Teacher Induction: Challenges and Opportunities

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Teacher induction, mentoring and renewal are vitally important issues in education today. How do we help teachers survive their first years of practice? How can mentorships help guide new teachers towards competence, proficiency and, even, expertise? What can be done to renew the practice of teachers at all career stages?

A year ago, the faculty of the Centre for Teacher Development of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto identified these as important questions. In order to explore them, we decided to invite several distinguished scholars to discuss these issues with us as part of a modest conference or symposium in Toronto. As we shared our plans with others, it became clear that these were timely questions of interest to many teachers and educational leaders in Ontario. In particular, teacher induction emerged as a high priority for school boards and the Ontario Ministry of Education. The wider OISE/UT community became involved in organizing a two-day Teacher Induction, Mentoring and Renewal Conference on November 3rd and 4th, 2006. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of the Ministry of Education generously offered to be a sponsor of this event.

Scholars concede that the transition from initial teacher education to the field is often difficult, with no clear path from survival to success towards expertise (Berliner, 1994). Recent work even questions the notion of stages of professional development. Dall’Alba and Sandberg (2006), who see some merit in identifying stages, developed a model that incorporates skill progression and embodied understandings into our understanding of professional development. Clearly, teacher development of educators is highly complex.

The Holmes Group (1986) identified teacher education as being in need of substantive reform. Teacher educators and universities responded to the challenge with many innovations, but the journey has not been easy. We have begun to ask some of the right questions and have developed some thoughtful roadmaps for the future, according to two high profile reports (Darling-Hammond & Bradford; Cochrane-Smith & Zeichner), but there is still much work to be done. In light of our modest successes over
the two decades, education professors should approach field-based teacher induction, mentoring and renewal with humility.

Teacher induction has become a major priority in Ontario due to the New Teacher Induction Program initiated by the Ministry of Education. Boards of education are now being challenged to systematically address the diverse learning needs of large numbers of new teachers. This is a tremendous institutional undertaking, and an opportunity to maximize the potential of a large pool of highly qualified new teachers. A number of school boards have developed interesting and effective pilot projects in response to this challenge; several of these will be presented during the conference. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, a sponsor of this conference, has been visionary in recognizing the induction challenge as an opportunity to develop literacy and numeracy skills among new teachers.

In order to successfully meet the challenge, we need to look back at the experiences of those who are further advanced in teacher induction work. The United States, facing a high attrition rate among recent graduates (Guarino, Santibanez & Daley, 2006), has become active in the development of teacher induction programs and the training of mentors for new teachers. Worthwhile initiatives include the Teachers for a New Era project and the work of the New Teacher Centre. Understanding the Ontario context, through research (such as the work of Kosnik & Beck in this volume) and practice (as presented in numerous conference sessions), is also important.

This conference and the papers in this volume offer some of the best scholarship and practices in the field.

Bank Street College of Education has been identified as one of the most innovative and effective teacher education programs in the world (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). It was one of eleven institutions awarded a Teachers for a New Era grant to redesign teacher preparation. One of the grant requirements was to develop programs of support induction and support for graduates. In “Endings and Beginnings: Experiences in Building a New Teacher Induction and Support Model through a Higher Education Program of Teacher Preparation”, Barbara Stern, Ira Lit and Jon Snydor describe the induction model designed at Bank Street. More importantly, they discuss the issues and challenges they faced in understanding the needs of their graduates, involving them in
induction initiatives, and marketing to their graduates. One challenge of induction is that it blurs the lines between teacher education and teaching practice. The authors consider the opportunities this offers for new relationships within the faculty and with outside partners.

“Teachers’ Induction Needs: A Report of Ongoing Research on New Teachers and Literacy Teaching”, by Clare Kosnik and Clive Beck of the Centre for Teacher Development of OISE/UT, outlines their finding during the first three years of a longitudinal study into the teacher education and teacher induction experiences of 20 new teachers in Ontario. In this paper, they report on the induction needs identified by first and second year teachers. The findings are intriguing, and suggest that we need to look at both teacher education and induction in new ways.

The New Teacher Centre at the University of California at Santa Cruz is one of the most successful teacher induction and mentoring programs in the world. Many Ontario school boards are already examining their program with considerable interest. At the heart of their program is mentorship. In “Beyond Mentoring: How Veteran Mentors Apply Their New Skills as Teachers and Leaders in Schools”, Susan Hanson and Ellen Moir describe the NTC mentorship program briefly then examine what became of three mentors after they returned to their school districts at the conclusion of their three-year mentorship appointments. It is a fascinating reading that invites us to consider how we harness the expertise developed in our mentors.

John Dewey (1916) writes, “Life is a self-renewing process through action upon the environment” (p.4). Yet teachers sometimes need support and assistance in order to continually renew themselves. In the final paper, “Teacher Renewal: What is It? And How is It Engendered?”, Virginia Richardson of University of Michigan considers the range of ways in which it is possible to renew teachers over the course of their careers. Early in the article, she writes, “This term, teacher renewal, focuses, first and foremost, on the teachers who make up the critical workforce…So often, the research and reform program that focus primarily on the system forget about the lives of the teachers within the system.” After examining four categories of teacher renewal approaches, Richardson offers some important considerations about teacher renewal for us to ponder.
We offer you this collection of conference papers in the hope that they will stimulate discussion and assist you in developing and enhancing your teacher induction, mentoring and renewal activities.

References


