Between Obligation and Identity: Making Sense of Mentoring in School-Based Agricultural Education

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Abstract

The mentor–mentee relationship is crucial for developing effective teachers by providing confidence, support, and opportunities for self-reflection. Despite its importance, research examining mentor teachers' motivations to serve remains limited, particularly in school-based agricultural education. This study explored how teachers in school-based agricultural education make meaning of their decision to mentor student teachers. Guided by Situated Expectancy-Value Theory and the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice model, we employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to examine the shared lived experiences of six mentor teachers from one state. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed interpretively. Findings revealed that mentors were motivated by social utility and a desire to give back to the profession, framing mentoring as both an honor and a professional obligation. Participants also described the moral and emotional labor inherent in mentoring, including vulnerability and ethical responsibility. While the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice model was useful for examining perceived value, cost, and expectancy, it did not fully capture the relational and identity-based considerations shaping mentors' intentions. Based on participants' narratives, mentoring was described as a socially embedded professional act shaped by relationships, professional culture, and identity, highlighting the need for professional development supports that address mentors' emotional labor.

Introduction

Teachers are singlehandedly the most powerful source of student success in schools (Gultekin & Kara, 2022; Mojavesi & Tamiz, 2012). As powerful forces within the education system, teachers' success relies on their sense of self-actualization and perceived importance within their educational landscape (Benigno, 2017; Oberski et al., 1999). When teachers engage and learn from one another, their feelings of self-actualization are heightened by their sense of belonging within their school community (Wator et al., 2025). The concept of collaboration further shapes the dynamic between experienced teachers and their student teacher mentees aspiring to enter the teaching profession, laying the foundation for sustainable and effective relationships (Adeoye et al., 2025; Barrera et al., 2010).

The relationship between student teachers and their mentor teachers is influential in shaping novice educators (Izadinia, 2015). Mentor teachers can boost confidence, ease the transition into teaching, encourage reflection, and provide emotional support (Izadinia, 2015; Napanoy et al., 2021). A growing body of empirical research on mentorship and motivation in education has examined student teachers' motivations and their desire to enter the profession (Bergmark et al., 2018; Gorard et al., 2023; See et al., 2022). However, the exploration of mentor teachers' motivation to mentor student teachers remains limited, particularly within school-based agricultural education (SBAE).

SBAE teachers take roles beyond classroom instruction, including FFA advising and supervising supervised agricultural experience (SAE) projects (Torres et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2020). SBAE programs, typically housed in Colleges of Agriculture or Schools of Education, prepare candidates to teach diverse middle and high school courses such as animal science, plant science, agricultural mechanics, and agricultural business (Torres et al., 2010). This complex and

multifaceted nature of SBAE leads to teachers' increased burnout, stress, and difficulty managing the work-life balance within the profession (Smith & Smalley, 2018), whether the individual is a novice or experienced teacher (Chenevey et al., 2008; Solomonson et al., 2018).

SBAE teachers make upward parallels between themselves toward those they feel motivated by (Kitchel et al., 2012), reaffirming the importance of mentoring within SBAE (Jones et al., 2014). Mentoring programs in SBAE have a longstanding relevance within the profession, aiding in the development of teachers' self-efficacy and contributing to lower rates of attrition (Swan et al., 2011). Despite the high demands of the career and the risk of burnout (Queen et al., 2025), many SBAE teachers still choose to mentor student teachers, raising essential questions about their motivation to serve in this role (Samoei, 2020).

Literature Review

Understanding what drives experienced teachers to mentor new teachers is critical for SBAE. The literature highlights the intrinsic and extrinsic values of mentoring student teachers, barriers and challenges, and the impact of mentoring styles across different fields of education. This review provides a deeper understanding of what shapes mentoring engagement and motivation and can be further applied to SBAE.

The mentor teacher and student teacher mentoring relationship is widely used across various education subjects (Hall et al., 2008; Jaspers et al., 2014). When teachers adopt the role of a mentor, they can promote the integration of new knowledge and empower other teachers to become active agents of change (Butera et al., 2020). Mentor teachers, frequently selected by their seniority, expertise in the subject area, and knowledge of school or subject policies (Weimer, 2020), are often influenced by intrinsic motivations to serve, such as generativity, a sense of pride in their profession, and enthusiasm for the subject (van Ginkel et al., 2015). Intrinsic motivation and overall enthusiasm have been identified as respectable qualities of mentor teachers, enhancing the student teacher's overall experience at their placement site through the teaching and learning process (Aderibigbe et al., 2022). Mentoring also provides mentor teachers with their own avenues for professional development and reflective practice, which can further develop a sense of belonging and efficacy within the profession (Abetang et al., 2020; Shanks, 2017).

Ongoing professional development, monetary rewards, and supportive school and institutional cultures are notable extrinsic motivators of mentor teachers (Ben-Amram & Davidovitch, 2024; Rangel et al., 2021; See et al., 2022). When school communities and credentialing institutions note the value of the mentoring relationship, aspiring mentor teachers are more likely to view mentoring as a way to grow professionally, enhance their own competencies, and contribute positively to the profession (Aderibigbe et al., 2018; Ampomah et al., 2024). In SBAE, mentoring is viewed as a value-added activity, as mentor teachers help address the unique challenges specific to SBAE new teachers may face. These challenges can include managing FFA chapters, supervising SAE projects, and the overall balance of professional responsibilities inside and outside of the classroom (Moore & Swan, 2008).

Despite these intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors, barriers to teachers' choice to mentor are prevalent, such as a shortfall of institutional support and time restraints, which can diminish teachers' willingness to mentor student teachers (Levterova, 2017; Wisdom et al., 2025). A lack of interest or motivation from mentors, as well as a lack of support from colleagues in the placement site's leadership, are significant challenges (Aderibigbe et al., 2022) even in SBAE (Moore & Swan, 2008). Additionally, discrepancies in the mentor teacher's expectations of their student teachers' outcomes, and vice versa, can also affect the mentoring relationship (Hawkey, 1997; Rasheed, 2025).

Mentoring student teachers in SBAE is driven by a multitude of factors, including internal factors such as enthusiasm for the profession and a desire to give back, professional development opportunities, and school and institutional support. However, these motivations can be hindered by a lack of motivation, support, and time. Therefore, we seek to extend previous work and understand the motivating factors for mentor teachers to mentor student teachers specifically in SBAE, in hopes of maximizing growth and proficiency for both SBAE mentor teachers and student teachers.

Conceptual Perspective

Multiple bodies of literature and theories inform this study, collectively underscoring the important role of mentorship in motivating teachers (Kuhn et al., 2022; Lawver & Torres, 2011; Marx et al., 2017; Nesbitt et al., 2024). Recognizing that the relationship between a student teacher and mentor teacher holds significant potential, this exploration is guided by Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, 2020) and the Factors Influencing Teaching (FIT) model (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Grounded in these perspectives that emphasize motivation and the factors shaping teaching-related choices, it is essential to examine mentoring in SBAE through the same lens.

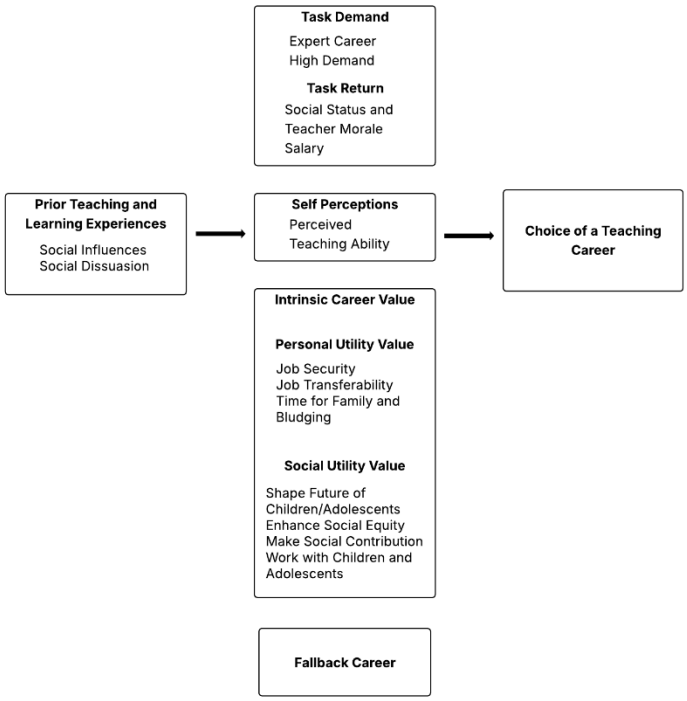
Eccles and Wigfield (2002, 2020) Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) proposed that motivation and related choices are determined by individuals' expectations for success. This theory was later refined into the SEVT, which emphasizes that situation, culture, and interpretation interact with motivation to inform expectations for success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, 2020). In this framework, expectancies are conceptualized as key influences on individuals' future achievement behaviors, shaped by self-perceptions, task values, and contextual factors. SEVT integrates ideas from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), highlighting the importance of social contexts in mentoring relationships In framing this qualitative exploration, we considered that the expectancies and values of student teacher mentors are mediated by their sense-making, or how they interpret experiences that shape their expectations and values related to mentoring (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Moreover, the culture of the SBAE profession (Torres et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2020) adds another layer of context that may further influence mentors' motivations and outcomes.

SEVT (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, 2020) informs the theoretical logic of the FIT-Choice® model (Figure 1), which operationalizes the logic to teach. We specifically used the FIT-Choice® model to guide semi-structure interview protocol development. The FIT-Choice®

model was developed to identify the factors that influence individuals' decisions to pursue teaching (Watt & Richardson, 2007). The model domains, influenced by prior teaching experiences, include Task Return, Self-Perception, Value, and Fallback Career, which lead to the decision to teach agriculture as an outcome. Career expertise, job demand, social status, teacher morale, and salary make up task return, while self-perception includes one's perceived teaching ability. Personal utility value includes items relevant to job security and transferability, as well as time for family and bludging, or ease within the career. Social utility value includes items that describe an individual's willingness to contribute to the greater good (Watt & Richardson, 2007), and the concept of career fallback addresses how one initially came to the career of teaching. Guided by SEVT, the FIT-Choice® model places motivation within relational, institutional, and cultural contexts that influence how teachers interpret the value, cost, and expected outcomes of teaching and related tasks, including mentoring student teachers. While the FIT-Choice® model explores teachers' logic to teach, we utilized the framework to guide the design of this study, which prompted reflection on value, cost, and expectancy. The FIT-Choice® model did not structure analysis or theme development.

Figure 1

FIT-Choice® Model adapted from Richardson and Watt (2006) and Watt and Richardson (2007).



Purpose/Research Questions

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore how SBAE teachers in California make meaning of their decision to mentor. To guide this exploration, we used the following research question: How is the meaning of mentoring shaped by California SBAE teachers' past experiences, beliefs, and cultural understandings of the profession?

Methods

This study was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, guided by van Manen (2016, 2023), who frames phenomenological inquiry as an interpretive exploration of lived experience co-constructed by participants and researchers. Rather than applying a fixed method, van Manen advocates for flexible strategies tailored to the phenomenon. While our analytic stance was hermeneutic, we maintained a pragmatic orientation to emphasize relevance for SBAE teacher preparation (Creswell & Poth, 2025).

As SBAE teacher educators and graduate students, our insider perspectives shaped how we interpreted participants' narratives, particularly our sensitivity to the cultural norms, professional expectations, and relational dimensions of mentoring within SBAE. To support reflexivity and guard against assuming shared meanings, we engaged in analytic memoing, reflective journaling, and peer debriefing throughout the study to surface assumptions, question initial interpretations, and attend to moments of tension or ambiguity in the data (van Manen, 2023; Crowther & Thomson, 2020).

We contacted all five California SBAE credentialing institutions for lists of mentor teachers from the past three years. Three institutions responded, yielding a pool of 94 potential participants. All were invited via email, and six agreed to participate in individual, semi-structured Zoom interviews (see Table 1). Interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 6)

Pseudonym	Years Mentoring	Gender	Institutions[a]
Brooke	1	Female	1
Charlotte	20	Female	1, 2, 3
Lily	1	Female	1
Susie	12	Female	4
Tracy	15	Female	3
Von	7	Male	1, 2, 3

[a] Numbers associated with institutions and blinded for submission

Recruitment persisted until sufficient interpretive depth and recurring themes appeared across participants' narratives, enabling a solid hermeneutic analysis of the phenomenon. Interviews followed a protocol informed by the FIT-Choice® model (Table 2) and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes depth of meaning rather than breadth of representations. The small sample size was suitable to support thorough interpretive engagement within the phenomenon (van Manen, 2016).

Table 2

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Aligned to the FIT-Choice Model

Question		Domain Alignment[a]
1.	Tell me about your experience mentoring agriculture education student teachers.	PTLE, TR
2.	How do you define mentoring?	PTLE, TR

3.	What motivated you to mentor?	PTLE, TR, IV, PV
4.	What challenges do student teachers face during their clinical placement?	TR, SV
5.	Describe the qualities of previous student teachers?	PTLE
6.	How do you plan on mentoring in the future?	Choice
7.	How does mentoring student teachers align with your goals?	PV, IV, SV
8.	Can you identify any factors that have overwhelmed or challenged your decision to become a mentor?	SP, PV, SV, TR
9.	What aspects of mentoring are most appealing to you?	IV, TR, SP, PV, SV
10.	What aspects of mentoring are the least appealing to you?	TR, SP, PV, SV
11.	Why do other California agriculture teachers choose to mentor?	Choice, SP, PV, SV, TR

[a] PTLE = Prior teaching and learning experiences, TDR = Task demand and return, SP = Self-perception, IV = Intrinsic career value, PV = Personal utility value, SV = Social utility value, FC = Fallback career.

Data analysis followed an iterative, interpretive th-ee step process guided by hermeneutic principles (Crowther et al., 2017). The first level of analysis allowed us to craft stories and conduct an initial interpretation. Transcripts were read in a hermeneutic circle (Figure 2), moving between parts and the whole to identify resonant patterns of meaning. Stories were developed to evoke both textural and structural dimensions of experience. The second level of analysis allowed for deeper interpretation. A second researcher independently analyzed a subset of transcripts, and differences were resolved through discussion. An audit trail was maintained to ensure transparency and dependability. The third and final level of analysis allowed the researchers to make an interpretive leap, guided by philosophical notations outlined by Crowther and Thompson (2020).

Figure 2
Hermeneutic circle, taking an interpretive leap (Crowther & Thomson, 2020)

Findings

In line with Crowther and Thomson's (2020) hermeneutic phenomenology, we present findings as crafted stories, evocative narratives that capture the essence of lived meaning, followed by a deeper analysis of the crafted story, which shaped and informed the interpretive leap. While all six participants contributed to the interpretive analysis, two crafted stories were selected as exemplars because they most vividly captured recurring meanings and tensions present across participants' narratives.

Guided by hermeneutic phenomenology principles, the following themes, *legacy of stewardship and service,* and *the mentor I aspire to be* reflect the shared significance of mentorship articulated by participants. These stories reflect the consistency of narratives and perspectives that surfaced across all interviews, demonstrating a clear intersection in how participants described the phenomenon of their motivations to mentor student teachers. These themes highlight the sources of meaning for California SBAE teachers when mentoring and their overall experiences serving as mentors. Additionally, while these narratives may reaffirm familiar professional narratives that frame mentoring as unquestionably positive, the findings are shared to express ambivalent meanings that can evoke feelings of purposefulness and burden at the same time.

Legacy of Stewardship and Service

Mentoring SBAE student teachers was described by participants as grounded in tradition, shaped by personal experiences, professional lineage, and pride in preparing future educators. Lily recalls her own student teaching as a time of excitement, growth, and eagerness toward being called on to mentor.

I was excited and eager to begin student teaching, though I was placed in a community far from my hometown and preparation program. When I found out, I felt both fear and excitement. I still remember being welcomed by my mentor teacher and introduced to key people and processes on the first day. It made me feel like a new hire, rather than a student teacher.

Now, finishing my first year as a mentor, I can say it's an honor to be chosen to host a student teacher. It felt like I had crossed a threshold that only certain teachers are invited into. While qualification processes vary across institutions, they're fairly consistent statewide. I know there is a list of qualified teachers. I'm still not sure how I made the list; maybe enough people like me, but it felt like a meaningful accomplishment. When our student teacher arrived, I felt both proud and humbled.

That said, I didn't anticipate some of the challenges. I forgot that student teachers are still learning and initially expected them to perform at my level. I have my curriculum down, I know exactly what I am going to teach and how it flows into the next lesson. When my student teacher asked what lesson came next, I looked at [student teacher] as if they were asking me a dumb question. I had to check myself. I realized that they didn't and it was unfair of me to expect them to know what I know, I have many years under my belt.

I also underestimated the time-consuming nature of mentoring. It took effort to provide useful feedback and build trust in their ability to lead the class. This may have come after a lesson that did not go to plan. I knew they would 'fail' at some point, but I was not ready for the effort that it takes to reflect and support the student teachers growth. I quickly realized that being a good mentor requires significant time and energy, something I didn't fully grasp when I accepted the role.

I hope to mentor again. I believe most people do it to support the profession, to watch the next generation continue the legacy of quality agriculture teacher in California, but I also know some see it as a status symbol. A symbol of making it to the next pedestal of their career. It can feel like a badge of honor at regional meetings, when they announce who is mentoring. I watched for years as others stood up and were called on. Now it's my turn. I hate to admit it, I do like the recognition. I didn't agree to mentor because of it, but it does help, I am contributing to a long line of mentors that came before me, and that brings me pride in mentoring.

In SBAE, becoming a mentor is often seen as a rite of passage, marked by both pride and responsibility. Lily's story reflects the field's intergenerational ethos, where mentoring honors tradition while demanding the hard work of guiding a novice. Her experience moves from pride in being selected to the ongoing effort of mentorship, drawing on her past as a student teacher, engaging in the present, and investing in the profession's future (van Manen, 2023).

We interpret this experience through Heidegger's (1962) notion of solicitude (*Fürsorge*), in which care is directed toward another's becoming. Lily's realization that she must slow down and trust her student exemplifies leaping-ahead (*Vorausspringen*) solicitude, where the mentor supports growth without taking over the mentee's path. For participants in this study, mentorship

is experienced as an act of legacy, linking mentors to the SBAE tradition and reinforcing their identity as stewards of the profession.

The Mentor I Aspire to Be

The ideal mentor is seen as someone with clear character and values. Motivations to mentor often stem from wanting to emulate a role model or prevent negative experiences. Mentoring prompts reflection and growth for the mentor. Von reflects on the mentor he has become.

> I was thrown into mentoring in my third year of teaching and suddenly had to be the adult in the room. I quickly realized I wasn't great at tough conversations; my bluntness wasn't working. I had to learn how to communicate in a way my student teacher could hear without feeling defeated.
>
> I started asking student teachers directly, "How can I give you feedback that doesn't feel harsh or make you cry?" I wanted to be kind and human in my approach. Once I learned how to offer feedback more effectively, I saw real growth in my student teachers—and in myself.
>
> Mentoring has led to lasting friendships; many former student teachers still call me for advice as if they never left my classroom. One called me in tears, convinced she wasn't cut out for teaching. I reminded her that sometimes it's the environment, not the person, and encouraged her to find a better fit. She changed schools and is now thriving. She is absolutely killing it as an agriculture teacher, and I am so proud of her. To this day, she still calls me, typically to catch up and talk about her successes. No more tears, thankfully.
>
> I've had plenty of teachable moments, especially when I needed to change my own behavior. Once, I asked a student teacher to pick up the ag truck, and she replied, "I don't mind—I'm here for the grunt work." That stuck with me. I realized I was asking her to do something I wouldn't have done myself, because frankly, I had something else that I needed to do, and I didn't want to pick up the truck at 8 PM. I never want my student teachers to feel like they're just there to run my errands. They're there to learn and be part of the community. Asking them to pick up the truck was a meaningless task—I would have never thought about it if they didn't respond in that way.
>
> Figuring out who I am as a mentor is still a work in progress. Balancing mentoring and family life isn't easy, and I'm not always the best model. I am the teacher that stays until 7-8 PM. Not because I have to, but because I want to and I haven't set boundaries for myself. But even in the moments I've felt like I've failed and I have learned from myself, I still try to find purpose. I do not want to the be the mentor that my student teachers say 'I was just there to teach the classes [mentor] doesn't want to teach, or go to the fair meetings that [mentor] doesn't want to go to. That's part of this job. I enjoy doing those things, sometimes at the cost of my personal life. They need someone they can rely on in this thankless profession. I hope I am that person.

Von's story captures mentorship as a process of self-becoming, where guiding a student teacher also prompts the mentor to confront and refine their own professional identity. Mentorship was described as a reflective, iterative practice that involves trial, error, and personal growth. Through moments of tension, such as recognizing when he was asking a student teacher to do "grunt" work, Von discovered the ethical dimensions of mentorship, realizing that supporting another's development requires humility and self-awareness.

We interpret this experience through van Manen's (2016) notion of lived relationality, as mentoring deepened Von's connection with his student teachers and the profession. Mentoring extends beyond the immediate placement; relationships with student teachers transform into lasting professional bonds that continue to shape both mentor and mentee long after the initial experience.

Discussion

The FIT-Choice® model (Richardson & Watt, 2006; Marx et al., 2017) and SEVT (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020) initially served as a scaffold for approaching the decision to mentor. However, hermeneutic interpretations revealed that mentors' narratives went beyond the explanatory scope of these frameworks. While this study was initially framed within motivational theories to explore why SBAE teachers choose to mentor student teachers, motivational constructs such as cost, utility, and expectancy were diluted by mentors' experiences of meaning-making, moral responsibility, and professional identity. Mentoring was not experienced as a singular choice, weighed against an alternative, but rather as an extension of identity development as an educator within the SBAE profession. Further, motivation was shaped by social influence and the dynamic interplay among pride, professional culture, past experiences, and ethical commitments.

Mentorship is framed as both an honor and a professional obligation, with motivations to serve stemming from personal satisfaction as well as a recognized professional need. Across narratives, professional belonging emerged as a central motivational benefit, as mentors consistently expressed a desire to give back to the profession and contribute to the broader tradition of SBAE. By balancing individual gain with collective welfare, professional obligation lays the foundation for SBAE's generativity. Further, mentors made sense of their experiences through ongoing tensions between legacy and labor, pride and pragmatism, which ultimately shaped how mentoring was understood and enacted within SBAE.

As mentor teachers engaged with student teachers, some noted that the mentoring relationship prompted deeper self-reflection on their own teaching approaches. Within SBAE, there is a strong emphasis on the perceived usefulness of tasks aligned with personal teaching goals for those tasks to be deemed valuable (Thiel & Marx, 2021). Participants did not describe these gains as calculated benefits, but rather as outcomes of reflection, trial, and the acceptance of failure. Mentoring prompted ethical self-assessment and reoriented professional identity, processes better captured by van Manen's (2016, 2023) concept of lived relationality than by motivational categories alone. Importantly, mentoring also functioned as a sign of continued professional growth for mentor teachers, as engagement with student teachers prompted renewed

reflection in instructional practices, communication, and ethical responsibility (Abetang et al., 2020). In this way, mentoring served not only as a support for novice teachers but as an opportunity for experienced SBAE teachers to refine their own craft within a relational and reflective context.

However, the deeper weight mentors described, including questioning their worth, avoiding harm, and navigating institutional ambiguity, points to an existential cost of mentoring. The burdens are integral to mentorship and are not easily balanced against the value they provide (Kuhn et al., 2020). Drawing on van Manen's (2016, 2023) idea of lived relationality, mentorship emerges as a pedagogical act that shapes both mentor and mentee within the profession. These moments often involve vulnerability, mutual recognition, and the challenge of guiding without overstepping.

Further, participant narratives revealed decisions to mentor were shaped not only by rational evaluations of benefits and demands but also by relational, moral, and identity-based considerations embedded within the culture of SBAE. Thus, in this interpretive analysis, mentoring emerges as a socially embedded professional act shaped by relationships, professional culture, and identity (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Lave & Wenger, 1991; van Manen, 2016). Mentoring is experienced as a calling, an obligation to give back to the profession, where it was difficult for participants to separate "why I mentor" from "who I am as a mentor," which contributed to the motivation to mentor.

Future research should explore the lived tensions influencing mentoring motivations in SBAE, including how mentors balance pride, obligation, and professional labor. Given the limitations of existing teaching motivation frameworks in fully accounting for mentoring intention, additional conceptual work is needed to examine how mentoring decisions are formed, sustained, and constrained within relational and institutional contexts. Studies could examine how these dynamics shift across different career stages, differ by institutional context, or vary across state-level systems of teacher preparation and support. Replication across states is particularly important, as mentoring structures, expectations, and professional development opportunities differ widely, and these contextual differences may shape both mentors' willingness to serve and their capacity to sustain the role over time.

For practitioners and those responsible for SBAE professional development, these findings highlight the importance of attending to the emotional labor inherent in mentoring. While some states, including the context of this study, offer professional development opportunities such as mentoring teacher conferences within a broader professional development continuum, it remains unclear whether these efforts intentionally scaffold support for mentors' emotional and relational work. Mentorship programs should move beyond selection based on status or seniority and prioritize mentors who demonstrate a commitment to relational care, reflective practice, and the development of student teachers. Institutions and professional development providers should also consider whether intentional programming exists to help mentors navigate the emotional strain, ethical responsibility, and the risk of overextension. Providing structured and ongoing support may better prepare mentors to guide student teachers effectively while sustaining their own professional well-being.

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