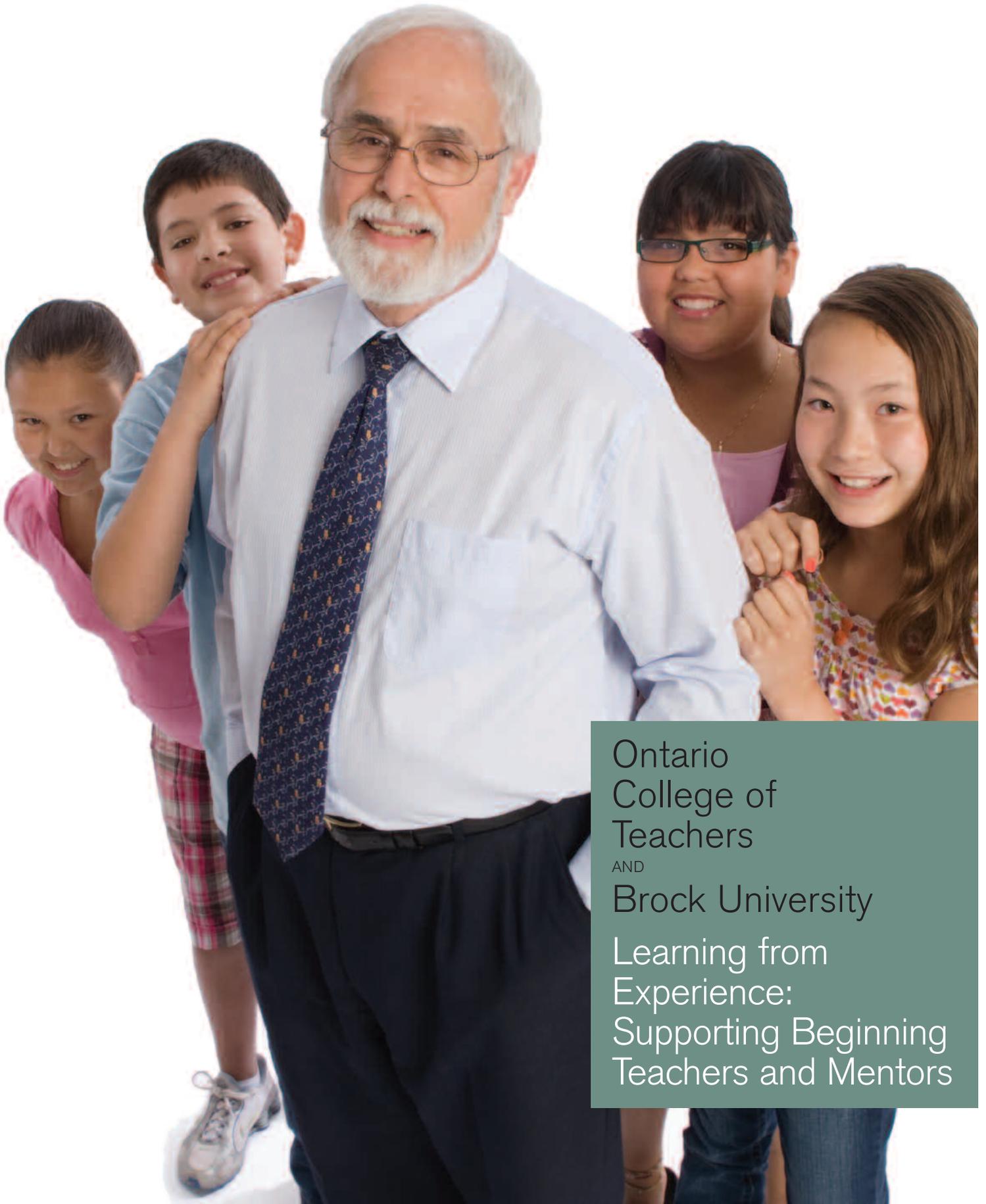Ontario
College of
Teachers
AND
Brock University

Learning from
Experience:
Supporting Beginning
Teachers and Mentors

Table of Contents

Ontario College of Teachers
Brock University

Learning from Experience: Supporting Beginning Teachers and Mentors

Booklet 5: Research Summary

Research Summary

The Ontario College of Teachers, Brock University and six district school boards embarked on a collaborative project to support the induction of beginning teachers in Ontario.

Beginning and mentor teacher development was supported through collaborative activities based on the *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* and the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*. These activities extended knowledge, deepened ethical teaching and built leadership capacities within learning communities (Cherubini & Smith, 2006). Timely and relevant professional support for beginning teachers is cited as a significant factor not only in retaining teachers but in facilitating their emotional development, enhancing their commitment to teaching, fostering their professional efficacy and, most significantly, improving pedagogical practice that improves student learning.

Data Collection

To further inform future attempts at supporting teacher induction, researchers collected data throughout the project from both beginning and mentor teacher participants. Participants were asked to complete surveys, engage in written critical reflections, script their viewpoints, provide feedback and participate in virtual focus-group interviews after the conclusion of the workshop. The researchers coded and analyzed the various data and identified emerging themes. Of utmost significance, the data remained grounded in the voice of the participants.

The data was used to create pedagogical and curriculum resources for teacher education and induction. The data also provides insight into the perspectives of beginning teachers and mentors as well as information regarding key dimensions of an effective induction and professional learning framework.

Background

Teacher induction has become a priority in Ontario. There is increasing awareness that beginning teachers need support during their induction into the profession. Teacher mentors also significantly benefit from professional learning that enhances their role as teacher leaders.

The partnership between Brock University, the Ontario College of Teachers and six district school boards supported the development of beginning and mentor teachers by means of carefully planned activities that strengthened their leadership capacities and fostered learning communities (Cherubini & Smith, 2006; Cherubini, 2006).

Effective mentoring contributes to the development of an individual's self-efficacy and can help educators cope with the stresses of teaching. Since quality teaching is a significant factor in student achievement (Ganser, Marchione, & Fleisehmann, 1999), the induction model was designed to foster self-critical and adaptive educators (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005) who are intent on improving their pedagogy to improve student learning (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk, & Hoy, 2001).

The induction project resulted from an invitation extended by Brock University and the Ontario College of Teachers to the participating public school boards, all within the Golden Horseshoe Learning Consortium. Our collaborative endeavours reflect an approach to professional learning that supports inquiry-based teacher induction. The project represents the eclectic expertise of all those engaged in conversations about effective induction practices, including school board supervisory officers, school principals, new-teacher induction program co-ordinators, and most significantly, beginning and mentor teachers.

The project was firmly grounded in the research literature that describes the fundamentals of effective teacher induction practices. To begin, a collegial and trustworthy relationship was established between the representatives from Brock University's Faculty of Education, the Ontario College of Teachers and the six public school boards. Given that teacher education programs produce the teachers whom school boards are responsible for inducting into the profession (Shroyer, Yahnke, & Heller, 2007), the partnership made sense and developed into an effective working alliance based on mutual goals and a shared vision of beginning teacher needs and mentor practices (Dallmer, 2004; Lefever-Davis, Johnson, & Pearman, 2007). Support for beginning teachers, in addition to being a significant factor in teacher retention (Cherubini, 2007; Johnson, 2004; Wilkins & Clift, 2007), fosters emotional development (Bullough & Draper, 2004), enhances job satisfaction, improves pedagogical practice and, most significantly, improves student learning (Howe, 2006).

Purpose of the Induction Research Project

The purpose of the professional learning project was:
- to enhance teacher induction and mentorship practices in Ontario
- to model partnership approaches to induction with district school boards
- to support the induction of beginning teachers by using the professional learning activities outlined in the revised standard of Ongoing Professional Learning: dialogue, reflection, inquiry and collaboration
- to collaboratively develop induction resources based on the revised ethical and practice standards of the Ontario College of Teachers
- to contribute to the scholarship of teaching through the collaborative dissemination of the results of the induction research project.

Induction Framework

Given that the preparation of beginning teachers is growing increasingly complex in our rapidly changing world, the teacher induction project was conceptualized with a view to helping new teachers develop adaptive expertise. To become adaptive experts, pre-service teachers need opportunities to draw on their knowledge, skills and dispositions in authentic classroom situations (Bullough & Gitlin, 1994). They need to make informed pedagogical decisions, reflect on those decisions and make the necessary adaptations in their practice (Schon, 1983). Teachers need to feel a sense of moral agency within collaborative professional communities (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005).

This induction resource kit presents a framework whereby school boards can provide opportunities for beginning and mentor teachers to actualize the underlying values and ethics of their professional roles and their leadership potential, given the often daunting responsibility of ensuring student learning. It is, ultimately, an occasion for school boards – and specifically those individuals responsible for inducting beginning teachers – to reflect on their roles in their shared responsibility of supporting beginning teacher and teacher mentor development. This resource provides significant information regarding the structures, practices and levels of support necessary to sustain an inspired, passionate and highly motivated teaching cadre of professional educators.

In developing an approach to teacher induction grounded in effective practice and adapted to the Ontario context, we introduced beginning and mentor teachers to case-based inquiry skills, while providing ample opportunity to foster "the habits of critical colleagueship" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). In our facilitation of professional interaction among teacher participants, we sought to create a safe place in which they could identify critical professional development issues, honestly discuss them and thoughtfully reflect on them. As Tickle (2000) suggests, "Induction needs to go beyond the mere practical advice and socialization process … to include opportunities for self-questioning and reflection not only upon teachers' own actions, but also upon the values and norms underlying the education settings in which they work" (page 63). This objective was met by grounding the induction project in the Ontario College of Teachers' newly revised

standards of practice and, more importantly, in the ethical standards. The project addressed the pressing need to situate teachers' knowledge in a context-based and reflective environment (Wang, Odell, & Strong, 2006) whereby their critical inquiry skills and constructive responses could illuminate their potential as teachers and teacher leaders.

The success of the project is a testament to the voices of the beginning and mentor teachers who participated. Their oral and written reflections, both during and after the sessions, gave the project its vitality, authenticity and promise of relevancy. In the sections below we summarize the participants' responses to the workshop activities.

Beginning Teacher Perspectives

The first years of practice are critical to the professional identity of teachers. In the feedback provided by our pilot induction group, the second- and third-year teachers identified their professional learning needs and ways in which these needs were served by the casework and narrative inquiry dimensions of the induction project. In particular, they stressed the importance of reflection and sharing their concerns.

Near the start of the first two-day session, beginning teachers identified the major challenges they faced in their first years of practice. While lack of time, classroom management, finding teaching resources and meeting the specific needs of students were considered important, they identified communication, collaboration and developing self-efficacy as their greatest needs.

As they studied cases and shared their teaching stories, they again emphasized the value of sharing their experiences with others and reflecting on their own practice. These two areas were intertwined in most of their answers. They felt that collaboration broadened their pedagogical scope, affirmed their teaching abilities and offered alternate perspectives on issues that concerned them. It was evident that collaboration was critical to developing a professional identity and more effectively addressing the needs of students.

The casework in the session, according to one participant, "provided us with the language required to have a professional conversation." Through "amazing conversations," participants were able to develop "constructive" solutions and "reflect on the past to deal with the future." One beginning teacher distinguished that through participation in the project she discovered the importance of being "open to learning new ideas" and fostering a greater understanding of what it means to be a "lifelong learner." Another participant noted that his leadership capacities were nurtured and recognized in his "desire for [his] school to do well," and his professional to "always seek new learning, new insight, new understanding and connectivity."

Writing a case study based on personal experience, according to one participant, "gave me a chance to reflect on how far I have come in the past year … a chance to give myself a pat on the back … I made it!" Others emphasized the value of reflecting on

their practice and gaining "insight into my own students." By sharing their stories with others, participants saw that they were not alone and that other beginning teachers had faced experiences similar to theirs. Many identified feeling "empowered" by being part of a "teaching community."

While participants saw value in the range of professional learning workshops on an array of topics offered by their employers, they valued our two-day institutes as a means of integrating their understanding into their developing professional identities. Beginning teachers in particular were candid in describing how their participation in the induction project affirmed their belief that they too can make significant contributions to inductee/mentor relationships. One participant observed, "I found that he [the mentor] came to me a lot for input, which helped me to believe in myself."

Consider as well this beginning teacher's reflection:

> *I LOVE teaching. I think that is one quality that beginning teachers bring to the profession – they are not tired and overly jaded and are willing to take on many tasks (not that seasoned teachers do not). I think we're willing to take a few more risks with the students and our teaching styles and possibly our classroom management.*

On countless occasions, beginning teachers identified the many skills and talents they bring to the profession from previous careers and their experience in working with children. One teacher said:

> *As a beginning teacher I am open to suggestions and I want to be at work every day … Because of my background in technology I bring a lot of skills in that area to my classroom and I'm happy to help my students work with technology whenever possible.*

Examining case studies and sharing teaching stories in a safe collaborative environment supported the multiple needs of the beginning teachers. Professional learning workshops address a long-recognized need for teachers to begin with their own professional knowledge in order to address the needs of students. By providing a sense of community, the induction project offered a release from the isolation teachers often experience as they focus on immediate classroom challenges.

In the final session there were further opportunities to build a community of reflective and critical teachers. Although the beginning and mentor teachers differed greatly in experience, they grappled with issues in a similar manner and shared similar approaches to solving problems. The beginning teachers enjoyed working as colleagues with the experienced teachers and were interested in how mentors had navigated the challenges of teaching over many years.

Mentor Teacher Perspectives

During the process of supporting beginning teachers, mentors benefited from recalling their own induction experiences. The process was a catalyst for mentors to revisit their early experiences and examine their views on the plight of beginning teachers, whose perspectives were presented throughout the sessions. This was particularly powerful when the message was delivered in the form of vignettes, one of the activities developed to engage the beginning teachers. Consider, for example, one mentor's reflection, which mirrored the experience of other mentors:

> *At the teacher induction workshop, I was able to listen to teachers with different styles, experiences and backgrounds. When you find that person or those persons who share a teaching style similar to your own, or a style that you admire or aspire to utilize yourself, you are able to select the strategies and ideas that will work best for you. I also feel that sharing sessions with colleagues can rejuvenate and inspire you because it provides a sense of camaraderie and that basic feeling that comforts you and reminds you, "I am not the only one who feels this way." What makes us good teachers is that we continue to question our decisions and look for new and better ways to help our students and support one another.*

The mentors who attended the sessions felt strongly about the benefits of networking with other mentors. Some said that collaboration was one of the most useful aspects of the sessions. They were able to gather ideas from other mentors about approaches for assisting beginning teachers. As most mentors were unacquainted with the other mentors in the group, the sessions presented them with potential contacts for future dialogue about the mentoring process.

The sessions allowed both mentors and beginning teachers to examine their roles within the mentorship experience and to consider the role that school administrators might play in facilitating relationships among mentors and between mentors and beginning teachers.

Mentors indicated that working with the beginning teachers' vignettes allowed them to think reflectively in order to form an idea or opinion and to then re-examine it in light of other participants' views. Mentors expressed gratitude for the opportunity to articulate opinions about mentoring, about strategies for supporting beginning teachers, and about effective teaching and mentoring practices. Many felt that the sessions allowed them to voice divergent views on teaching, learning, and mentoring.

Once again, the sessions reminded mentors of the difficulties faced by beginning teachers, the same difficulties they once faced themselves. Mentors were reminded of the degree to which beginning teachers internalize their concerns and fears about teaching. They were able to assure beginning teachers that the induction period will pass and their anxiety will be replaced by composure, confidence and exciting professional and
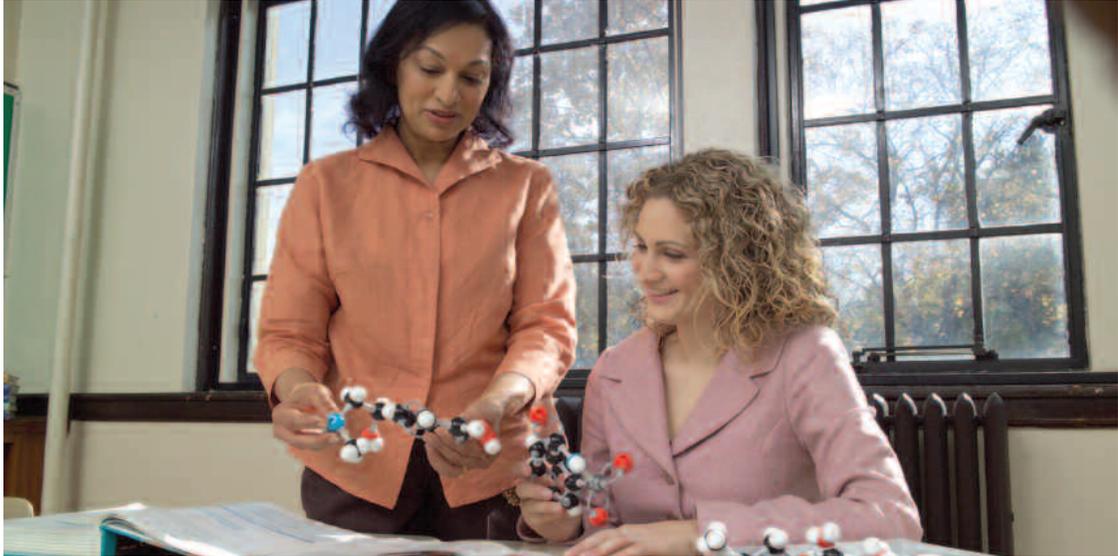
pedagogical opportunities. Mentors also remarked that beginning teachers' viewpoints and critical inquiry were neither tentative nor inexplicit. On many occasions mentors admired the beginning teachers' poise in dealing with difficult ethical dilemmas.

Mentors were reminded of the need to support teachers as early as possible in their careers, the obvious focus of teacher induction. Some felt that some teachers who had not been supported early in their careers continually struggled as their professional years passed and that in such cases it became difficult to find solutions. When teachers are supported during their induction period, all teachers benefit because the effects of the support are lasting. It was suggested that the induction resource kit might benefit those who provide instruction to pre-service teacher candidates as well.

Mentors suggested that the resource kit could highlight all the important areas of support for beginning teachers, including, for example, student learning, curricula, resources and relationships with colleagues. These aspects of teaching practice arose often in discussion and were thoughtfully considered. The College's standards provided guidance, affirmation and support to the teachers. As well, the group of beginning and mentor teachers provided a rich resource of knowledge, skill and experience.

Reflection

Participants strongly endorsed using case studies and acknowledged the benefits of this methodology. Perhaps the most transformative aspect of the sessions occurred when participants embraced perspectives other than their own. Through empathy they were able to recognize and value the thoughts, feelings and knowledge of others. They could thus consider several perspectives before deciding on a course of action. Many mentioned arriving at a new understanding or a more balanced stance before moving on to decision making. This particular benefit was noted as significant.

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