtaining a better understanding of human behavior and the everyday occurrences by those experiencing the event (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology, or the study of a particular phenomenon, describes the lived experience as it is reported by several individuals (Moustakas, 1994); to “grasp . . . the very nature of the thing” that is being experienced and thus reported by participants (Van Manen, 1990, p. 177).

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

This research focuses on three areas that have been present in much of the corresponding literature examining challenges beginning teachers face, namely, the preparedness beginning teachers feel they have to differentiate instruction for all learners, the challenges beginning teachers face when trying to manage a classroom effectively, and the expectations beginning teachers have of themselves and of the job-related expectations of the teaching profession,

The corresponding literature for this research focuses primarily on three areas considered challenging for beginning teachers: differentiation, classroom management, and job-embedded expectations for beginning teachers. Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson, an expert in the field of differentiation, conceded that classrooms today offer an abundance of technology-based instruction and learning, yet more diversity and inclusion of diverse learners than perhaps ever before (Tomlinson, 2014). According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiation is varying instructional methods and processes in such a way that all learners are accommodated. Tomlinson (1999) stated, however, that preservice teachers must receive preparatory support in differentiating instruction; and further, that all teachers, especially those new to education, must be supported in their efforts to provide differentiated instruction.

In 2005, Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, an expert in the area of teacher preparation, along with Baratz-Snowden, conceded that “teachers are much more likely to stay in the profession if they are supported in their early efforts to learn to teach” (p. 65). The authors continued by stating that all too often beginning teachers are placed in classrooms without needed support or access to seasoned professionals who could assist

in their transitions from “transforming their book knowledge into action,” thereby easing their transitions from student into teacher (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005, p. 65). The authors stated further that quite often beginning teachers receive the most challenging students and the most undesirable duties; all the while left on their own to master the fine art of teaching (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005, p. 66).

This inquiry-based, phenomenological research study will sought to understand firsthand the experiences lived and told to this researcher as they occurred in the lives of the participating beginning teachers in an effort to understand the most challenging aspects of the beginning teachers newly acquired profession.

It should be noted, and is understood by this researcher, that the state of North Carolina has in place for all beginning teachers, guidelines in terms of support. The state policy for new teacher induction includes the following.

- Teachers receive induction support during their first two years in the profession.
- All school administrators receive induction in their first two years in the profession.
- Formal standards that govern the design and operation of local teacher induction programs. This includes guidelines for teaching load, extracurricular duties, student assignment, and working conditions.
- Mentor will be provided who are experienced and qualified teachers.
- Mentors will participate in, and be provided support, through a mentor teacher training program. Mentors will receive ongoing training and support to better understand their role and responsibilities as a mentor.

- Mentors will initiate contact with beginning teachers prior to, or near the beginning of the school year. Mentors will meet regularly and consistently with beginning teachers, and time will be provided and protected during and outside of the school day.
- Key induction programs should require a minimum of mentor and new teacher contact time, formative assessment of teaching practice, and classroom observation. (Goldrick, Osta, Barlin & Burn, 2012, pp. 1-2)

The state of North Carolina has formally adopted induction program standards and clearly recognizes that support for beginning teachers is needed for professional growth; however, specifics of support may vary according to district guidelines (Goldrick et al., 2012). “Weak professional environments rob new teachers of the opportunity to achieve their full potential” (Goldrick et al., 2012, p. v).

It is further understood that many other states are in the process of following North Carolina’s lead regarding support for beginning teachers. According to the Georgia Department of Education Teacher Induction Guidance (2012), an induction document created in an effort for Georgia districts to support beginning teachers advised “Georgia districts and schools to create, implement, and sustain a quality induction program that supports not only the retention, but the induction phase (for) teacher’s growth” (p. 1). The guide stated, however, that “Most beginning teachers receive insufficient on-the-job support during their initial years in the profession” (Georgia Department of Education Teacher Induction Guidance, 2012, p. 1).

## **Overview**

The demand for quality teachers is increasing nationwide. Nearly half of the

teachers in their first 5 years of teaching choose to leave the profession (DuFour et al., 2008). An in-depth understanding of the challenges beginning teachers face which eventually lead to their decision to leave teaching has the potential to improve teacher induction programs, thereby decreasing the current teacher shortage (Balls et al., 2011; DuFour et al., 2008).

The first few years in a classroom are critical for beginning teachers' survival. Smith (2004), award winning teacher, education consultant, and international presenter, stated, "Being a new teacher is like trying to fly an airplane while building it" (p. 44) and added that unrealistic expectations beginning teachers place on themselves is perhaps the single largest source of stress. The transition from being a student teacher to that of a classroom teacher brings with it many challenges and difficult situations unknown to most other professions. According to Liston, Whitcomb, and Borko (2006), beginning teachers struggle to find a connection between theories learned in teacher preparation programs and the realities they face in daily classroom routines. The authors contend further that the intensity and demands associated with teaching seldom support their need for ongoing learning.

Beginning teachers spend the majority of their day within a classroom setting learning to respond to the needs of diverse learners with little support from colleagues. A lack of much needed professional development can potentially lead to low self-efficacy, stress, and burnout (Gold, 1996). According to Smith (2004), in general, teachers only become comfortable after teaching at the same grade level for 3 years consecutively; and it takes 7 years to reach a quiescent or dormant period. The author further suggested, however, that excellent teachers never reach this stage, as they are continually trying to improve their skills (Smith, 2004). Liston et al. (2006) concurred, stating that most



teachers reach a certain level of mastery around their fourth year of teaching or beyond.

When beginning teachers enter the classroom for the first time, they encounter numerous challenges. The most prevalent of these challenges is transitioning from the role of student teacher into that of a professional educator responsible for planning and delivering instruction to a group of diverse learners. Learning to teach effectively requires beginning teachers to transition from apprentice to that of a crafted and well-versed educator. A large part of this new responsibility includes creating a classroom management system and planning instruction that is differentiated, challenging, and meets local and state standards. In their first few years of placement, beginning teachers are required to “sink or swim,” according to NCTAF (1996, p. 39). Beginning teachers are often assigned the most challenging classes, students with special needs (Bransford et al., 2000). In some cases, teachers are asked to take on “many extracurricular duties—and they are usually asked to take on these responsibilities with little to no support from administrators or senior colleagues” (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 203). DuFour et al. (2008) contended that schools have unwritten rules and norms to which beginning teachers must adapt and adjust.

Being responsible for a classroom of children who are diverse learners, independent thinkers, and present a variety of unique learning styles can bring with it a host of challenging tasks. Facing these challenges in relative isolation can make the task more daunting. Elmore (2007) reported that teachers spend the majority of their working hours alone with students in classrooms and have very little time to engage in the continuous learning that could lead to improved instructional practices. NCTAF (1996) concluded that working in isolation prevents teacher collaboration and shared learning which lead to improved student achievement. Lieberman (1990) further added that one

of the most important factors lacking from school improvement was teacher isolation.

“The most persistent norm that stands in the way of 21st-century learning is isolated teaching in stand-alone classrooms” (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005, p. 1). With the lack of practical know how, limited teaching experience, topped with being isolated in their own classrooms, many beginning teachers feel overwhelmed (Scherer, 1999). Teachers in the United States spend 3-5 hours each week planning alone, with very little time to collaborate and learn from fellow teachers; and sadly, less than half of U.S. teachers are involved in mentoring, coaching, or collaborative studies (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Without this support, beginning teachers are more likely to leave the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Providing beginning teachers with the tools they need to ensure their overall success cannot be accomplished by simply telling them what to do or showing them how it is done or how to do it. It is instead a process of collaboration and learning through observation, reflection, and induction (DuFour et al., 2008). DuFour et al. (2008) contended that in order to help novice teachers, professionals in the field of education need to understand three distinct problems related to teaching: (1) learning to teach requires that teachers understand that teaching students is very different than what they remember and experienced as students themselves; (2) effective teachers think like teachers. They not only understand what to do, but they use a variety of methods in actually doing it. They must develop coping skills in which they learn to juggle activities, events, and strategies on a daily basis; and (3) teachers need to understand that routine is not the rule. Effective teaching requires whole group, small group, and one-on-one instruction depending on the needs presented by the students (DuFour et al., 2008). The ultimate goal for educators, to increase student proficiency, goes without saying; but

with added support provided to new teachers, an increase in teacher efficacy could be achieved which in turn would improve student learning. According to Darling-Hammond Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009), “teachers need to learn the way other professionals do: continually, collaboratively and on the job” (p. 1).

### **Challenges for Beginning Teachers**

The challenges that beginning teachers face daily can be quite overwhelming, to say the least. This research, however, was limited to three challenges that have been present in a great deal of the corresponding literature: the preparedness beginning teachers feel they have to differentiate instruction for all learners, the challenges beginning teachers face when trying to manage a classroom effectively, and the expectations beginning teachers have of themselves and of the field of teaching.

**Preparedness to differentiate instruction.** The definition of teacher has changed dramatically in the last century. A sage on stage form of instruction is viewed as unequitable, and the antiquated system of one size fits all in public education is not beneficial to the majority of students. According to Tomlinson and Allan (2000), addressing the complexity of academic diverse classrooms is one of the greatest challenges in education today. Tomlinson and Allen contended, however, the reality is that many students will receive instruction in the same manner as if they were essentially identical in learning styles, readiness skills, proficiency levels, and behaviors. The authors continued by stating that rarely are schools prepared or organized to meet the needs of students who vary in interest, readiness, or level of learning (Tomlinson & Allen, 2000). Tomlinson (2003) contended that in order to meet the needs of a mixed-ability classroom of diverse learners, many adaptations to the curriculum are necessary. She stated that finding time to work extensively with students who are nonproficient to

ensure their growth, to teach inquiry skills to those who have no concept of the skill, and to extend the curriculum beyond grade-level expectations in order to challenge the advanced learners are beyond what most teachers are willing or capable of doing (Tomlinson, 2003).

A teacher in a differentiated classroom does not classify herself as someone who “already differentiates instruction.” Rather that teacher is fully aware that every hour of teaching, every day in the classroom can reveal one more way to make the classroom a match for its learners. (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5)

According to Tomlinson et al. (2003), the majority of teachers make little effort to modify their instruction based on the variance in individual student learning needs.

Tomlinson (2003) stated a lack of sufficient preparation in many college education programs as the reason teachers are entering the field of teaching ill prepared to differentiate instruction. In a 1996 report from NCTAF, it was stated that “What teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn” (p. 10). The report further stated that one of the major flaws in assuring that all students receive instruction from a qualified teacher who is prepared to meet the needs of all students is a lack in teacher preparedness (NCTAF, 1996). In 2009, United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in a speech at Columbia University’s Teachers College, stated “America’s university-based teacher preparation programs need revolutionary change-not evolutionary tinkering” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2).

NCTAF stated, “to help diverse learners master much more challenging content, today’s teachers must go far beyond dispensing information, giving a test, and assigning a grade” (NCTAF, 1996, p. 8; NCTAF, 2003, p. 9). Casey and Gable (2011) conducted research on beginning teachers’ perceptions of how prepared they were to differentiate

instruction for diverse learners. Their research participants included teachers in their first three years of service. Their research concluded that when beginning teachers attempted differentiation, the results were only at surface-level implementation rather than the in-depth and structured form most beneficial to student learning outcomes (Casey & Gable, 2011). Their findings further concluded that beginning teachers were challenged in their efforts to differentiate instruction due to “pre-existing ideas of how to teach . . . misconception regarding differentiation, and classroom management skills” (Casey & Gable, 2011, p. 1).

If beginning teachers are to be successful in providing instruction that is differentiated to fill the needs of diverse learners, they should receive training and be prepared sufficiently to meet the needs of these learners prior to entering the classroom. In a report for the National Council on Teacher Quality, Putman, Greenberg, and Walsh (2014) stated, “The challenge of training for the classroom must be commensurate with the challenge of effectively teaching within it” (p. 35). According to Howard Gardner, one of the biggest mistakes made throughout the centuries of educating children is in the assumption that all children are of same or equal intelligence—this fallacy has led educators to teach their students the same curriculum in much the same manner (Dack & Tomlinson, 2015; Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1994). “A teacher who differentiates robustly creates environments and processes that make room for students’ varied approaches to learning” (Dack & Tomlinson, 2015 p. 15).

A study conducted by Renick (1996) found that beginning teachers face many challenges in transitioning from the role of student teacher to that of teacher. One such area of consideration, according to Renick, is in the area of differentiated instruction. Renick stipulated that university preparation programs provide instruction to preservice

teachers in adapting their instruction for individual learning needs of their students who exhibit exceptional strengths or weaknesses. Renick's research study was an attempt to determine if first-year teachers use their knowledge of differentiated teaching learned at university in their classrooms. The study was guided by three questions: How did beginning teachers in the study determine the individual needs of their students; what strategies did beginning teachers use in providing for individual ability levels; and, what support did beginning teachers receive for incorporating differentiated strategies? Renick found that very little of what is learned by preservice teachers at the university level is transferred into the classroom setting. The lack of transfer from university learning to classroom setting is due primarily, according to Renick, by a "washing out" of what is learned at university which occurs during the student-teaching experience (p. 13).

McGarvey, Marriott, Morgan, and Abbott (1997) concurred when they said beginning teachers were faced with many challenges as they enter the field of education. Prevalent among these challenges, McGarvey et al. stated, is transferring the methods they learned at university as preservice teachers into differentiated instruction in the classroom.

McGarvey et al. further stated that less than half of the teachers they studied provided for the diverse ability levels at the classroom level. Tomlinson (1999) summed up the lack of differentiation in the classrooms of beginning teachers as a need to conform to "the way we do school here" and an undercurrent of "teach to the middle" (p. 115). Moir (2012) shared the reflection of a first-year teacher in which she reported feeling as if she was sufficiently prepared at the university level as a student teacher; however, when she entered the classroom as the teacher, being in charge of the learning that would take place, she felt an enormous amount of stress. The teacher further shared she did not anticipate the overwhelming amount of differentiation that would be required in order to

meet the needs of all of her students (Moir, 2012).

**Classroom management.** Of the many challenges beginning teachers face, one of the most prevalent is managing a classroom and engaging students effectively. Most teachers struggle from time to time to keep a classroom of students engaged. For beginning teachers, however, the struggle can seem especially daunting. “We are the authors of what happens in the classroom. Students follow our lead and behave in ways that we unconsciously allow” (Smith, 2004, p. 105). Smith (2004) contended that the key to effective classroom management is to be conscious of student actions and behaviors and of the actions teachers present to the class, to develop and follow procedures routinely, and to maintain consistency in acceptable versus unacceptable behavior.

Coggs, Bivona, and Reschly (2012), in their report which evaluated the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs, quoted the United States Department of Education, saying,

Too many future teachers graduate from prep programs unprepared for success in the classroom. We have to give teachers the support they need to ensure that children get the high quality education they deserve. Our goal is to develop a system that recognizes and rewards good programs, and encourages all of them to improve. (p. 2)

Greenberg, Putman, and Walsh (2014), in their report for The National Council on Teacher Quality, stated that most teacher preparation programs are not preparing beginning teachers effectively for the demands that await them in classrooms. They further stated, “New teachers deserve better. It is time for teacher prep programs to focus on classroom management so that first-year teachers are prepared on day one to head off potential disruption before it starts” (Greenberg et al., 2014, p. 2). Darling-Hammond

(2003) suggested that when beginning teachers lack initial preparation, they are more likely to leave the teaching profession (Coggshall et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In a survey conducted by Farkas, Johnson, and Duffett (2003), 45% of the teachers they surveyed said beginning teachers need more training on effective strategies to assist them in handling student discipline problems. In the same survey, 42% of the teachers surveyed reported that new teachers need a lot of help in finding effective ways to help struggling students (Farkas et al., 2003).

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) found that beginning teachers need the opportunity to share, discuss, and connect what they know and what they want to learn. They further stated that this can be accomplished through enquiry and collaboration, team planning, and evaluation and learning. Their research further indicated that beginning teachers need the opportunity to work alongside expert teachers in order to learn and grow in the field of education (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

Beginning teachers are often overwhelmed and frequently feel defeated as they are challenged to deliver engaging instruction and manage appropriate behavior in their classrooms (Greenberg et al., 2014). According to Greenberg et al. (2014), in a well-managed classroom, teachers are consistent in planning and establishing routines before misbehavior occurs, teachers establish appropriate interactions with their students in which good behavior is recognized, and teachers constantly focus on instruction. In their 2014 report for the National Council on Teacher Quality, Greenberg et al. stated the five most important strategies in which teacher candidates need to receive preparation are establishing rules for behavioral expectations, establishing routines to guide students in a wide variety of situations, reinforcement of positive behavioral choices which includes



praise, consistently imposing consequences for unacceptable behavior, and teaching interesting and engaging lessons that elicit student participation. Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003) added to this when they suggested that by establishing, modeling, and practicing specific behavioral techniques that acknowledge and reinforce behaviors that are acceptable and by setting clear limits for unacceptable behaviors, teachers establish essential strategies for successful classroom management.

According to Anderson (2012), a nationally recognized speaker on effective classroom management, former classroom teacher, and a responsive classroom consultant for the Northeast Foundation for Children, classroom management is one of the most common reasons beginning teachers choose to leave the profession. Anderson (2012) contended that it generally takes 5 years for beginning teachers to establish viable classroom management routines, but about half choose to leave the profession during these first 5 years. He further stated that beginning teachers fail to establish essential classroom management routines and procedures, struggle to find a balance between the fun and friendly approach to teaching and that of the firm disciplinarian, and they generally lack the basic skills and strategies necessary to communicate effectively. Anderson (2012) suggested that demonstrating and specifying desired behaviors, setting brief and firm behavioral limits, being consistent in classroom behavioral expectations for all students, and stressing common classroom values will set the stage for effective classroom management for beginning teachers. Anderson (2011, 2012) further suggested that teaching requires a balance between active participation of students and direct teaching while adhering to established routines and set boundaries. Anderson (2012) stipulated consistency is the key to a beginning teacher's overall success in the field.

A classroom teacher must create a classroom environment that is conducive to

learning and include a vast array of differing instruction to insure all students are included in the learning process. It is, therefore, imperative that the teacher learn to manage unwanted behavior by challenging students. Tomlinson (2012) said teachers are not provided the opportunity to choose whether or not they have students who present challenges in their classrooms. They should, however, be prepared to make decisions on how to respond to the needs challenging students present in an effective and productive manner. Tomlinson (2012) further suggested that teachers need to teach engaging and well-planned lessons and create a warm and well-structured teaching and learning environment. She recommended that teachers show respect for and seek-out redeeming characteristics of all students and further try to determine the root cause of a student's negative behavior. Tomlinson (2012) suggested that teachers should not personalize the negative behavior demonstrated by the student. The author further suggested that by working with the student to recognize and plan a cueing system for negative behavior and by having an alternate plan in place where the student can remove him/herself from the situation at hand, the teacher can eliminate a great deal of the stress and time away from teaching that the unwanted behavior is creating. Greene (2008) suggested that quite often challenging students want to do what is expected of them. Greene further stated that real teaching is about working with students in a respectful and empathetic approach to learn the skills the students need to be successful. Greene further stipulated that some teachers think that challenging students are making a choice to misbehave. In fact, according to Greene, the students need to be taught skills to be successful and to make appropriate behavioral choices.

**Beginning teacher expectations.** To capture the true essence of the overall demands placed on beginning teachers, one must experience firsthand the rigor associated

with the profession. Teaching is indisputably a challenging and time consuming profession. Planning, meeting, conferencing, grading, and instructing are only a minute portion of the responsibilities that describe a teacher's daily routine. Many teachers begin their day far earlier than required by many other professions, in an effort to prepare adequately for the diverse learners in their charge, only to work extra hours in order to once again stay one step ahead of the group of learners. According to Smith (2004), a teacher's job is ongoing and often feels as if it is never ending. He described a teacher's responsibilities as "infinite" (Smith, 2004, p. 45). Smith stated further that the single most stressful part of teaching is the unrealistic expectations that teachers have of themselves. When beginning teachers enter the classroom, their ideal of what teaching a heterogeneous group of learners is like suddenly becomes a reality that most are not prepared for. To make matters even more challenging and stressful for beginning teachers is the fact that there are 20 plus students for whom they have assumed the responsibility of assuring their success academically; all with various levels of proficiency and skills, social and emotional needs, and many who present behavioral issues that must be addressed.

In Weinstein's (1988) research on preservice teachers' expectations regarding their first year of teaching, she described the teachers as having "unrealistic optimism," and a "reality shock" (p. 31). Weinstein added that beginning teachers have "unrealistic expectations about the difficulty of teaching in general and about their own ability to deal successfully with the demands of the classroom in particular" (p. 32). Weinstein further found that preservice teachers greatly underestimated the challenges they would encounter as beginning teachers in motivating students, organizing class activities, dealing with parents, and handling the differences in individual needs learners present

within a classroom.

Gilbert (2005) reported on a survey conducted through the Georgia Systemic Teacher Induction Program (GSTEP) in which first- and second-year teachers were asked to rank new teacher support strategies according to the ones they felt were the most beneficial to them as beginning teachers. In 2003, of the 140 teachers who responded to the survey, the top five strategies in order of importance to the respondent were

1. Giving new teachers the opportunity to observe other teachers.
2. Assigning mentors to new teachers.
3. Providing new teachers with feedback based on classroom observations.
4. Providing new teachers with co-planning time with other teachers.
5. Assigning teachers to smaller classes (Gilbert, 2005, pp. 36-37).

In 2004, the total of respondents to the survey was 222 teachers. The top five strategies, while in a different order, remained the same (Gilbert, 2005):

1. Giving new teachers the opportunity to observe other teachers.
2. Assigning new teachers smaller classes.
3. Assigning mentors to new teachers. (Tied with no. 4).
4. Providing teachers with co-planning time with other teachers.
5. Providing new teachers with feedback based on classroom observations  
(Gilbert, 2005, pp. 36-37).

Gilbert noted that in both surveys, the respondents indicated that spending time with and learning from more experienced teachers were among the top five strategies they found beneficial in their careers as new teachers. She stated further that when teachers were asked to explain their biggest surprise as beginning teachers, many respondents commented on the overwhelming amount of paperwork as well as noninstructional duties

that were required.

NCTAF (1996) stated,

Every teacher must know how to teach students in ways that help them reach high levels of intellectual and social competence. Every school must be organized to support powerful teaching and learning. Every school district must be able to find and keep good teachers. Furthermore, to be effective, such teachers must work in schools and school systems that are well designed to achieve their key academic mission and to support student learning. (p. 3)

## **Conclusion**

According to Headden (2014), America's teaching force has changed considerably in the past 20-30 years. In the 1980s, the common teacher in an American classroom was a veteran with approximately 15-years of experience. Today, however, according once more to Headden, American children are being instructed by teachers who are far "younger and markedly less experienced than a generation ago" (p. 3). Headden contended further that one area teachers need support in is differentiation of instruction for diverse learning needs. Teachers are, according to Headden, consumed with tasks other than instructional obligations including accelerated accountability making their jobs increasingly "much harder" than a decade ago (p. 7). Headden pointed to a substantial lack of meaningful, concentrated, and substantial support for beginning teachers in their first years on the job as a contributing factor to our nation's high rate of exodus from the profession.

It is easy to say differentiation is an effective practice for teachers to reach all learners; however, without proper training in how to effectively accomplish differentiating instruction within a classroom, beginning teachers might feel the task

overwhelmingly challenging. According to Tomlinson et al. (2003), the typical modern classroom is strewn with academic diversity. In a single classroom setting, a beginning teacher confronts students with a variety of academic, emotional, and social depravities. Students who are advanced learners, those performing at or near grade-level expectations, and those who fall far below academic expectations for their perspective age and grade level are grouped together as one unit (Tomlinson, 2003). The beginning teacher further finds in his/her midst students from diverse cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds, students who are motivated and ready to learn, and those who lack motivation and initiative to advance their learning. Students who struggle to stay on task and who often create a distraction and disturbance on a regular basis make it difficult for those who are trying and eager to learn. Migrant students who speak little or no English, and perhaps students who speak more than one language fluently, are once again grouped together regardless of extenuating learning circumstances (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

“The challenge of training for the classroom must be commensurate with the challenge of effectively teaching within it” (Putman et al., 2014, p. 35). While the challenges for beginning teachers are numerous, three areas have been repeated in the research and corresponding literature as the most stressful and troublesome: the expectations beginning teachers have of themselves and of the field of teaching, the preparedness beginning teachers feel they have to differentiate instruction for diverse learners, and the challenges beginning teachers face to manage a classroom effectively.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Phenomenological research is used to describe the true and unique events and perspectives of beginning teachers as they occur in everyday life (Welman & Kruger, 1999). Groenewald (2004) stated that phenomenology is based on the perspective and experiences of people as they are lived. Creswell (1998) described phenomenology as “the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 10).

As beginning teachers encounter challenges throughout their first years in the classroom, many find these challenges are simply too overwhelming to deal with. In many cases, the beginning teacher cannot see a light at the end of the proverbial tunnel and, thus, chooses to close the door to teaching and decides to leave the field of education. Roosevelt (1960) stated,

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, “I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.” You must do the thing you think you cannot do. (pp. 29-30)

### **Problem Statement**

Survival in the first few years of teaching is the key to success for many beginning teachers. The demand for quality teachers is increasing nationwide. In the state of North Carolina, attrition rates are at the highest recorded within the past 5 years (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014). Until there is a deep understanding of the challenges beginning teachers face as they embark on their careers and attempts are made

to provide much needed support, it is likely that many beginning teachers will choose to leave the teaching profession. This qualitative interpretative phenomenological research sought to deepen the understanding related to beginning teacher perspectives on their preparation to both differentiate instruction and manage a classroom effectively as well as their ability to handle unrealized expectations the teaching profession holds.

This research attempted to answer the following questions.

1. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to preparedness to differentiate instruction be characterized?
2. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to difficulties in classroom management be characterized?
3. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to unrealized expectations of the teaching profession be characterized?

### **Description of Methodology**

This qualitative, inquiry-based research study includes the use of phenomenology. Based on research conducted by Groenewald (2004), phenomenological research design was originally introduced by German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) as he “sought to develop a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization” (p. 3); this in regards to the social unrest at the end of World War I. According to Groenewald, Husserl believed that one's belief within their own personal consciousness in itself should be relied on as certainty and that realities should be treated as a “pure phenomena” and as the “only absolute data” (p. 4). Phenomenology can thus be described as the science of phenomena (Groenewald, 2004). Phenomenological research is aimed at describing the true events and perspectives of individuals as they occur and unfold in everyday life



(Welman & Kruger, 1999). According to Groenewald, a researcher who then employs the use of phenomenology is “concerned with the lived experiences of people” (p. 5). According to Creswell (1998), phenomenology describes “the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 10). “There is no experience from which you can’t learn something. When you stop learning you stop living in any vital and meaningful sense” (Roosevelt, 1960, foreword).

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used as a research tool for this study. Phenomenology, first introduced by philosopher Husserl in 1931 and later translated into a qualitative method for research by Moustakas in 1994, describes and defines the lived experiences of a phenomenon by those who lived it (Moustakas, 1994). There are several approaches to phenomenology research. Two major and differing procedures employed for research are transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology was advocated by Moustakas (1994) and described by Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) as “a design for acquiring and collecting data that explicates the essences of human experience” and “meaning is the core” in understanding the lived or human experience (p. 2). Hermeneutic phenomenology, on the other hand, strongly advocated by Van Manen (1990), requires the researcher to employ “reflective interpretation of text or a study in history to achieve a meaningful understanding” (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 2).

The question then for this researcher was what form of phenomenology best suits the research being conducted? Moustakas (1994) looked to Hegel in referring to phenomenology as the “knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (p. 26). For this researcher, the experience lived and told by participants

through reflection was key to understanding the true phenomenon. Due to a limited data base and without extensive focus, interpretive phenomenology was employed by this researcher in an effort to describe the events represented as fresh and unique as they were perceived initially by those who lived it. Through an interpretive perspective and through a reflective interpretation, this researcher hoped to capture meaningful understanding of the events of participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology seeks to understand the wholeness of the experience and asks, “What was the phenomenon shared by participants?” Further, in what context or situation did the participants experience the event? Moustakas (1994) listed the common bonds of a phenomenological study as,

1. Recognizing the value of a qualitative design for the study of human experience.
2. Focusing on the whole experience rather than its parts.
3. Searching for meaning of the experience rather than a measurement or explanation.
4. Obtaining descriptions of the experience via first-person accounts through formal and informal conversations and interviews.
5. Regarding the data as imperative in understanding the human behavior as evidence.
6. Formulating questions that reflect the interest, involvement, and commitment of the researcher.
7. Viewing the experience and behavior as integrated and inseparable (p. 21).

**Research site.** The site chosen for this research project was an elementary school located in Northeast Georgia. At the time of the study, the school employed 56 teachers

and provided instruction to approximately 810 students. Of the 56 teachers, 55 were female. The student to teacher ratio was 15:1. The average student population in Georgia elementary schools in 2015-2016 was 643, making this school considerably larger than average by approximately 170 students. The student population at the site was 71% Caucasian, followed by 11% Hispanic, 6% of more than one ethnicity, 6.2% Asian, .9% Indian, and 4.8% African American. Of the 810 students, 46% were female and 54% were male. At the time of the study, the school was a Title I school which, according to the Georgia Department of Education, Federal Programs for Disadvantaged Children (2015), is “a part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” and “provides federal funds through the Georgia Department of Education to local educational agencies . . . with high numbers . . . of poor children to help ensure that all children meet challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards” (p. 1). The school community could be identified as lower middle class with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged families. The school is ranked relatively low achieving according to the State of Georgia Milestones.

**Participants.** The participants for this research project were chosen purposefully from a group of beginning teachers employed by the school and were, at the time of the study, in their first 3 years of teaching. The term recent is used in reference to describe persons who are current or relatively new graduates. For this research, participants were those who had graduated within the past 3 years of when the research was conducted. In an effort for this researcher to gain a variance in perspective from participants, effort was extended to include both male and female as well as individuals with various levels of educational training. This research included elementary grade graduates only. Kruger (1988), Morris (2015), Seamon (2000), and Smith et al. (2009) stated that in

phenomenological research, the goal is to examine similar experiences of participants that are actual in situation and place. Morris went on to say that the sample group should include individuals who are chosen purposefully rather than a random selection for the purpose of similarity in contextual perspective relative to the phenomenon being studied. For this research project, the participants shared similarities in university training; similarities in the number of years enrolled as teachers; and similarities in that at the time of the study, they were teachers in the same state and employed at the same site.

Letters, in the form of emails, were dispersed to a purposeful group of candidates who graduated within the past 3 years (Appendix A). The letter provided a detailed description of the research project, the research questions, and the purpose of the study and further described for the candidates their role in the research. The candidates were provided a list of the research questions and were asked to specifically address and reflect on the research questions in their journal entries and interviews.

**Assumptions.** Based on the experience of the researcher and corresponding literature, this researcher assumed that many beginning teachers were faced with insurmountable challenges they find challenging on a daily basis.

This researcher further assumed that many beginning teachers feel challenged to find a balance between job-related expectations and expectations they have of themselves as teachers in differentiating instruction for diverse learners and managing classrooms effectively.

This researcher further assumed that this research topic would be of interest to beginning teachers as they begin their careers as educators. This researcher further assumed that this study would hold equal interest to school administrators. Results may provide ideas for professional development for beginning teachers in the areas they feel

most challenged. It could aid in slowing the ever-increasing number of beginning teachers who leave the field of teaching within their first 5 years.

This researcher assumed that university and college staff responsible for planning curriculum and training for preservice teachers would have an interest in the outcome of this research. If preservice teachers receive extensive training in the areas that are deemed most challenging, perhaps the field of education will see an increase in the number of teachers who remain in education after graduation.

**Limitations of the study.** As this research was conducted from a pool of recent graduates employed by the same school, these individuals could report similar experiences. As all participants graduated within the past 3 years within the same state, the participants potentially entered the field of teaching with similar experiences in college preparation. This research included education graduates from only one elementary school, limiting the research to a select group of participants.

This researcher was assisted in this endeavor by a “gatekeeper” (Morris, 2015, p. 63), or someone who was familiar with the school and had access and authority to provide assistance to the researcher. Morris (2015) stated specifically that the term gatekeeper is used to identify “someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site” (p. 63). The participants in this study were chosen purposefully, rather than from a random selection method, in that they at the time of the study, they were all teachers from the chosen elementary school. A list of teachers employed by the school was provided to the researcher by the gatekeeper, principal, of the school. Participants, however, were chosen randomly from the list provided by the gatekeeper.

At the time of the study, the researcher was a coworker of participants; however, the researcher had very little knowledge or acquaintance of most participants prior to the

research study.

A further limitation of this study was a lack of variance in gender. The research site employed a limited number of male teachers, none of which were in their first 3 years of teaching.

**Delimitations of the study.** The participants selected for this research were based on an opt-in model in which they volunteered to participate (Appendix A). In order to maintain a balanced population of participants without bias or prejudice, this researcher dispersed letters requesting participation to most individuals from the generated purposeful list provided by the gatekeeper. The researcher had little to no knowledge of participants prior to the research study; therefore, no predetermined qualifications were in place other than, at the time of the study, participants were recent graduates who were employed as classroom teachers and were designated by the gatekeeper as both recent graduates and beginning teachers. Recent graduates is a term used by the researcher to define individuals who graduated within the past 3-year period.

**Procedures for data collection and analysis.** This qualitative, inquiry-based, phenomenological research study included an in-depth analysis of the reflections of experiences beginning teachers viewed as most challenging in their first years of teaching. More specifically, this research examined personal self-reflections that provided insight as to the level of preparedness beginning teachers feel when they enter the classroom to differentiate instruction, manage classrooms effectively, and deal with job-related expectations. The participants were asked to describe in detail their experience with these three challenges and how significant they felt these challenges were to them in their role as beginning teachers. Through personal reflection by participants, this researcher gained a clear, logical, and descriptive disclosure of the

experiences shared by participants (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology was used to explore how participants with same-life experiences described the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants were provided the research questions prior to journaling and provided weekly journal prompts (Appendix B). From the responses generated by these prompts, participants were then asked to expand further on the topic(s) in individual interviews. In order to gain a broad perspective from these teacher participants, their own journal responses were used as a guide during the interview process. The goal of this researcher was to obtain personal insight and experience of these beginning educators related to the three most prevalent of challenges indicated by the research which included classroom management, differentiation, and unrealized expectations of the teaching profession.

This research project was divided into the following four stages.

### **Stage One: Initial Contact with Prospective Research Candidates**

This phenomenological research study began with an introductory letter to potential candidates which included an opt-in form. This letter was sent to a purposeful group of individuals who at the time of the research were employed as teachers at the elementary school (Appendix A). The gatekeeper for this research project was one of two principals employed at the elementary school. The gatekeeper assisted in dispersing the participation letter to a purposeful selection of recent elementary grade education graduates, in that the researcher was provided initial contact information during the initial phase of the research project. The letter served as an introduction to the researcher and explained the purpose of the research being conducted (Appendix A). The letter further requested voluntary participation in this project from those who were purposefully chosen to participate, and an informed consent agreement was dispersed. Although the

goal of this researcher was to include five to 10 candidates in this research project, only five beginning teachers volunteered. After the initial confirmation, one candidate withdrew, leaving only four research participants.

The main source of communication for this research project was email correspondence. Candidates were provided the cell phone number of the researcher and asked to specify the mode of communication they preferred (Appendix A).

The candidates in the research project were informed that data would be collected in the form of journaling (Appendix B) and taped interviewing of participants. Participants were given weekly journal prompts and were asked to respond to the researcher via email (Appendix B). The journals were sent to this researcher weekly in the form of emails.

The journal entries and recorded and transcribed interviews were analyzed to find patterns and trends in beginning teacher experiences that were relative to this research in attempting to answer the research questions. In-depth analysis of the data included reading and rereading of the content to find patterns, trends, and themes. The researcher used coding marks and margin notes to develop themes while reading.

An informed consent agreement, or Opt-In Agreement, specifically addressed the following:

- The participants acknowledge their participation in the research
- The purpose of the research which includes the research question
- The procedures of the research
- The risk and benefits of the research
- The voluntary nature of participation in the research



- The participants right to stop or end involvement in the research at any time
- The process used to protect the identity of participants and ensure confidentiality (Groenewald, 2004, p. 10).

In order for the participants to share their experiences as beginning teachers with this researcher, a relationship based on trust was established early in the project.

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) stated that reflection on one's practice requires trust and open communication between the researcher and participants and, further, that trust is essential. The authors further stated that reflection requires participants "to be willing to analyze their own behavior and explore thoughts, feelings, and actions" (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004, p. 66). The participants were assured that any information shared with the researcher would be held in the strictest form of confidence and that, if desired by participants, their individual journal entries and transcribed interviews could be read by them at any time throughout the research process to ensure validity. The participants were assured that any information shared with this researcher would not, in any form, be traced back to them. The identities of participants in this project were changed to pseudonyms.

In order to gain the trust of candidates for this research project, the researcher established an open line of communication which began with an initial email to participants. The email provided insight into the researcher and the research project. The information included the research questions, the role of the participants, and the purpose of the study. The email further provided information about the researcher conducting the study. This information included a list of colleges and universities attended by the researcher and degrees earned. The participants were provided with the researcher's

background in the field of education, number of years in the classroom, and any other positions the researcher held in the field of education. The researcher provided candidates with personal information if requested. It was the desire of the researcher that candidates who participated in the study felt comfortable when sharing their experiences as beginning teachers with the researcher; in other words, with someone who has been where they are and has felt the frustration associated with differentiating instruction, managing a classroom, and with handling the unrealized job embedded responsibilities associated with teaching. The researcher shared her story in her own words, explained why this research was meaningful to her, and asked that participants share in the same manner: tell their stories to the researcher in their own words.

In order to gain access and establish trust and rapport with potential candidates, informal or personal, access for research was used. Johl and Renganathan (2010) listed informal ways to communicate with participants as informal emails; telephone calls; and when needed, appointments arranged for interviews. The researcher established with participants that communication in any form would be made at the candidates' convenience and would not interrupt their professional or personal schedules. The researcher assured candidates that all communication would be confidential, based on their schedules, and made to fit in their personal and professional timeframes.

The researcher was consistent and reliable in communication, inclusion, and in addressing all questions and concerns related to this research as it was her belief that this research project could benefit beginning teachers in the field of teaching and preservice teachers who will eventually encounter challenges in differentiating instruction, classroom management, and in handling the unrealized expectations of the teaching profession.

## **Stage Two: Journaling**

According to McNamara and Field (2007), it is through reflection that we learn and grow in our profession when they commented,

The capacity to reflect on one's own strength and weaknesses, to learn from constructive criticism, and to practice critical reflection by monitoring one's own work performance and interpersonal interactions is essential to the ability to learn from experience and is the cornerstone of the journey to becoming a lifelong learner. (p. 87)

Lee (2005) looked to Dewey's (1933) description of reflection as "active, persistence, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the future conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1933, p. 7; Lee, 2005, p. 700). According to Lee, teacher reflection encourages beginning teachers to reason through why they use certain instructional strategies and what improvements they can make in order to improve student learning. Lee stated further that it is recommended that preservice teachers engage in reflective (journaling) as a method of sustaining professional growth. Lee stated, "reflection is begun either when there is a problem that the teacher cannot resolve or when a teacher simply wishes to reconsider an educational situation" (p. 700). Lee surmised that universities and beginning teacher education programs should provide preservice teachers the opportunities of reflection in an effort to analyze their thinking and experiment with various instructional techniques.

A practitioner's reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning. Through reflection, he can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself

to experience. (Schon, 1983, p. 61)

This research study incorporated the reflective tool of journal writing by participants. The physical act of recording one's thoughts is instrumental in conveying experience as it originally occurred, thereby expanding the experience through reflection (Lamb, 2013; Morris, 2015). The journal entries of beginning teacher participants were collected for a 4-week period. The participants were asked to respond to a weekly journal prompt and submit their responses weekly to the researcher (Appendix B). The journal entries provided a detailed account of their experiences as beginning teachers and addressed the research questions specifically. The participants of this study were asked to provide personal accounts of their teaching experiences relative to differentiating instruction to diverse learners, dealing with the challenges involved in classroom management, and in handling the job-imbedded expectations they find challenging as new participants in the field of education.

Participants were instructed to document their lived experiences with differentiation, classroom management, and handling the nonteaching expectations related to the teaching profession. The beginning teachers in this study were further asked to document events that were worrisome, troubling, and challenging in their first year as teachers and subsequent years in the profession in response to differentiation, classroom management, and unrealized nonteaching expectations.

### **Stage Three: Interview**

In addition to reflective journaling by participants, individuals who elected to participate in this research project were given the option of engaging in an interview with the researcher. Smith et al. (2009) and Morris (2015) referred to this type of data collection as “a conversation with a purpose” (Morris, 2015, p. 69). The participants

were asked to address the research questions specifically and to reflect in their own words on their experiences as beginning teachers in differentiation of instruction, classroom management, and the unrealized expectations related to the teaching profession unknown to them prior to entering the field. The questions used for the interview process were generated directly from the journal response of the individual participating in the interview.

Moustakas (1994) stated that a phenomenological interview includes an “informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). Moustakas extended this by stating that the researcher may plan in advance questioning that evokes personal accounts from, and as experienced by, participants as is relative to the phenomenon in question. The interview, according to Moustakas, begins as a “social conversation” which is followed by a “focus on the experience” described in full by the participants (p. 114). Moustakas further stipulated that the interviewer, in this case the researcher, should “engage in the Epoche process” which is considered and practiced throughout the research process (p. 116).

Interviews were sought for each participant and were scheduled after the 4-week period of journaling ended. Interviews were scheduled and arranged with participants at their convenience via email correspondence and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes in duration. The interviews were in the form of a personal one-to-one meeting. The researcher gained permission from participants to record their responses prior to the interview. Recorded interviews were then transcribed into text.

#### **Stage Four: Data Analysis**

According to Moustakas (1994), in phenomenology, the researcher avoids making “suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or

problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection” (p. 47). The researcher asked, and sought to understand, if beginning teachers’ experiences through personal reflection indicated a lack of preparedness to differentiate instruction, difficulties in classroom management, and in handling the unrealized expectations of the teaching profession as exceptionally challenging.

As the researcher repeatedly read and analyzed the data, *Epoche*, a Greek word meaning to “refrain from judgement,” was considered (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Moustakas (1994) stated that in the *Epoche* method of analysis, “no position whatsoever is taken; every quality has equal value. Only what enters freshly into the consciousness . . . appears as appearance, has any validity at all in contacting truth and reality. Nothing is determined in advance” (p. 87). In this research project, the researcher set aside all judgements and understandings of ordinary and perceived situations and had a fresh and naïve approach to everyday experience as reflected by participants. The researcher attempted to “learn to see what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). In order to understand the unique challenges presented by each participant in this study, the researcher analyzed all journal entrees and interviews with an open mind and with the understanding that all prior experience related to the field of teaching would be set aside for research purposes.

Analyzing of data began the first week of the research phase. Upon receipt of responses posted by participants, the researcher asked candidates to expand further or to enlighten the researcher on specific details of journal reflections. Data analysis continued as weekly responses were posted and were ongoing throughout the 4-week period and beyond.

## **Summary of Methodology**

This qualitative, inquiry-based, phenomenological research study included an in-depth analysis of the experiences relative to the challenges faced by beginning teachers and the level of preparedness beginning teachers feel when they enter the classroom. The purposefully selected participants who opted in to this research study were provided specific reflective prompts that were directly linked to the research questions.

This research examined self-reported teacher experiences reflected in the form of journals and transcribed interviews. The personal reflections provided by the participants were analyzed to find themes and patterns that coincided with the research findings. The data collected by the researcher were read and reread to find patterns and themes in the reflections of participants. The themes were grouped, coded, and counted by the researcher.

## **Conclusion**

According to Headden (2014), experts consider that teachers in their first 5 years in the classroom are “neophyte” or novice, in that they are still learning and growing in the teaching profession. Headden continued, stating there is a major trend in today’s American classrooms for novice (beginning) teachers to be at the helm. Headden stated further that without “promising solutions, especially affective teacher induction strategies” providing “targeted training and intensive support,” student achievement will be compromised (p. 3).

Teaching, without question, entails far more than what is realized by many preservice teachers prior to when they enter the classroom as the sole provider of instruction for a diverse group of learners. There is a plethora of contributing factors in a beginning teacher’s decision to leave the field of teaching after such a short time in the

profession. Through this study, the researcher would like deeper understanding of the challenge to differentiate instruction, handle classroom management, and unrealized job-embedded expectations of these novice teachers.

This qualitative, inquiry-based, phenomenological research study included an in-depth analysis of the experiences beginning teachers reported as challenging in differentiating instruction, managing a classroom affectively, and dealing with the enormity of job-related expectations. This study examined the events that were lived and experienced by teachers, retold in written form in their own words through personal reflective journaling and/or through reflection in the interview process.

This study provided insight into the challenges the beginning teachers reported in differentiating instruction, classroom management, and job-embedded expectations and if these challenges were relative to the overwhelming and increasing level of beginning teachers who decide to leave teaching in their first few years and, in a sense, offer an explication to this extensive problem plaguing education.



## **Chapter 4: Findings of the Study**

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine if beginning teachers through personal experience and reflection identify differentiation, classroom management, and the unknown expectations required of teachers as the most challenging aspects related to their careers in education. With an ever-increasing demand to retain quality teachers in American classrooms, the goal of this study was to provide insight into the challenges deemed most significant by a group of beginning teachers and the impact these challenges had on their overall wellbeing as educators.

### **Introduction**

This interpretative phenomenological research study was designed as an instrument to examine the lived experiences of beginning teachers in the form of reflective practice. Phenomenology, through journal writing and one-on-one interviews, was the chosen method to study the reflections of beginning teachers in their first 3 years in the profession. According to Groenewald (2004), phenomenology is based on the perspective and experiences of people as they are lived. Creswell (1998) described phenomenology as “the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 10).

Capturing the mere essence of the lived experiences of beginning teachers was by far the overall goal in this research project; however, in conducting this research which included in-depth conversations with peers, it was equally an exercise in self-awareness and self-reflection on the part of the researcher. As the researcher in this project, great care was taken to capture the intrinsic nature of the experiences as they were relayed by participants’ own words. According to Moustakas (1994), “The essences of an

experience are never totally exhausted” (p. 100). Moustakas noted that “The fundamental textural-structural synthesis represents the essence at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon” (p. 100).

## **Overview**

The population of this research study consisted of four beginning teachers, all of whom were female and recently employed by the same school district at the same research site. Although there were approximately 8-10 teachers who were recognized as beginning teachers at the research site, due to a variety of extenuating circumstances, the researcher chose not to include all teachers recognized as beginners. These circumstances included maternity leave and teachers who were viewed as beginners but who had prior experience outside the realm of a public school. Letters requesting participation in the research were sent to the majority of beginning teachers at the site. Five teachers initially volunteered to participate in the research project; however, after the research began, one teacher withdrew participation. She did not formally withdraw participation or signify that she was terminating involvement in the research project; however, due to a lack of any correspondence from the beginning teacher after the initial affirmation, it was determined she had withdrawn.

Over a 4-week period, the participants in the study were emailed a weekly journal prompt and asked to complete an in-depth reflection on the research question being asked. They were then asked to email their responses back to the researcher. After the 4-week period and after all journal entries had been read and analyzed, interviews were scheduled with the participants. The interviews were approximately 20 minutes in duration and focused on the research questions as well as the responses provided by the

participants to the journal prompts. The interviews were all transcribed, making it easier for the researcher to analyze.

The data collected in the form of written journal entries and transcribed interviews were analyzed using a method similar to that outlined by Smith et al. (2009) and Morris (2015) in which the researcher read and reread the data while making notations, descriptive code marks, and comments in margins. This method of coding, called a Descriptive Code, “summarizes the primary topic of the excerpt” (Saldana, 2008, p. 3). While reading responses to journal prompts and transcribed interviews, the researcher made codes or wrote descriptive words in margins. During this process, the researcher analyzed the data for similarities, patterns, and connections in challenging experiences described by the participants as well as emerging themes that were further duly noted. If a similar experience was shared by more than one participant, the experience was categorized as a theme. After multiple readings, themes merged and, when applicable, were extricated and listed by title.

The results of this interpretative phenomenological research data analysis are presented in the form of thematic descriptions as identified by the researcher. A general discussion of each participant’s background and professional experience in the field of education is presented in narrative form as a way for the researcher and the reader to gain a better understanding of factors that could have influenced or had bearing on each participant’s experience with the phenomenon being discussed. The narratives are based on interviews and the data collected by the researcher from each individual participant. The narratives are also reflective of the researcher’s general observations and perception of each participant. According to Moustakas (1994), in phenomenological research, perception is regarded as the predominant source of understanding. When applicable,

direct quotes from the participants were used to make the experience as genuine as possible.

### Research Participants

The participants of this research project were chosen purposefully from a group of beginning teachers employed by the school. All of the participants were currently in their first 3 years of teaching. The teachers were provided pseudonym identifiers for this research project and promised anonymity throughout the research study. The table below provides an overview of the participants, the pseudonym used by the researcher to identify each, year(s) of teaching experience, level of education attained, and the number of interviews and journal entries submitted.

Table 1

#### *Information Regarding Participants*

Participant Identified by Letter	Participant Identified by Pseudonym	Years of Teaching Experience	Number of Journal Entries	Number of Interviews	Educational Level Achieved
A	Mae	2	4	2	Bachelors
B	Bree	3	4	1	Bachelors
C	Kim	1	3	1	Bachelors
D	Leigh	2	4	1	Bachelors

**Participant A: Mae.** Participant A, referred to in this research study as Mae, is a Caucasian female in her early 20s. One's first impression of Mae is that she presents a front of straightforwardness, strength, and of being very frank and honest. Mae is witty, charming, and entertaining. At times throughout both interviews, Mae made humorous observations and reflections regarding her youth and inexperience in the field of education.

Mae was interviewed twice. The first interview was after school at the end of a

busy work week. The initial interview allowed the researcher the opportunity to gain a personal insight into Mae's first and subsequent second year of teaching, the challenges she endured that first year, and the strength and fortitude she has to carry on in the field of education in spite of the challenges.

Mae, a second-year teacher, was hired as a classroom teacher for special needs students at the research site. Mae, new to the research site, was more than willing to share her experiences thus far in the field of teaching. Mae's first year of teaching left her with a renewal of anxiety problems that she had endured as a child, and at times the bouts of anxiety were so extreme Mae was unable to sit in a crowded room or participate in a group discussion in which she felt even the least bit stressed or threatened. Mae's initial placement after graduating college was in one of the largest and fastest growing school districts in Georgia. According to Mae, the support for new teachers was all but nonexistent. In Mae's own words, she did not feel supported by coworkers or administrators in her first placement. Mae described an atmosphere of animosity between herself and a paraprofessional assigned to assist and support her efforts in the classroom. The much older paraprofessional chose to openly defy Mae's instructional decisions made for her students and further berated Mae's performance to peers and administrators. Mae stated, "I felt bullied and cornered. This made it difficult to truly shine and be the teacher I wanted to be. The lack of support and influx of toxic personality, not only impacted my teaching, it impacted my personal wellbeing." When Mae was asked if she had been assigned a mentor her first year of teaching, she stated,

I was assigned a mentor teacher and though she was a wealth of knowledge, she herself was a relatively new teacher. My first year in the field was her third year. We were both rookies and unfortunately, there wasn't someone more experienced

within the school building who served this particular population of students. So, essentially, we were both learning together.

After only 1 year of teaching, Mae decided to resign her position. Her desire to work in an environment where teachers were supported by coworkers, administrators, and support staff outweighed her desire to continue on in the school, even though the school district from which she resigned is much sought after by professionals seeking teaching positions due to the location and pay.

When Mae was asked if she currently has a mentor, Mae responded no. She indicated that she was assigned a mentor when she was initially hired for her current position; however, after only the first few weeks of school, her mentor was reassigned to a new position in another school in the district leaving Mae to fend for herself. Mae went on to say, “I’ve learned to fly on my own, and ask questions when I need to, and ask for forgiveness later.”

Mae is registered to begin classes in the fall in order to work towards a Master’s Degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Applied Behavioral Analysis. Mae will also serve as a member of the Operational Leadership Team at the research site for the 2016-2017 school year, focusing on Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), school operations, and community involvement events.

For several years now, Mae has spent her summers working at a camp for children with special needs. In her words,

As I got into college, I had the opportunity to work at a special needs camp. I was like, I want to teach special ed. That’s the direction I wanted to go. Now granted, I had a camp mindset going into special ed . . . building relationships with these kids, and really focusing on their strengths . . . I wanted to work with the children

who didn't fit into a box or who were seen as outliers to the group of typical students.

Mae participated in two one-on-one interviews with the researcher and answered all journal entry prompts provided by the researcher in written form.

**Participant B: Bree.** Participant B, referred to in this research study as Bree, is a Caucasian female in her early 20s. Bree is quiet and reserved in her manner but is equally self-assured and knowledgeable in her field of study.

Currently, Bree has a Bachelor's Degree in early childhood education as well as an English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsement and a Reading Specialist certificate. Bree plans to continue her education beginning in the fall of 2016 by obtaining a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education or a degree in a similar disciplinary field. When asked where she sees herself in 5 years, Bree stated,

I plan to actually . . . I want to teach for the next 10 years. It's my goal for sure.

I'm going back to school in the fall, and I went to a meeting like 2 week ago.

They said that if you work 3 years, you'll be able to pay yourself back. Honestly, the pay scale isn't enough. I'm hoping to work an extra 2 years on top of that.

Bree chose the field of education for several reasons. According to Bree, she wanted to make a difference. She had a preconceived idea of what teaching looked like prior to entering the classroom. This preconception was due in part to the fact that Bree's mother was a paraprofessional in a school system for 14 years. Bree describes herself as growing up in a school. Currently in her third year of teaching, Bree teaches first grade at the research site. Bree shared openly and honestly her experiences as a beginning teacher. Bree's first and second years of teaching were both spent in one of the largest school districts in Georgia. Her first teaching assignment was in a high poverty, Title 1

school. The student population was very diverse, and the needs of the students went far beyond what Bree could have ever imagined. Bree stated,

I believed that I was ready to face these challenges and provide my students with the tools they needed to be successful. I believe most first year teachers feel this way once they are handed their degree and step out into the real world. I remember one of my college professors referred to this stage of teaching as the fantasy stage. A part of you believed you could single handedly change the world one student at a time, and do so easily. I was one of those first year teachers.

When asked if Bree was assigned a mentor her first year of teaching, she confirmed that she was. Bree referred to her mentor that first year as amazing. Bree stated, “If it hadn’t been for my mentor teacher my first year, I don’t know if I would have made it. She was extremely helpful.” Due to the fact that Bree was at a different site her second year of teaching, she did not have the same mentor. She did, however, receive support from peer teachers. When asked if she currently has a mentor teacher for her third year of teaching, Bree responded that she did. Bree stated, however, that she had no knowledge of mentor standards for the state of Georgia.

Bree participated in a single one-on-one interview and answered all journal entry prompts provided by the researcher in written form.

**Participant C: Kim.** Participant C, referred to in this research study as Kim, is a Caucasian female in her early 20s. Kim presents herself as very reserved and appeared to choose her words cautiously. When the interview began, Kim was extremely reticent and only answered the question being asked in a matter-of-fact manner; however, as the interview progressed, the researcher did notice that Kim’s demeanor changed somewhat. After being reassured several times that her comments were confidential, Kim began to



relax and appeared to be more trusting of the researcher. Kim's disposition was less expressive than the other participants; however, as the interview progressed, she appeared less intimidated by the questions and interview process.

Kim currently has a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education. Kim did not speak of continuing her formal education in the near future. When asked, however, where she saw herself in 5 years, Kim responded,

To be honest, I have to base it on whether or not I'll want to stay in the teaching field. Only because of what I've seen and what I've heard. I'm afraid that might happen to me. You can only try your best. I always feel like I need to be careful in what I do and what I say. I love teaching, but I'm wondering if it's, from where it is now, is it going to get . . . I wouldn't say worse, but I don't know.

Would it become less enjoyable?

Kim, a recent graduate, interviewed for several positions before finally being offered her current position at the research site. Kim is a teacher in the Early Intervention Program (EIP) supporting teachers in classroom small-group instruction and supporting students who are struggling academically. Officially, this year is Kim's first as a teacher; however, prior to serving in the EIP position, Kim served as both a long-term substitute and as a paraprofessional. While Kim did not seek out the EIP position she currently holds, she has found it fits her teaching style in that she does not have to manage the paperwork, including report cards, parent-teacher conferences, or the other demands associated with the needs of 20 plus students daily. During the interview, Kim spoke of her struggles to obtain a teaching position:

I applied for any position that was open. I just wanted a job; a teaching job. It wasn't until last year that the EIP position was open. I (had) already applied for

2nd grade. I applied for 1st grade. I didn't apply for EIP (but) secretly I wanted EIP.

When asked if she currently has a mentor, being it was her first year of teaching, Kim responded that officially her mentor is a veteran kindergarten teacher at the research site; however, Kim acknowledged that she and the kindergarten teacher rarely see each other due to scheduling and proximity of classrooms. She further stated that she receives support from a fellow EIP teacher with whom she shares a classroom at the site. Kim was unaware of any mentor standards that may or may not exist for the state of Georgia.

Kim participated in a single one-on-one interview, responded to journal entry prompts 1, 2, and 3 in written form, and responded to journal entry prompt 4 verbally during the interview session.

**Participant D: Leigh.** Participant D, whom the researcher will refer to in this research study as Leigh, is a Caucasian female in her early 20s. Leigh, new to the research site, is a newlywed and stepmother to one child. Leigh presents herself as extremely self-assured, energetic, and positive. Leigh's demeanor is one of experience in the field of teaching, even though she is a novice; this year being her second in the field. Leigh further presents herself as strong and capable of handling the stress and challenges that are present in the classroom setting on a daily basis. In Leigh's own words, she is still a work in progress.

Leigh, a second-year teacher, also began her career in one of the largest school districts in Georgia. Leigh currently teaches fifth grade at the research site. Leigh describes her first year of teaching as a nightmare. Fresh out of college, Leigh was hired to teach second grade at the end of July, just 1 week before school began. To Leigh's utter dismay, only 2 and a half weeks into the school year, she was told she would be

transferred to a new school. According to Leigh, she was informed this extremely disappointing event would be effective immediately. Leigh stated,

My first year was a nightmare compared to my expectations. I was hired in late July, a week before school started. Two and a half weeks in, my principal comes into my 4th grade classroom during my planning and tells me that the attendance for the school was too low, whereas other schools (in the district) were too high. Meaning the last one hired gets transferred to a new school. It was like living in a bad dream. The room I had just put together for the first time had to be torn down within 24 hours. I didn't even know where I would show up to work on Monday morning.

In somewhat of a bewildered and disappointed state, Leigh reported to a different school and a different classroom, filled with students she did not know the following Monday morning. Leigh's new teaching assignment was a second-grade classroom in an entirely different area within the district.

Leigh currently holds a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education but plans to continue her education in the near future. Leigh was chosen to serve on the Academic Parent Teacher Team (APTT) at the research site for the 2016-2017 school year.

When asked if Leigh currently has a mentor to support her during her second year of teaching, she responded "no." She further stated that she was unaware if Georgia has mentor standards in place. She responded that it was her understanding that individual schools and districts handled the mentoring aspect for beginning teachers as they chose.

Leigh participated in a single one-on-one interview and answered all journal entry prompts provided by the researcher in written form. Although Leigh participated in a 20-minute interview, the recording was inadvertently compromised. The only remaining

record of the interview with Leigh is a short segment of the original recorded interview and the notes taken by the researcher during the interview.

### **Addressing the Research Questions**

The goal of the researcher in answering the research questions was to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges new teachers confront when entering the classroom with regard to differentiation of instruction, classroom management, and in dealing with unexpected job-related obligations of the teaching profession. It was the researcher's belief that if the challenges most prevalent in the lives of beginning teachers were better understood, perhaps more effort could be placed on preparing preservice teachers at the university level and professional development opportunities could be made available in these three challenging areas to assist beginning teachers prior to their entry into the classroom environment.

This research attempted to answer the following questions.

1. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to preparedness to differentiate instruction be characterized?
2. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to difficulties in classroom management be characterized?
3. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to unrealized expectations of the teaching profession be characterized?

### **Research Question 1**

The participants in this research study were asked to reflect in detail on their experience as beginning teachers in differentiating instruction for diverse learners. For the purpose of this research study, differentiation was defined as "a way of thinking about and approaching the planning and implementation of curriculum and instruction with an

understanding that learners differ in important ways” (Sands & Barker, 2004, p. 1) and further by Tomlinson and Allan (2000) as a response and attention provided by the teacher to address the academic needs of individual learners.

In addition to the preceding prompt, participants were further asked to include in their reflection an explanation of support received through mentoring, coaching, administration, peers, or professional development opportunities. Table 2 shows information related to Research Question 1 (How can beginning teachers’ experiences through reflection with regard to preparedness to differentiate instruction be characterized?) and journal prompt 1 (Please reflect in detail your experience as a beginning teacher in differentiating instruction for diverse learners).

Table 2

*Themes Identified During Coding*

Theme	Number of Occurrences in Data	Exemplars
Differentiation	27	<p>“It’s so hard to plan for instruction when you’ve got so many different needs and so many different levels.” Mae</p> <p>“Differentiating my first year was not only an expectation, but essential for the success of my diverse learners. I found differentiating to be extremely challenging because of a lack of resources and a lack of support.” Bree</p>

**Preparedness to differentiate instruction.** One of the greatest areas of challenge experienced for the beginning teachers in this research study was in differentiating instruction for the various learning needs of their students. In response to

Research Question 1, the initial journal prompt asked the participants to respond to their experience with the challenges of differentiating instruction as beginning teachers (Appendix B). The following information regarding challenges the participants incurred with differentiation also includes experiences shared during the individual interviews.

Kim shared that even though she felt her college experience was good, she did not feel completely prepared for the challenge of differentiating instruction for diverse learners. Kim further stated she felt many college professors have perhaps spent little or no time in a classroom setting for quite some time; therefore, it is difficult for college instructors to fully teach a group of preservice teachers the difficulties associated with differentiating instruction for diverse learners when they themselves do not fully understand the changes that have occurred in modern classrooms. In Kim's own words,

I just feel that my professors were . . . out of the field, and things change constantly. It's hard for them to keep up and try to stay with (the changes). I've asked teachers around here . . . Does it feel different from 10 years ago? Does it feel different from 5 years ago? It's constantly changing. It's hard enough for me to keep up, and I'm a new teacher. I feel that what I've been taught throughout school has been different from the idea(s) in here. Differentiation . . . how the learner learns, basically . . . Howard Gardner. He was the one . . . everybody learns differently. Multiple Intelligences. I feel like differentiation doesn't have one definition, that it has multiple definitions. I think basically it goes down to reach the learner. Whatever they need, you try your best to help them.

According to Leigh, differentiation was perhaps one of the most challenging aspects in teaching her first year. She referred to differentiation as the "biggie" for beginning teachers. Leigh went on to say that her first year of teaching was made even

more challenging with trying to meet the needs of individual learners. This is supported by her statement that

As a first year teacher last school year, I almost felt as if I had been thrown out to the wolves in regards to differentiation. I was confused about exactly how to differentiate instruction for 25 different 8 year olds on a daily basis. Despite the fact that I went to school for four years to master the art of teaching, I soon realized I was nowhere near done learning.

Leigh's reflection included strategies she incorporated into her instructional routine in an effort to differentiate for the diversity within her second-grade classroom her first year in the classroom. Leigh further stated,

I think that differentiation is one of the more difficult things about teaching. So often I think I got lost in thinking that differentiation was only referring to small group lessons. I soon learned that differentiation is about reaching all those kids . . . through hands on experience, and auditory and visual stimulation. I learned a lot from my 2nd grade team, rather than my administration, and found different ways to differentiate. Some strategies I learned and used my first year were small reading and math groups, and also ways to differentiate with the way I was giving information to my students.

As indicated in Leigh's introduction, she did not have a mentor her first or subsequent second year of teaching. She instead relied on her experienced coworkers for support.

Bree stated that college cannot fully prepare you for the actuality of being a teacher. She went on to say that her student teaching assignment was nothing like the real-life experience of being alone in a classroom meeting the demands associated with 20 plus students. According to Bree, even though she initially felt as though she was

prepared for the demands of classroom instruction, she was not prepared for the amount of time and energy involved in differentiating instruction for diverse learners. Bree stated simply that she was not prepared for what awaited her that first year which included a differentiated instruction. Bree's words were as follows:

I don't think there's any college education out there that could really prepare you because you never know what kind of students you're going to get. I really think that it all depends on the school. It all depends on your students. You have no control over the needs of the students you're going to get. I took countless classes in college where differentiation was the buzz word. I read numerous articles by Carol Ann Tomlinson about differentiation, and wrote countless papers that included research about the topic. Of course I learned lesson plans written for hypothetical students and actual students look very different and require modification. Once in my own classroom I realized college had not prepared me for how to deal with a lack of resources required to differentiate. With student teaching, you have someone in there constantly. If you make a mistake, or you do need help, there's someone to help you. Once you have your own classroom, you're the only one in there. I quickly learned that teaching diverse learners requires a great deal of time and effort. I wish student teaching could be a career, because all you do is teach and you don't have to worry about all the extra.

Of the four research participants in this study, Mae's experience with differentiation was perhaps less of a challenge, but a challenge no less. Mae indicated that because she was trained as a special needs teacher, she was required to differentiate instruction for the diverse learners she would encounter on a daily basis. Mae did indicate, however, that her classroom experience has been that finding ways to deliver



differentiated instruction to the many diverse learners she sees in 1 day, to make the instruction exciting yet at the same time predictable, and to do so on a daily basis, has been an ongoing challenge. Mae acknowledging that like thumbprints, each of her students was unique and left an impression on the classroom setting. Student learning styles, personalities, and level of development had to be addressed when planning differentiated instruction. Mae further indicated that to differentiate instruction to the extent in which it is most beneficial for her students was beyond her comfort zone during her initial placement. Due to the fact that her students were so unique in the many academic needs they presented, Mae ultimately decided that her success and the success of her students would ultimately fall on her implementing a differentiated instruction for each student. Mae stated it this way:

I did not feel adequately prepared to differentiate . . . when I was initially placed. This was not only new to me in the teaching sense, but it was outside my comfort zone of what I had learned in college, and the experiences I had during student teaching and practicums. During my first year of teaching, I was the teacher of record in a self-contained special education classroom serving students moderately to severely impacted by ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Fresh out of college, I was working with students who were not only diverse academically, but developmentally and verbally as well. I had to differentiate instruction on many different levels. Differentiation was how instruction was delivered; one-on-one instructional support, and small group instruction was used on a daily basis. Differentiation in this setting may be teaching multiple grades and subjects at the same time. I can recall some segments that required me to teach writing to a group of 10 students, and then also have 2 additional students in the room for

math instruction. The most difficult part . . . was finding a way to do this every day, change things up to keep instruction exciting, but also keep it predictable because these were students who relied on routine in the classroom, and who needed it in order to be successful. As the year progressed, I did learn to implement several strategies to differentiate instruction in my classroom to support all the types of learners that depended on me for their academic success and personal wellbeing. At times, I did feel alone in my efforts to adequately provide instruction to such a diverse group of students based on the support within my classroom.

### **Summary**

Differentiation was deemed a significant challenge for all four of the participants in the research study as the coded occurrence of the theme in the data was 27 times. More specifically, differentiation was coded as a challenge 27 times of the 220 coded responses. All four of the participants in this study reflected on challenges they experienced as beginning teachers with differentiating instruction for the various learning needs of their students.

### **Research Question 2**

In response to Research Question 2, the second journal prompt provided to beginning teachers asked participants to reflect on their experience in managing a classroom. For this research project, the term classroom management was defined as “a set of behaviors and activities by which the teacher organizes and maintains classroom conditions that bring about effective and efficient instruction” (McEwan, 2001, p. 49). Classroom management was further defined as everything that a teacher must do to fulfill his/her teaching objectives. These objectives might include preparation of instructional

materials, planning of instruction, and structuring of activities and student involvement. Most notably, however, classroom management was defined for the group as the adequate control of the whole classroom and individual student behavior. Table 3 shows information related to Research Question 2 (How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to difficulties in classroom management be characterized?) and journal prompt 2 (Please reflect in detail your experience as a beginning teacher in managing a classroom).

Table 3

*Themes Identified During Coding*

Theme	Number of Occurrences in Data	Exemplars
Classroom management	26	<p>"Managing this classroom of . . . incredibly diverse students would be a challenge. . . . My classroom would never be managed if I didn't stick to one thing for a longer period of time and continue with fidelity." Mae</p> <p>"I thought managing my students would be easier. My experience proved differently. It took me my entire first year to learn how to manage my students, and by the time I felt I knew what I was doing, the school year was over." Bree</p> <p>"Experiences I encountered during my first year teaching related to behavior management caused me to question if I was cut out for a career in education." Bree</p>

**Classroom management.** An enormous part of the success of any classroom teacher is determined by the ability they possess to maintain and manage their classroom

effectively. Classroom management challenges were among the greatest of challenges experienced and shared by the majority of research participants. In response to Research Question 2, the second journal prompt asked the participants to respond to their experience with the challenges of classroom management (Appendix B). The following information regarding challenges the participants incurred with classroom management also includes experiences shared during the individual interviews.

In addition to the preceding prompt, participants were further asked to include in their reflection support received through mentoring, coaching, administration, peer support, or professional development opportunities.

Kim's initial placement was as an EIP teacher at the research site. Although she felt very fortunate to have the position, she was told by the administration that she was chosen as an EIP teacher rather than for a regular education teaching position because of lack in experience with classroom management. In her role as an EIP teacher, Kim is able to learn classroom management strategies and grow as a teacher by following the lead set for her by the teachers with whom she works. Kim believes her success lies in adapting to the classroom management style and to the needs of the individual teachers in the classrooms she supports. Kim's experience revealed that consistency is the key to success regardless of the expectations. Kim stated the following:

As an EIP teacher, I am constantly in and out of classrooms. Each classroom teacher sets their expectations at the beginning of the year. I adapt to each teacher. Some teachers have traditional ways of classroom management (sit at desks) and some have non-traditional (multiple areas for working such as the floor, buckets, small chairs, and large chairs). I myself feel like I am in between traditional and non-traditional. My classroom management style changes with

each teacher. I feel like my classroom management is adaptable based on the teacher's expectations and the grade level.

Although Mae observed many classroom management techniques and strategies during her student teaching experience, nothing quite compared to maintaining order in a classroom of her own. According to Mae, her first year of teaching was wrought with undue time spent on trying techniques she had witnessed during student teaching or strategies shared with her by her mentor teacher. Mae soon learned after trying visual schedules, seating charts, study carrels, and sticker charts that the key to her success would be in consistency and follow through on her part. Mae stated,

During my first year of teaching I was working with a rather unique population of students. Like thumbprints, each one (of my students) was unique and each one left an impression on the classroom. Managing the classroom of . . . diverse students would be a challenge. In short, there was no one right way to manage this class. It had to be differentiated for each student. I was always trying to impress my administrators by doing things exactly how they were being done in my mentor teacher's classroom. My classroom would never be managed if I didn't stick to one thing for a longer period of time, and continue it with fidelity. The cutesy sing-song rhymes were great attention getters at the start of the year for the younger grades, but quickly lost their significance by mid-October. Students would often roll their eyes and reply in a mocking tone. The cutesy clap in unison, ring a wind-chime wouldn't cut it with this group.

Mae ultimately experienced success when she chose a system, stuck with it, tweaked it when necessary, and did so with fidelity. She explained it like this:

At the close of the year, my students and I had established systems that worked. I

had all my students working for tickets to cash in for the prize box. Two students had proximal seating in which they were close to an adult during all parts of the school day. Three students truly depended on having a visual schedule on their desk that corresponded to the one on the board-for consistency, for predictability, and seeing what their day entailed. A few of my students also had a punch-card system where if they received X number of punches, they would earn their preferred item/activity for that segment. One student had a study carrel to minimize distractions while yet another student sat on a wiggle cushion during instruction to increase focus. Another student was in a connected desk that prevented her from throwing the desk out of frustration. Each student needed something different, but once it was determined what the child needed, they were more successful in the classroom.

Though I was working with a different population of students, the principles were the same-choose a system, stick with it, tweak it as needed, and be open to having individual systems based on student needs. While it hasn't been . . . easy . . . I find my students do better when they have a classroom expectation for how they should behave and participate. They also need a system that works on their individual levels as well. We differentiate instruction so why not differentiate the ways we manage the classroom for those we instruct?

Mae stated she feels more training is necessary in the area of behavior management within the classroom setting and more support from administrators in dealing with out of control students. Mae put it this way:

I've talked to a lot of teachers here. They say, "We can't teach because we're having to manage behaviors." You're either chasing kids. I've had to do that

several times, chasing kids down the hallway, running up the stairs . . . call their parents. It's a constant battle managing their behaviors. It makes it very hard to teach.

According to Bree, during her student teaching experience, the class in which she worked had their classroom management system and routines in place several months prior to her arrival. Little, did she realize the importance of establishing rules, structure, and routines during the first few months of school. In Bree's words,

My first year in my own classroom was a challenging one. While the majority of my students were eager to learn, and had little to no behavior problems, I had a hand full of students who were difficult to manage. My classroom was like a revolving door my first year, and the ones who came and left were usually the ones with the most behavior issues. Many of my students who had behavior problems did not have stable homes. My definition of an unstable household is one that has a myriad of people in and out, constantly moving homes, and parents who are in and out of the picture. I spent more time the first few months in my classroom learning how to teach, and honestly putting the management part on the backburner, which was a huge mistake on my part. I had a clip system in place where each student had a clip and moved their clips up and down the chart depending on their behavior, however, I was not consistent enough when I first implemented the system. I would ask some students to move their clips for undesirable behaviors, while letting others off the hook because their behavior was usually good. I have learned that to make a behavior management system effective, you have to be consistent.

Although Bree eventually realized consistency was the key to maintaining order

and discipline in her classroom that first year of teaching, she conceded that given the same students and circumstances, her third year might have been equally as challenging. Bree further stated that the challenging experiences she encountered during her first year of teaching related to classroom and behavior management caused her to question if she was cut out for a career in education. Bree commented,

One of my most challenging behavior problems I have ever experienced was in my first year. He would run away from me so I had to hold his hand wherever we went. He would urinate on other students in the bathroom, throw woodchips during recess, and talk about inappropriate things to other students. If I did not keep a close eye on this student, he would start crawling around on the floor under other students' desks. I was not equipped to handle his behaviors, especially while being the only teacher in my classroom with nineteen other students. I had another student who would yell, scream, cry, and hide under desks when he did not get his way. Another student would throw things at other students.

Bree went on to say that she chose not to ask for support from administration due to the fact that she thought seeking help would make her appear ineffective in controlling her classroom. Bree decided that going undetected and flying under the radar of administration would be her best tactic. Rather than seeking support from administrators, Bree chose instead to turn to her fellow coworkers and especially veteran teachers in her building. According to Bree, she simply tried to survive her first year:

I thought managing my students would be easier. My experience proved differently. It took me my entire first year to learn to manage my students, and by the time I felt like I knew what I was doing, the school year was over. I was not prepared to manage some of the students I encountered my first year. I did not



want to ask for help because I did not want them to think I could not handle it. I was afraid to seem like I had failed.

Leigh described similar experiences and circumstances during her first year of teaching. According to Leigh's detailed account of events her first year on the job, her college experience did not fully prepare her for events that would occur in her own classroom. Leigh described an experience with a 7-year-old student who was so angry at her that he wrote and illustrated death threats towards her and another situation with the student in which he tried to injure a classmate by stabbing him with pencils. Leigh shared that it was common for the student to run out of the classroom and at other times to run out of the school building. Leigh stated that upon seeking support from administration in dealing with the out-of-control student, she was told the classroom management problems she was having should have been handled on her own. Leigh stated,

As a beginning teacher I was terrified about managing a classroom all alone. Despite all of the classroom management portfolios I was to create in college, it didn't seem to prepare me quite for what I would meet my first year in the classroom. When I first got started it didn't seem so bad. The kids weren't difficult; I didn't see much that I couldn't handle. They would follow the rules for the most part, but then, when my ideas and plans didn't work, I would try new things only to have them fail a few months later. After a while the students got comfortable and their true colors began to show. The college classroom didn't prepare me for the administration team that wasn't supportive (and) became frustrated when you had to call on them for help . . . your first year you just don't know how to handle it.

## **Summary**

Classroom management was deemed a significant challenge for the beginning teachers as the occurrence of coded responses in the data was 26 times. Classroom management responses were only slightly below differentiation at 27 coded responses. All four of the beginning teachers in this study reflected on challenges they encountered in managing a classroom effectively.

## **Research Question 3**

In response to Research Question 3, the third journal prompt asked the participants to reflect on their experience as a beginning teacher in dealing with the unrealized expectations associated with the teaching profession. The teachers were asked to include in their response how prepared they were as beginning teachers to handle the extra requirements that are associated with the teaching profession. These requirements might include the amount of paperwork required, the accountability for student proficiency, and planning of instruction. The group was asked to include details and descriptions of the experiences they encountered in dealing with the expectations as a beginning teacher and the requirements of the teaching profession.

In addition to the preceding prompt, participants were further asked to include in their reflection support received through mentoring, coaching, administration, peer support, or professional development opportunities. Table 4 shows information related to Research Question 3 (How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to unrealized expectations of the teaching profession be characterized?) and journal prompt 3 (Please reflect in detail your experience as a beginning teacher in dealing with the unrealized expectations associated with the teaching profession).

Table 4

*Themes Identified During Coding*

Theme	Number of Occurrences in Data	Exemplars
Unrealized expectations	52	<p>“Instruction is just such a small part of what teaching really is. Entering into the profession, I was warned that there would be many things that were entirely unrelated to teaching. I had NO idea just how many things would pop up over the course of a year.” Mae</p> <p>“I think the most challenging part of teaching that I had to adjust to was helping struggling students and learning about the RTI process. I was in a fantasy stage of teaching when I first began, but reality set in rather quickly when I realized all the extra duties of a classroom teacher.” Bree</p> <p>“I think all aspiring teachers have this rainbow of hope that when they walk in the building, despite all of the negative thoughts towards the public education system, and the many people telling you to choose a different career, that it’s too much, that it will all change, that all those people are wrong, that it can’t be that bad . . . I was so naïve to how it all worked.” Leigh</p>

**Beginning teacher expectations.** Without a doubt, a plethora of unexpected expectations that beginning teachers face when they enter the classroom was shared by all the participants as highly challenging. All of the teachers in this research study confirmed that they were unaware and somewhat surprised at the amount of expectations outside of teaching that were required of them their first year on the job. In response to Research Question 3, the third journal prompt asked the participants to respond to their

experience with the challenges of unexpected expectations related to teaching (Appendix B). The following information regarding challenges the participants incurred with unexpected expectations related to their teaching position also includes experiences shared during the individual interviews.

Kim shared her frustration with what she described as unavoidable circumstances associated with her teaching assignment that inadvertently limited her instructional time. In her role as an IEP teacher Kim is often pulled from regularly scheduled classrooms to assist in mClass Dibels Assessments, Lower Quartile Interventions, ITBS (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills), and CGI (Cognitively Guided Instruction). Kim's expectation of teaching did not include the countless hours of instructional time lost to state and local testing requirements. Kim described the amount of time lost to testing as alarming and that her expectation of teaching and classroom instruction did not include all the time away from her students that would be required to complete assessments. Kim stated,

At the beginning of the year there was a handbook given out. This handbook told teachers in advance of all the after school events that were mandated to (attend). So the expectation for that is a given. Soon I will be more than likely pulled for the Milestone testing. I will lose two weeks of instructional time with my students. This is a bit frustrating because state tests are no fun for anyone. If I had to guess how much instructional time I have lost with my students due to testing, I would guess at least 6 weeks of instructional days. This is alarming to me because that is around a month and a half lost. The expectation of a teacher is to teach, and this takes away from teaching. There has to be a better way to not lose instructional time with the students.

Mae shared that she first began toying with the idea of becoming a teacher during

high school. Her idea of what teaching was like and what she learned to be the reality of teaching collided soon after she was hired. Mae's comments regarding her first year of teaching were insightful:

I thought it was going to be rainbows and sunshine, freshly sharpened Crayola Crayons. Boy, was I in for a surprise. Initially, I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. I was going to change the world one Dr. Jean song at a time. One shape, color, or number word at a time. I felt as though I was ready to conquer the world! I didn't realize how quickly the world would show me who was boss. When I think of my first year of teaching and the undulating list of do ASAP's I was given, the lyrics to the song, In Too Deep, by Sum 41 come to mind.

Following are the lyrics Mae recorded in her journal:

The faster we're falling  
 We're stopping and stalling  
 We're running in circles again  
 Just as things were looking up  
 You said it wasn't good enough  
 But still we're trying one more time  
 Maybe we're just trying too hard  
 When really it's closer than it is too far  
 Cause I'm in too deep, and I'm trying to keep  
 Up above my head, instead of going under. (Sum 41, 2001)

Mae further shared that she was warned prior to entering the classroom that there would be obligations and requirements of her that were totally unrelated to classroom instruction. Mae stated,

Entering into the profession, I was warned that there would be many things that were entirely unrelated to teaching. I had NO idea just how many things would pop up over the course of a year. I quickly learned the term voluntold. When something needs to be done and the administration or team leader think the new person would be perfect (for the job), ultimately you get voluntold. Volunteered without your consent. That happened many times during my first year of teaching.

Mae further shared that she was overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork that was required of her that first year:

I had no idea the amount of paperwork I would undertake. The countless hours I would spend being critiqued for my data notebooks, attendance records, goal sheets, Instructional Education Plan (IEP) paperwork, and alternative testing portfolios that we had to assemble over the course of 18 weeks and send out of state to be evaluated. Yes! Paperwork was a beast that I knew I would have to tackle, but would eventually be the bane of my existence by the end of the year.

Mae further noted that she did not expect a complete lack of collaboration and collaborative planning with peer teachers that she encountered her first year of teaching and once again during her subsequent second year on the job.

One of the most insightful comments regarding teacher expectations was offered by Leigh when she shared during an interview that she would much rather spend a couple of hours after school planning than to take her work home. Leigh further stated that it is very common for her to spend 2 plus hours after school on Friday afternoon preparing for the week ahead. According to Leigh, if she does not stay late to plan instruction, grade papers, and attend to other paperwork, she would spend her evenings and weekends

managing the tasks. Leigh indicated that taking her work home takes time away from valuable time with her family. In Leigh's words,

The faculty meetings, the RTI folders, the progress monitoring, the conferences, the communication with parents, the lesson plans, the after school programs, the tutoring, the grading, the incessant stream of never-ending items to check off your work to-do list . . . I could go on. It is a lot!

Bree too described her experience with unknown expectations her first year as extremely challenging. According to Bree, the unrealized expectations for teachers were unbeknownst to her prior to stepping into her own classroom. Bree stated that even though she arrived to school an hour early and generally stayed long after the students left the building, she could never find enough hours in the day to complete all that she felt needed to be accomplished to ensure success. According to Bree, if she did not work extra hours after school and on weekends to plan instruction, her job as a classroom teacher would be incomplete. In her own words,

I was in a fantasy stage of teaching when I first began, but reality set in rather quickly when I realized all the extra duties of a classroom teacher. I did not realize the extra time I would have to put in to be a proficient teacher. The lack of planning time left me feeling very overwhelmed my first year. Planning lessons aligned to the standards seemed easier when it was not my classroom.

An experience categorized as an unrealized expectation for Bree prior to stepping into her own classroom was the amount of time and energy it would take to implement the RTI (Response to Intervention) process. Bree further stated that the requirements associated with learning the RTI process to support her struggling students with learning and behavioral needs, implementing the strategies, tracking students' progress, and then

reporting back to the RTI team, was the most challenging aspect of her first year of teaching. Bree commented on her experience with RTI:

My first year of teaching I had about 6 or 7 students in the RTI process, and I found the task of tracking their growth to be a daunting and almost impossible one. When I first started teaching I really had no idea. I had been to the RTI meetings with my mentor teacher . . . but I had never been responsible for implementing the interventions every week day whatever it calls for, and tracking the data and the graphs. I had no formal training. It was kind of like sink or swim. If you have to pull a student every single week, and track what they're doing . . . you have the rest of the class . . . that was really challenging for me.

### **Summary**

The unrealized expectations related to the teaching profession were the most significant challenges noted by the participants in this study. Of the 220 total coded responses, unrealized expectations were coded in the journal entries and interviews 52 times. The beginning teachers in this study included in their reflections the enormous amount of paperwork, the RTI process, staff meetings, grading, conferences, lesson planning, afterschool programs, and communicating with parents as just a few of the many unforeseen expectations they encountered upon entering the field of teaching.

### **Further Reflections and Emerging Themes**

Journal prompt 4 solicited an open-ended response from the four participants asking, "what did you think teaching would be like, and what was your experience?" Due to the open-ended aspect of prompt number four, the beginning teachers shared experiences that they viewed as most challenging that did or did not include any of the previous addressed challenges. For this reason, journal prompt 4 was valuable in



providing the researcher with several challenging aspects of the first year(s) of teaching that were coded and thematized. Table 5 shows information related to journal prompt 4:

What did you think teaching would be like? What was your experience?

Table 5

*Themes Identified During Coding*

Themes	Number of Occurrences in Data	Exemplars
Disillusionment	27	<p>“I thought it would be rainbows and sunshine and freshly sharpened Crayola crayons. Boy, was I in for a surprise. I felt as though I was ready to conquer the world! I didn’t realize how quickly the world would show me who was boss.” Mae</p> <p>“that’s a lot to handle when you’re twenty-three years old and you’re handed your first big girl job and then all of a sudden it’s taken away from you.” Mae</p> <p>“My first year of teaching was a nightmare compared to my expectations. I was hired in late July. A week before school started my principal came into my 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom and tells me that the attendance for the school is too low . . . meaning the last one hired gets transferred to a new school. It was like living in a bad dream.” Leigh</p>
Administrative support	21	<p>“I felt because I was new, I wasn’t being heard . . . the anxious first year teacher who would come to work with knots in her stomach . . . the support was nowhere to be found.” Mae</p>
Preparedness	19	<p>“I believed that college and student teaching had prepared me for the challenges of teaching, but I quickly learned that teaching diverse learners requires a great deal of time and effort. I realized college had not prepared me for how to deal with a lack of resources required to differentiate.” Bree</p> <p>“In college, they didn’t prepare me for the student who would get so mad at me at the age of seven, he would write and illustrate death threats towards me.” Leigh</p>
Mentoring	15	<p>“I was also assigned a mentor teacher and though she was a wealth of knowledge, she herself was a relatively new teacher. We were both rookies, and unfortunately, there wasn’t someone more experienced within the school building who served this particular population of students. So essentially, we were both learning together.” Mae</p> <p>“My mentor teacher my first year was my saving grace. If it had not been for her along with a community of other teachers, I honestly do not know if I would still be teaching.” Bree</p>

(continued)

Themes	Number of Occurrences in Data	Exemplars
Lack of planning time	9	“The lack of planning time left me feeling overwhelmed my first year.” Bree
Emotionally challenging	7	“You have to be mom to twenty kids a day. It’s a lot of work. That’s one of the biggest things I face. I had one kid tell me, “I hate the yelling at home.” I had to watch how much I raised my voice.” Mae
Professional development	7	“As a new teacher trying to find her way in teaching, I usually did not find the professional development that took up my planning time helpful.” Bree
Collaboration	4	“The final thing I didn’t expect during my first year of teaching (and subsequent year) is the lack of collaborative planning. There is little to no mutual planning time to meet and conference with the teachers whose students I support.” Mae
Feedback	2	“Feedback is everything. If you’re told, “Oh, you did a great job,” or, “Oh, that was terrible,” and you don’t have a reason why, then you don’t know what to fix. When the only feedback you receive is of a negative nature, it hinders your hopes of being successful in what you’re pursuing.” Mae
Isolation	2	“Once you have your own classroom, you’re the only one in there. My first year, I was in a trailer, so I felt really isolated.” Bree
Salary	2	“I never once thought the money would phase me, but boy! The large amount of work that goes in for the little bit of money, in the big scheme of things, can mentally wear someone down.” Leigh

### Emerging Themes

In response to the fourth journal prompt in this research, the participants were asked what they thought teaching would be like, and what their actual experience in the field of teaching was (Appendix B). Along with the responses to this journal entry prompt, the teacher’s challenges and struggles were recorded during the individual interviews, transcribed, and analyzed. As the researcher read and reread the responses to all four journal prompts and transcribed interviews, several challenges emerged.

Among the list of challenges reported by the beginning teachers in this research study in conjunction with the challenges they experienced with differentiation, classroom management, and the unforeseen expectations of being a teacher, further struggles included a lack of collaboration and support from coworkers, insufficient planning time, isolation, low salaries, and the challenge of dealing with the overwhelming need from their students emotionally. The most prevalent of the struggles the beginning teachers wrote about in their journals and discussed in individual interviews, however, was dealing with the disillusionment and realities of their new profession, a lack of support from administration, a lack of preparedness and for what awaited them in the classroom, and mentoring.

The themes that emerged during this research study are categorized into two groups. The first group of themes are those which were most prevalent during coding in that they ranged in occurrence between 7% and 12%. These themes were categorized as primary emerging themes. The second group of themes occurred for a minimum of two times during coding but were less substantial in occurrence than those labeled primary. Therefore, the second category is titled secondary emerging themes. These themes occurred 6% or less in the coded data.

### **Primary Emerging Themes**

#### **Dealing with the disillusionment and realities of the teaching profession.**

When beginning teachers enter the field of education and confront the realities that await them as classroom teachers, there is a sense of disillusionment with the many requirements associated with their career of choice. All of the research participants in this study shared experiences in which they were left with a sense of disenchantment and disappointment with their chosen field. What they initially dreamed teaching would be

like for them that first year soon became a reality for which they felt unprepared. For the research participants, the 8-hour day stretched into 12, and the 40-hour work week soon became 60 long, grueling hours of planning and preparing for their position. All of the long hours of preparation were an attempt to stay one step ahead of the students they were assigned and to prove to themselves and others they were capable of handling the job at hand.

Kim's disillusionment, as previously stated, stemmed from the overabundance of time necessary for administering state and local assessments which, according to Kim, was excessive. Kim was further concerned with the amount of time she lost to instruction when she was asked to participate in schoolwide testing events. Kim's further disillusionment came in the form of a lack of support and trust from administration. Kim shared the following:

Because of what I've seen and what I've heard. I'm afraid it might happen to me. You can only try your best . . . not that I know the whole situation, but I've heard, there's some teachers here that administration have honed in on. I've only heard it from one side. I hear that (it) was based off of parents. Parents who are part of the PTO. She (the teacher) would do out of the box things, like . . . the wax museum, and there was a poetry slam. I always feel like I need to be careful in what I do and say. I am afraid that administration might . . . I don't want to do (anything) wrong.

Within the same context, an area of further disillusionment indicated by Kim was in dealing with parents. Kim stated the following:

I guess the expectation from the parents and the teachers can be different. I guess one thing I've learned is (dealing with) the parents. I don't interact with the

parents as much as a classroom teacher does. I do have afterschool, and then I interact . . . with some of those parents?

Mae's initial disillusionment with teaching came in the form of what she described as bullying and antagonistic behaviors from a much older coworker. During Mae's second interview, she elaborated on an event that left her with anxiety issues that would linger far into her second year of teaching. Mae described in detail an event that occurred at the end of her first year of teaching when she approached the coworker in an attempt to make reparations. Mae had purchased an end-of-year gift card for the much older paraprofessional and offered it to her with what she felt were kind and apologetic condolences only to have a highly unprofessional encounter with the disgruntled paraprofessional. Mae's reflection was as follows:

When you're fresh out of school, you don't realize that people can be nasty. Especially grown people. People that are your mother's age. You're just like, Wow! It blows you away. Last year I had people I worked with who set out to make my life a living hell. I was very apologetic even if it wasn't my fault. I handed her the gift card, and she threw the card. Threw it back at me. She said, "I don't want anything from you. I've told you that. I don't like you, and I don't want anything from you."

To add to Mae's disillusionment with her newfound career in teaching, she was further disenthralled when she was informed her contract would not be renewed after only 6 months in the classroom. To Mae's utter dismay and disenchantment with the labyrinth she found herself entangled, she chose to resign her teaching position rather than being denied the much-coveted contract by administration. She knew if her records indicated that the administration had chosen not to renew her contract, it would be

impossible for her to find a teaching position within the same system.

When my dreams were shattered of being a successful teacher . . . what point was there in pursuing anything new? I had to be better than what brought me down.

Things may have had a rough start but it was up to me to persevere. I chose to leave the school on my terms. I resigned from the position and was forced to seek out a new teaching position.

Mae eventually found a new job in a new district for the following school year and has since tried to put the discord and discontent of her first teaching assignment behind her. Although Mae's second year in the teaching profession was a welcomed change in comparison to her first, it too was wrought with discontent in another form. Mae found dealing with the emotional needs and neglect of her students was a challenge to her youth and inexperience. According to Mae, teaching is like putting together a puzzle. She used the following analogy when describing the students with whom she works and the difficulties associated with meeting their academic and emotional needs:

One piece at a time . . . and sometimes you get puzzles that have pieces missing.

You have puzzles that are the wrong shapes. You can try and mash them to fit and they just won't. Our kids come from broken homes and broken families.

When teachers are being forced to take care of the Maslow stuff before you take care of the Blooms stuff. It's not easy. That's for sure. That's the first thing people need to know. I mean, it's not what it used to be. I went into this thinking teaching was going to be rainbows and sunshine and everything was going to be happy . . . picture 1960's Woodstock . . . coming in with a skirt and guitar and just playing music, and everything is happy and lovely, and it's just not.

Although stress and anxiety issues continued into her second year of teaching,

Mae has begun to feel less anxious during conferences and in staff meetings. Mae admitted that she has more confidence in herself and in her abilities and, with the newly acquired confidence, the anxieties of teaching have subsided somewhat. Mae stated,

I've asked people what it's like to have a nine to five job. I have a wake up to go to bed job. Coming at this at 24 years old, my experience of the world isn't all that strong, and all that great either . . . you come into it and you're just like, shocked. As an educator, there are many things we have to do, but the biggest thing is teaching, and that should be at the forefront of everyone's mind. A quote I hold onto is this: Don't sweat the small stuff and it is all small stuff. Focus on the bigger picture: teaching, and the little menial things, take with a grain of salt, knowing that to whom much is given much is required. We are given the opportunity to change lives on a daily basis. We can handle the paperwork and pointless professional development meetings.

Leigh, too, was challenged with the disillusionment she felt that first year when her thoughts of what teaching would be like and the reality she encountered collided. Leigh wrote in her third journal entry that her first year of teaching was a nightmare and that the reality of teaching was mentally taxing. Leigh described herself as worn out. Her first year proved so difficult that for her trying to make it to the 5-year mark would be extremely difficult. Leigh stated,

When I decided to become a teacher, I knew I had a passion to work with kids. I had heard from the time I began my field experience that I was a natural, and to boot, it came easy to me, too! I also thought that I would always be available when my kids needed me, and that I could work a 7-4 job, and come home.

However, that didn't happen. The expectations that were to be met by me were so



overwhelming. It seemed that I was thinking about work, or dreading it (my first year) even when it wasn't right in front of me or it was the weekend. My first year was a nightmare compared to my expectations. What I thought teaching to me was, was dead and gone.

The stresses and expectations of a teacher are beyond what I ever imagined. I never once thought the money would phase me, but the large amount of work that goes in for the little bit of money in the big scheme of things, can mentally wear someone out. I was so mentally worn out my first year that I didn't know if I could make it to 5 years, let alone 30.

Bree too was left with a feeling of disillusionment when the realities of teaching were revealed to her that first year. She spoke more than once about being in a fantasy stage during her student teaching experience and how overwhelmed she was her first year on the job when the realities of teaching began to present themselves. Bree's disillusionment included the challenge and overwhelming amount of time involved in implementing RTI. Bree stated that not only did she not receive training in the RTI process prior to her classroom assignment, but she was unaware of the many requirements associated with the system. Bree's journals indicated her lack of experience in the RTI process, the challenge of managing her classroom, the abundance of professional development, and the overwhelming amount of time and energy involved in planning as her ultimate challenges. In Bree's words,

I did not realize the extra effort necessary to carry out the expectations of a modern day educator. I did not realize the extra time I would have to put in to be a proficient teacher. The lack of planning time left me feeling very overwhelmed my first year . . . it was rare that I had my planning time to actually plan lessons.

This time was largely dedicated to professional development. Every meeting that I sat down in I found that my mind was wandering back to the thousands of other things I could and needed to do in my classroom.

Bree also spoke candidly about the feeling of isolation and of being left to fend for herself her first year and even into her second and third years of teaching. Bree shared the astonishment she felt when comparing her student teaching experience with her first years of teaching. She shared her experience of being a first-year teacher, working in a trailer which is a separate unit used for overflow classrooms, and the utter isolation and disconnect she felt from peers and coworkers. In light of the fact that Bree was in a trailer her first year, the feeling of isolation was magnified as there was no one to ask for help and no one to turn to if she had questions or concerns about her students or instructional procedures. Bree explained that in a regular school building, there is at least a hallway in which you are able to consult coworkers outside your classroom door and converse with coworkers in the hallway to and from scheduled events; however, the isolation she felt was excessive. Bree stated,

My first year, I was in a trailer, so I felt very isolated. I felt very alone my first year, as far as you couldn't just pop your head in the hallway and be like, "Can I ask you a question?" You know what I mean? You can't walk out and leave. I don't think that anything really prepares you until you're actually in it.

**Administrative support.** All four participants in this research study indicated through recounts of personal experience, their first year(s) were made more challenging from a lack of support from administrators.

In Kim's reserved manner, she indicated that her first-year experience with administration had not been as supportive as she had hoped. She, too, discussed discord

with one of the research site principals her first year on the job. Her problem stemmed from an evaluation by the administrator that Kim felt was unfair and offered little feedback to the beginning educator as to why the evaluation was not as good as she had planned and hoped it would be. Kim's experience further indicated a sense of distrust of the administrator given the information she was provided by peers and based on her own experience. Kim indicated that while she did not feel supported by one administrator, she did feel that the other administrator supported her as a beginning teacher.

Mae's experience her first year was perhaps more indicative of the challenges that occur for beginning teachers who lack a supportive relationship with administration. According to Mae's recount of the experience, she was fresh out of college and eager to begin her new job when she was confronted with the dilemma of working with a much older paraprofessional. Mae conceded she was intimidated in the beginning knowing she would be assigning instructional support assignments to a paraprofessional twice her age; however, the situation was far worse than Mae could have imagined. Apparently, according once again to Mae, the paraprofessional had no intention of following her lead and went out of her way to ridicule and condemn Mae's every attempt at successfully instructing her students. Mae stated,

Met with an indignant paraprofessional, endless paperwork, an unsupportive administration, and having to manage a classroom of high-maintenance special needs children, the cards were stacked quite high against me. There were days I would come home from work, sit at my kitchen table, and cry. I wasn't meeting expectations of myself, or from others. I was constantly under a microscope. It got to a point where I didn't feel like trying new things. I had hit rock bottom. I was told after six arduous months of my first teaching position, that my

administration wouldn't be renewing my contract. I was dumbfounded. I felt that because I was new I wasn't being heard. Where was the support for the anxious first-year teacher who would come to work with knots in her stomach, bullied by the staff who was supposed to assist and support her? (Where was the support) for the fledgling scared to flap still dampened wings?

Mae recounted a litany of highly unprofessional encounters of bullying and berating as well as attempts at discounting her credibility as a newly hired educator, all by a much older paraprofessional assigned to assist her. When Mae attempted to share her concerns with administration, she was made to feel as if the problems she described all stemmed from her inability to perform her teaching job effectively. Mae felt completely unsupported.

Leigh also stated that when she approached her administration regarding a student with severe behavior problems who in her opinion was impeding her instruction and the learning of other students, she was less than thrilled with the lack of support she was given. Leigh was told she should have handled the situation on her own. Leigh described in detail an event in which she asked for support from administrators only to have them become frustrated and unsupportive:

In college, they didn't prepare me for the student who would get so mad at me that at the age of 7, he would write and illustrate death threats towards me. I wasn't trained on how to handle a situation where the same student tried to injure another student by stabbing him with pencils, or at times that he ran outside the school building. Not just the classroom.

After exhausting all efforts in managing the student's behavior, Leigh called the child's mother and requested that the parent attend school with the child for a brief period.

Leigh felt the mother could assist her in understanding the child's needs and provide insight into how to calm him when he became so angry within himself that he cannot do it alone. According to Leigh, this action provoked frustration from the administrator:

The college classroom didn't prepare me for the administration team that wasn't so supportive, that became so frustrated when you had to call on them for help.

Nor was I prepared to be looked at by my administration and to be told to my face that I should have handled the situation without having to call the student's mother, and without her having to come and sit in the classroom on almost a daily basis. I feel like . . . (that) was the worst point of my career.

Bree's recount of her first year was similar to Leigh's in that when she encountered a student she felt was out of control, rather than seeking much needed support as a first-year teacher from administrators, she instead turned to coworkers. Bree described the administrative staff her first year of teaching as unapproachable. In her words,

I was afraid to seem like I had failed. I also wanted as little attention placed on me as possible. I liked to fly under the radar and if I needed help, I usually turned to veteran teachers to ask for help. They gave me guidance and tips on what to do. I had witnessed other teachers being placed on Professional Development Plans because they were not effective at managing students. I did not feel like I had a lot of support from administration.

**Preparedness.** Of the four participants in this research study, all of the beginning teachers shared that their initial experience in the classroom setting was that of unpreparedness to do the job they were hired to do and of the expectations they encountered once they were in their classrooms.

During an interview session with Kim, she spoke of her unpreparedness when she entered the school setting but did not elaborate or share a personal experience in which the lack of preparedness was a challenge for her. When discussing college preparation, Kim stated simply that she did not think that college fully prepared her for the realities of teaching.

Bree commented in several journal entrees of her feeling of unpreparedness. Bree's comments included, "I believed that college and student teaching had prepared me for the challenges of teaching . . . once in my own classroom, however, I realized college had not prepared me for how to deal with a lack of resources to differentiate." Leigh's comments mirrored Bree's when she stated,

I think as a first year teacher, I was so naïve to how it all worked. I think all aspiring teachers have this rainbow of hope that when they walk in the building, despite all of the negative thoughts towards the public education system and the many people telling you to choose a different career, that it's too much that it will all change, that all those people are wrong, that it can't be that bad. It seemed like a walk in the park. And then reality hit.

Mae too was astounded by the emotional stress of teaching and her lack of preparation for the realities that awaited her the first year in a classroom. Mae shared,

I'm almost nauseated thinking about how I thought it was going to be. Instruction is just such a small part of what teaching really is. I didn't think it would be so much about the paperwork, which is the ugly beast that teaching has turned into. It's turned into writing all the IEP's (Individual Education Plan), collect data on all their goals and objectives, and do progress reports every nine weeks; call the parents, and keep the parents informed, and write notes in folders every day, on

top of (that) are you meeting the standards Are you covering the curriculum that has to be covered? A lot of it was jumping in with both feet, and seeing here's what public education looks like nowadays. It was terrifying to see.

One of my experiences was at a high school. At the time, I was (barely) 20 years old, and I was teaching ninth grade language arts to students with learning and emotional disabilities. One of my students was seventeen, and was on house arrest. I was teaching a seventeen-year-old with an ankle bracelet, an ankle monitor, about Romeo and Juliet. She was dismissing the idea of education. She was in ninth grade, and she was seventeen. I had a very hard time relating to that student. One, I have never been in jail. I wouldn't know that life. Like I said, trying to teach curriculum standards to somebody who's in jail, or just got out of jail, or their girlfriend's pregnant. I had another one, their best friend got shot a week before, and they had to go to a funeral for a sixteen-year-old.

**Mentoring.** Although Kim said she was assigned a mentor upon being hired at the research site, she did not have a mentor-mentee relationship with the assigned mentor. She instead gained support and advice from a coworker her first year on the job. When asked if she was aware of any mentor standards for the state of Georgia, Kim said she was unaware if Georgia had anything in place to support beginning teachers.

Of the four research participants, only one, Bree, indicated she currently has a mentor that was assigned to her when her employment began at the research site. Bree also spoke of the enormous amount of support she received her first year as a classroom teacher from a mentor. Bree stated,

My mentor teacher my first year was my saving grace. If it had not been for her along with a community of other teachers, I honestly do not know if I would still

be teaching. She provided me with more guidance and resources than my school district. She created differentiated center games and activities and would give them to me to use. She instructed me on how to differentiate my Word Work center in Daily 5 and provided me with resources to do it effectively. She provided me with strategies to effectively teach guided reading groups. We would meet before and after school to plan differentiated instruction, and then meet again to talk about what worked and what we could alter to make the instruction more effective. Her support and motivation were what kept me going through my most difficult year of teaching.

Leigh and Mae both shared that they do not currently have a mentor in place to support them in their second year of teaching. When asked if they were aware of any guidelines or established standards for mentoring at the site or in the district, both participants stated that to their knowledge there was nothing in place as far as induction services for beginning teachers.

Regarding Mae's first-year experience with a mentor teacher, she stated, Last year I did have a mentor, and I really didn't like her. It wasn't so much that she wasn't a big help . . . I tried hard to just do everything by the book, and do it her way. As far as the mentor thing goes, I'm one of those people who is independent anyway. The guidance is nice, but if somebody's your mentor and they're mentoring you in something that's not your field . . . that was my thing. I had somebody who was totally out of my field as my mentor teacher. I didn't really feel like she did a whole lot for me. I'm very open to feedback. I don't always like it, but it helps you grow. I know genuine feedback when I get it.

Later, Mae added to her statement regarding the aspect of support from a mentor:



With it being my first year, I would've appreciated a lot more support. We had county mentors that we could go and visit, and that kind of thing. Somebody to just hold your hand and reassure you that you're doing the right thing. I don't like being coddled.

### **Primary Emerging Themes Summary**

Disillusionment with the realities that the beginning teachers encountered when they entered the field of teaching occurred 27 times during the data coding process. This theme is significant in that disillusionment with the realities of teaching was coded the same amount of occurrences as the challenge of differentiation.

Support from administrative staff was reported as a challenge by all four of the participants in this research study. The coded responses of occurrence were 21 times. This theme is significant in that neither the research questions nor the journal prompts mentioned support received from administration as a possible cue for response.

Throughout the journaling and interview process, a lack of preparedness by participants was noted by all four beginning teachers. In the coded responses, preparedness occurred 19 times. While this is less significant in occurrence than support received from administration, it is significant in that all of the beginning teachers shared through their reflections a sense of unpreparedness to fulfill the obligations of teaching. It is of further significance that all four teachers are recent college graduates from education preparation programs and were hired to complete the requisite requirements of a teacher.

Although mentoring was not coded in occurrence as frequently as anticipated by the researcher, it was coded as occurring 15 times. Of the four participants in the study, two reported that they did not receive support from a mentor their first year(s) as

teachers. One of the four, Mae, said she had a mentor but felt that the support she received was not beneficial. All four of the respondents shared that they were unaware of mentor standards for the state of Georgia. This finding is significant in that research has shown that when provided support through a mentor, the likelihood of beginning teachers remaining in the profession is substantially increased.

### **Secondary Emerging Themes**

As the researcher delved deeper into each and every journal entry and transcribed interview by reading and rereading, many themes emerged. While these responses were noted and coded as themes, they occurred fewer times and were therefore viewed as less significant by the researcher. These themes were a lack of planning time, emotional challenges, professional development, collaboration, inconsistent feedback, isolation, and salary.

**Lack of collaboration and planning time.** Three of the four research participants reflected on a lack of time for planning or collaborating with peers. Mae shared that the lack of collaboration and planning time was a challenge for her both her first and second years in the teaching profession. Mae shared,

The final thing I didn't expect during my first year of teaching (and subsequent years) is the lack of collaborative planning, especially in special education.

During my first year of teaching, my planning was essentially with my mentor teacher at bus duty in the afternoons and discussing what she'd be doing with her kids that week. In my current teaching, I am a teacher to students with learning disabilities. I teach two grade levels (2nd and 3rd) primarily reading, writing, and math. My planning period is at the end of the day after my final guided reading class with my 3rd graders. I have forty-five minutes to plan, however, the

teachers I need to collaborate with are meeting with their grade levels for meetings, or teaching their classes. There is little to not mutual planning time to meet and conference with the teachers whose students I support.

Bree also stated that a lack of planning time had been a challenge for her, especially a lack of planning for differentiated instruction. In her words,

A lack of planning time was also a major constraint in planning differentiated instruction. Differentiated lessons are more detailed and require more thought and planning. My first year of teaching, we had meetings two or three times a week during planning time, so working before or after school hours was the norm in order to plan those lessons. The lack of planning time left me feeling very overwhelmed my first year.

Leigh also stated that finding the time to plan for instruction for her students during the school day was all but impossible. She found that if she did not take her work home, she was left unprepared for her students. She stated,

When I student taught, my host teacher was out the door at three-thirty or four o'clock every day. She never took papers home to grade. She never stressed about meetings because she didn't seem to have that many. She would work on her lesson plans at school, and barely ever have to take them home. It seemed like a walk in the park. I am just now to the point in the last few weeks of my second year teaching that I am learning to take advantage of every nook and cranny of time I am given during my school day.

**Emotional challenges.** The aspect of being emotionally challenged as beginning teachers was coded as occurring seven times during the reflections for this research. The beginning teachers shared the many hardships encountered by their students which

inadvertently made their jobs more challenging.

Kim reflected on her inexperience or lack of awareness of students living in poverty. Her first encounter with the challenges students present when living in poverty was during student teaching and once again as a first-year teacher at the research site.

Kim reflected on the experience:

Coming in, I knew that some students are living in poverty. Some of the stories I've heard, I'm like, "Whoa I can't believe that." Last year, a student didn't have a mattress, because they couldn't afford it. They're sleeping on the floor. There are some things that you wish you could control, but you can't control. There's some parent you wish you could control, but you can't control.

Mae perhaps was challenged most by the emotional aspect of teaching as her population of students was unique. She shared,

Coming at this at twenty-four years old, my experience of the world isn't all that strong . . . You come into it and you're just like, shocked. I have a wake up to go to bed job. These kids are always on your brain from start to finish. Coming into this, you know it's a high poverty, low income school. When you hear about some of the kids, DFCS (Division of Family and Children Services) is mentioned in some of the kid's records. They've been in and out of DFCS, or that drugs are in the home, or that they live with grandma because the parents ran away when they were just little. Having all that thrown on you with these kids? Plus, these are kids with learning disabilities. They already have a load against them. They can't understand and do what's expected of them. It's a rat race that they're never going to get to the finish line unless they've got supportive teachers.

Our kids come from broken homes and broken families. When teachers are being

forced to do academics and take care of the Maslow stuff, before taking care of the Blooms stuff, that's my biggest thing. When their basic needs are take care of, then you can start working on the nuts and bolts of why they're here. I didn't expect this in teaching, either, that there would be so much of the family part of it. Kids don't have that at home. They don't have the support and that family unit. You have kids that come in, and they've been gone over a break, and they're like, "I missed you so much," or, "I love you so much." They don't hear that at home. I have kids that come in, that say "I'm hungry. I didn't eat breakfast. I didn't eat lunch. I'm tired. I'm sleepy. I'm cold." You have to meet those basic needs before you can even touch academics.

I go home every night and worry, are my kids going to get dinner? Are my kids in a warm bed? Are their parents' home? Are their parents treating them the way they're supposed to be treated? We don't know. As soon as they leave our doors, there's no telling what they go home to. It's emotionally draining.

**Professional development.** A challenge identified by both Bree and Mae was the amount of time they were required to participate in professional development their first year of teaching. Bree reflected on the amount of time she was required to participate in professional development each week and how quickly it seemed the information was put on the back burner or even replaced for yet another piece of have to learn technique or strategy. Bree stated,

My first year as a teacher, it was very rare that I had my planning time to actually plan lessons. This time was largely dedicated to professional development. As a new teacher trying to find her way in teaching, I usually did not find the professional development that took up my planning time that helpful. Sometimes

the professional development was helpful, but many times I felt overloaded with the amount of information the instructional coaches would give us. Every meeting I felt as if we were introduced to the “new and improved” way of teaching a certain standard or content area. I would think, I haven’t even mastered the way I know how to teach this, and now I have to learn a new way? Before I knew it, I would be in a different professional learning down the road where I would be introduced to another way to teach the same thing. I am a believer in trying new things and that change can be good, but I think it is too overwhelming for teachers to be expected to change instructional methods at the drop of a hat just to change it again in a few months. The ever evolving best practices for instruction was an unrealized expectation for me during my first year.

Mae shared that all too often she sat through professional development meetings in which the content did not apply to her instruction or to the population of students she instructed. Mae stated,

There were many things that were mandatory such as professional development training and faculty meetings. Oftentimes as a special education teacher of students who did not participate in general education curriculum, but required a highly modified/adapted curriculum, the meetings generally did not apply to me. There were topics discussed that my students did not participate in, and I felt the meetings were a waste of time. I was overwhelmed and distracted, making it hard to focus on the topics that did apply to me and my students, which were few and far between.

**Feedback.** Although only one participant in the research study reflected on a lack

of feedback as being a challenge, her experience was well worth noting. Mae shared both in journaling and during an interview that although her college experience had instilled in her the value of feedback, her experience as a beginning teacher was void of this growth-enhancing activity. Mae reflected on several encounters during her first year of teaching when she received a negative response to her performance or actions but no growth-producing feedback was accompanying the response. She stated,

Feedback is everything. If you're told, "Oh, you did a great job," or "Oh, that was terrible," and you don't have a reason why, then you don't know what to fix. Going into that I had a lot of really great professors, and my cooperating teachers were really good, too. They would be like, "You, know, I love the way you started it, but you didn't have a closing to your lesson. You left the end kind of floating, and your kids are all kind of looking at you, confused, like what did I just learn?" That helped, too, by getting strategies broken down. My only input that I received from mentors and administrators (my first year) was that I didn't do anything consistently. When the only feedback you receive is of a negative nature, it hinders your hopes of being successful in what you're pursuing. People are very nice and complimentary and stuff. "Oh, Mae. You're doing fine." You wonder how much of that is genuine. I know genuine feedback when I get it. I don't like being coddled.

**Isolation.** Bree and Mae reflected briefly on their feeling of isolation in their first year of teaching. For Bree, the experience was so unlike her student teaching experience that it was a huge adjustment and a challenge for her as a beginning teacher. Bree stated,

With student teaching, you have someone in there constantly. Once you have your own classroom, you're the only one in there. My first year, I was in a trailer,

so I felt really isolated. I felt very alone my first year.

Mae also touched on the concept of isolation when she reflected on the aloneness she felt her first year as a beginning teacher. The isolation she experienced stemmed from the lack of support and open opposition to Mae and her position of authority from the paraprofessional who was assigned to assist her in her new profession. Mae stated many times throughout her reflections the challenges she experienced due to the paraprofessional and her unprofessional demeanor. When Mae felt there was no one to turn to, the feeling of isolation was quantified. In regards to isolation, Mae stated,

At times, I did feel alone in my efforts to adequately provide instruction to such a diverse group of students based on the support within my classroom. I had two paraprofessionals assigned to assist me in the classroom. Due to unfortunate circumstances, one of my paraprofessionals was out for the first semester due to a family and medical emergency. My other paraprofessional made it clear from day one in the classroom that she would combat me on all of my academic decisions. During the first semester I also went through seven substitutes before my other paraprofessional came back from medical leave. It was not easy. Back on the stress thing, my anxiety got so bad I couldn't hardly be in the same room with her. I was scared to go to work every day. I was stressed all the time, thinking what have I done to make her mad? Administration always took her side. I was accused of not being a team player and this negatively impacted my passion to teach. My first year was a nightmare, but I think it has made me a stronger teacher in how I work with people.

**Salary.** Two of the four participants reflected on their salaries as beginning teachers. Although the aspect of pay was mentioned only twice in the data, it was clear



by the statements shared by both Bree and Leigh that the monetary gain of the teaching profession was not of the utmost importance prior to entering the field of education. However, once they were fully immersed into the field and were made aware of all that is required of a teacher, the salary they received as compared to the enormous amount of hours spent either at their schools or planning for instruction, they questioned if the compensation was justified for their work. Leigh reflected on the amount of time she spent after school preparing for her students and other job-related requirements. She further shared that staying 2 or 3 hours after the school day ended on a Friday afternoon was common in order to fulfill her planning and other obligations associated with being a classroom teacher. Leigh shared, "I never once thought the money would phase me, but boy! The large amount of work that goes in for the little bit of money in the big scheme of things, can mentally wear someone down." Leigh commented further on the exorbitant amount of work that is required of her for the low salary she receives: "I had rather spend two hours at school on a Friday afternoon than take my work home with me. All the planning and grading takes time away from my family."

Bree's comments were focused on continuing her education in an effort to increase her current salary; and perhaps in doing so, decrease her student loans. She stated,

Honestly, the pay scale isn't enough. I'm going back to school in the fall to get my Master's. I went to a meeting like two weeks ago. They said that if you work three years, you'll be able to pay yourself back. I'm hoping to work an extra two years on top of that for it to make me more money. There's actually a grant in the state of Georgia, where if you work five years in a Title 1 school, they'll pay off a certain amount of your student loans. This is my third year in Title 1, so

definitely two more years to get that, to pay off my student loans. I know that sounds awful.

Bree's reflection continued as she discussed her frustration with the enormous amount of money she has to spend out of her own pocket to do her job effectively. She added,

It is frustrating when you think about other professions that get paid more money. I get discouraged thinking that, and honestly, it's not even, to me it's not the salary. It's not my salary that upsets me. What upsets me is that I'm spending so much money of my own. I feel like so much is coming out of my own pocket to do my job. I just think there's no other profession that has to spend their own money to do their job effectively. That's frustrating. I've thought about, if I left education, what would I do? I don't know what I would do instead of teaching. I haven't ever really thought about it. Honestly, there are other professions that make more money, but I just don't know if I would be completely happy in it. I really can't think of anything else that I would want to do.

### **Summary of Secondary Emerging Themes**

During the analysis of the research findings, several themes were identified and labeled as secondary themes due to the limited amount of frequency in occurrence in the data and coding process. These secondary themes were a lack of collaboration and planning time, emotional challenges, professional development, feedback, isolation, and salaries. Although these themes were categorized as secondary themes, their significance in the lives of the group of beginning teachers and to this research study is duly noted.

Three of the four research participants reflected on a lack of time for planning or collaborating with peers as being challenging their first year(s). Mae, Bree, and Leigh reflected on the limited amount of planning time they each received when they first began

teaching and how this impacted their schedules. Leigh shared that because her planning time was so limited, she had to take advantage of every available moment in order to stay ahead. Leigh and Bree agreed that staying several hours after school in order to be prepared for their students and their many other obligations was the norm their first year(s).

The emotional challenges associated with teaching were also categorized as a secondary theme by the researcher. Mae especially struggled with the many issues she confronted her first and subsequent years in the classroom. Mae reflected on the importance of meeting the challenges her students presented emotionally before she attempted to fill their academic needs. In her reflection, she shared the importance of providing students with emotional support and how vital supporting their Maslow Hierarchy of Needs is to their overall academic success.

Two of the four research participants reflected on experiences in which they felt that the amount of professional development they were required to participate in exceeded their expectations and impeded their time for planning. Bree reflected that although she was required to participate in countless hours of professional learning to learn a new strategy, she was disconcerted to learn that only shortly after the training ended, she once again had to participate in the latest and greatest professional learning to learn a new strategy to accomplish the exact same thing. Mae too reflected on attending professional development events that had little to no relevance on her classroom instruction.

Although only Mae reflected on the challenges she encountered her first year from a lack of practical and valuable feedback from mentors and administrators, her reflection was deemed worthy and constituted a theme. Mae reflected on several

occasions how hard she felt it was as a beginning teacher to receive feedback that was negative and did not provide alternative instructions that would have encouraged growth. Mae further shared how shallow feedback, or feedback lacking in substance, was equally ineffective.

Both Bree and Mae shared events in which they felt isolated their first years as teachers. Bree was placed away from the flow of her peers and coworkers, as her first year of teaching was spent in a trailer. Bree reflected on the challenges she encountered with this placement, as she was left alone with her students with very little adult contact or support. Mae too felt isolated as she encountered an aggrieved relationship with the paraprofessional assigned to assist her that first year.

Last, but not least, two of the four research participants reflected on their dissatisfaction and challenges associated with their salary as beginning teachers. Bree reflected on the amount of her own money she is required to use in order to teach effectively. She further shared plans of pursuing a Master's Degree beginning this fall as one way she could increase her current salary and pay off student loans. In Leigh's reflection, she commented that prior to teaching she had not considered the salary she would receive her first year; however, when she was immersed into the full gamut of a teacher's many duties, she soon became aware of how little compensation she received for the extreme amount of requirements.

### **Summary of Findings**

Beginning teachers struggle daily in dealing with situations unknown to other professions. Without question, all four research participants identified (a) differentiation, (b) classroom management, and (c) the unexpected expectations of teaching as their primary challenges. Throughout the journaling and interview process, several equally

challenging aspects for beginning teachers were also revealed. The four research participants through their personal accounts of their first year(s) as teachers shared experiences in which (d) lack of support from administration, (e) dealing with the disillusionment and realities of teaching, (f) mentoring, and a (g) lack of preparedness were equally as challenging. Secondary themes also emerged and included (h) lack of planning time and collaboration with peers, (i) emotional challenges associated with teaching, (j) professional development requirements, (k) a lack of constructive feedback, (l) isolation, and (m) salary or compensation for the many requirements of teaching.

The data collected by the researcher and the subsequent analysis of the data through repeated readings and coding of similarities and likeness of challenging experience provided the researcher with a truer understanding of why so many beginning teachers feel so overwhelmed their first year(s) on the job that they choose to leave the profession. The literature collected and presented in Chapter 2 of this study led the researcher to believe that the most prevalent of challenges for beginning teachers were the struggles they encounter to differentiate instruction for diverse learners, meet the challenges of managing a classroom effectively, and the unexpected and unrealized expectations of the teaching profession. The data in this research, however, indicated that there were equally challenging aspects for beginning teachers.

These findings helped the researcher to understand and make meaning of the many taxing events that challenge beginning teachers. Through this study, the researcher was able to consult firsthand with a group of beginning teachers and record their reflections and experiences while they were in the midst of their first year(s) in the teaching profession.

It is hoped that through the information gleaned from these beginning teachers of

their classroom struggles that more support can be provided in the preservice college years and to beginning teachers as they initially enter the field of education.

In Chapter 5, the researcher looks further at each of the areas the four participants deemed as most challenging, discusses implications, and provides recommendations for educational leaders and further study.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences viewed as most challenging for beginning teachers and the possible impact these challenges have on beginning teachers' willingness to remain in the teaching profession. The aim of this study was to provide insight and shed light into the challenges beginning teachers feel they have to deal with: differentiating instruction, classroom management, and the unrealized expectations related to the teaching profession. This study focused on the real-life, day-to-day accounts experienced and retold by teachers in their own words through journal entries and interviews. The goal of the researcher was to seek understanding of how beginning teachers experience these and other challenges and the impact these challenges present to their overall wellbeing as educators.

This research study was designed as an instrument to examine the daily lived experiences of beginning teachers in the form of reflective practice. As a guide to this research the following questions were used.

1. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to preparedness to differentiate instruction be characterized?
2. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to difficulties in classroom management be characterized?
3. How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to unrealized expectations of the teaching profession be characterized?

The goal of the researcher in answering these research questions was to gain a deeper understanding for beginning teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators of the

challenges new teachers confront when entering the classroom. It was a further goal to determine if differentiation of instruction, classroom management, and dealing with the enormous amount of unexpected job-related obligations of the teaching profession were the most challenging aspects for the beginning teachers.

### **Summary of the Study**

The data collected for this study were in the form of written responses by research participants to weekly journal prompts and transcribed interviews that were then analyzed by reading and rereading and making notations, thematic code marks, and comments in margins. During this process, the researcher analyzed the data for similarities, patterns, and connections in challenging experiences described by the participants as well as emerging themes. After multiple readings of the data, themes were coded and then grouped according to number of occurrences. Determination was made by the researcher if the emerging themes presented were either primary or secondary in nature based on the number of times the themes occurred during analyzing data.

### **Research Participants**

This study was conducted in a Title 1 school in the state of Georgia. The population of this research study consisted of four beginning teachers, all of whom were in their first 3 years of teaching. Five teachers initially volunteered to participate in the research project; however, after the research began, one teacher withdrew participation. All four research participants were female, in their early to mid-20s, and all attended college in Georgia. All four research participants were elementary school teachers employed by the same school district within the same school.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Reflective practice and experiential learning theories were used in this qualitative



phenomenological study and provided the basis for the research. Dewey (1944) recognized reflection as an active and intentional action and further that even a minute amount of experience is better than an abundance of theory, because it is through experience that theory has significance. Kolb (1984) introduced experience as the main source of learning and that experiential learning is a combination of experience, perception, cognition, and behavior and is a holistic and integrative perspective in the cycle of learning.

The data for this research project were in the form of journaling and transcribed interviews of relative experience relayed to the researcher by the teachers through reflection. The reflections showed that the beginning teachers in this study struggled significantly with differentiation and classroom management. Most significantly, however, were the findings that teachers struggle most of all with the unexpected expectations of the teaching profession. Through analysis of data, several emerging themes were revealed. The reflections showed that one of the most challenging aspects of teaching for the participants was in dealing with the disillusionment and realities of the teaching profession. The beginning teachers further reflected on how unprepared they felt they were in their first year(s) as classroom teachers and that they did not feel supported by administration. Although the teachers reflected on a lack of support from mentors, the challenge was not as substantial as the researcher thought prior to analysis of data. The reflections indicated that teachers were challenged by a lack of collaboration and planning time, emotional issues related to their students' wellbeing, professional development, inconsistent feedback, isolation, and insufficient compensation in the form of a low salary for the enormous amount of requirements for their positions.

## **Interpretation and Discussion of Results**

**Preparedness to differentiate instruction.** In response to Research Question 1, the data collected for this research indicated that differentiation was one of the greatest areas of challenge experienced by the beginning teachers in this research study. The data further indicated that all four participants struggled with differentiation of instruction in some form as beginning teachers.

These findings on the challenges beginning teachers face with differentiation of instruction when entering the classroom are significant in that additional support in the preservice years should be provided to the novice educators.

All four beginning teachers in this study shared the challenges they faced when entering the classroom as novice teachers with differentiating instruction for the diversity in learning they encountered. The findings of this research align with findings in the literature review on the subject in that Tomlinson (2003) argued a lack of sufficient preparation in many college education programs as the reason teachers were entering the field of teaching ill-prepared to differentiate instruction. Further findings on this topic support this research including a 1996 report from NCTAF. The report found that “What teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn” (NCTAF, 1996, p. 10). The report further stated that one of the major flaws in assuring that all students receive instruction from a qualified teacher who is prepared to meet the needs of all students is a lack in teacher preparedness (NCTAF, 1996). In 2009, United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in a speech at Columbia University’s Teachers College, concluded that “America’s university-based teacher preparation programs need revolutionary change—not evolutionary tinkering” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2).

Kim shared that she felt her preparedness to differentiate instruction was lacking in that she felt her college professors had limited access and understanding of the complexities of the modern-day classroom and the many challenges of planning and implementing instruction for the current student population. Kim's thoughts on differentiation concur with Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) when they asserted that "teacher preparation often has been criticized for being overly theoretical, having little connection to practice" (p. 37).

Bree reflected on the abundance of instruction she received, information she obtained in her college courses on differentiation, and how different her college and student teaching experiences were than the actualities of differentiating instruction for her own classroom of diverse learners. According to the literature review, Liston et al. (2006) stated that beginning teachers struggle to find a connection between theories learned in teacher preparation programs and the realities they face in daily classroom routines, the intensity and demands associated with teaching, and often in workplaces that do not support their need for ongoing learning.

Leigh referred to differentiation as the "biggie" for beginning teachers and indicated through her reflections that she felt differentiation was extremely challenging for most beginning teachers.

These findings relate directly to the research on the challenges of beginning teachers in differentiated instruction provided by the researcher in the literature review. According to Tomlinson (2014), classroom teachers have to be prepared to meet the challenge of planning instruction that is diverse, inclusive, and at the same time challenging in order to meet the needs of the students they encounter. The beginning teacher is further required to effectively teach students from a variety of cultural

backgrounds and at a variety of learning abilities and interests (Tomlinson, 2014).

Tomlinson contended that although teachers are given students who are generally of approximately the same age, the true talent comes in dividing the school day to effectively maximize the individual talents of the students by connecting the curriculum with needs and interests (Tomlinson, 2014).

**Classroom management.** In response to Research Question 2, three of the four participants in this research project indicated that classroom management was a challenge for them as beginning teachers. Classroom management ranked among the highest coded challenges for the group of beginning teachers in this study.

Recognized by prominent researchers in the field of educational research as one of the most challenging aspects of teaching, classroom management poses an even greater challenge for beginning teachers today than in the past. Today, teachers are not considered the primary source of information as has been the case in past decades. The current role of the teacher in the classroom setting is as facilitator of the learning that takes place and as the planner of that learning. The plan must be constructed in such a way that students are fully engaged and on task.

The literature retrieved for this research project reported on a survey conducted by Farkas et al. (2003) in which 45% of the teachers surveyed said beginning teachers need more training on effective strategies to assist them in handling student discipline problems; and further, 42% of the teachers surveyed reported that new teachers need a lot of help finding effective ways to help struggling students. The findings of this research project are in alignment with previous research reported in that three of the four research participants shared experiences in which they felt overwhelmed and underprepared for the challenges of classroom management and with managing the needs of struggling

students.

Three of the four participants in this study reflected on the challenges they encountered their first year(s) in dealing with classroom management. Mae and Bree reflected on their initial problems in managing their classrooms effectively, which they believed stemmed from a lack of consistency in the management plans they initiated. Bree reflected that by the time she actually had a workable system in place, her first year had come to an end. Bree further stated that during student teaching, her classroom had a workable system in place prior to her entering the class; therefore, she missed out on the initial planning and implementation, limiting her knowledge of how to get a classroom management plan started from day one. Leigh shared that she was completely unprepared to deal with the circumstances surrounding an out-of-control child and the lack of support she received in finding a viable solution to the classroom management problem.

**Unrealized expectations.** In response to Research Question 3, all four participants in this research project indicated they were challenged by the unexpected and unrealized challenges that awaited them as beginning teachers. Unrealized expectations of the beginning teachers ranked highest in occurrence according to the data for this study. The beginning teachers reflected on the challenges they encountered with the unrealized expectations for the teaching profession: 52 of the 220 coded responses, making this theme the highest in occurrence.

As first reported in the review of literature, Weinstein's (1988) research on preservice teachers' expectations regarding their first year of teaching described the teachers as having "unrealistic optimism" and a "reality shock" (p. 31). Weinstein went on to say that beginning teachers have "unrealistic expectations about the difficulty of

teaching in general and about their own ability to deal successfully with the demands of the classroom in particular” (p. 32). Weinstein further found that preservice teachers greatly underestimated the challenges they would encounter as beginning teachers in motivating students, organizing class activities, dealing with parents, and handling the differences in individual needs learners present within a classroom.

The research presented in the literature review correlates directly with the findings for this research study in that all four of the research participants reflected on expectations for their teaching positions that they were totally unaware of prior to being employed. Mae shared that she was not expecting the enormous amount of paperwork; the frequency of being volunteered for extracurricular activities; and most significantly, dealing with a disgruntled and much older assistant.

It was further reported in the review of literature that according to Headden (2014), teachers are consumed with tasks other than instructional obligations including accelerated accountability, making their jobs increasingly “much harder” than a decade ago (p. 7). Headden also found that this difficulty is due in part to a substantial lack of meaningful, concentrated, and substantial support for beginning teachers in their first years on the job. Headden pointed to these factors as contributing to the United States’ high rate of teachers choosing to leave the profession. Mae reflected on being voluntold rather than volunteering when extracurricular events occurred outside her instructional duties. Leigh mirrored Mae’s reflection when she stated that she was overwhelmed with the amount of work she was responsible for aside from classroom instruction. Leigh further reflected on how often she finds it necessary to stay hours after school has ended to stay caught up with her responsibilities.

**Disillusionment.** In response to Research Question 3 and journal prompt 4,

which elicited an open-ended response from participants, several primary and secondary themes emerged. Although disillusionment with the realities of teaching was not previewed by the researcher in the review of literature for this study as one of the challenges encountered by beginning teachers, it was determined by the researcher to be one of the most challenging aspects for the research participants. During the analysis and coding process, disillusionment was coded as occurring 27 times of the 220 coded responses. This was a significant finding as the disillusionment felt by the group of beginning teachers was reflected on as often as differentiation of instruction.

Mae reflected on the many aspects of teaching that were of a disillusioning nature for her. After working so hard to obtain a degree in education and landing that all-important first job, Mae's ultimate disillusionment was in the fact that her teaching contract was not renewed after only 1 year of employment. Mae reflected on the stress and anxiety she experienced that affected her overall wellbeing and instructional performance. Leigh too was disillusioned by the fact that after only a few weeks of her initial employment and placement, setting up her classroom, and preparing for students, she was asked to pack up and relocate to a new school. Kim's disillusionment was in the form of an overabundance of testing and assessment which inadvertently limited her instruction time; and Bree was overwhelmed with the realities of teaching a diverse group of students with a variety of learning needs and further by the challenges associated with implementation of the RTI process.

**Administrative support.** Journal prompt 4 further provided insight into a lack of support by administration felt by the group of beginning teachers. All four of the research participants in this study reflected through personal experience that their first year(s) were made more challenging by the lack of support they felt they received from

administrators. As reported by the researcher in the literature review, Scherer (2003) and Ingersoll (2000) found that one of the contributing factors to beginning teachers leaving the profession was a lack of support they received from administrators. Scherer (2003) contended that principals play a large part in supporting beginning teachers by promoting a workplace environment that supports their development and growth in the profession.

All four teachers reflected on events in which they felt a lack of support from administrative staff. Bree, Mae, and Leigh all described events in which they were not supported in a time of distress or for classroom management issues. Kim felt limited support from one of two of the administrators her first year.

**Preparedness.** Reflections provided through Research Question 3 and journal prompt 4 indicated that all four of the first year(s) teachers in this research study were substantially challenged by a lack of preparedness. Their first year(s) were made more taxing from a lack of preparedness for the challenges they encountered in the teaching profession and, more specifically, the challenges that awaited them in the classroom setting.

The findings of the researcher in the literature review indicated that many teachers feel unprepared for the challenges that await them in the classroom. The National Council on Teacher Quality (Greenberg et al., 2014) found that most teacher preparation programs are not preparing beginning teachers effectively for the demands of teaching. Their report stated, “New teachers deserve better” and further that “It is time for teacher prep programs to focus on classroom management so that first-year teachers are prepared on day one to head off potential disruption before it starts” (Greenberg et al., 2014, p. 2).

In a study on teacher preparedness, Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow (2002) found that “Teachers who felt better prepared were significantly more likely to



believe they could reach all of their students, handle problems in the classroom, teach all students to high levels, and make the difference in the lives of their students” (p. 294).

Darling-Hammond (2003) suggested that when beginning teachers lack initial preparation, they are more likely to leave the teaching profession (Coggshall et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The findings presented in the literature review correlate directly with the challenges the research participants in this study experienced in their first year(s) in the classroom. All four research participants, through their reflections, shared how unprepared they felt to handle the demands presented to them in their first and subsequent year(s) in the classroom setting. Bree reflected on the ease she felt in her student teaching year and the opposite feeling of being alone and lost her first year on the job. Mae, Leigh, and Kim all shared the extent to which they felt unprepared as beginning teachers and how this unpreparedness was a challenge they had to learn to deal with.

**Mentoring.** Research Question 3 and journal prompt 4 inadvertently answered the question for the researcher if the beginning teachers were challenged by a lack of support from mentors. To the researcher’s surprise, mentoring only appeared in the coding 15 of the 220 responses, making it the least challenging of all the primary themes. The intent of this research project was not to delve into the advantages and disadvantages of having a mentor in place for beginning teachers the first few years of their teaching careers, nor was it to decipher if states, districts, and schools were following mentor standards. It was noted by the researcher that two of the participants did not have a mentor their first or subsequent years in the classroom. Furthermore, being that all four teachers were in their first 3 years of teaching, only one of the four teachers indicated a relationship with a mentor during the time the research took place; three of the four

indicated a lack of support from an assigned mentor. All four research participants indicated that they were unaware of mentor standards for the state of Georgia and were unaware of mentor standards for the district for which they were employed.

The findings of this research related to mentoring are in alignment with findings in the literature review based on a 2012 report from the Georgia Department of Education. According to the Georgia Department of Education Teacher Induction Guidance (2012), “Most beginning teachers receive insufficient on-the-job support during their initial years in the profession” (p. 1). The guide further stated that the induction guidance document was created in an effort for “Georgia districts and schools to create, implement, and sustain a quality induction program that supports not only the retention, but the induction phase teacher’s growth” (Georgia Department of Education Teacher Induction Guidance, 2012, p. 1).

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. The most substantial limitation of this research study was the small sample size. The research project consisted of four participants who were all employed by the same school within the same school district. The researcher would suggest that the findings of this study were limited by the small number of participants involved, a lack of variance in teaching placement, and a lack of variance in perspective.

A second limitation of this study was a lack of variance in gender perspective. All four participants were female. The researcher would suggest that a male perspective as to the challenges faced as a beginning teacher could have been different than that of a female.

A third limitation of this study was the length of time the research took place at

the participating site. Due to the demanding schedules for beginning teachers, this project was limited by time and the availability of participants. The journaling by participants was 4 weeks in duration, followed by an additional 2 weeks of interviewing. One participant was asked to participate in an additional interview which added 1 week to the total number of weeks of involvement by the group for a total of 7 weeks. The researcher suggests that findings of this research could have been different if more time had been allotted for the research study.

The fourth limitation of this study was the possibility of the researcher effect. The participants in this research study were informed of the research questions in the form of the initial consent to participate letter. Journal response prompts 1, 2, and 3 asked the participants to reflect on the challenges they faced as beginning teachers in differentiating instruction, classroom management, and in the unexpected expectations of teaching. Journal prompt 4, however, was more open-ended in that it asked the beginning teacher participants to reflect on their experience as beginning teachers and also what they thought teaching would be like. By asking this open-ended question, the researcher elicited a response from the group of beginning teachers that was individual, unique to their experience and perspective, and self-directed.

### **Summary of Findings**

Throughout the research process for this study, the research pointed to differentiation, classroom management, and the unrealized expectations associated with the field of teaching as the most challenging aspects for beginning teachers as they enter the field as novice educators. The findings of this study concur with the research in the review of literature in that differentiation, classroom management, and the unrealized expectations of teaching are major challenges to the beginning educator, with the

understanding that there are many other contributing factors that present as challenging for the beginning teacher.

This study identified both primary and secondary themes shared by the group of teachers through reflection that were deemed as challenging. The primary emerging themes identified through analysis of data were dealing with the disillusionment and realities of the teaching profession, a lack of substantial support from administration, a lack of preparedness, and issues related to mentoring.

The secondary themes identified through analysis of data were a lack of collaboration and planning time, the emotional aspect of teaching, issues related to professional development, inconsistent feedback, isolation, and substandard salary.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The results of this study lend themselves directly to future research. The researcher suggests further exploration into the following areas.

1. An extended case study focused on the challenges encountered by only one beginning teacher rather than a short-term study working with a small group of participants. Hindsight being just that, at the onset of this phenomenological study, the level of participation varied greatly among those participating. In retrospect, to obtain an in-depth and clearer understanding of the challenges encountered of only one participant could have provided for a more enhanced vision of the lived experience of a beginning teacher.
2. A phenomenological study similar in methodology to the current study but with a variation in participation of candidates by gender and by location.

Throughout this study, it was noted by the researcher than one participant, Mae, had a unique perspective on the many challenges she faced her first year and on into her

subsequent second year as a Special Education classroom teacher. Mae's reflections alone could have produced an enlightening look at a first-year teacher who chose the field of Special Education due in part to the many struggles she encountered as a child when trying to fit into a prescribed vision of the typical student.

Mae's story was not simply a narrative about a beginning teacher struggling with the challenges encountered her first year(s) in the classroom. Mae's story was instead about a young woman who herself was challenged with anxiety so intense that at times she could not function in a group setting, let alone in a public venue; therefore, for Mae to work in a public school was in itself an accomplishment beyond all other challenges described by the researcher.

Mae's humor and demeanor made her stand out in this research study. She was eager to share her story and to reflect on the challenges she encountered as a young adult and her first year(s) in the field of teaching. Mae was the only research participant who volunteered for a second interview with the researcher. If the request had been made for subsequent interviews or journal reflections, Mae would have undoubtedly volunteered.

Mae had so much to share in the way of experiences she encountered as a beginning educator in the field of Special Education. Mae's journey in the field of education is yet to be fully told. It is, therefore, suggested by the researcher that an in-depth case study focused on just one research participant over an extended amount of time would have produced an even more enlightening analysis of the challenges and unique perspectives presented by a first-year teacher.

The limitations of this study included a lack of perspective based on gender participation and variation of participants by location. Although it was the initial intent of the researcher to include a variance in participation in the study, the final list of

volunteers all were of female gender. The participating research site was lacking in male teachers, and there were no male teachers who were recent graduates. A further limitation of the study was that all four of the beginning teachers were employed at the same research site. It is, therefore, suggested by the researcher that to conduct a similar phenomenological study regarding the challenges faced by beginning teachers which includes a larger number of participants both male and female from several different schools could in fact produce challenges that were different than those presented in this study.

### **Final Reflection**

Providing beginning teachers with the tools they need to ensure their overall success is essential in retaining quality educators for our American classrooms. This idea cannot be accomplished by simply telling the beginning teachers what they need to do to be successful. It is, instead, a process of in-depth instruction in which preservice teachers learn from professionals through on-site observations and preservice training in real classrooms and challenges encountered with real students. It is further the belief of the researcher that teachers need firsthand experience of the challenges they might encounter far in advance of their first year in the classroom. Teacher education programs should be expanded to include multiple classroom experiences in which preservice teachers encounter a variance in degrees of complexity. The preservice teacher should be required to enroll in behavior management courses in which a vast array of classroom behaviors one might encounter are highlighted and viable solutions are offered in managing the unwanted behaviors.

Beginning teachers need ongoing and sustained support from administration, on-the-job mentoring, extensive and enhanced induction programs, and professional

development that is relevant based on their actual needs as classroom teachers. More specifically, teachers need to be supported as they transition into their roles as beginning teachers in differentiation of instruction for diverse learners; managing a classroom effectively; and, most of all, preparing teachers for the unrealized expectations they will encounter when entering the classrooms.

Professional development should be intentionally designed to support beginning teachers as they transition into their new roles in best practice, pedagogy, and curriculum. Professional development should be provided in a manner that is beneficial to the beginning teacher and should be easily implemented with sustained support.

If beginning teachers are adequately prepared, the possibility and likelihood of retention is greater. Teacher efficacy, as well as a teacher's view of the occupation of teaching, is strongly influenced by a sense of preparedness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). The authors found that teachers who felt that they were unprepared for the challenges of the teaching profession were "significantly less likely to say they would choose to become a teacher if they had it to do over again and significantly less likely to say they plan to remain in teaching" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002, p. 294).

In order to prepare our beginning teachers for the challenges that await them as classroom teachers, a paradigm shift in policies and programs at both the college level and in the preservice years that affect their overall wellbeing is a needed change in education.

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## Appendix A

### Letter Requesting Participation in Research

Dear Candidate, (I will insert name of prospective candidate here)

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation and accompanying research titled, *A Teacher's Journey: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Beginning Teachers*. I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study and I am excited of the possibility of your participation.

As you consider whether this project is of interest to you I would like to share with you a bit of information relative to myself, the researcher, of this project. My educational journey began in 1996 soon after I graduated from the University of Portland in Oregon. I worked as a classroom teacher in Oregon for nine years, during which time I taught a variety of grade levels, and further, encountered a host of individual learning needs and diversity in learning styles of students. My first few years in the classroom were challenging to say the least. There were days that I arrived an hour before the school day began, and usually left most days long after the students and my peers were home with their families.

In 2004 my family moved to North Carolina where I spent nine years as a third grade teacher, and two years as a Reading Specialist. I also furthered my own education by completing a Master's Degree in Elementary Education. With the encouragement of friends and family I decided to continue my education even further by obtaining a Doctorate in the field of Curriculum and Instruction.

Last year my family moved once again. This time to Georgia, where I once again resumed my teaching career. These days you can find me working with a very diverse group of second graders.

My personal life includes my husband of 25 years, my two sons; Cole, 15, and Owen, 13, and our dog, Koda. Both of our children are avid swimmers who keep us busy with daily swim practice and monthly competitive swim meets.

In sharing with you a somewhat brief picture into my background, I hope you will see that I am a teacher just like you. I deal with the demands of the profession daily, while still managing to find time for my family, and of course, this research project.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the experiences viewed as most challenging for beginning teachers. This research will examine teacher perception as to their level of preparedness and confidence to meet the needs of diverse learners, to manage a classroom effectively, and to handle the everyday occurrences deemed as challenging related to teaching. This investigation will focus on the real-life, day-to-day accounts experienced and told by teachers in their own words through reflection. My research questions are as follow:

How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to preparedness to differentiate instruction be characterized?

How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to difficulties in classroom management be characterized?

How can beginning teachers' experiences through reflection with regard to unrealized expectations of the teaching profession be characterized?



**Procedures and/or Guidelines for Participants:**

- Participants in this research project are recent (1-3 years) graduates from the university.
- Participants will respond to weekly journal prompts via email correspondence
- Participants will be asked to engage in an interview with researcher
- Participation in this research is voluntary and may end at any time during the research
- Participants are guaranteed complete anonymity

You are receiving this invitation to participate in this study because you graduated from Gardner Webb University within the past three years in the field of education.

Data for this research will be collected in the form of digital journaling or emails. If applicable, face-to-face interviews and videotaping of conversations with participant(s) will be used. The documents will be analyzed to find patterns and trends in beginning teacher experiences that are relative to this research, and in attempting to answer the research questions.

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please review the enclosed information, complete the enclosed form, and email the form, or mail the form in the pre-paid envelope. You can also call me at XXXXXXXXXX or email XXXXXXXX.

It is important to know that this letter is not to tell you to join this study. It is your decision. Your participation is completely voluntary. Names of all participants will be anonymous (pseudonyms), and confidentiality will be assured by researcher. You are granted the right to end involvement in this study at any time. You do not have to respond if you are not interested in this study, and no one will contact you.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Wanda Brubaker

## OPT-IN FORM

Research Title: A Teacher's Journey: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Beginning Teachers

This research is being conducted by Wanda Brubaker, a doctoral student at Gardner Webb University.

**Please complete this form and return in the pre-paid envelope provided**

☐ I am interested in learning more about this study. Please contact me using the following information:

Name:

---

Please indicate preferred method of communication:

---

Phone Number:

---

Best time to call:

---

Email Address:

---

Please indicate your willingness to participate in an interview with this researcher:

Yes, via a phone interview\_\_\_\_\_

Yes, via a face-to-face interview\_\_\_\_\_

Yes, via a digital format interview (Google Chat, Face Time, etc . . . )

---

No, I would decline an interview\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
Weekly Journal Prompts

### **Weekly Journal Prompts**

Week 1: Please reflect in detail your experience as a beginning teacher in differentiating instruction for diverse learners. For the purpose of this research study, differentiation is defined as “Differentiating instruction is a way of thinking about and approaching the planning and implementation of curriculum and instruction with an understanding that learners differ in important ways” (Sands & Barker, 2004, pg.1). Tomlinson and Allan (2000) define differentiation as a response and attention provided by the teacher to address the academic needs of individual learners.

Please include in your response how prepared you felt you were in your initial placement as a beginning teacher in differentiation of instruction. It is further requested that you reflect on personal experiences you have had in trying to differentiate instruction, the support you have or have not received from mentors, coaches, administrators, peers, or through professional development. Please share openly and honestly your firsthand accounts of any information related to your experience as a first year teacher in differentiating instruction.

Week 2: Please reflect in detail your experience as a beginning teacher in managing a classroom. For this research project the term classroom management will be defined as “a set of behaviors and activities by which the teacher organizes and maintains classroom conditions that bring about effective and efficient instruction” (McEwan, 2001, p. 49). Classroom management further involves everything that a teacher must do to fulfill his/her teaching objectives. These objectives might include preparation of instructional materials, planning of instruction, and structuring of activities and student involvement.

Classroom management further includes adequate control of the whole classroom, and individual student behavior. Please include in your response experiences you have encountered during your initial classroom placement in dealing with student behavioral problems. It is further requested that your reflection include any support you have or have not received in classroom management through mentoring or coaching, administration, peer support, or professional development opportunities. Please be specific and reflect openly and honestly.

Week 3: Please reflect in detail your experience as a beginning teacher in dealing with the unrealized expectations associated with the teaching profession. Please include in your response how prepared you were as a beginning teacher in handling the extra requirements that are associated with the teaching profession. These requirements might include the amount of paperwork you are required to do, accountability for student proficiency, and planning of instruction. Your reflective response should include as many details and descriptions of the experiences you have encountered in dealing with the expectations you have of yourself as a beginning teacher, and the requirements of the teaching profession. It is further requested that you reflect on personal experiences you have had in trying to meet these requirements, the support you have or have not received from mentors, coaches, administrators, peer support, or professional development. Please share openly and honestly your firsthand accounts of any information related to your experience as a first year teacher in dealing with the unrealized expectations of the teaching profession.

Week 4: What did you think teaching would be like? What was your experience?