Support for Beginning Teachers: An Invitation to Participate in a Collaborative Induction Process

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Introduction

There is certainly no diminution of interest in teacher induction in the province of Ontario, Canada. Education Minister Gerard Kennedy has launched a concerted effort to implement the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) consisting of contextually relevant professional development opportunities for beginning teachers, an experienced teacher to serve as mentor, and school and district orientation sessions. The Minister has also proposed legislation that will streamline beginning teacher evaluation and formally credit participants for their successful completion of the program to be recorded on the Certificate of Qualification issued by the Ontario College of Teachers. The recently released NTIP Program Guideline (March, 2006) states that induction programs "will build on the faculty year experience by providing another full year of professional support" through the partnership among beginning teachers, mentors, principals, superintendents of the NTIP" etc. (pp. 3 & 4). The above measures underpin the Ministry's initiatives to work collaboratively with education stakeholders and operationalize more pragmatic and efficient professional development initiatives to improve teacher induction practices in order to improve student learning.

A necessary back-story to the Ministry's overarching conceptualization of induction practice is the broadening impact that the Ontario College of Teachers has had on this very topic. The Ontario College of Teachers consulted with the educational community and the public to garner informed and experienced opinions of how induction is a necessary but dubious practice in a provincial, national, and even continental context. In Growing into the Profession (2004), the College of Teachers called for the Ministry of Education to fund comprehensive teacher induction programs that were necessarily compatible with the needs of beginning teachers.

Promoting a Culture of Collaboration

Both the Ministry of Education and the Ontario College of Teachers continue their call for a collective response to better teacher induction protocols in this province. It implies an ethos of collaboration and partnership. In Ontario Education: Excellence for All (2004), the Ministry of Education's focus is clear:

We believe the time is very opportune for a discussion with our partners about how teachers can best be supported in their professional growth. Teachers, the Ministry of Education, school boards, teacher federations, a revitalized College of Teachers, the faculties of education, subject associations, and principals...all have important perspectives and roles to play. (p.2)

The Ontario College of Teachers reflects this view as well in Growing into the Profession (2004):

Teachers' federations, school boards, the Ministry of Education, faculties of education and the Ontario College of Teachers have all been investigating ways of addressing the crucial issues of retention and new teachers' professional growth. (p. 4)

Extending the Invitation: A Pilot Study

As educators we are being consciously urged to begin a collaborative discussion in this most critical phase of initial professional in-service. Allow us to extend an invitation to the directors and supervisory officers who are overseeing the implementation of the NTIP in their board as the stakeholders in this Golden-Horseshoe consortium. The induction mandate from the province is clear: that no beginning teacher will be left behind. Equally clear, to be sure, are the challenges of effectively construing and formally delivering a successful program of induction in these times of fiscal restraint. Perhaps, however, by mainstreaming discussions and shaping alliances with others the task may be both more gradual and efficacious for all involved.

The Faculty of Education, at Brock University, has dedicated itself as a learning faculty. Our momentum, to a great extent, is fuelled by the impulses of the educational community that we serve. The Ontario College of...
Teachers, as the self-regulatory body for teachers, clearly articulates the Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession that define what it means to be a member of the teaching profession. We invite you to join in the discussion of teacher induction in a culture of collaboration. Given our collective agencies, our intent is to sustain a genuine conversation about the relevancy of induction in a southwestern Ontario context. By orchestrating the eclectic expertise of all those engaged in the conversation, we can determine the outcomes of teacher induction more saliently. The precedent already exists. One need only examine the positive impact of such collaborations south of the border where it is widely accepted that teacher quality is the most significant variable in improving student achievement. As Moir and Gless (2003) state on behalf of a nationally renowned program, The New Teacher Center, University of California, Santa Cruz, an investment in teacher quality needs to start at the earliest stage and continue throughout a professional lifetime. To do this we need to break loose of the traditions that have divided us and build models of teacher development. Universities and schools, administrators, teachers, and teacher educators must come together to create systems grounded in effective teacher education and professional development. (p. 3)

Departments of Education have taken the lead in the joint supervision of state licensure standards, the implementation of performance-based assessments for beginning teachers, and in collecting data from the funded entry year programs (see Bartlett et al., 2005 & Hanby, 2003). The New York State Education Department, to cite another example, considers the induction of teachers as an experience of „collegial collaboration“ (Office of Teaching Initiatives, 2004, p. 5).

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I. Implement Strategies to Develop Collaborative Induction Practices in a Local Ontario Context
- Invite a representative sample of 20 beginning teachers and 5 mentors from participating school boards to Brock University’s Hamilton campus at monthly intervals for afternoon sessions to facilitate opportunities for them “to attend presentations and / or in-service together and [have] time to apply their learning” (Ministry Guideline, 2006, p. 12).
- Team with a core group of educators from different school boards to include a representative sample of senior board and school administrators, the Ministry of Education, the Ontario College of Teachers, and the Faculty of Education at Brock University.
- Articulate a collective vision with measurable goals for teacher induction to assist beginning teachers in assisting themselves thereby building upon their “professional capacity” that reflect the Ethical Standards and the Standards of Practice (Ministry Guideline, p. 12).

II. Account for the Research Literature
- Critically conceive the intricate interplay between beliefs and data regarding phases of teacher development, beginning teacher concerns, and issues of teacher retention.
- Strategize a data collection process across a variety of schools and their respective boards to identify components of induction that have the greatest impact on teacher development and student learning in a local context in line
with the Ministry’s reporting and evaluation policies (see Guideline, p. 14).

- Implement a process to gather data regarding the impact of a collaborative induction program that perceives beginning teachers as autonomous, mature, and collaborative learners.

III. Conceptualize Curriculum Planning

- Center topics on themes so that beginning teachers can demonstrate their depth of understanding of identified primary areas but also deepen the breadth of understanding in related matters as outlined in the expectations for professional development (see Guideline, p. 34).
- Foster critical thought “in a process for sharing of reflections and application of learning” in an invitational and collegial environment (Guideline, p. 35).
- Design case study pedagogy according to the specific needs of beginning teachers in the local participating school boards.

Incentives for Getting Involved: Building Beginning Teacher Capacity

Case work inquiry, in light of the process advocated by Goldblatt and Smith (2005) from the Ontario College of Teachers, is well-intended in seeking feedback from participants on the different circumstances that may be germane to each of them. In fact, it is a recommended method of delivery (see Ministry Guideline, 2006, p. 34) for facilitating the core content the Ministry of Education identifies as professional development, including classroom management, assessment and evaluation, communication with parents, and addressing student diversity (see p. 3). It is also instrumental in providing a non-threatening milieu for beginning teachers to self-reflect, be privy to the insights of others, “engage in professional dialogue,” and possibly reframe their own critical stance of the various situations under discussion (Guideline, p. 34). The process empowers beginning teachers to think for themselves, recognize their shortcomings, affirm their own capacities, and resolve their own differences (see Mitchell & Laidlaw, 1999). The American Educational Research Panel on Teacher Education (Cochran-Smith & Zeicher, 2005) has identified case pedagogy as a promising research methodology for teacher education and recommends further studies be developed using this approach. Given that the research has informed the fact that the plight of beginning teachers is multiplying in its complexity, this process enables participants to self-affirm a sort of retrospective interpretation of hypothetical but embedded tensions within their practice. Bringing beginning teachers, mentors, and administrators with different experiences and perspectives back to the faculty of education in the company of the Ontario College of Teachers can provide a profoundly different level of support to beginning teachers. The Faculty and College’s position at the symbolic center of this program would serve to solidify strong links between the various boards, their staff, and the research community. It would serve as an alternate site for teachers and a physical separation of sorts from the hectic pace of their schools and the officious atmosphere of their school boards.

Improving Student Learning: Beginning Teacher Leadership and the Standards of Practice

Teacher induction is on the threshold of educational relevancy and immediacy in this province. It may be most opportune to invite school and board leaders to broaden their leadership influence by becoming constructively involved in this collaboration. As already discussed,
An interesting result driven by these analyses was that it became especially clear that beginning teachers were unable to see themselves as recognized leaders in the school community. The reason for this illustrates the paradox that while they perceive themselves as teachers and they know the tasks they perform are leadership-type activities, the word leader itself is embedded in the culture of education in such a manner that only those with administrative duties are considered leaders.

These findings present significant implications for the structure and delivery of teacher induction programs and for this conversation. It suggests inviting beginning teachers to engage in collaborative and critical professional discussions in a case study pedagogical approach in order to self-affirm their contributions and capacities, and be more in tune with the postindustrial paradigms that they bring to the profession and the very ethical and practice standards that serve as the basis of their professional growth. In this light a case study approach is especially applicable for its potential to develop proactive and self-directed beginning teacher professionals, while illuminating their leadershipping capacities. By raising the leadershipping capacities of entry year teachers to a level of consciousness during induction, they may be better able to affirm their own unique capacity-building skills, recognize their reflective professional capacities, extend their professional knowledge and improve their self-efficacy to then improve student learning. In the process, the mystique of traditional conceptual understandings of leader and leadership may be demystified for novice professionals.

A Standards-Based Framework for Induction: Learning Communities

Supporting beginning teacher development and mentor teachers through the design of collaboratively constructed processes framed on the standards has the potential to extend professional knowledge, deepen ethical teaching, build leadership and enhance inquiry based professional practice within learning communities.

Professional knowledge, as identified in the revised standards of practice, recognizes the extensive knowledge base required of members of the teaching profession: content, subject, curriculum, learning theory, ethics, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation, and special education. As teachers progress through their careers, this knowledge is refined and deepened. Beginning teachers build on their professional knowledge, skills and values through inquiry within learning communities.
A Final Word

This is an open and inclusive invitation for educational leaders to nurture dimensions of leadership in their most infant stage. It is an invitation to a group conversation. Note that this is not about replacing current induction and mentoring initiatives that already exist in the respective school boards; it is, however, an opportunity for beginning teachers to enter other professional spaces away from the immediacy of their schools and boardrooms to come together in a collegial academic environment and communicate about issues that are most relevant and timely to them. It is to derive the benefits of the collective wisdom and energy of beginning teachers, experienced colleagues, and administrators from different local school boards. It is an opportunity for beginning teachers to crystallize the underlying values of their professional roles and their leadership potential given the often daunting responsibility of ensuring student learning. It is, ultimately, an occasion for the various partners involved in the formation of beginning teachers, to reflect on their roles in this shared responsibility. This joint research partnership also offers the potential to provide significant information regarding the structures, processes, resources and levels of support necessary to recruit and sustain an inspired, passionate, committed and highly knowledgeable teaching profession.

The discussion waits to be had. We look forward to hearing from you.

References


