Exploring the Worth of Online Communities and e-Mentoring Programs for Beginning Teachers

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Abstract: Education systems worldwide face challenges in retaining and developing beginning teachers against a widespread pattern of significant attrition. This study used interviews with beginning teachers, their mentors and other relevant staff members in the local system to investigate the potential of online communities and e-mentoring to address the problem. The findings support the hypothesis that online mentoring would effectively supplement induction procedures already in place. The initial topics or threads of discussion within the learning community should address issues identified in the study, such as behavior management, interactions and relationships with parents, and assessment and reporting. This will allay concerns by addressing issues seen as most relevant by beginning teachers.

The attrition rate among beginning teachers is alarming (Herrington et al., 2006; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Schuck, 2003). While a high turnover can have benefits such as providing new blood to the profession and the departure of teachers who feel they are unsuited to the role (MacDonald as cited in Herrington et al., 2006), Herrington et al. (2006) suggest that attrition rates in the vicinity of 30% must concern governments and universities, because of the high cost of training these teachers who leave the profession after a short period of time.

For some time, the teacher shortage has been attributed to increasing numbers of students and teachers reaching retirement age. Policymakers have seen the recruitment of more teachers as a solution to this problem and have introduced incentives to encourage more people to take up teaching as a career. However, more recent research suggests that retention of teachers is a more significant factor in addressing the shortage (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Because retention problems seem to be most dramatic among beginning teachers, it is sensible to suggest that the focus needs to shift from recruiting more new teachers to supporting those who have already joined the profession. Research suggests that the high rate of attrition of teachers in their first years is due to inadequate induction and a lack of guidance and support (Fletcher & Barrett, 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Schuck, 2003).

Teaching can be a very isolating occupation (Herrington et al., 2006; McCormack et al., 2006). The transition from a university climate of peer-support and encouragement to being an inexperienced teacher alone in a classroom can be a difficult beginning (Herrington et al., 2006). Manuel (2003) highlights the uniqueness of the teaching profession in that its new members are expected to assume all the roles and responsibilities of their experienced counterparts from day one of their career. Very few allowances are made for beginning teachers. The reality is also that, while many of their colleagues express a desire to assist and inform new teachers, the time constraints of the beginning of the year for all teachers, even the more experienced, can limit the time they have available to assist their newer colleagues.

Fletcher and Barrett (2004) compared the achievement gains of classes taught by new teachers and those taught by more experienced teachers. Their survey data suggested that the majority of beginning teachers did not feel under pressure to match their experienced colleagues but the truth may be different. Beginning teachers are generally expected to carry out their teaching roles, while also managing to develop professional relationships in a new setting. Fletcher and Barrett (2004) also noted that, while teacher retention is a clear benefit of induction programs, there are also wider benefits such as the emotional support of beginning teachers.

Perhaps the most common application of support for beginning teachers has been seen in formalized mentoring programs. The assignment of mentors to teaching neophytes is considered by many researchers to be necessary (Brady & Schuck, 2005; Fletcher & Barrett, 2004; Livengood & Moon-Merchant, 2004; Schuck, 2003). Mentors typically provide information for new teachers about school policies and expectations, and assist beginning teachers to develop collegiality and professionalism within their school setting. Often mentors will provide suggestions and support to new teachers to assist them in solving problems that they may be having within their classroom. While mentors are often assigned to new teachers, Carter and Francis (2001) reported a range of ways in which these relationships could be established. They found that some mentoring relationships flourished spontaneously, while in other schools it was an expectation that senior staff would assist in the emergence of natural mentoring relationships.

Brady and Schuck (2005) reported that beginning teachers indicated a preference for a wide range of mentoring experiences. They conducted a study using online forums for beginning teachers in New South Wales. These forums allowed the participants to access a number of volunteer mentors over the three month period of the study. Interviews at the completion of the period included questions focusing on how the online forums compared with face-to-face mentoring programs. These interviews provided useful information about the advantages and disadvantages of both methods. The experiences of the participants suggested that, while there are huge benefits to the situation-based, face-to-face mentoring relationships, the opportunities provided by the online forums were substantial. Perhaps the most successful outcome was the access to a variety of opinions and solutions to issues that were addressed. Though time constraints were undoubtedly an issue among beginning teachers, this can also be a challenge in face-to-face mentoring relationships. The ability to maintain some sense of anonymity in an online discussion forum was also noted as beneficial when asking questions that beginning teachers did not feel comfortable discussing face-to-face, or with colleagues from their own school setting.

E-mentoring (Livengood & Moon-Merchant, 2004) allows geographical barriers to be eliminated. Beginning teachers can be matched with a mentor regardless of location. Time barriers can also be limited, owing to discussions taking place via email or online discussion groups rather than scheduled meetings. Such mentoring methods have provided a solution to lack of funding for face-to-face mentoring programs. Schuck (2003) recommended providing laptops and online connections from home for graduate teachers to combat difficulties that a lack of technological resources can impose on online mentoring programs. "If employing authorities were to invest in this, the consequent raising of retention rates might well make it cost-effective" (Schuck, 2003, p. 64).

Mentoring programs are being adopted by teaching authorities in the hope of decreasing the feelings of isolation highlighted by many beginning teachers (Heider, 2005; Herrington et al., 2006). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found evidence that teachers who are provided with support via mentoring and induction activities in their first years of teaching are less likely to leave the profession. Whether face-to-face or online mentoring strategies are used, there is clear evidence to suggest that these programs all provide much needed support to the teaching neophytes. The establishment of online communities allows the development of a community of peer support that is lacking for many beginning teachers (Herrington et al., 2006).

While induction processes appear to be important in most education systems, to date much of what has been done at the base level has been at the discretion of the individual schools' administrations and the goodwill of the supporting staff (Herrington et al., 2006). It was the intention of this research project to determine what induction is occurring in the nominated school settings and to use what is in place as a basis for determining the worth of an online community and e-mentoring program for beginning teachers in the local area.

This study aimed to explore three key research questions in relation to induction and mentoring:
1. What understandings of induction are held by beginning teachers, their mentors and other relevant staff members of the participating schools?
2. In what way can individual schools and the system best support induction and mentoring?
3. What part should online communities and e-mentoring play in the induction of beginning teachers?

Methodology

Support of principals and the area supervisor was sought prior to commencement of the research project. It was imperative to maintain sensitivity to the risk of the system or individual schools being criticized through the

examination of current procedures. Questioning and reporting focused on what works well and what could be improved upon, rather than identification of shortcomings.

Participants

A case study approach was chosen for a clear description of mentoring and induction from the view of the participants. Statistical generalization is not possible but the findings can be applied more widely by "naturalistic generalization" (Stake as cited in Stark & Torrance, 2005) whereby recognition of aspects of the experiences of other schools allows the findings of this study to be intuitively generalized and applied to other situations.

Interviews were conducted with nine participants from three primary schools in South-east Queensland. To limit the possibility of participant anonymity being breached owing to the small sample size, research was conducted within schools with a large number of staff so that the identification of the participants would be more difficult. At each of the three schools, interviews were conducted with staff members in a variety of roles, including beginning teachers, mentor teachers or other senior members of staff with experience in such roles, and staff who had experience in administration roles where they were responsible for the induction of new teachers to the school.

Because the study was set within the first author's schooling system, some participants had standing relationships with the researcher prior to the commencement of the study. Precautions were taken to ensure that participants did not feel compelled by this dual relationship to participate in the interviews. Consent of participants was gained prior to the commencement of the study and they were kept well informed of progress during the research project and of results that are revealed from the study. "Rolling informed consent" (Piper & Simons, 2005, p. 56), a process of renegotiating informed consent of participant throughout the research process as more realistic assessments of the risks to participants are revealed, was used in order to ensure that participants continued to give consent in full knowledge of the project at each step of the way. It was made clear to participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, even mid-interview if they should so choose, without jeopardizing their employment or their relationship with the interviewer.

Procedure

Semi-structured individual interviews were used. This qualitative approach was intended to explore participants' understanding of factors associated with good induction and mentoring, as well as to explore what possible benefits the parties perceived that e-mentoring and online communities for induction could provide. Participants were provided with background information regarding e-mentoring and open-ended questioning was used to encourage a free-flow of thought from the participants and to enable them to expand on areas they thought important.

Each interview lasted from half an hour to an hour. Questions were formulated prior to the interviews, based on current literature and the researcher's discussions with colleagues. Such preliminary work is recommended by Stark and Torrance (2005) where large-scale surveys are not undertaken prior to entering the field. Through the interviewing process, other issues were revealed and these were used to formulate further questions. Participants were provided with suggestions of the key topics of discussion prior to their interview. This allowed them to consider issues and be more prepared to answer questions in the constraints of the interview sessions.

The interviews took place during the final term of the 2006 school year. This allowed the beginning teachers to have settled into the role of teacher in their current school setting and to have identified important issues. By this time of year it was also hoped that mentoring relationships would have been developed and maintained for a period of time.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and later selectively transcribed for analysis. The researcher used extensive field notes as a basis for analysis, and to identify relevant segments of the interview recordings to be transcribed. These transcripts and notes were returned to the participants for member-checking to ensure that the researcher's interpretations were indicative of what participants meant by their comments.

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to identify emerging themes. The constant comparison method was used in an inductive manner by "coding, delineating categories and connecting them" (Boeije, 2002, p. 393). By using

this method, the formulation of questions for each subsequent interview was guided by the themes that emerged and the internal validity of the project was enhanced. External validity was also increased by the comparison of the interview findings with literature from similar studies. Triangulation, or cross-checking of views (Barbour & Schostak, 2005) of the multiple sources from each school, was used to assist in the identification of key issues. General trends and patterns from the transcripts are reported without identifying individuals.

Results

Mentoring and Induction Understandings and Experiences

Participants described a wide range of mentoring and induction experiences. Beginning teachers and mentors alike described pre-service teaching experiences as a foundation for developing good mentoring relationships. One participant described internship experiences as being *"as real as you can get without actually teaching"*.

Participants in this study described mentoring relationships positively. Many neophyte-mentor pairs were created according to year level taught or physical proximity of classrooms. One beginning teacher commented:

> *Because of [my mentor's] own bad experiences, [he/she] was really motivated to be the perfect teaching partner for me.*

In some situations natural mentoring relationships developed. Carter and Francis (2001) reported this spontaneity as common-place in many schools. Some of the more experienced teachers spoke of how neophyte teachers often approached them for help and advice. One expressed a sense of professional responsibility about it.

> *The first year can be a year of feeling lost. [I try to] help them find their niche.*

Another commented on the importance of supportive relationships within the school system:

> *The ethos in our schools is one of welcoming, and in order to do that we need to put new teachers in the best scenario where they may feel welcome, and can walk with the mentor teacher rather than the experienced teacher being seen as the leader all the time.*

These experiences of emotional support reflect the wider benefits of induction programs (Fletcher & Barrett, 2004). Supportive environments with open communication channels were also seen as important for teacher development.

> *[Beginning teachers] need to feel as though they can ask questions.*

Sitting next to beginning teachers at staff meetings and explaining certain issues in further detail was seen by one mentor as an important part of the role. Participants also commented on the importance of acknowledging the skills and strengths that beginning teachers can bring to the profession.

One beginning teacher reflected on a variety of mentoring roles that developed within the first year of teaching. This teacher was placed in a teaching partnership where the other teacher was also a beginning teacher with less than three years teaching experience. The principal assigned a more experienced teacher to be a formal mentor for the neophyte but a natural mentoring relationship (Carter & Francis, 2001), developed with the teaching partner.

> *Because I didn't know [my assigned mentor] very well, it seemed easier to see my teaching partner for help and advice. [Young teaching partners] are very fresh and know exactly what we're talking about.*

Participants commented on the support beginning teachers received from administrators within their schools. They indicated that it was important for administrators to be approachable and to be available for beginning teachers to ask for assistance.

Most beginning teachers reported that some sort of induction had taken place within their setting. Presentation of staff or student handbooks, timetable distribution, help with reporting and introductions to staff were some of the areas of assistance highlighted by beginning teachers. Some beginning teachers commented that, while they felt their administration team were approachable if required, they would have liked to have had scheduled meetings to discuss further issues and to receive feedback.

The Role of Individual Schools and the system

Development and administration of most mentoring and induction programs has been at the discretion of the individual schools' administrations (Herrington et al., 2006). The experiences of the participants in this study reflected this, and were many and varied across the different school communities of which they had been a part.

One participant felt strongly that mentoring and induction must be valued within all school settings, and that more responsibility needs to be taken by the system to fund quality teacher programs in this area. One participant acknowledged the current induction procedures run by the system and the individual schools within the system, but expressed a strong belief that more support is needed for beginning teachers.

If mentoring and induction is left to individual teachers or schools, it just shows that it is not valued by the system. Good induction, mentoring and support is what makes good quality teachers.

Other participants shared the view that more support could only be beneficial for new teachers. The beginning teachers indicated that the systemic induction day at the beginning of each school year was a positive experience, particularly the elements in which they were able to participate in discussions with other beginning teachers.

Bouncing ideas off each other was great.

It was good to be introduced to other graduates from my area on the day.

Splitting into year levels and talking to each other was the most beneficial part [of the day]. Another day of this would be great, [allowing] more discussion between beginning teachers, exchange of ideas, and sharing of experiences.

All beginning teachers commented that it would be beneficial to have more than one such day within their first year of teaching. One neophyte acknowledged the difficulty for beginning teachers who have missed such induction days because they were not employed until after this meeting date.

When asked how else the system could support beginning teachers, participants suggested funding release days to allow beginning teachers to meet in clusters within their regional area. The importance of such interactions was highlighted by the enthusiasm of all the beginning teachers when speaking about their recent "Consistency of Teacher Judgment Day" experiences. This day involved meeting in year level clusters with teachers from other system schools to moderate work samples and assessment tasks.

[Beginning teachers] should get together with other young teachers to meet and 'unload'.

It doesn't matter how long you have been teaching – you will always learn from meeting with colleagues.

One experienced teacher suggested that beginning teachers were more likely to share their experiences with people of their own age, and when they are placed in a school without other new teachers they should be consciously given opportunities to meet with their peers in focused settings. Another suggested that it would be a good idea for graduating teachers to be allocated to schools in pairs where possible.

Several participants also highlighted the need for professional development specifically for beginning teachers.

If there are a number of new teachers in one school or area, they could be given focused [development] opportunities in pastoral care, behavior management, or other areas as needs become apparent.

Professional development opportunities were also highlighted as a way in which school administration teams could support beginning teachers. Participants commented on the need for administrators to be aware of how beginning teachers are managing and to provide in-service opportunities that are relevant to the needs of the neophytes.

Participants also highlighted the importance of providing support for mentor teachers and training them in this role.

A good mentor is brilliant, but a poor mentor is a waste of time. You need someone that you can download to. Someone who understands what teaching is about and is prepared to listen.

The desire of an allocated mentor teacher to undertake the role was seen as very important. It was also highlighted that administrators need to check that mentoring is progressing. Establishing a partnership early in the year may not

necessarily mean that good mentoring has continued to occur and that a mentoring relationship has been maintained. Most interview participants agreed that regular meetings with administration teams were important.

> *[Administrators and beginning teachers] need to have scheduled monthly meetings. [Administrators] shouldn't just allocate a mentor and leave it at that.*

> *It is easy to get carried away with the day-to-day busyness of schools, so scheduled dates for meetings would be beneficial.*

School administration should also be a visible presence in the initial induction of beginning teachers into their first school environment. Providing copies of timetables, policies and staff handbooks were indicated as common ways in which information was passed onto new staff. While this is a positive starting point, the importance of keeping such information up-to-date and allowing unthreatening opportunities for content to be discussed was highlighted by one beginning teacher:

> *I was given an induction folder by my principal and key points were discussed for the benefit of myself and other new staff members. I read through it and made a few notes and I wrote down a few questions, but I felt nervous about asking questions in front of the whole staff [at the meeting at which it was presented]. Some things [in the folder] were different from what actually happened [in the school].*

The most positive experiences for beginning teachers seemed to involve their principal or other senior teachers making it clear to them that they were still learning and that mistakes they might make would help them in their learning. Beginning teachers agreed that this made them feel more comfortable to approach their principal to discuss issues and ask questions, but on most occasions they approached other experienced staff for assistance instead. This highlights the importance of developing a whole school ethos of support and guidance for beginning teachers.

Generally, experiences of beginning teachers in this study were positive and they mostly felt adequately supported by their colleagues.

E-Mentoring and Online Communications

Participants reported a wide range of experiences with electronic communications, including email, chat, discussion boards, teleconferences, blogs and My Space. When asked about the possibilities of e-mentoring and online communities, all agreed that it would be beneficial to use such technologies in conjunction with mentoring and induction processes already occurring. The possibilities seemed exciting to participants, one commenting:

> *Wow! This is the communication of today.*

The beginning teachers all commented on the ease of such communications in terms of their own experiences, and were positive about trialing e-mentoring. They expressed interest in sharing resources and ideas and discussing issues with other beginning teachers who may be facing similar challenges. Experienced teachers agreed that is it important for beginning teachers to meet and communicate among themselves. While they were excited at the possibilities that e-communications could bring, all participants felt that meeting with cluster groups as well as communicating online would be most beneficial. One beginning teacher confirmed this suggestion, stating:

> *It would feel a bit strange chatting to somebody I didn't know.*

Time constraints posed a challenge to some participants, while others noted that, if online discussions were valuable, they would make the time to use them. One beginning teacher thought that it would be beneficial to be provided with extra release time to participate, where others felt that while extra release for discussion may not be necessary, it would certainly be beneficial to be released to meet in cluster groups to support the online components. The development of trust among the online communities was one area of concern. One participant suggested that people could be trained as mentors to act within the online communities, and that they could make a commitment to show integrity and trustworthiness in their interactions.

> *Confidentiality is needed in order to develop integrity in a relationship. If trust is not there, people will not share freely.*

Participants highlighted the perceived benefits of online communities for beginning teachers. Some remarked that guidelines would be required and structure would be necessary to maintain relevant and worthwhile discussions. The

beginning teachers seemed most enthusiastic about sharing resources via this means, and being able to interact with their peers in a non-confrontational manner. It was suggested that inclusion of experienced teachers would assist in helping beginning teachers to make improvements and to have a feeling of being supported.

> Beginning teachers are great to bounce ideas off each other and share what they are going through, but experienced teachers could offer support and advice [on how to improve our teaching].

One teacher suggested that online professional development and sharing would benefit all teachers in regional areas, saving on travel time and related expenses. Provision of Blackboard communities on the system intranet has made this professional sharing possible but only one participant claimed to have used this platform for communication.

When asked for how long they would like support as beginning teachers, neophyte participants all agreed that they would like additional support and mentoring to continue in their second year of teaching. This lead to exploration of the possibility of second year teachers being involved in online communities, to which beginning teachers responded with enthusiasm, suggesting it would be good to have the support and advice of other new teachers who understand their experiences and may have better knowledge of where to go to find solutions and answers.

Responses to the possibility of e-mentoring and online communities were positive and all participants felt that such communications would be a beneficial supplement to what is already taking place in schools. One beginning teacher was skeptical about the rate of participation being very high unless such communications were compulsory, where others commented that if the discussions were worthwhile, participation would be increased.

Implications

Beginning teachers in this study spoke positively of the systemic Induction Day and requested that there be more opportunities like this throughout the first year of teaching. They found the presentations beneficial but suggested that more time for discussion with their peers would be preferable. Perhaps additional days could be allocated for this, either biannually or quarterly.

The development of cluster groups within regional areas would also allow for professional sharing to occur between teachers new to the profession. As noted above, funding of such days would recognize the importance of such discourse and would allow scheduled meetings to occur within school hours. Beginning teachers are already burdened with a heavy workload, and allowing times for them to break from their daily routines and engage in professional sharing could be extremely beneficial.

The development of online communities would be beneficial in supporting the mentoring and induction that is already taking place within individual schools. Online communities would allow a venue for discussion and sharing of resources among beginning teachers. The suggestion for second year teachers to take part in these communities is a sensible one. As noted by interview participants, second year teachers are aware of the challenges faced by neophytes and are usually willing to share their own experiences in order to assist their new colleagues. They could also benefit professionally through the sharing of resources, and may be able to offer neophytes advice on where to source information and support for particular issues.

The involvement of more experienced teachers in the online communities would also be valuable. Acting as e-mentors, these teachers could provide support for their less experienced counterparts in a non-confrontational manner. As reflected in the literature, many beginning teachers found conversing with someone from outside their own school setting less difficult (Brady & Schuck, 2005). These mentors would be most effective if they were trained in their roles and would need to be teachers who were enthusiastic about e-mentoring and willing to devote time to participation in the online discussions.

The online discussion areas would be most beneficial if they included some structure by which beginning teachers could organize their thoughts and experiences. From the interviews, suggested areas for opening discussion threads include behavior management, pastoral care, assessment and reporting, and parent relations. Subsequent topics would emerge as the participants added to the discussions. Specific professional development opportunities for beginning teachers could also be arranged according to identified needs based on discussions in the online areas.

One beginning teacher identified Internet access as an issue in maintaining their involvement in an online community. While the Internet was accessible at school, their time seemed to be limited. As recommended in Brady and Schuck (2003), providing laptops and online connections from home for graduate teachers could combat the difficulties a lack of technological resources may impose. Additional release time for beginning teachers could also help to alleviate such constraints.

Conclusion

If beginning teachers are not adequately inducted and supported in their initial years, levels of teacher retention can be low (Herrington et al., 2006). Findings from this study of mentoring and induction procedures and their possibilities will inform actions that can better support beginning teachers in the region. The findings support the hypothesis that online mentoring would supplement existing induction procedures and it is anticipated that an online community will be developed to support beginning teachers throughout the system. The initial topics or threads of discussion within the learning community should be determined by the responses that the participants provided in the interviews, such as behavior management, interactions and relationships with parents, and assessment and reporting. This will ensure immediate relevance to perceived needs.

It is clear that induction and mentoring are seen to be important to beginning teachers, their mentors and other relevant staff members in the participating schools but there are varied ideas about best practice in mentoring and induction, and how schools and the system can best support beginning teachers and their mentors. E-mentoring and online communities are increasingly relevant methods of professional sharing and peer support in today's technologically-savvy world. It seems sensible and natural that such methods would be used to assist the development of competent teachers and to encourage commitment to their profession for extended periods of time.

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