Running head: TEACHING TEACHERS

# Teaching Teachers Through Induction

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*Abstract*

Induction is a common term used to describe the process of introducing new teachers to a campus or district. The most used format includes a mentor assigned to a new teacher/protégé. This paper will explore contemporary induction research and its implications to new teachers and their mentors.

# Teaching Teachers Through Induction

## Introduction

Experienced teachers with tested longevity are rapidly reaching endangered species status. While student populations increase across the nation, retirement is becoming the preferred option for many educators, leaving a gargantuan whole. Young and energetic teachers inexperienced in the world of high-stakes testing rush to fill this gap. Reality quickly crushes idealism. First year teachers describe their careers as chaotic, confusing and frustrating. Home lives vanish while they spend long hours at school working through lesson plans. Despair sets in under the weight of two-dozen individualized students. Stress increases when e-mails from well-intentioned administrators attempt to tighten the screws on their faculty. In short order, educators begin to question their call to teaching and search for other career opportunities. Though not at crisis stage, school districts must face the dilemma of grafting these would-be heroes into the confusing world of education. Induction has become the popular term to describe this process.

## Studies

### *Hollander-Scharff*

Highly researched areas, like induction, offer a wealth of useful data. One such research project, conducted in Manhattan, explored such data. Rebecca Hollander and Neil Scharff remember struggling as first year teachers. Overwhelming feelings and a fight for survival dominated that year. After spending time in teaching and blocking out the emotions of that first year, they wondered how new teachers rated their overall experience, and what kind of supports they needed. Twelve teachers populated the faculty roles during the year of their project and offered valuable insight into the mindset of beginning educators. Conducted surveys supplied

the primary data. Four results emerged (Hollander & Scharff, 2002). The first conclusion being that new teachers are overwhelmed and live in a state of survival. Some teachers described their first year as chaotic and lonely. Other teachers equated that year to multiple performances in a three-ring circus. Still other teachers illustrated their rookie year as the assembly of a lawnmower using instructions written in a foreign language. The second research conclusion showed that new teachers displayed an eagerness to observe master teachers in a classroom setting, be observed in a non-evaluative way, and participate in teacher-led instructional meetings. Each first year teacher described teacher-led instructional meetings as a top-level priority; with half saying this was their number one support need. The other half said observations were their top need. Because of their initial survey, Hollander and Scharff (2002) began to hold regular lunch meetings for these new teachers. In fact, Rust's research (as cited in Hollander & Scharff, 2002) had already identified professional conversations as influencing teacher behavior. However, the young researchers stumbled onto a surprising occurrence: poor attendance marked their meetings. Led by a subsequent survey, they established the third result. While teacher-led meetings are beneficial, time constraints prohibit involvement. The new teachers even described the meetings as helpful and professional, but simply could not attend because of the aforementioned survival mentality. The research project's final conclusion identified teacher growth as an exercise in patience. Referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the researchers said that until teachers can move away from the survival instinct thrown upon each new educator, authentic learning cannot take place. Their discovery stated, "In survival mode teachers don't have the time and space for the kinds of reflection that we know lead to increased knowledge and understanding" (Hollander & Scharff, 2002, p. 15). The summary submitted two recommendations. (1) Reduce the teaching load or offer release time for new

teachers , and (2) allow new teachers to develop individualized professional development plans in conjunction with their mentor. (Hollander & Scharff, 2002)

*Feiman-Nemser*

Sharon Feiman-Nemser in her article, "What New Teachers Need To Learn" (2003) suggests that induction involves much more than simply attempting to retain new teachers: "Keeping new teachers in teaching is not the same as helping them become good teachers" (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, p. 25). The induction process must involve a solid level of effective pedagogy in addition to vision and values communication. Rookie educators are not finished products simply needing a refinement of their skills. The areas where they need learning are not a sign of deficiency or poor educator preparation. "Beginning teachers have legitimate learning needs that cannot be grasped in advance or outside the contexts of teaching" (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, p. 26). Nemser (2003) states that three to four years is a common time frame for a teacher to achieve competence and even more before proficiency sets in. The abandonment of a teacher before that might cause a teacher to leave the field. Even if they stay, however, poor attitudes and strategies practiced in the survival stage of teaching may become ingrained and damage the future learning of students. Therefore, beginning teachers must learn proper teaching practices from their early experiences. In addition, poor mentors could "indoctrinate new teachers with attitudes, behaviors, and values that they have defined as appropriate for teachers working in an education bureaucracy" (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, p. 28). Nemser's (2003) solutions involve highly qualified mentors who view novice teachers as learners and themselves as teachers. Furthermore, this relationship is a fluid one in which the protégé requests help when needed and the mentor offers unsolicited advice when observation deems it necessary. The mentor would regularly find herself in the protégé's classroom assisting where needed and constantly offering

informal observation. As confidence increases and solid teaching practices emerge, the mentor would slowly shift assistance away and allow the teacher to more fully stand on her own feet. Though still receiving regular feedback, the teacher now offers insightful reflection. A deeper sense of belonging will surface. This creates a positive concentration on instruction and a dissipation of the survival mode.

### *TELT*

The National Center for Research on Teacher Learning conducted a study known as the Teacher Education and Learning to Teach (TELT) study (Kennedy, 1991). Focusing on pre-service, in-service, and induction programs, the project sought to identify what teachers learned about teaching and how application to a diverse student population occurred. The researchers questioned over 700 teachers and teacher candidates during multiple interview sessions. The first surprising conclusion was that students majoring in an academic subject did not necessarily possess needed knowledge for teaching that subject. "[Academic] majors are often no more able than other teachers to explain fundamental concepts in their discipline." (Kennedy, 1991, p. 14) The researchers determined several reasons for this finding. First, questions asked of teachers focused on real life teaching situations rather than the obscure, idealistic conditions often present on teacher certification tests. Since multiple choice answers were not offered, the test subjects had to generate their own original answers and were unable to eliminate the obvious incorrect responses. Second, most universities pack knowledge into the human brain with voluminous amounts of information rather than providing an in-depth focus on a few issues. Students simply do not have the time to pause and reflect on the implications this information has on classroom teaching. Third, K-12 classes simply do not cover the depth of subjects universities deal with. Core knowledge is assumed to already be present at the university level, having been learned in

grade or high school. Teachers, then, must teach not what they learned in college, but what they can remember from childhood. The TELT (Kennedy, 1991) study also found diversity needs of teachers was unmet through teaching programs. Graduates took diversity courses and studied the ramifications of diverse vs. non-diverse educational systems; however, such learning did not equip them to teach the children of these diverse cultures. The study found that most diversity classes offered a wealth of description and information, but failed to educate teachers how to teach in that setting. In fact, studies examining the appropriate pedagogy in such situations and how teachers should deal with that are inconclusive. Concerning specific induction programs, the TELT (Kennedy, 1991) study focused on the popular use of mentors. They discovered that mentors, in and of themselves, offer no real insight to overcome the weaknesses inherent in pre-service, in-service, or alternative certification routes. Teachers with mentors do not show a marked improvement in teaching over those educators without mentors. The reasons for this display a layered quality. "Teachers teach as they were taught." (Kennedy, 1991, p. 16) Former childhood teachers possess more influence than current mentors do. Second, many mentors are ineffective content instructors. They do not exhibit positive classroom pedagogy and cannot instruct a novice teacher how to do so. Third, some mentors are very good in the classroom, but are unable to dissect their practices so that a new teacher could reproduce it in their own setting. These mentors describe teaching as a process of learning to feel it, or just sense what is going to happen. TELT (Kennedy, 1991) did study one program showing effective mentor practices. These mentors, temporarily released from teaching and allowed to focus on their novice teachers, experienced a meaningful relationship with their novices. Regular instruction and opportunities for group discussion of mentor experiences offered a further depth of meaning. In addition, while classroom management and discipline still played a major part in their day, mentors

received more instruction in goal-setting, purposes of teaching, academic content and pedagogical reasoning. The TELT (Kennedy, 1991) study reiterates that the solutions to education offer no simple answers. Variety and integration are the keys to effective induction programs.

*Birdville I.S.D.*

Birdville Independent School District has adopted a new means of induction this year. Years past had new teachers partnered with one mentor in that building. Each teacher had his or her own mentor for encouragement. This year, however, one mentor becomes responsible for many teachers. Each building has only one designated person who acts as the senior mentor for that campus. All new teachers (whether to the district, or to teaching itself) utilize that mentor for their growth. I interviewed our campus mentor and found surprising results (personal interview, September 15, 2004). She felt inadequate communication plagued the district concerning an overarching purpose or theme for novices to hold onto. Questions of "What are we about?" and "What is our purpose?" remained unanswered. Second, our campus had a number of teachers transfer out or retire. Mostly novice teachers filled those positions. The campus mentor now feels an immense amount of stress attempting to coach each of these heroes into effective practices. Their needs consume much of her free time. The district continues a high expectation for her classroom. Release days for mentoring do not exist. She stated the stipend offered for her services provides little in the way of motivation. On the other hand, her expertise in classroom instruction is unquestioned. She consistently displays high test-scores and excellent pedagogy. No teacher has expressed surprise that she is our campus mentor. She has the respect of the whole faculty. The district supplied just over a full day of mentor instruction, much of which, she describe as wasted. Furthermore, they have not expressed an interest in

setting up group discussion for mentors, or checking in on their new teachers. Administration officials do not sit down with her on a regular basis to discuss her mentoring needs or lack of knowledge as a mentor and have not collected any useful data to improve the induction process. Overall, she is pleased to offer her experience and advice. She says she would probably be doing the same thing even if she was not the campus mentor, simply because the need is there. A sense does exist, however, that she is frustrated with the system and feels isolated with the responsibility of coaching these newbies into excellence—a harrowing task on even a good day.

## Opinions

The stated data offer real insight into effective teacher training. The question must be asked: what would a good induction process look like? The research shows the probable results, but how would such a system be organized? An excellent research-based induction process will tackle the system in two stages: choosing and training mentors, and proper protégé education.

### *Choosing and Training Mentors*

While the TELT (Kennedy, 1991) study suggests mentors by themselves do not improve teacher training, it has found the mentoring process eases emotional adjustments. Based upon that, conducting personality profiles on each new teacher and mentor produces an acceptable union between similar personalities. This forms a strong bond and creates a sense of cohesion—both necessary in relationship building. Districts should also build a solid pool of mentors within the campus, area or district. Recent retirees, teachers showing an aptitude in working with other adults, and effective classroom teachers are all potential mentors. Appropriate mentors have shown evidence of creativity, effective pedagogy, and an unwillingness to slip into a traditional teaching role. Nemser (2003) also adds that solid mentors avoid the attitudes and practices bound up in education bureaucracy. Mentors need to receive a generous stipend that expresses

the significance of their jobs. If they are currently teaching, mentors should temporarily move away from teaching duties to focus on the novice teachers. The Birdville setup of assigning multiple teachers to each mentor is overwhelming and ineffective to both mentor and teacher. Therefore, each mentor must receive only one teacher. Each teacher, though, might gain an additional mentor to offer supplementary feedback and perspective. Mentors must receive at least 5 days of solid training, concentrating on effective pedagogy as both a trainer and a teacher, as well as goal-setting, reflection, and group dynamics. Mentors will also regularly meet in discussion groups to evaluate the current situations with their teachers and examine problems and pitfalls common among the teams. The mentors should also conduct regular group meetings with novice teachers to discuss classroom issues in a cluster setting.

### *Proper Protégé Education*

Novice teachers should receive the utmost in preparation and provision—not simply for their own sakes, but for the children as well. Hollander and Scharff (2002) discovered that teachers found real help in a teacher-led meeting that volunteered deliberate advice. Weekly meetings should begin where new teachers and mentors can interact. In order that such meetings might happen, administrators should monitor new teachers schedules closely. Each novice must receive a limited day's instructional responsibility and constant monitoring from their mentor. Regular involvement from the mentor in the classroom as an assistant to the teacher could generate a sense of confidence only seen in veteran teachers. Mentor/teacher planning and goal setting could occupy more of the extra time created by light schedules. New teachers will gain a deeper understanding of classroom protocol by observing competent, well-rehearsed veterans in real teaching situations. The TELT (Kennedy, 1991) study concluded that lack of knowledge might be viewed as a deficiency. Young teachers should freely ask questions without fear of

judgment or retribution. Administrators and mentors should encourage this. The free exchange of ideas in such a safe place will make the teacher better and the students stronger. Since the TELT (Kennedy, 1991) found that most new teachers are unable to dissect their subject into its basic parts, mentors should not hesitate to discuss practical ways that such may take place in a classroom. By implementing the preceding observations, districts can assure well-trained, confident teachers enter the classroom and offer the most comprehensive, dependable instruction available.

## Conclusion

School districts and local campuses are in hot competition to recruit and keep the best teachers. Unfortunately, those fine, new teachers are probably yet untrained to perform at their highest level. Simply having a degree does not guarantee discipline fundamentals. Mentors must approach these new teachers as learners themselves and train them accordingly through aggressive modeling and effective pedagogy. Teachers should seek regular, comprehensive feedback concerning their strategies and applications. Administrators must free up both mentors and teachers to participate in collaborative meetings. The freedom to question and evaluate should become top priority in the mentor/protégé relationship. The future of a district's ability to recruit and hold on to the best teachers depends upon it.

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