

BEGINNING TEACHER INDUCTION

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In April of 2009, Canada's federal government passed "Work Mobility" Legislation that has since been ratified by each of the provincial governments. The legislation states that "any qualified worker in an occupation in one province or territory must be granted access to similar employment opportunities in any other Canadian jurisdiction" (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). This has implications for all professionals in Canada, but for teachers this has particular ramifications because the certification of teachers is a somewhat idiosyncratic provincial phenomenon. That is, each province administers certification requirements that are mirrored in the design of undergraduate teacher education programs offered by universities in each province. However, the new ability of teachers to acquire their certification at any Canadian university for use anywhere in Canada is changing the game.

Teacher education programs vary in length from university to university. Even without considering concurrent programs in which students get two degrees at the same time, after-degree programs range from 10 months to two years (Crocker & Dibbons, 2008). Here in New Brunswick, both the University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University offer one year after-degree Education programs resulting in a B.Ed. Due to the monetary and time costs associated, more and more students in Canada are opting for shorter programs, and now that prospective teachers are free to employ their trade anywhere in Canada, there is increasing pressure for all Canadian universities to shorten their programs.

One of the inevitabilities of a 1-year Bachelor of Education is that there is reduced time for on-campus and field experiences and Education programs have to make hard decisions about what to include and omit. Despite the shorter duration, however, many believe that present day education students are generally better prepared than education students that experienced longer duration programs due to the increased levels of integration of their on-campus and field components. Accompanying a short-duration model is an increasing emphasis that the education of teachers does not stop with graduation. Teachers are not finished products that are ready to be plugged into any teaching context. Beginning teachers need to continue to develop and be supported as they enter the profession (arguably all teachers, not just those at the beginning of their careers, should be supported in their lifelong pursuit of better teaching, but the focus of this article is on beginning teachers).

Unfortunately, the province of New Brunswick has recently cancelled its nationally recognized Beginning Teacher Induction Program (BTIP), an organization formerly dedicated to providing support and mentorship for beginning teachers as they began their careers. This places schools, District offices and the Universities at the center of the induction of new teachers.

Recently, I completed a research study examining induction experiences of 17 beginning teachers through their undergraduate education programs and on into their first two years of teaching. This study was focused on the role of the student teacher relationship in the survivability of these teachers. Interestingly, despite each prospective teacher having a unique journey, there were common elements, which collectively seemed to help these teachers through their induction years. I would like to share a few of these with you.

Beginning teachers invest themselves extravagantly in order to sustain their workload in the absence of many of the learned efficiencies their experienced colleagues use. This often reduces their preparation and teaching to “have to’s” and mandated requirements. These teachers expressed deep remorse that they were being “forced” to become the teachers they hated because they had no time to be anything more. Providing these teachers with reduced workloads, or at the least, not workloads consisting of difficult classes their experienced colleagues refuse on the basis of seniority, would go a long way toward increasing the quality of new teachers’ instruction. Contrast education with medicine; are the most difficult cases (patients) given to the experienced veterans or the rookies?

All teachers need someone to share their day, joys, experiences and difficulties with. Beginning teachers need this even more, because they lack the extensive experience by which to normalize and make sense of their new worlds. One of the most common statements I hear from beginning teachers is “is it just me?” A mentor in the school can be this person – a trusted confidant who knows the ropes and can offer beginning teachers advice, resources or even that shoulder we all need from time to time. Beginning teachers, however, also need resonance: a cohort of similar teachers who are actually walking a mile in similar shoes, people who “get it because they are going through it”. It is important that at the University and School Districts those structures be established for beginning teachers so that they can periodically gather with their other new teacher colleagues, and share some of their experiences.

In New Brunswick, most recent graduates seem willing to accept almost any job. When you talk with teachers, it is amazing how many have a story about their period on the supply lists around the province and what they endured in order to obtain their B-Contract. Does this desensitize us to the ways we can make the induction of beginning teachers better? After all, there is always another excited, unemployed teacher ready to step into the breach and if a difficult context pushes a new teacher

out, it must be because they were not made of the right stuff. New teachers get into teaching most often because they want to work with students and make a difference in the lives of these students. Experiences like having no time, no classroom, or nobody to lean on from time to time, reduce the ability of beginning teachers to form these relationships and thus dramatically decreases their willingness to endure and learn from the inevitable difficulties.

My greatest concern with many of the issues described by beginning teachers is not that they are unique or unexpected; it is that most often, these teachers survive and develop as professionals regardless of the schools and university programs they emerge from. There are hardships associated with any profession. However, organizations that serve teachers and students, like faculties of education, schools and school districts, need to remember the needs of students *and* teachers; both potentially flourish or falter, in part, *because* of these organizations.

References

- Crocker, R. and D. Dibbon. 2008. *Teacher education in Canada*. Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. 2010. *Labour Mobility*. Retrieved September 25, 2010 from <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/hip/hrp/corporate/labourmobility/labourmobility.shtml>