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Teacher induction: What is really happening?

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Abstract

Retention rates and stress levels of beginning teachers are of concern. There is evidence to suggest that well-planned induction programs can assist beginning teachers to make the transition successfully into the profession, which may increase retention rates. This qualitative, year-long study aims to explore and describe the induction experiences of eight beginning teachers as they negotiated their first year of teaching. The participants of this study represented 10% of the final cohort who attended the same regional university and completed a four-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree. Data were gathered through email correspondence at the commencement of term one and then at the end of each of the four school terms. Data also included telephone interviews and a questionnaire at the conclusion of term four focusing on these first-year beginning teachers' perceptions of their induction into the profession. At the beginning of their first year of teaching these beginning teachers indicated they may require assistance in teaching to cater to individual difference, assessing in terms of outcomes, relating to parents, relating to the wider community, and understanding school policies; yet most commented they would not require assistance in relating to students and understanding legal responsibilities and duty of care. At the conclusion of their first year only one beginning teacher was assisted by a mentor (veteran teacher) on whole school programming, and planning for improving teaching with opportunities to visit classrooms of more experienced teachers. This was also the only beginning teacher who received a reduced workload in order to meet with the mentor to discuss pedagogical developments. The inadequate support provided to beginning teachers in this study highlights the need for principals and school staff to re-assess their contribution to beginning teachers' development within the school context, which includes providing time, funding, and clear guidelines for a quality induction.

Introduction

Many experienced classroom practitioners will reflect upon their first year as one of the most challenging: where the transition from preservice teacher to classroom practitioner is made. Beginning teachers that are successful in attaining a teaching position are usually expected to assume the same responsibilities as their veteran colleagues and are often assigned to the most difficult teaching placements (Carter & Francis, 2001). It is not unusual for beginning teachers to be employed in rural or remote locations far from their family network or the area

in which they trained. In some instances, the beginning teacher does not survive this transitional stage and decides to leave the profession having invested time and money in the completion of a four-year degree (Marsh, 2004).

Currently in Australia, many experienced teachers are reaching retirement age or are making career choices that remove them from the profession (Ryan, 2002). It is estimated that the need for teachers in Australia will increase in the next ten years (Green & Reid, 2004). This trend is not unique to Australia. Similarly, in the next decade it is estimated that in the United States, public schools will need to recruit more than two million teachers to overcome the retirement of the “baby boomers” (Villiani & Danielson, 2001). The New Teacher Support Initiative (National Education Association, 2002) in America claims that recruiting new teachers needed will be a challenge but, retaining them will also be a challenge as only 50% of new teachers today are choosing to stay in the profession beyond five years.

The predicted teacher shortage and the attrition rate of teachers from education systems will have implications for employers of beginning teachers (Marsh, 2004). It is therefore essential that well-monitored teacher induction programs effectively support beginning teachers as they make the transition from preservice teacher to beginning classroom practitioner (Ramsey, 2000).

Induction and beginning teachers

Jackson and Davis (2000) purport that effective beginning teacher induction is as important as an effective preservice teacher education program. Unlike other professions such as medicine, beginning teachers are placed into classrooms on their own and are expected from day one to undertake the duties and operations of a more experienced teacher (Ramsey, 2000). Quality teacher induction programs are noted to greatly assist the beginning teacher process (Ewing & Smith, 2003; Wong, Britton, & Ganser, 2005; Peeler & Jane, 2003).

There are many models for the induction of beginning teachers (Wong, Britton, & Ganser, 2005). But, as Wong (2005) claims, the process of induction is a “highly organised and comprehensive form of staff development, involving many people and many components” (p. 379). Wong further purports that the beginning teacher induction process should be coherent, sustained and focussed upon students’ learning with support being provided for the first two to five years of a teachers’ career.

Countries such as Switzerland, France, New Zealand, Japan, and China have recognised the importance of beginning teacher induction and have implemented well-funded, well-monitored induction programs that offer support to all beginning teachers for at least the first two years of teaching (Wong, 2005). In Australia each of the education authorities in the various states have their own specific policies and procedures for inducting new teachers into the profession. However, across the states support for beginning teachers is invariably in the form of websites with some online information and further reference to school-based induction programs developed and implemented at the discretion of school principals.

In New South Wales (NSW) the Department of Education and Training (DET) has a website for new teachers that contains information mainly relating to the professional and legal responsibilities of teachers and their conditions of employment together with some curriculum resources (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002). Additional information on the DET website is directed towards schools with a set of guidelines for supporting the induction of new teachers and suggestions that school-based induction programs should involve structured supervision, collegial support, mentoring and professional networking (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002).

In Queensland, the Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) has recently produced a sixty page Flying Start Induction Toolkit that will be distributed to permanent and temporary beginning teachers in 2007 (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2006). The toolkit will be supported by online resources and other professional links for beginning teachers. As in NSW, school principals in Queensland will be provided with information to assist in the development of their own school-based induction programs. Similar support for beginning teachers is evident in other states, however, there is little or no mention of how these programs will be monitored or funded to ensure all beginning teachers are provided with an on-going, quality induction program.

Mentoring is a component of the beginning teacher induction process (Wong, Sterling, & Rowland, 2005). The terms “induction” and “mentoring” are often used interchangeably, hence, teacher employment bodies may profess to have quality induction programs because beginning teachers are offered the assistance of a more experienced practitioner noted to be a mentor. It is well recognised that good mentors are important (Ryan & Cooper, 2000) and that quality mentoring programs can be significant in shaping a beginning teacher’s practice (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Ryan & Cooper, 2000; Staton & Hunt, 1992); however mentors must be trained to ensure they provide support that is linked to the process of induction (Wong, 2005). Furthermore, the support should be evaluated, on-going and appropriate to the needs of the mentee.

Aim of this study

It is evident from the literature noted that producing and retaining quality teachers requires a commitment on behalf of those who employ beginning teachers. For teacher employers, it is essential that all beginning teachers have the opportunity to be part of quality induction programs that are comprehensive, coherent, sustained and are directly linked to their needs. This study aimed to explore and describe the induction experiences of eight beginning teachers as they negotiated their first year of teaching. The participants of this study attended the same regional university and completed a four year Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree. At the completion of their four year degree the preservice teachers were employed in a range of contexts across two different states.

Methods of data collection

This interpretive study sought to understand human behaviour through the perspective of the respondents and employed qualitative methods of data collection (Best & Kahn, 2003; Neuman, 2000). The data for this small-scale study were collected over a one-year period (Hittleman & Simon, 2002). This investigation included eight beginning teachers that completed a Bachelor of

Education (primary) degree at the same regional university. The eight beginning teachers involved in this investigation were selected from those members of the final year cohort who indicated that they were successful in attaining full-time employment or fixed term full-time employment at the completion of their four-year Bachelor of Education degree. The beginning teachers were selected using simple random sampling as it was hoped that those selected would “reflect the distribution of relevant variables found in the target population” (Hittleman & Simon, 2002, p. 94). The participants in this study represented 10% of the total cohort that completed the Bachelor of Education in that year.

As a result of using simple random sampling a cohort of beginning teachers were selected for the study that had been employed in a variety of school settings in two different states. The cohort was of varying ages. It should be noted that although only 20% of the total cohort were males, the random sampling process produced an equal number of males ($n=4$) and females ($n=4$) for this investigation. Table 1 below provides an overview of the age, sex and school contexts in which the beginning teachers were employed.

Table 1: *Age and sex of beginning teachers and summary of school contexts.*

Participant	Age	Sex	Context: Gov/Non-Gov	School Description
1	> 40	Male	Gov	Rural/town
2	22-29	Female	Gov	Rural/town
3	30-39	Male	Gov	Rural/isolated
4	22-29	Female	Gov	Rural/town
5	22-29	Male	Gov	City suburbs
6	30-39	Female	Non-Gov	Rural/town
7	22-29	Male	Gov	Rural/town
8	> 40	Female	Gov	Rural/town

The data were collected using information gathered from emails, telephone interviews and a questionnaire. The beginning teachers were asked open-ended questions as this allowed for an unlimited number of possible answers and the inclusion of the unexpected (Neuman, 2000). Each of the beginning teachers were contacted via email at the beginning of term one to gather data regarding the school contexts and to obtain initial data in regards to their induction experiences. They were then contacted again via email at the end of each term to discuss their progress and document the induction processes provided by their school. Phone interviews were conducted and a questionnaire administered towards the end of term four. The phone interviews allowed for a more extensive discussion in a relaxed environment that was conducive to eliciting more frank and honest responses (Hittleman & Simon, 2002). The questionnaire provided an opportunity to elicit additional data (Neuman, 2000) that was directly related to the induction of the beginning teachers.

The open-ended email questions, the phone interviews and the questionnaire related to the induction processes experienced by the beginning teachers and were based upon The Public Education Network’s (2004, cited in Wong, 2005) attributes of a quality induction program. As Wong (2005) purports, the induction process should be comprehensive, coherent, sustained and focussed

upon students' learning. So, by asking the same or similar questions each term, it allowed for the preservice teachers to add information and document the induction process over the entire year. The responses gathered each term from each participant were analysed to note the emerging themes and document and compare the variations and similarities in the experiences of the eight beginning teachers.

Results and discussion

The first data were gathered at the beginning of term one. At this stage the beginning teachers had just been appointed to their schools and had been allocated to their classes. All eight beginning teachers noted in their emails that they felt apprehensive about teaching but seemed excited at having their own class. The participants commented that they had areas of concern in regards to beginning teaching and were hopeful of gaining assistance from their colleagues at their school. Table 2 below summarises the areas the beginning teachers felt they may require assistance.

Table 2: *Areas of concern in which the participants commented that they felt they may require assistance as beginning teachers*

Areas in which the participants felt they may require assistance	Number of beginning teachers who noted this area
Planning and implementing a program	5
Managing a classroom	7
Organising a classroom	3
Employing a range of teaching strategies	3
Teaching to cater to individual difference	8
Incorporating ICTs into teaching	4
Teaching across the six key learning areas	4
Assessing terms of outcomes	8
Reporting in terms of outcomes	5
Relating to students	1
Reflection upon own practice	6
Relating to parents	8
Relating to fellow staff members	4
Relating to the wider community	8
Understanding school policies	8
Understanding legal responsibilities and duty of care	2
Understanding roles and for responsibilities for the first year of teaching	3

As can be seen in Table 2 above, eight beginning teachers felt they may require assistance in 'Teaching to cater to individual difference', 'Assessing in terms of outcomes', 'Relating to parents', 'Relating to the wider community' and 'Understanding school policies'. However, most of the students commented they would not require assistance in 'Relating to students' and 'Understanding legal responsibilities and duty of care'.

At this stage 6 participants noted they were satisfied with their teaching placements and positive about the way they had been welcomed to their school. A typical positive response was noted by participant 7 who commented:

I arrived in the town on the Thursday before school started and I contacted the principal to introduce myself. He invited me to a welcome function for all the new staff on Monday at the school. I went along and all the staff attended. They seem like a great bunch. I got a school tour and was shown my classroom.

Two participants were not so positive about their initial encounter with the school. Participant 4 commented:

I rang my principal the week before school started. He said to come on the first pupil free day. I arrived at the school and was introduced to the staff. There was a staff meeting in the morning and I really did not understand most of what they were talking about. The Deputy then showed me to my classroom and stated that I could leave at 3pm on that day. I had questions but felt too scared to ask anyone

The initial six positive responses may have been related to the beginning teachers' adulation at being successful at attaining employment. By the end of term one, there were two positive responses and six negative responses. Participant 5 was particularly positive with the induction he was receiving at his school.

I feel very happy with the induction arrangements at my school. I am team teaching with a very experienced teacher. I have allocated release time so I sit with my mentor and discuss any areas that may be of concern to me. I program with her and so far we have discussed school policies, assessment in terms of outcomes, classroom management, working with parents and effective ways of working with the varying needs of students in the class.

Six beginning teachers indicated they were disappointed with their induction experience. A typical response came from Participant 1 who commented.

Induction....I don't think my school has heard of that word. The welcome barbecue and the 'meet the parents' afternoon seems to be the extent of the induction process. I think everyone is just busy. I handed in my program in week 4 of this term. There was a positive comment at the end so all I can think is that they are happy with my progress.

While Participant 3, who was placed in the isolated/rural context, noted no one was available to induct him as all the staff were new.

Induction....what is that? Everyone at our school is new. Even the gardener is new. There is no one who can induct me.....we are just muddling through together.

Similarly, Participant 8 noted

I am under the impression that as a 'fixed term' appointment that I don't qualify for induction. This has not been explained directly to me but I have not been approached at a school level or by the department.

By the end of term 2 the responses had become less detailed and many of the responses took several weeks to be returned via email. Those who returned late emails apologised for their lateness noting the demands of teaching as the cause. At this stage of the year, many of the participants had settled into their teaching contexts but did not feel supported within their school context. The beginning

teachers were specifically asked about their relationships with their mentors. Six of the eight participants noted they had been allocated mentors but the relationships and styles of mentoring varied amongst the group. Participant 2 commented.

The Deputy Principal is my mentor. I feel quite reluctant to let him know when I am experiencing difficulty as I feel he will think I am failing.

However, Participant 5 was again positive with his mentor experience.

The principal is my mentor but I can approach anyone at my school. They are so willing to help. I know I only have to ask.

While Participant 4 commented

My mentor wants me to do everything her way. I am so frustrated. I know she has a great deal of experience but I think she believes everything I do is wrong. I would describe her as controlling rather than helpful.

At the end of term three, six of the beginning teachers noted they had attended a two-day induction program for beginning teachers. All six participants noted they enjoyed the two days and gained from the experience. A typical comment came from Participant 2 who noted:

During this term I attended a two-day induction in-service for beginning teachers. It was great to speak with other beginning teachers and know that my feelings of self doubt and the problems I was experiencing were the same as the others.

Participant 1 was also positive but noted the induction program could have provided more ideas for the classroom.

I really enjoyed the two-day induction program I attended this term. It was great to talk to other people in the same boat. I think the people who organised the program need to design it more so it meets the needs of the group. We talked about the Quality Teaching Framework and our professional identities. I don't think they realise that we did all that stuff at uni.

Participant 5 did not attend a two-day induction program. This may have been because he was teaching in a different state or territory however; he maintained his positive attitude towards his induction into teaching. He noted at the end of term three:

I feel my school has done it (induction) well. I have attended in-service courses on a range of issues. I have been well supported by the staff and have been given assistance and direction by my mentor and the other staff at my school. I feel I have had input into my induction and the staff value my opinion.

At the end of term four the beginning teachers were interviewed by telephone and sent a questionnaire via email. The telephone interviews revealed that although five out of the eight felt they had "survived" the year, only one beginning teacher felt they had been provided with a suitable on-going induction experience. A typical response was from Participant 4 who noted that schools should be funded so that well-planned induction programs can be provided for beginning teachers:

I have survived my first year of teaching and I am ecstatic. I love my class, I love teaching but there have been days when I have been close to giving it all away. How much effort would it have taken to provide some on-going support?

Everyone at my school is lovely but they are busy. I have spoken to the staff and they have stated that schools needed to be funded so that the support beginning teachers require can be provided. I have spoken to some of my friends from uni and they did not even have a mentor. I found my mentor quite negative but at least I could speak with her if I had a problem. Something needs to be done to better support beginning teachers in their first year.

Participant 5 who felt positive about his induction experience throughout the year attributed his success in teaching to the staff that had supported him.

He noted:

I have had a fantastic year. The staff have been great. I think my induction into teaching has been well-planned and maintained throughout the year. The parents have been very positive and the students have obtained great results. I think the year was a positive learning experience mainly due to the induction I received.

The final email sent at the end of term 4 asked the beginning teachers if they were satisfied with the induction they had received throughout the year and if the induction they had experienced met their needs. Seven of the eight participants in this study noted they were not satisfied with their induction and felt it did not meet their needs as beginning teachers.

Participant 2 noted:

I would say I am not satisfied with my induction. I know everyone is busy but how much effort would it have taken to find the time to meet each week and ask 'how are you going, can I help? It would have been nice to be asked what would you like to know in your first year?

The questionnaire asked for the beginning teachers to note the types of induction experiences they had experienced throughout the year and the school terms in which they were experienced. Table 3 below summarises the results.

Table 3: *The types of induction experiences noted by the beginning teachers and the term in which they were experienced*

Induction activity	Number of participants who noted the activity	School terms in which they were noted
The beginning teacher was welcomed to the school and the context of the school outlined	5	Term 1
The instructional philosophy of the school was outlined	2	Term 1
Assistance was provided for long term planning for improving teaching and leaning	1	Term 1 & 2
Institutional support and commitment was provided incorporating administrator support and involvement.	4	Term 1 Term 2
Input was provided from beginning and veteran teachers on whole school program design and structure	1	Term 1 & 2
Beginning teachers were provided with opportunities to visit classrooms of more experienced teachers	1	Term 1
Meetings with more experienced teachers to provide assistance and guidance in aspects that are of concern	3	Term 1 & 2 Term 2
Beginning teachers provided with opportunities to attend professional development courses for beginning teachers to build networks and support outside the school setting	7	Term 3
Allocation of a carefully selected mentor who offered on-going support throughout the year.	4	Term 1 Term 4
Reduced workload, release time, in order to meet with the mentor to		

discuss the development of the beginning teacher	1	Term 1, 2, 3 &4
Ongoing discussion and assessment of the induction being received by the beginning teacher to ascertain the level of support.	1	Term 1, 2, 3 &4

As can be seen from Table 3 above, only one beginning teacher noted that he had been involved in all of the eleven induction activities; however, seven out of the eight beginning teachers noted that they had attended a beginning teacher conference in term 3. It also appears from the above table that the initial contact with the school was fairly positive with over half of the participants attending a welcome function at the school.

Summary and conclusion

The data indicated that the initial contact with the school and the way in which the participants were welcomed to the school met the needs of most of these beginning teachers. However, as the year progressed, the induction process experienced by the group differed greatly. It appeared that at the conclusion of their first year only one beginning teacher was assisted by a mentor (veteran teacher) on whole school programming, and planning for improving teaching with opportunities to visit classrooms of more experienced teachers. This was also the only beginning teacher who received a reduced workload in order to meet with the mentor to discuss pedagogical developments. Other beginning teachers, who noted they had been allocated a mentor, commented they were concerned about approaching their mentor or the mentor was ‘busy’ or ‘controlling’. Indeed at the conclusion of their first year of teaching only one beginning teacher noted they were satisfied with their induction into the profession.

The data also suggested that the beginning teachers welcomed the opportunity to attend professional development to build networks and support outside the school setting with seven out of the eight participants attending the professional development provided in term 3 of the school year. Indicating that beginning teachers recognise the importance of such events and are keen to be supported and guided. Evidence also suggested that the beginning teachers had individual needs in regards to the type of support and information they would like to acquire in their first-year of teaching.

Finally, although a small-scale study, the evidence indicates that there is little support offered from employment bodies to school personal and beginning teachers to ensure the smooth transition into the profession. If employers of beginning teachers in Australia are serious about teacher retention rates and quality teaching, they need to consider the induction models being implemented in countries such as Switzerland, France, New Zealand, Japan, and China (Wong, 2005). The introduction of websites and on-line support systems are a positive step, however, induction programs need to provide support at the school level. This support should include training for school staff in the delivery of quality induction programs, mentor training, funding for professional development and the inclusion of reduced workloads for mentors and their mentees. Furthermore, school induction programs need to be on-going, well-monitored and tailored to meet the individual needs of the beginning teachers as it cannot be assumed they enter the profession with the same knowledge, skills and practices. As noted by Ramsay, “Employers and the profession have a responsibility to provide high quality induction experiences. Beginning teachers have a right to expect them”

(p. 22).

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