

The Necessity of Mentoring Programs in the North

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Abstract

Mentoring programs are beneficial in northern or rural Canadian communities. Educators teaching in these areas often have higher demands placed upon them and encounter different challenges including higher workloads, a lack of personal and professional resources, and difficulties adjusting to life in isolated communities. Mentoring programs provide the opportunity to improve teaching ability, provide professional development, enhance school climate, and promote teacher retention.

Are teacher mentoring programs a necessity in northern communities? Teachers face different and arguably bigger challenges living in these communities. Teachers in the north have higher workloads than their southern counterparts and often have a difficult time adjusting to life in the northern. They face isolation and a lack of both personal and professional resources. Mentoring programs can help. They have a positive effect on school climate, and therefore impact student learning and engagement, and develop a level of confidence among educators. Mentoring programs foster consistency in the transfer of knowledge, develop confident leaders, and promote teacher retention. In helping teachers adjust to life in northern communities, a mentoring program is crucial. Mentoring programs are a means of utilizing a “non-threatening, non-evaluative” (McCann et al., 2009, p. 92) method for working with new teachers, prior to actually evaluating them, thus giving them the chance to overcome some of the problems they may face simply because they are inexperienced or encounter difficulty in adjusting to northern living. Evaluators would then be able to evaluate with school initiatives in mind, rather than focusing on the “growing pains” that a new teacher experiences.

Northern Teachers Have Bigger Workloads

It is important for school divisions to have mentorship programs in northern areas. A study by Northwest Territories Teachers' Association (NTTA, 2013) determined that teachers in northern, remote communities have bigger workloads than teachers in urban areas. A factor that contributes to the large workload of teachers in the north is the necessity of the teachers to plan for “highly diverse classes spanning two or three grades, and multiple ability levels falling outside of grade level curriculum” (NTTA, 2013, p. 7). With mentoring programs, educators shift from working in isolation to becoming more team and process oriented, which is a benefit to students. The pressure that a beginner teacher feels can be greatly alleviated by working and team teaching with a mentor (Stanulis & Floden, 2009, p. 119). Being mentored provides teachers with the chance to “learn valuable skills and build instructional strategies and capabilities necessary to strengthen teaching ability and to grow in competence” (Clarke, 2012, p. 199). Teachers who are involved in a mentoring program can lessen the time needed to learn and master new teaching practices, thus taking some of the strain off their workloads.

Another factor that contributes to the high teacher workload in remote areas is that teachers are often the “only source of organized recreational activities for children and youth” (NTTA, 2013, p. 7), making the demands on them to coach sports and run arts programs a hardship. In these communities, it is imperative for teachers to pull together in order to provide services and support each other. Providing teacher mentoring is a way to ensure that this is happening. Lastly, the teachers in northern areas have “an added responsibility to know and understand not only the historical significance of education for Aboriginal communities but also to know and understand contemporary social, political and economic realities” (Burleigh, & Burm, 2012, p. 23). Considering the fact that these teachers are in the process of learning, often

in “far from ideal circumstances in comparison to schools in the south” (Burleigh, & Burm, 2012, p. 23), it is essential that they have mentorship programs to guide and support them.

Difficulties Living in the North

Teachers regularly face difficulties that they are ill prepared for, or did not anticipate, when living in northern communities. Teaching in the north can be socially isolating, which is often “accentuated by the geographical location of the rural or northern community” (Hellsten, McIntyre, Prytula, 2011, p. 14). While “isolation is not unique to northern settings . . . the severe winter conditions coupled with patterns of extended light and darkness are conditions that are not often found in more southerly settings” (Klassen, Rosemary, Foster, Rajani, Bowman, 2009, p. 390). The fact that it is dark when teachers go to work and dark when they leave “has a profound psychological effect on people in the school” (Klassen et al, 2009, p. 390). It is difficult to adjust to the fact that it never really “gets dark” in the summertime. Additionally, the fact that it is very expensive and time consuming to travel south can add to the feelings of isolation that teachers may experience when they live in the north.

Another aspect of northern teaching that teachers find difficult is that there is a culture or manner of “doing things . . . and persons who ignore these phenomena are designed to experience a significant struggle if they attempt to import changes which run counter to the established way” (McCracken & Miller, 1988, p. 24). Teachers struggle with parents who go directly to administrators to solve problems, instead of giving them the opportunity to deal with situations themselves (McCracken & Miller, 1988). Another inconvenience that teachers face in northern communities is the high expectations of the parents and community members (Hellsten et al, 2011). In these communities, teachers are “highly, highly visible and are held to a higher professional and personal standard” (Klassen et al, 2009, p. 391). The local residents have an intensely strong investment in their communities because they often have very strong and historical ties (Eppeley, 2015). As a result, the school is often viewed as the foundation for the community, one that is expected “to do everything, to fix everything – to fix all the problems” (Hellsten et al, 2011, p. 14). It is simply not realistic to expect teachers to rectify all of the problems that a community undergoes.

Teachers find it difficult to integrate themselves in these communities and frequently feel “scrutinized having not grown up in the community” (Hellsten et al, 2011, p. 13). Being a part of the community can be very difficult when one is referred to as “not from here” (Eppeley, 2015, p. 71), even after having lived in the community for many years. This adds to the feelings of isolation. Teachers in the north deal with a “lack of facilities and opportunities for socialization” (Hellsten et al, 2011, p. 14). Similarly, teachers report that they have difficulty dealing with the “lack of privacy,” the fact that “everybody knows everybody's business” (McCracken & Miller, 1988, p. 25), and navigating the seemingly endless “community cliques, gossip and small town talk” (McCracken, Miller, 1988, p. 24). For these reasons, it is important for teachers in these settings to have a mentor and induction program to help them navigate the intricacies of northern living.

Lack of Professional Development in the North

Teachers in northern areas have less access to professional development opportunities, which directly affects their job stress and satisfaction (Klassen et al., 2009, p. 389). There is thus a discrepancy between fulfilling “the professional development needs . . . in relation to the modes of professional development and their topics of interest” (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010, p. 871). Many teachers in the north struggle with understanding the culture and issues that many Indigenous peoples face, and do not receive the appropriate professional preparation to work with Indigenous families. Due to the inequities of professional development offered in northern areas, it is imperative that teachers share, collaborate, and learn from each other. In

doing so, teachers have the opportunity to become learners and leaders (Lieberman, Campbell, Yashkina, 2015), and to focus on the types of professional development that are within an "area of concern from their own context and school culture" (Lieberman et al, 2015, p. 122). Sharing resources may alleviate some of the financial burden felt by school divisions due to the high cost of travel from northern or remote communities. Having teachers provide professional development within their school divisions is a way to ensure the "opportunities for building capacity, rather than compliance, supporting development . . . and supporting the idea of learning in practice" (Lieberman et al, 2015, p. 128). Teachers who become leaders are proactive and empowered in their school divisions.

Mentoring is a form of professional development that benefits new teachers, rejuvenates current staff members, and provides a consistent transfer of knowledge that benefits the school as a whole. This form of professional development teachers can reduce the time it takes for teachers to acquire necessary information. Mentorship promotes rapid learning (Stanulis & Floden, 2009), and builds a level of consistency that is useful for administrators who are evaluating their staff members.

Conclusion

Teacher mentoring programs are a necessity in northern communities. These programs can help teachers adjust to a lifestyle in which they may feel "social . . . geographical . . . and professional isolation" (Hellsten et al, 2011, p. 14). Mentoring programs can lessen some of the stressors involved with the higher workloads that teachers encounter in northern communities and help teachers adjust to the high expectations placed upon them by families and community members. Mentoring in the north offers teachers the chance to engage in professional development where they are otherwise limited. This professional development supports the "opportunity for teachers to network with others" (Lieberman et al, 2015, p. 126) and to use mentorship as a means to focus on an "area of concern from their own context and school culture" (Lieberman et al, 2015, p. 122). In terms of evaluations, the "role of principals in teacher evaluation is nowadays becoming more significant given the international calls for increased accountability in education and improving quality of teaching" (Orphanos, 2014, p. 245). When mentors work with new teachers, an intense partnership is created wherein the mentor can assist the teacher in overcoming some of the growing pains associated with being new to the profession. This gives principals the opportunity to evaluate based on school goals and initiatives. The chance for teachers to collaborate with each other in the north is needed for "teachers' professional development, morale, and long-term psychological and physical health" (NTTA, 2013, p. 6). Knowing that healthy teachers are a necessity in contributing "to a healthy school environment . . . student learning and well-being" (NTTA, 2013, p. 6), it is of vital importance that teachers in the north have access to mentoring programs that will help them adjust both personally and professionally.

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About the Author

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