

Original Paper

Supporting the Development of Novice Teachers: A Multi-tiered and Differentiated Approach

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Received: August 15, 2020

Accepted: August 24, 2020

Online Published: August 29, 2020

doi:10.22158/jecs.v4n3p191

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v4n3p191>

Abstract

This article explored innovative methods of delivering novice teacher induction in support of assisting and retaining new teachers. Rather than conducting traditional mentoring and new teacher professional development days, the authors advocate for more personalized, differentiated, and systemic ongoing methods including assigning and training Support and Content Mentors, providing a Streamlined and Scaffolded Teacher Induction Program, and then offering in-depth Differentiated Instructional Coaching support in order to assist in developing and retaining new teachers.

Keywords

novice teacher retention, teacher mentoring, new teacher professional development, new teacher induction

1. Background

In developing and supporting new teachers; colleges, universities, and other types of teacher preparation programs invest hundreds of hours and significant resources to adequately prepare novice teachers for the classroom. Regardless of the type of preparation program, the rate of attrition for 0-2 year teachers remains high. Gray and Taie (2015) noted that 10% of all first-year teachers do not return for a second year.

Once teachers leave the preparation setting, school districts work just as diligently to bring teachers into their schools, providing many supports such as teacher induction programs, mentoring, and professional development. Why then, do we still see such high rates of attrition?

2. An Innovative Approach in Support of New Teachers

While school districts work on solving the myriad challenges facing public schools; from standardized curriculum and testing, student discipline issues, chronic absenteeism, a lack of financial and other resources, and a possible lack of parent support, leadership must take time out to critically evaluate the supports that novice teachers receive. We have come a long way since Ingersoll and Smith made the comment that, “Indeed, critics have long assailed teaching as an occupation that cannibalizes its young and in which the initiation of new teachers is akin to a sink or swim, trial by fire, or boot camp experience” (2004, p. 28). But, rather than relying on traditional methods of new teacher induction, a multi-tiered, differentiated approach to supporting new teachers is paramount in addressing some issues that school systems can alleviate in developing and retaining teachers. Innovative approaches have helped to alleviate some of the attrition problems in some local districts. Moore (2016) revealed that only 9% of the teachers in her district left the district after the implementation of a supportive (STEP UP) program compared to 31% in the previous year. However, not every program will fit every district, every school, or even every novice teacher, but in order to adequately prepare teachers to face the varied challenges and day-to-day problems that novice teachers encounter, district and campus leadership must keep novice teacher development on the forefront of their agendas.

What is a multi-tiered, differentiated approach to new teacher development? Rather than list the components of this approach, consider some of the traditional methods used to onboard new teachers to ascertain what might be revised or improved to provide a more personalized experience for novice teachers.

3. Teacher Mentors (Support and Content Needs)

In many schools, novice teachers are assigned a teacher mentor to assist with procedures and to ensure new teachers have what they need to be successful in the first days of teaching. In elementary grades, this is usually an experienced teacher or grade level leader. In secondary grades, this may be a department chair or an experienced teacher in the same content area or within proximity on the campus. Some schools are fortunate enough to be able to offer a stipend for these additional duties, but many are not financially able to provide compensation. Bonato (2019) argued that new teachers should be placed in mentoring programs that provide support in streamlining instructional practices and include opportunities for teachers to collaborate with others in the field to reduce the feeling of isolation. And yet issues often arise when experienced teachers, who are already overworked with the many responsibilities of teaching, have the additional burden of shepherding a new teacher along the way. This occurs especially when the most experienced, highest performing teachers are selected for mentoring when already assigned multiple responsibilities. It is common to see a great teacher fail to provide needed assistance for a new teacher when they have multiple deadlines to meet and duties to perform. New teachers often report hesitation in seeking answers to questions because their assigned mentor is overworked and therefore, unavailable.

Another more personalized approach to assigning mentors is to consider appointing 2 mentors per novice teacher. This may sound like adding more responsibility and work for additional people, but consider this idea. The general nature of mentoring falls into two distinct categories; first, new teachers need help getting through required day-to-day procedures and have lots of questions that involve how to get work tasks completed and how to handle different types of students. This category of need can be addressed by *Support Mentors* who have good organizational habits, a good track record for following procedure and policy, and who have a generally supportive nature. These types of mentors do not have to be content experts for the mentees. And a single Support Mentor can mentor up to three novice teachers who are within the same grade band. For example, one strong K-2 teacher can act as a Support Mentor for two or three novice teachers who are also teaching K-2 classes. The mentor and mentees will need a common time to meet, so a campus leader may need to coordinate schedules for a weekly meeting. Additionally, when assigning two teacher mentors to each novice teacher, not only are the tasks of the single teacher mentor reduced, the specific training needed for the mentors can also be reduced or tailored to the type of support being provided.

The second category of need for novice teachers is assistance with content questions. Following curricular guidelines, lesson plan creation, grading and assessment assistance, handling needs for reteaching students who need remediation, are all types questions that should be answered and monitored by a different type of teaching mentor. We call this type of mentor a *Content Mentor*. These mentors need to be experts in teaching practice and in the pedagogy of delivering content for that particular discipline. This type of mentoring can be provided through multiple sources. When looking for a Content Mentor, consider not only a department head, but an instructional coach, an administrator with specific content knowledge, or even a recently retired teacher. And don't forget about local educator preparation programs as they may have university supervisors who are highly qualified and may also be available to provide content mentorship. The expertise needed by a Content Mentor is only surpassed by a willingness to provide the support and availability to meet with the novice teacher. Some schools may feel they do not have the resources to provide new teachers with two types of mentors, but if an effort is made to look at the entire pool of faculty and administrators available for such a role, then the possibilities expand significantly.

Support Mentors and Content Mentors will need specific clarification of the types of support that they will provide, and they will need clear direction in when and how to provide support. They will also need to be aware of milestones for reporting to ensure all novice teachers are receiving adequate services and to head off any problems they notice. Bringing Support and Content Mentors together for initial training can work wonders in defining new teacher needs and providing checklists and guidance for the mentoring process. Proper training of mentors is critical in providing effective support for new teachers. This training is best provided at a district level, as this provides consistency across campuses. And those implementing such a program should check with their state educational agency to make sure they are following any state requirements for mentor program. Several resources are available for

training mentors, and training should be updated on a yearly basis. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) offers The Mentoring Leadership & Resource Network, and there are books, articles and even online training packages that can assist in developing a strong mentorship training program.

Once Support and Content Mentors receive their initial training, it is beneficial to bring those groups back together at least once per semester to discuss any issues that have arisen and to discuss possible solutions. Another way to maintain communication among the groups can be to create a Google Classroom, or other online group platform, to house training resources and to post reminders and discussion prompts. Additionally, it is a good idea to conduct a wrap up at the end of the year to celebrate a successful mentoring process and to gather feedback for any needed improvement in the program. Some districts do this through end-of-year surveys of both mentees and mentors, but the celebration shouldn't be neglected. Surviving the first year is a victory for all involved!

Finally, campus or district leaders may also want to consider appointing a special education mentor to assist all novice teachers with any special education paperwork or other needs. A qualified Special Education Mentor can hold periodic meetings to train novice teachers in basic procedures such as maintenance of appropriate records, completing referral paperwork, or advice in providing services for special needs students. Other specialized types of mentors can also be appointed so that areas of need are not overlooked in the support system for novice personnel. The importance of appointing specialized mentors is that leadership clearly acknowledges that support in several areas needs to be provided to new teachers and a conscious effort is made to ensure teachers receive the timely training and support needed to provide the best instruction possible for their students.

4. Teacher Induction Streamlined and Scaffolded

Currently, many school districts work in conjunction with their individual campuses to provide beginning-of-the-year programming and professional development. These programs typically combine one or more days assigned to district convocation, compliance trainings (safety, bullying, emergency protocols, etc.), and individual campus welcome back activities and campus procedural trainings (attendance, handbooks, discipline procedures, etc.). New initiatives may also be introduced during these days. Often, new teachers are asked to report to duty a day or two prior to these professional days to receive induction training. There are countless required trainings that must be provided during these precious new teacher days and many novice teachers report overload from all the information they receive during their first days.

Ingersoll and Strong (2011) reviewed 15 empirical studies and noted that most studies showed that teacher induction programs had positive effects on teacher outcomes in regards to retention, instruction, and student achievement. And yet we can do better. A different approach to the typical new teacher induction process is to provide a *streamlined initial teacher induction program*, providing only those mandated trainings that are absolutely necessary during the new teacher days prior to the start of school.

To this streamlined approach, adding a *scaffolded induction program* throughout the remainder of the school year allows for a much more in depth experience. In this innovative type of Streamlined Teacher Induction, novice teachers are introduced to other new teachers, to key campus or district personnel, and to their mentors. Include the Support Mentors as a part of the induction program, wherein time is scheduled with support mentors on the new teachers' individual campuses, so needs for the first weeks of school can be discussed through a scheduled mentor/mentee process. This will allow one-on-one time for questions and specific needs. Time should also be scheduled with Content Mentors as well. Allowing novice teachers to prepare for the initial days of teaching, rather than sitting through hours or even days of professional development, can take a large amount of stress off the new teacher and may also aid in retention of the streamlined information that is presented during the first days of teacher induction.

When providing the remainder of the Scaffolded Induction Program during the remainder of the year, some districts offer substitute teacher funding so novice teachers attend an additional day of professional development each month (or every 1-2 months) for the rest of the school year. Rich discussions regarding curricula, pedagogy, ethical dilemmas, assessment methods, student behavior strategies, and much, much more can be explored, given appropriate time to do so...and not when a new teacher is overwhelmed by trying to set up their first classroom. These days can also be used to provide a combination of campus-based or district-provided trainings and can also be used to provide time for novice teachers to observe experienced teachers in other classrooms or even in neighboring districts. The cost of providing a scaffolded training program will pay off in having well-prepared teachers who feel supported and have opportunities to have their questions answered and their needs met throughout their first year of teaching.

To support communication during and in between these ongoing teacher training days, again, Google classrooms can be created. In the same way that teacher mentor groups can have access to resources and communicate with each other in discussion blogs, novice teachers can be a part of an ongoing network of new teachers.. guided by district or campus leadership. Some districts provide and maintain this platform through Human Resources, Professional Development Departments, or Curriculum Departments. Large districts can provide subgroups to accommodate different grade bands, content areas, or campus groups. In small districts, a single district coordinator or other key personnel member can facilitate the training days and the communications platform. If the district isn't currently providing ongoing professional development for novice teachers, then campus leadership can provide such ongoing support and supportive groups in various ways. Neighboring campuses or districts may provide willing partners in sharing the tasks of delivering new teacher professional development. Providing communication and cohort-style professional development groups can prove so successful that teachers have requested the groups be continued beyond the first year.

One word of caution here. Consider the validity of your trainings for each of your new teachers. Often professional development is generalized and not applicable to all grade levels or content areas. You are

wasting your teachers' valuable time, if you are asking a pre-kindergarten to attend sessions that provide test-taking strategies for students who can already read. Likewise, a novice physical education teacher might be better off observing another experienced coach work on skills with large groups than sitting through a session on affording challenging content to gifted students. Some sessions may be required by governmental mandate, but there should be regular opportunities for teachers to specifically request professional development that they believe will improve their skills. Just as all students do not necessarily need the same assignments each day, all teachers should not be required to sit through generalized trainings on a continual basis.

5. Differentiated and Positive Instructional Coaching

Moving beyond both mentoring and new teacher induction programs, a third major area of support that can be provided to novice teachers involves a deeper level of content and pedagogical support. In *Differentiated and Positive Instructional Coaching*, campus-based instructional leaders partner with instructional coaches in ascertaining individual teacher strengths and needs and then developing plans to address needs on an ongoing basis (not a deficit model) – Using the text, *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success: A Collaborative Approach for Coaches* by Pete Hall and Alisa Simeral, campus leadership learn about both common and individual responsibilities of instructional coaching and then work as a team to offer collaborative support for novice teachers. Although not created just for new teachers, this practical resource provides rubrics for assisting in evaluating areas of strengths and areas of growth and templates for goal-setting for both teacher and coach. Ideas and tips for building strong relationships with teachers are provided as the team works across the “continuum of coaching.” This model for differentiated and positive instructional coaching, may not work for all campuses, but those who do not have access to instructional coaches may still benefit from the perspectives provided. Another method of providing a team approach in a small school, without instructional coaches, might be to provide a release period for secondary department heads who act as both instructional coaches and mentors to novice teachers in their disciplines. If the teachers do not have training in coaching, consider building your teacher leaders by providing access to professional development for instructional coaching.

There are many forms of Differentiated and Positive Instructional Coaching, but any method of instructional support that goes beyond a cursory, one-size-fits-all approach to providing professional development may go further in developing the teaching skills of novice teachers. Currently, in the state of Texas, the T-TESS appraisal system allows teachers to set goals for themselves and to select professional development that will address those selected goals. This is a first step in differentiated support, but if the leadership team and the teachers are not working together to identify areas of strengths and areas that need growth in a systematic manner, then goal-setting and the resultant professional development put in place may not be targeted to needs. Additionally, monitoring support systems for timely improvement and interventions is critical. Novice teachers can become mired in

small issues that contribute to burn-out and a sense of being overwhelmed. Campus leadership must remain consistently vigilant to ensure teachers are making progress, getting their questions answered, and receiving positive support throughout their formative teaching careers.

6. Concluding Thoughts

There are many ways to care for and assist new teachers in our school districts, and some may prove more effective than others. But the most important concept for district and campus leaders to internalize, is that new teacher mentoring and support doesn't end with New Teacher Induction Week. Each area, from mentoring, to professional development, to instructional coaching takes time to plan and must be continually monitored to establish and maintain effective assistance for novice teachers. Thoughtful consideration of each phase of teacher development, as well as having an understanding that each opportunity to interface with and to support our new teachers is critical in both cultivating and retaining effective teachers who can deliver the highest quality of instruction for our children.

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