

Supporting Beginning Teachers Through Mentoring

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Abstract

It is often assumed that beginning teachers possess the skills, strategies and practices necessary for effective instructional practice and classroom management. The reality is that beginning teachers struggle to overcome the many challenges and obstacles faced in the first years of teaching. Without adequate supports, beginning teachers may crumble under the pressure, assume basic survival skills, or simply quit in the face of dismay and disillusionment. A quality induction program that offers mentoring support is an ideal way to retain teachers and build capacity. A mentoring relationship, consisting of joint inquiry and reflective dialogue, should increase teacher effectiveness and professional growth.

The term “natural born teacher” is often used to describe those who seemingly have an innate ability to convey a message while reaching out to engage their audience. They possess empathy, patience, and a large repertoire of behaviour management skills and strategies (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Flores & Day, 2006; Lipton & Wellman, 2003). Although these natural born teachers appear completely at ease in their role, knowing how to teach is a demanding and complex task that requires intellect, skill, and commitment, and takes years to develop (Lipton & Wellman, 2003). Once they leave the university campus, the beginning teachers in many schools are on their own, left to “sink or swim.” Unlike professions and trades that have internship or apprenticeship programs, most school divisions lack formal programs that continue training and provide support. Teachers face many challenges in their first year of teaching, and mentoring is an ideal form of support that can be provided through beginning teacher induction programs.

The Reality of Teaching

Upon receiving confirmation of their first teaching assignment, beginning teachers eagerly anticipate the arrival of September and the chorus of young voices ready to begin another year of school. Planning begins immediately: resources are bought, materials are ordered, and curriculums are read. An excitement and confidence is experienced – “This is what I’ve worked for; this is the dream.” September finally arrives, and the idealism felt during the summer is replaced by cold reality. Nothing is as imagined: the classroom is ill-equipped, the students are not on grade level, and there are two special needs students with educational assistants who require accommodating. Excitement and confidence are quickly replaced by panic and desperation, as the beginning teacher asks, “What have I gotten myself into?”

The challenges encountered in the first year of teaching are varied and numerable, and the amount of work is grossly underestimated (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). The demands and complexity of teaching are unexpected with the pressures of daily planning, trying to juggle multiple responsibilities, and meeting the expectations of students, parents, and administrators (Helsing, 2007). Paddling furiously to keep one’s head above water is an analogy common to first-year teachers. Compounding these struggles are feelings of isolation, shock, and disappointment that expectations do not match reality (Flores & Day, 2006). The first year can be exhausting at the least and traumatic at the most.

Preparation at university for a career as a teacher is often viewed by teachers and administrators as inadequate (Flores & Day, 2006). Knowledge of educational theory and

subject content are superseded by the heavy workload and other pressures faced in the first year of teaching. Student-teaching experiences, comprised of six to eight-week terms in classrooms of veteran teachers who have already established procedures and routines, cannot prepare beginning teachers for the realities of their own classrooms. University programs and student-teaching experiences rarely include the culture and climate or the collective and individual needs of the school in which one is hired. Real teaching, in the classroom context, is the only viable preparation for the journey from beginning to expert teacher (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005).

Challenges and Responsibilities of Beginning Teachers

Beginning teachers have the same tasks and responsibilities as experienced teachers (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Lipton & Wellman, 2003). In fact, it is a common practice in many schools for the beginning teacher to have the most undesirable of teaching assignments, including large student numbers accompanied by the demands of many learning, behavioural, and/or emotional needs. Experienced teachers feel that they have “paid their dues,” preferring teaching assignments that are deserving of their talents and status. Such challenges result in a pervasive feeling of failure and burn-out (Fantilli & McDougall), as beginning teachers question their effectiveness and try to be all things to all students: educator, mentor, guide, and friend (Helsing, 2007). Afraid of failure and desperate to please, the beginning teacher takes it all on, surviving through a system of trial and error. Regardless of a teacher’s years of experience, the responsibilities of the classroom and the expectations of other teachers, students, parents, and administrators are the same.

Beginning teachers take ownership for problems encountered in the classroom and assume responsibility for them (Bullough et al., 2008). Common concerns of first-year teachers include behaviour management, student needs, time and workload management, and conflict with parents and other adults (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). During the first year, content knowledge and pedagogy can take a back seat to the daily running of the classroom. It is enough just to get through each day, and when planning does not extend beyond tomorrow, yearly goals seem impossible. Such experiences are more common than imagined and can have a catastrophic effect on the self-esteem and confidence of the beginning teacher. In a school culture in which collegiality is undervalued, the beginning teacher shoulders the entire load, and looks inward not for self-reflection but for blame.

Unique Needs of the Beginning Teacher

Realizing the numerable obstacles and challenges they face, beginning teachers welcome and seek out support. Many form close, supportive relationships not with their colleagues but with the people seen most, usually the custodian and the secretary (Doerger, 2003). Spending evenings in the classroom preparing unit plans and materials, it becomes routine to share with the custodian one’s stories and struggles of the day. Additionally, the principal conduit of information in a school is usually the secretary, who is relied upon for supplies and knowledge of school procedures and protocol. The secretary is available, has his/her fingers on the pulse of the school, and usually has a sympathetic ear. The custodian and secretary may provide the necessary emotional support that the beginning teacher craves at this time. Although critical for surviving the year, emotional support is not enough, and may inadvertently encourage complacency when it is the only support provided (Lipton & Wellman, 2003).

It is important to realize that beginning teachers are still learning to teach and have emotional, instructional, and professional needs different from their more experienced colleagues (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005). In response to the growing awareness of these needs, induction programs are seen as a way to aid in the transition from university to classroom, supporting the ongoing process of learning to teach. A successful induction program

requires a “comprehensive plan that formulates and quantifies the expectations of the induction program” (Portner, 2008, p. 7). Programs should be structured to provide the skills necessary to assist beginning teachers in their development into high-quality, effective teachers. Such skills are developed through problem-solving and decision-making opportunities, collegiality with experienced teachers, and support in classroom management (Doerger, 2003). These needs require addressing in the first three years of teaching, as they provide a solid foundation on which to build a teaching career.

Mentoring as a Component of an Induction Program

Quality induction programs, which are designed to meet the needs of beginning teachers by offering support and professional development, not only hasten the development of effective instructional practice but can make a difference in teacher satisfaction (Stanulis & Floden, 2009). One component of a successful induction program that cannot be overlooked is mentoring. Induction programs that include a comprehensive mentoring component are significantly more effective in providing emotional and professional support (Lipton & Wellman, 2003). It usually takes educators three to seven years to “reach maximum impact on student learning” (Stanulis & Floden, p. 112). With the provision of one-on-one mentoring support, this time is significantly shortened.

Mentorship is often seen as simply easing teachers into their new role by answering questions and providing emotional support. In reality, it is much more complex, consisting of developing new teachers’ learning through reflective thinking based on regular examination of themselves and their instructional practices (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005). A comprehensive definition of mentoring is the “one-to-one support of a novice or less experienced practitioner (mentee) by a more experienced practitioner (mentor), designed primarily to assist the development of the mentee’s expertise and to facilitate their induction into the culture of the profession” (Hobson et al., 2009, p. 207). Mentoring emphasizes engagement in joint inquiry to help beginning teachers understand the importance of learning from practice, while providing tools useful for studying teaching (Stanulis & Ames, 2009). As such, mentoring is the most “complex and intricate role in the induction process” (Portner, 2008, p. 7), and has a significant impact on the beginning teacher.

Benefits of Mentoring

As a form of beginning teacher support, mentoring offers the opportunity for improvement in teacher quality and strengthens the connection between teaching and student engagement, resulting in effective, balanced instruction (Stanulis & Floden, 2009). Through reflective thinking, mentees are assisted in understanding what is happening and the reasons why, in order to act more effectively (Bullough et al., 2008). Without the process of mentoring, these beginning teachers are at risk of being inadvertently influenced by experienced teachers who resist change, resulting in a “cyclic reproduction” of teachers who are not responsive to the individual and collective needs of their students (Doerger, 2003, p. 1). The ultimate objective is to understand students’ needs and to create a toolbox of strategies to meet these needs.

Perhaps the most important benefit from the viewpoint of the beginning teachers is the provision of emotional and psychological support, as the mentor assists in putting difficult experiences into perspective and creates a safe space for venting frustrations. Beginning teacher mentoring reduces feelings of isolation, increases confidence and self-esteem, and stimulates self-reflection and problem solving (Hobson et al., 2009), resulting in a win-win situation for all. Therefore, because of increased morale and greater job satisfaction, the benefits of mentoring cannot be overlooked.

The Role of the Mentor

The key factor in mentoring is, of course, the skill and development of the mentor. The primary role of the mentor is to develop beginning teachers' capacity and confidence to make informed decisions, expand their pedagogical knowledge base, and develop their teaching abilities (Portner, 2008), while guiding them to independence as competent and confident teachers. Mentoring must be responsive to the needs of the beginning teacher, as all teachers have different beliefs, values, and experiences (Lipton & Wellman, 2003). Accordingly, the beginning teacher should be treated as an adult learner, with skills, strategies, and knowledge to share and contribute (Hobson et al., 2009). The mentor's role is to assess the type of support required and decide upon the necessary action, whether guiding or coaching. The mentor's skill and expertise determine the depth and quality of the interaction.

For a mentoring relationship to work, the roles and responsibilities of mentor and beginning teacher must be clearly established (Lipton & Wellman, 2003). It must be understood that a mentor does not operate in a supervisory capacity, as it is not the mentor's role or responsibility to evaluate. Any data gathered during teacher observations are used for reflection purposes, not judging. The quality of interactions is of utmost importance with the relationship being of a collegial nature, not hierarchical, thus becoming a partnership in which learning, questioning, and challenge is shared (The Board of Regents, 2009). A relationship that is undermining and condescending is not conducive to support. There must be a willingness by the beginning teacher and the mentor to participate, with both parties perceiving mentoring as having a "substantial and meaningful influence on the novice's learning to teach" (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005, p. 680). Vital to the mentoring relationship is the atmosphere of trust and respect between mentor and beginning teacher.

The Mentoring Relationship

The success of the beginning teacher is in large part determined by the quality of the mentoring interaction with the designated mentor. Although friendship and advice are valued at the beginning of the relationship, a more educative dialogue is necessary. In order for professional growth and development to occur, it is important to stimulate and encourage reflective thinking through learning-focused conversations regarding instructional practices and student needs. During learning-focused conversations, cognitive complexity, which includes the ability to think reflectively, is developed with the goal to create "mindful teaching" (Bullough et al., 2008, p. 1856; Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005, p. 681). Effective mentors are committed to the mentoring relationship and guide beginning teachers to independence as competent and confident teachers.

Mentoring should provide frequent, intensive, and individualized support (Allen, 2009). Mentoring cannot be hit and miss, grabbing a few minutes of conversation in the staffroom or exchanging pleasantries in the hallway. Support needs to be specific, tailored to the individual needs of the beginning teacher over a sustained period of time. When the support is relevant and connected to the daily challenges faced in the classroom, the greatest learning occurs.

Conclusion

Beginning teachers know how to act like teachers when they graduate from university, but they require continued training in how to think like teachers (Boreen et al., 2009). This is what mentoring does. It builds capacity in the beginning teacher to respond to the ever-changing demands of the classroom. It develops the beginning teacher's confidence in his or her problem-solving and decision-making skills. It fosters a professional identity and vision as an educator. With the support of administration, team leaders, colleagues, and experienced and

beginning teachers, the potential of mentoring cannot be underestimated; it can only be explored, enhanced, and celebrated.

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