

A Model for Teacher Induction and Mentoring Programs

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Abstract: There is argument for differentiation between induction and mentoring programs. A basis of this paper is that both programs must coexist; that neither program can be effective without the other. Literature, data and the experiences of a novice teacher revealed components of effective mentoring/induction programs for teachers.

Even with quality teacher education programs throughout higher education, beginning teachers often feel overwhelmed, disoriented and frustrated. The one semester or less of classroom experience obtained at the undergraduate level is usually not enough to train thoroughly and properly prepare a teacher for the rigors of the first year. Besides being totally on their own in the classroom (many for the first time), teachers are also adjusting to the many nuances and idiosyncrasies of their new school. This “unwritten code” can sometimes be difficult to understand when adjusting to a new setting. Beginning teachers are often given the most difficult assignments including classes that veteran teachers are able to avoid due to seniority and having already “paid their dues”. Fortunately, many schools have developed Teacher Induction and Mentor Programs to assist teachers through this period of major adjustment; a period often referred to as “the rookie year.” The purpose of this paper is to describe a mentoring and induction program for novice teachers in a secondary school in Florida. Mentoring is the one-to-one guidance which occurs between a first year teacher and an experienced teacher, while induction is a process undertaken by a first year teacher and the school to allow the teacher to become familiar with not only the particular school, but also the teaching profession as a whole.

Method

A brief review of extant literature was explored through the use of academic and professional journals, pertinent websites, and textbooks. Additionally, experiences of a novice teacher involved in the MINT program were described. Pseudonyms for the teacher and the school are used to protect confidentiality and anonymity. This study describes the mentoring and induction experiences of a novice teacher as these experiences relate to the literature.

A Brief Review of Literature

The intent of a teacher induction program is to provide a systematic structure of support for beginning teachers (Ganser, 1996; Halford, 1998; Seyfarth, 2002). Teacher induction/mentoring programs are a must for several reasons. These programs not only ease the transition into teaching but also reduce teacher attrition and turnover while at the same time improve a teacher’s ability to teach and quality of teaching (Creating a Teacher, 2003). A teacher induction program can help new teachers improve practice, learn professional responsibilities and ultimately positively affect student learning. In addition to providing support to beginning teachers, these programs allow veteran teachers to reflect upon practice and can unite the learning community as each individual works toward the same goal - improving the quality of education. Induction programs also have the potential of elevating the teaching profession and fostering a collaborative learning community for all educators. These benefits can lead to a much higher rate of retention, as new educators find themselves in an environment that cultivates continual growth and success (Education Reform Act, 1993). Many States across the US have

regulations that link professional teaching standards, licensure and induction programs by making participation in such a program one of the requirements for the Professional License. As a result, districts need to provide an induction program to all educators in their first year of practice.

There are several components to a well-designed comprehensive induction/mentoring program. These components are: 1) A school-wide support system to guide beginning teachers. 2) A fair and honest system to evaluate and critique beginning teachers. 3) A process to allow beginning teachers to grow and develop professionally. An orientation program begins the comprehensive induction program. Opportunities are provided to learn key information about the district and school beginning with mentoring. The mentoring relationship provides the novice teacher with an opportunity to work closely with and learn from an experienced teacher. Daresh and Playko (1995) assert that the mentoring relationship is shaped by the activities that the beginning teacher and mentor participate in together. Release time is a necessary part of the mentoring relationship as it enables mentoring activities such as observation, co-teaching, and lesson planning to take place. Oftentimes, a support team is introduced in an induction program. The purpose of the support team is to link the beginning teacher with a network of veteran teachers, in addition to their mentor, that they can rely on for assistance and guidance (Education reform Act, 1993).

Mentors need to receive training in the skills of effective mentoring prior to their assignment to a beginning teacher as well as opportunities to meet with one another to share successes and trouble-shooting strategies (Education Reform Act, 1993; Nolan & Hoover, 2004). Such opportunities are an important part of professional development for the mentor. Nolan and Hoover (2004) emphasize that in order for beginning teachers to gain an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and to grow professionally, it is important for the teacher to participate in a formal evaluation administered by a supervisor by means of clear expectations and well-defined standards and criteria (Daresh & Playko, 2004; Seyfarth, 2002). These expectations and standards of the evaluation form a "curriculum" for the joint work of the mentor and beginning teacher throughout the school year that leads to a successful mentor/induction process.

Experiences from the Front Lines

To find the importance of a mentoring program, Hank needed to look no further than his first year of teaching. He was hired as a Mathematics teacher at a Catholic high school where the first day of his "rookie year" was actually in mid-January, the start of the second semester. This was due to the fact that the teacher who started the school year had left in the middle of the first semester to take a position overseas. Between the time this teacher had departed until the time Hank came on board, for one reason or another, the students had experienced three different teachers. Hank would be the fifth teacher for these students, and it was only the midpoint of the year. This school had no induction/mentor program in place, but Hank was quite fortunate: a very experienced Mathematics teacher, Robert, was in the classroom next door to his. Robert now jokingly refers to his friendly offer to Hank of "If there is anything you need..." as the biggest mistake he ever made! This is because Hank picked his brain, asked for advice, confided/trusted in him and in general, took up quite a bit of his time. Robert showed Hank things both inside and outside of the classroom; how to plan and manage, people on campus who he should get to know (and those to avoid), how to fill out required paperwork, and how to grow professionally, and explained how policies and procedures were implemented in this school. Robert and his wife often invited Hank for dinner, showed him different parts of his new hometown, and make him feel part of the school community. Hank did not realize it at the time,

but Robert single-handedly put him through his own induction/mentoring program. To this day, Hank remains grateful for the time, knowledge, and consideration bestowed upon him by Robert. Hank often asks himself “What would have happened to me had he not ‘taken me under his wing’ in January of 1991?” Would he have stayed in education or would he have been one of the 13% of teachers who leave the teaching profession after the first year (NCES, 1992)? Or perhaps he would stick it out for another year or two before leaving, joining the nearly 30 percent of teachers who leave within the first five years (Halford, 1998). Would he have grown to love this profession the way he does? Hank believes he would have left the profession.

Hank believes that teachers who serve as mentors actually become better teachers themselves. He believes that the constant discussion, observation, and development of a professional relationship between mentor and first year teacher not only allows for professional growth of the beginning teacher but also for professional growth of the mentor as well. While serving as a mentor in the fall of 1999, he gained both insight and valuable experience as to just how time consuming (although important), demanding, rewarding, and involved it can be to serve as a mentor. Teachers grow professionally when they seek out peers for professional dialogue and turn to each other for constructive feedback, affirmation, and support (Danielson, 2002). Although this was Hank’s first experience as a mentor it was actually his second experience with the school’s mentoring program. During his first year at the school he was enrolled in the program as a beginning teacher. The school’s mentoring program is known as the MINT (*Mentors Influencing New Teachers*) program and has been in place since the early 1990’s. As with all good induction programs, this school’s program incorporates fundamentals needed by teachers during their first year (Creating a new teacher, 2003) such as:

1. Access to (directly assigned to) an experienced teacher within the same subject area.
2. Access to (and meetings with) members of the Administration.
3. Allotted time for working through the beginning teacher program.
4. School resources (substitute teachers, videotaping, etc.) available to teacher.

The MINT program actually begins during the first days of employment for the beginning teacher. Beginning teachers return to school one week prior to veteran teachers and during this time are involved in what is referred to as the “New Teacher Orientation Program”.

Teachers tour the different campuses, complete mandatory paperwork, are introduced to administrative staff, receive keys to their classroom, and begin to “settle in” to their new surroundings. Approximately one week later, when veteran teachers report, the beginning teachers are introduced to their mentor and formally begin the MINT program.

The program is divided into four parts: The pre-orientation week (as mentioned above), the on-going orientation program, the Breakfast meetings, and the New Teacher Observation Program. Hank compares the pre-orientation week to the “warm-up” phase of a long distance run: things start out somewhat slow, expectations aren’t quite clear, eagerness abounds, and everyone is fresh and “ready to go”. The on-going orientation program is, in his opinion, “the part of the mentoring program that seems to get overshadowed”. During this phase, the new teacher and the mentor sit with the following people on an individual basis: The Director of Guidance, the Dean of Students, the Dean of Faculty, the Activities Director, and the appropriate subject area Department Head (not applicable at the lower school level with self-contained classrooms). All of these meetings take place prior to November 1st of the school year, which is one reason Hank feels that this part of the program is overshadowed by the many happenings associated with the beginning of a school year. During the beginning of the year, teachers and administrators are busy and still “settling in” to the school year. Because of this, it is difficult to

block off an appropriate amount of time for a comfortable meeting instead the meeting often seems “rushed” and valuable points are not fully absorbed.

At this time of year, the Director of Guidance is already preparing Early Decision applications, the Dean of Students is reminding the students that summer break is over, the Dean of Faculty is making certain that all teachers are following through on their certification commitments, while the Activities Director is trying to remember where the school mascot was stored over the summer. All parties involved are being stretched in many directions. One excellent opportunity for ample meeting time occurs on Wednesday afternoon. The school operates a “Wednesday schedule” in which class periods are shortened and the school day, for students, ends approximately one hour early. In years past, this day was set aside for Department meetings, faculty meetings, and other presentations. However, for the last two years, the amount of faculty meetings and department meetings has been reduced. This is a direct result of teacher input and has greatly enabled teachers to have more time for planning, and most importantly, has allowed new teachers and their mentors to meet.

A favorite part of the MINT program is the “Breakfast Meetings”. During this segment of the program, new teachers and their mentors meet for one hour on assigned mornings, throughout the first three quarters of the school year, beginning at 7:00am. These meetings are held in the library, where a bountiful breakfast spread is provided. In addition, a veteran faculty member gives a presentation on a designated topic. Topics have included: lesson planning, interim reports, classroom management, the school’s academic honor code, report card comments, student assessment, effective dealing with parents, mid-term exams, and other selected topics. The best part of the breakfast meeting is seeing how the beginning teachers react and involve themselves with the veteran teachers. It is quite different than what their interaction with Administrators usually is. For some reason the teachers seem more relaxed and more willing to participate at the breakfast meetings, especially as the school year progresses. The presenters are usually teachers who have volunteered to present a specific topic at a Breakfast Meeting. Because of this, they almost always do a fantastic job. It is evident that they have put numerous hours into their presentation, although it is usually a relatively brief presentation, and the beginning teachers respond to this dedication. Three years ago Hank had the opportunity to make a presentation at a Breakfast Meeting, demonstrating several methods for grade calculation. Hank received great feedback from the beginning teachers, many expressing appreciation for “making the Math simple”. The presentation was given in mid-October which left him wondering, “What method(s) of grade calculation had the teachers been using up to that point?” He recommended to the administration that this topic should be discussed earlier in the year, perhaps even during the pre-orientation week. It is currently one of the topics covered in the pre-orientation program.

The final part of the school’s induction program is a total of twelve observations, this may seem excessive. However, this number of observations is not excessive because four of the observations are completed by the mentor teacher and are considered informal; four are completed by the Department Head and are also considered informal; two are completed by the Principal; and the remaining two formal observations are done by the Assistant to the Director. The only two observations considered to be formal observations are one each from the Principal and the Assistant to the Director. Since the majority of observations are informal, all observations are more relaxed for the beginning teacher. Hank believes that the vast majority of beginning teachers are in need of many observations and want them. Teachers realize that the observations are being completed in order to help them to grow and develop. Observations are a

major factor in beginning teachers rating the MINT program with highest marks (Dunn, 2002). In fact, in an end-of-year survey of teachers who completed the MINT program during the 2001-2002 school year, all 44 teachers responded with a “Yes” when asked if they would recommend this program to a colleague. Additionally, over 95% of the mentors replied that they, too, would recommend the program to a colleague (Dunn, 2002).

Hank believes that the process of selection is of utmost importance. He was fortunate to have a mentor who volunteered to provide assistance. Not everyone is as fortunate; many mentors are assigned to serve this duty (Ganser, 1996). Teachers who are assigned mentoring duty are less likely to be enthusiastic (and therefore not do as good of a job) as a teacher who has volunteered to serve as a mentor. If a school is going to assign a mentor, it becomes even more important to provide necessary support to the mentor. This support comes in the form of additional time, resources, and perhaps even financial allowance. Hank would like to see a type of system that uses full-time mentors. These full time mentors would be people who have demonstrated skill with mentoring beginning teachers. Perhaps the full time mentors could have a reduced class schedule or other modifications allowing a commitment of time to this important endeavor.

Conclusions and Implications for Practitioners and Policymakers

The art of teaching seems to be a difficult field to master, especially the first year of teaching. Beginning teachers frequently receive the most difficult teaching assignments yet are expected to perform as expertly as experienced teachers. Changing legislation, philosophy, policies, and practices have resulted in dramatic shifts in the skills needed by new teachers. As a result, beginning teachers leave the field at higher rates than beginning workers in other careers.

New teachers need skills to meet the needs of special populations, to coordinate school- and work-based learning, to manage work-based programs, and to prepare students for both the workplace and postsecondary education. Policymakers and practitioners can optimize the experience of beginning teachers by facilitating activities that foster the development of collegial relationships with teacher colleagues. These activities may range from creating convenient and clear ways for understanding complex school systems and policies, to providing adequate time and resources to prepare for initial teaching assignments. It requires support not only from the local school system but also from active partners—state departments of education, outside funding sources, professional organizations, and teacher education institutions.

Teacher induction programs cannot adequately address all the problems that novice teachers might encounter (e.g., outdated equipment), but they can do much to help. These programs can improve the knowledge and competencies of beginning teachers and increase higher job satisfaction, decrease teacher turnover, and improved student achievement.

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