Getting help from the outside: developing a support network for beginning teachers

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This paper is a discussion of a study conducted collaboratively by teacher educators at an Australian university and personnel from an Australian authority that employs state teachers. The study was an investigation of how beginning teachers could be supported by a network comprising teacher educators, beginning teachers and experienced teachers who were located at different schools from the beginning teachers. Ways of enhancing mentoring skills for the group of experienced teachers were also examined. In this paper, the nature of the support network and the experiences of the beginning teachers in the network are discussed.

The difficulties experienced by beginning teachers are well documented (see for example Gold 1996; Huberman 1989). Early negative experiences cause many beginning teachers to leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (Darling-Hammond 1990). While many countries have induction programs or mentoring support available for beginning teachers, these are often seen as limited in the ways they help beginning teachers meet the challenges of the classroom and the school culture (Schuck & Segal 2002). Schuck and Segal's study (2002) indicated that while new teachers often feel reluctant to disclose their difficulties to colleagues in their own schools, they are eager to share their experiences with other beginning teachers and with teacher educators with whom they have built up relationships over the course of their studies.

The Schuck and Segal (2002) study indicated that support outside of a beginning teacher's own school is often desirable and that it would be beneficial for beginning teachers if such support came from a network of beginning teachers, teacher educators and experienced teachers. This was the stimulus for the project discussed in this paper, in which support for beginning teachers was offered in a form that did not follow the traditional dyadic relationship between mentor and mentee in a school. Instead, this support came from a network external to the beginning teacher's school.

Myself (a teacher educator) and a colleague (now retired) approached the major employing body for teachers in New South Wales (NSW), the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), which was concurrently investigating ways to improve the induction and mentoring process for beginning teachers. Collaboratively, our research team of two teacher educators and three officials from the DET developed a project that would simultaneously develop the mentoring skills of a group of experienced teachers, and provide a support network for graduates of the teacher education program.

This paper is an examination of the nature of the external support network for beginning teachers. I argue that external support is important for beginning teachers if insufficient or inappropriate support is available from their school colleagues. The aims and methods of this collaborative project, funded by the university and the employing authority, are described, with a focus on the ways in which support was offered to beginning teachers in the project. The project findings are also discussed, and the ways in which these findings can lead to further work in the area of beginning teacher support.

The need for external support networks: an overview of selected literature

The high rate of attrition for newly appointed teachers is a matter of concern internationally. This issue is no less significant in Australia than elsewhere: the area is documented as needing attention in various Australian governmental papers and monographs (Ramsey 2000; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee 1998). Very closely aligned to the issue of retention are research findings that show that the effective induction and support of new teachers is vital in ensuring the transition from neophyte to competent and confident practising professional (Carter & Francis 2001). Research also indicates that the quality of induction programs is variable in Australian schools (McRae 2000) and is a key factor in the high rate of attrition among teachers in their first years of employment.

The importance of early experiences and the quality of support for beginning teachers is highlighted in international research as well. Beginning teachers often leave the profession in their first three years of teaching, due to a lack of appropriate support (Fideler & Haselkorn 1999; Odell & Ferraro 1992). The nature of the school culture is found to be one of the factors affecting the quality of induction support. Positive and supportive workplace conditions lead to higher morale, stronger commitment to teaching and intentions to remain in the profession (Weiss 1999).

A study by Angelle (2002) suggests that schools support beginning teachers differentially, depending on the effectiveness of the school as a whole. She found that the mentoring programs in schools designated as effective were far more dynamic and proactive than those in the schools designated as less effective. The latter were found to be limited to fulfilling mandatory requirements and were often of a 'sink or swim' variety (Angelle 2002). Other research indicates the difficulties that beginning teachers experience in confronting the realities of the classroom and

finding a fit between these realities and their ideals and beliefs about teaching (Kelchtermans & Ballet 2002).

Halford (1998) considers the support offered to beginning teachers to be so inadequate when compared to other professions, that education is provocatively noted as 'the profession that eats its young' (p 33). Flores (2001) found, in her study of fourteen beginning teachers in six schools in Portugal, that most of the teachers did not view their working conditions as supportive, and those who did were more likely to seek and act upon advice and to develop a more confident and positive attitude to teaching.

It appears, therefore, that if a beginning teacher is located in a school where the mentoring experience and the contextual conditions in general are not supportive, an external network of support would be valuable in assisting them to develop and grow in confidence.

The nature of external support networks

External support networks for beginning teachers can operate in a number of ways. They can take the form of district meetings for the beginning teachers, in which they get the opportunity to meet other neophytes and district advisers who act on behalf of the teacher employing authority. Most newly appointed teachers find such meetings useful. Another way for beginning teachers to interact with other novice teachers and with university staff is through email and other telecommunications networks. In the Lighthouse Project (Babinski et al 2001), twelve beginning teachers in the United States had the opportunity to interact with mentors, university staff and each other through an online forum. Such projects, in which computer networks are established that link beginning teachers to each other and to others, are reported to provide neophyte teachers with emotional support and encouragement while lessening their feelings of isolation (Merseth 1991).

The external network operating in this study was not restricted to offering support to beginning teachers at schools with inadequate or unavailable support, but was also offered as a supplement in schools where adequate support was already provided by colleagues. Our research team was interested in investigating the circumstances under which such a network would be beneficial to beginning teachers, and the preferred ways individuals interact in an external support network. Consequently, we designed the current project to include a variety of ways in which beginning teachers, experienced teachers and teacher educators could interact with each other in a support network operating outside of the beginning teachers' schools, including electronic interactions and face-to-face meetings.

The study: offering support from the outside

As indicated above, this paper is focused on the nature of a support network operating across a geographically dispersed region, and its value to the participants. A second aspect of the study, of interest to the employing authority, was whether experienced teachers could benefit from training in mentoring skills as well as

participating in an external support network. This aspect of the study is discussed in a separate paper (Segal & Schuck 2001).

The focus in this paper is best expressed by the following questions:

- How did the network operate?

- What aspects of the network were constraining to teachers in their first year of teaching?

- What was the preferred method of interaction for the participants in the network?

- In general, was the network of benefit to the beginning teachers?

Methods

Selection of participants

Participation of beginning teachers was voluntary. Students in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) and Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) at our university were approached at the end of their final year for expressions of interest in taking part. Graduates were contacted again at the start of the following school year (in early February) to confirm their participation. Eighteen beginning teachers initially volunteered. They were all female graduates of the university teacher education course and located at schools throughout Sydney and surrounding districts. Six were at independent schools, three were casual teachers and the remaining teachers were located at DET schools. A male beginning teacher who had graduated from a different university approached the team to join the network, but left the teaching profession before he had initiated any interactions.

To attract experienced teachers to participate in the study, the NSW DET advertised an opportunity for teachers to take a masters-level course in mentoring, sponsored by the DET and offered by our university, while simultaneously participating in a beginning teacher support network. Teachers interested in developing mentoring skills responded to the advertisement, and twenty were selected through a competitive process. Selection was on the basis of commitment to the profession and to helping beginning teachers. Teachers were selected from districts throughout NSW.

Interactions in the network

Participants could interact in the network in a number of ways: through attending workshops; an online discussion board; and via email, fax, telephone or meetings.

1) Face-to-face workshops

All workshops were held on Saturdays so that teachers could attend without having to get time release from their schools.

Beginning teachers were invited to a one-day workshop with the teacher educators and two of the DET personnel in March (near the beginning of the academic year). At this point the experienced teachers had not been selected yet. Eleven teachers attended this workshop. Our research team (teacher educators and DET personnel) developed an agenda for that first day to introduce the beginning teachers to the project and to the online communication tool. We also provided an opportunity for teachers to share critical incidents about their first few weeks of teaching. Finally, we obtained their consent to use their data in the project.

Three other workshops were held in May, July and November. In the first two of these, the mentors spent the first half of each workshop day discussing the nature of mentoring and developing their coursework in this regard. Beginning teachers were invited to attend the lunch and second half of the session to talk with the mentors and share their experiences with each other. Mentors assisted the beginning teachers, either by demonstrating useful resources or by acting as advisors for problems that the beginning teachers were experiencing.

All twenty mentors attended the first of these workshops and eighteen were at the second workshop, but far fewer beginning teachers took part (six attended the first workshop, and seven the second). The final workshop was held towards the end of the year (November) and was used as a debriefing for the project. It was targeted at the mentors, although beginning teachers could choose to attend. Two beginning teachers did attend, and both shared their stories of how the project had helped them. All mentors attended this workshop.

2)   Online interactions through a computer-mediated discussion board

In between the face-to-face interactions, teachers were able to interact through the online conferencing tool. Mentor teachers were asked to do so at least once a fortnight, and beginning teachers were encouraged to use the conferencing tool whenever they desired to do so. All teachers had access to the Internet at their schools, so we did not anticipate that access to the online conferencing tool would be a problem.

Forums were set up by request of network participants to address a particular topic, or where it became clear at a workshop that a topic was of interest. An important starting forum was one entitled 'Getting to know each other', in which we posted photographs of the participants (either taken at the first two workshops or sent to us by participants) and a short biography composed by each person.

3)   One-to-one interactions through email, fax, telephone or meetings

These interactions were not visible to our research team, and we were dependent on being told when they had occurred. Opportunities for reporting such interactions were made available at the workshops.

Data collection

Ethics approval was gained from the university Human Research Ethics Committee for the project. The participants were asked for their consent to be interviewed, and they granted the researchers permission to consider and interpret the data collected from the workshops and from interactions using the online tool. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant and the identities of the interviewees were not disclosed to the five researchers. This was considered important due to the teacher educators' roles as facilitators of the mentoring course and their historical associations with the beginning teachers, as well as the DET personnel's positions in the DET hierarchy.

Data were collected through a variety of methods. Field notes and tape recordings of workshops were used to collect data about the experiences and issues that beginning teachers were encountering, and to collect information about the perceptions of all the teachers regarding the network. Anonymous surveys were also completed at the end of each workshop, and these provided information on the participants' views of the online interactions and workshops, and any issues they were experiencing.

Audio-taped telephone interviews were conducted by an external research assistant at two stages: halfway through the project, with thirteen of the beginning teachers (the remaining five were not contactable); and at the end of the project, with eight beginning teachers and sixteen experienced teachers. The mentors and beginning teachers who were interviewed were asked to describe their views of the network; and to reflect about the support they received from other network participants, and about any constraints, challenges, facilitatory factors and any critical incidents that occurred during network or mentoring interactions. Participants' perceptions of the online aspects of the network were also gathered.

Records of interactions on the web-based conferencing tool were kept, and these indicated how the online network was used and what sort of problems arose or were discussed online.

Emails and other records of interactions between participants and the researchers or between researchers were examined for data regarding participation in the network.

One of the beginning teacher's journals (all beginning teachers were asked to keep one, but only one did) provided information on her perceptions about her experiences and the value of the network.

Data analysis

The initial intention was for the data to be analysed by the five members of the collaborative research team. However, on completion of the implementation phase of the project, the DET personnel were required to work on other projects, and one of the teacher educators retired. Some initial analysis of the collected data was shared by the five researchers during the project, and these results informed the DET

regarding their primary interest in the project: the benefits of mentor training. I undertook a further in-depth analysis on the value of the network for beginning teachers.

Findings

The findings will be discussed in four sections, corresponding to the four research questions.

1) Network operation

As discussed earlier, the network operated through three major modes of interaction, the data for which are reported below. The content of these interactions illustrate the nature of the support sought and offered through the network.

Workshops: session 1

Some of the issues that arose during this day highlighted common difficulties experienced by beginning teachers; many of the teachers described feelings of just keeping their head above water:

> *I felt as if I am swimming in a big fast flowing river and it doesn't take much for me to go under. I feel as if I am swimming and there is not much between having my head above water and having it below the water. (Lila, workshop 1, March)*

Others agreed and shared stories of how they spent much of their time at home, or at lunch periods in their rooms, just crying. The beginning teachers were very supportive of each other and would listen in attentive ways and show that they were empathising. Others shared problems that they were experiencing:

> *I just want to get in there and do the teaching, but there is so much stuff going on behind the scenes. Trying to satisfy so many other people, [as] opposed to getting on with the teaching. (Robyn, workshop 1)*

The value of the workshop for the beginning teachers was clearly in sharing their stories, and in realising that others were experiencing similar difficulties. This issue is discussed further in section 4, on the value of the network.

Workshops: sessions 2 and 3

Beginning teachers were invited for lunch and the afternoon session for the following two workshops. In these workshops, our research team set up discussion groups for the afternoon, on topics that we had noticed arising in the online discussion, and asked the beginning teachers for suggestions of other topics they would like discussed. The topics included behaviour management (a firm favourite with the beginning teachers); how to present stimulating lessons; individual differences in children; and mathematics and reading support. The mentors also brought along resources, such as reading kits or problem-solving activities, and all found these useful.

Online discussion board

The forum entitled 'Getting to know each other' was structured so that all postings were together in a folder, and not grouped according to whether the person was a beginning teacher or a mentor. Often, participants did not indicate their employment situation in their biographies. The absence of information regarding participants' positions in the hierarchy led to an interesting phenomenon: beginning teachers offered advice, which was accepted by experienced teachers – a situation unlikely to occur in a face-to-face interaction. This supports the contention in the literature that beginning teachers have much to offer and they should be given opportunities to share their knowledge (Ewing 2001; Martinez 1994). An example of this kind of interaction follows (Jane is one of the mentors and Emily one of the beginning teachers).

From: Jane

Subject: Skills program 3–6

I feel that the Daily Fitness Program at my school needs revitalising. Does anyone know of a good program? I would like one with a throwing and catching component. Any ideas would be welcomed.

From: Emily

Subject: Re: Skills program 3–6

Jane,

Can I first ask what it is that you have at your school ... I don't want to be telling you stuff that you've already done.

Emily

From: Jane

Subject: Skills program 3–6

Well Emily, we do the usual 20 mins of Games and Relays, Distance Jog, dance (social and aerobic) 4 mornings/week. While this is fine, there is a need for rejuvenating ideas.

Emily then responded at length with some suggestions.

The sort of interaction illustrated here would be unlikely to occur in a face-to-face situation in a school, where the authority of the mentor would dissuade the beginning teacher from taking on the role of advisor.

Typically, the structure of a number of discussion forums comprised a few questions by the beginning teachers (typically two or three), with a large number of responses to each question from various mentors. These responses would then lead to other comments from beginning teachers or mentors and often supplementary questions asked by mentors (and occasionally answered by beginning teachers). Most of the contributions to the online discussion were by mentors rather than beginning teachers, with the beginning teachers' questions acting as stimuli for the discussions.

Discussion forums in which the most interactions involving beginning teachers occurred were those dealing with behaviour management, general questions about aspects of the curriculum, multi-age classes, and questions about resources and concepts in English and mathematics. The teacher librarianship forum was also initially fairly active, but then moved to one-one contact between two teachers.

There were also a number of forums without any postings from beginning teachers. These forums comprised questions and comments from mentors and responses by other mentors to these postings. Forums in which mentors participated without any beginning teachers entering the discussion included ones dealing with special education, gifted and talented programs, and computer resources (although one beginning teacher was helpful in responding to a question here). Experienced teachers in new situations also used the network to gain support.

One-to-one interactions

A variety of interactions were conducted on a one-to-one basis through email, visits or phone calls. For example, a teacher librarian, supporting a newly appointed teacher librarian at a different school, visited her at school and advised how to work in her situation. In another one-to-one set of interactions, a beginning teacher who had experienced great difficulty with behaviour management was supported on a one-one basis by a mentor through emails and meetings over cups of coffee. A third example involved a teacher providing a mentoring relationship to a beginning teacher through email, encouraging reflection and challenge.

2) Network constraints

Beginning teachers experienced a number of constraints to participating in the network, as evidenced by data from interviews, discussion in the workshops and from their online interactions. The extent to which these teachers participated in the network is also of interest here.

Participation difficulties and limitations

A number of difficulties limited the success of the network. These included the attrition of beginning teachers from the network, and infrequent participation in it. These two circumstances were generally due to one or more of the following factors: a general feeling of being overwhelmed by the requirements of teaching; a lack of easy access to online aspects of the network; a lack of time to attend face-to-face meetings or read the online contributions; and a fear of having their trust betrayed if

they revealed their problems. Also, the motivation for participating in the project had a bearing on the frequency of a beginning teacher's use of the network, in that the project was often made a low priority when competing demands occurred.

The following table shows the reasons for irregular participation of beginning teachers. Teachers often mentioned more than one reason for their infrequent participation.

Table 1: Reasons for irregular participation

Reasons	Number
Felt overwhelmed by the job	3
Felt concerned about confidentiality and lacked trust in network members	3
Lacked time	5
Lacked easy access to online tool	5
Found online tool inadequate for providing a reflective environment (topics too mundane or superficial)	2
Had other priorities (?) – despite appearing interested, did not participate much/ forgot workshop was on/ had prior appointments/ did not attend after agreeing to	3
Already had a good school mentor	2

Network attrition

This project was significantly affected by the attrition of beginning teachers from the network. Initially, 18 beginning teachers had expressed interest in being involved. They were eager to get started and in fact urged us to have a workshop in early March, before the mentor teachers had been selected, as they felt they needed support early in the school year, at which point the advertisement for mentors had only just been distributed. However, through the life of the year-long project, involvement by most of the group of beginning teachers was very infrequent or not at all. Only five of the original 18 beginning teachers participated consistently in the network throughout the year.

Two beginning teachers withdrew from the network because they were so overwhelmed by their work commitments that they did not feel they had time to

seek support. Another left because she was getting all the support she needed from the mentor assigned to her at school. Another was not having many problems, and so only infrequently entered the network.

Online access difficulties

We had anticipated that beginning teachers would find it difficult to attend workshops on Saturdays. Consequently, we were expecting the major arena for interaction to be the online discussion forum. However, again, apart from the few regular participants among the beginning teachers, contributions from this group were infrequent.

It appeared that these teachers did not participate in the online interactions for a variety of reasons. Often beginning teachers did not have access to the Internet at home. We had anticipated that they would use the Internet at school, but found that it was difficult for them to get access there, because the only available computers were in inappropriate places for them to sit and work. These places included the library or computer lab, where teachers would have to wait for students to leave before feeling comfortable about sitting and working there; or the staff room, where lack of privacy was a major issue for teachers who wished to discuss problems in a confidential environment.

Also, teachers were generally too busy to participate in the network while they were at school. However, as we had anticipated that access might be a problem, we encouraged beginning teachers to use the other methods of contact such as phoning, or attending the workshops to set up contact with mentors.

Meeting attendance issues

Apart from the workshop held specifically for the beginning teachers in March, other than the five regular and committed participants who attended the majority of workshops, only about two or three beginning teachers would appear at a workshop, spend a fruitful few hours discussing issues of their choice with the mentors, and then not have any further contact with the group at all. This was a great disappointment to the mentors, who were extremely committed to attending and helping the beginning teachers.

Beginning teachers cited not attending the workshops due to other commitments on a Saturday afternoon. Sometimes, teachers would indicate that they were coming and then not attend, without indicating their reasons. One teacher, asked about her non-attendance in the interview, said she had forgotten all about it. While all beginning teachers who attended workshops appeared to find the sessions useful, all but the committed five teachers mentioned above did not appear to prioritise attendance at the workshops over other activities. It appeared to the research assistant, in trying to contact the beginning teachers, that even the teachers who were interviewed or did attend the workshops seemed overloaded due to their teaching commitments.

Mentor contributions

The professional, and sometimes quite intense, discussion between mentors in the online network sometimes dissuaded the beginning teachers from posting what they saw as naïve questions, which might display their ignorance or inexperience. They perceived this online community as one that would be difficult to enter with the status of neophyte.

As well, the beginning teachers sometimes found it discouraging to wade through discussions that were simply conversational. In her interview, one of the beginning teachers stated that for a teacher wanting to get support for an urgent problem, it was vexing to have to wade through conversational postings on subject matters of no interest to a new teacher;

> *But I've seen ten entries on sore throats. It took eight minutes to download, and is taking longer and longer to download as the messages pile up, and some of those things mean … I mean a sore throat's a sore throat.*

For others, these postings were a way of developing relationships online, and the social and sometimes mundane nature of the postings was not problematic.

Motivation for participation

It appeared that a few of the beginning teachers had volunteered for the project not because they thought they would need assistance, but because they felt an obligation to the research team as their lecturers and mentors during their studies. Consequently, they interpreted their participation in the project as a means of providing data for us, rather than acquiring support for themselves. As a result, when other obligations arose, these would take priority, as they appeared more immediate and important. The following email from one of the participants who withdrew in May illustrates this point well:

> *I wanted to let you know that I feel unable to continue to help you with your project. I have such a huge load this year in my teaching and all my strings are being pulled from all different directions. When I prioritize myself at the moment, writing a journal for the project and even finding time to logon here come after so many other things that need to be done.* (Elise (pseudonym), email correspondence, May)

Elise was due to be interviewed by our research assistant the following week and this extra requirement on her time might well have initiated this email, as she requested that we tell the research assistant she was no longer participating (and by implication, did not want to be interviewed). As she clearly desired to withdraw from the project, a valuable opportunity for finding out why she did not view the network as useful was lost.

Some valuable information for us regarding participation in the support network came from a beginning teacher who had excellent support at school from her grade partner, and consequently stopped interacting in the network. She mentioned in the first workshop that:

*I was getting more rundown and stressed because **I really didn't want to talk to anyone**, but I needed to! And eventually my grade partner **just made me talk to her**, which was very good. But in the end she made me come down to the staffroom and sit down with the other teachers and just have a chat and that kind of thing.* (Jay, workshop 1, March) (emphasis added)

This supports our observations that initially most of the beginning teachers were so overwhelmed by their problems that they did not want to interact with others, either online or face-to-face. It is noteworthy that the teacher with whom Jay worked was perceptive enough to see that Jay did need to unburden herself to others, and encouraged her to do so. In the mentoring network, however, we could not observe those teachers who failed to attend, nor could we ethically insist that they should participate. It is possible that some of those who stopped participating were in the same situation as Jay was before being persuaded to talk.

3) *Preferred methods of network interaction*

For the mentors and the beginning teachers who did participate in the network, the variety of modes of interaction were useful. The workshops appeared extremely important in allowing participants to get to know each other, and in a number of cases, supportive relationships between beginning teachers and mentors developed out of their face-to-face meetings. The workshops provided the opportunity for participants to make connections that helped them ascertain with whom they might wish to interact on a one-to-one basis in electronic mode.

At the debriefing session at the final workshop, mentors stated that they had found the workshops essential for keeping engaged in the project and as opportunities to give feedback and to interact with each other. They all felt more comfortable participating in the workshops than working online. However, they acknowledged the time and cost benefits of the online network, as three of them lived some distance from the location of the workshops, and had to fly to the sessions and stay overnight in Sydney.

The mentors showed a good attendance at the workshops, indicating that they also saw these sessions valuable. However, as mentioned earlier, a number of the mentors expressed disappointment and even frustration that so few beginning teachers attended the workshops. They felt that the infrequent and unreliable attendance of the beginning teachers indicated a lack of commitment to the project and to finding solutions to their difficulties as new teachers.

The workshops were appreciated by the beginning teachers who did attend, as evident by the following comment from the anonymous evaluations:

Very useful and interesting. It is personal, face-to-face and you can get the answer you need when you have the opportunity to bounce things off other people.

Beginning teachers seemed to find the online facility useful, commenting on its user-friendliness and the value of the advice they received. They reported appreciating the variety of thoughtful and detailed responses to their questions, and

acting upon advice they received. One beginning teacher talked about the value of the online communications as follows:

> *… A lot of the stuff on parent teacher interviews, I've actually transferred onto my hard disk, so even if something happens to TopClass, I've still got it. I found that invaluable.* (Lana, interview)

And another quotation from the interviews follows:

> *I found it quite interesting, not knowing about it before, and quite clever really to see how it all bonded together and I think it's great, just when you're busy it's really hard to have lots and lots of meetings. It's a great way of not having to have the meetings. It's almost like a virtual meeting.* (Leah, interview)

Mentors also found the information on the online discussion board interesting and informative, although many noted the difficulty of contributing when so many others had already made comments of a similar nature.

As indicated earlier, the other mode of interaction was on a one-to-one basis, through visits, emails and telephone conversations. The beginning teachers greatly benefited from these paired interactions. As mentioned earlier, three pairs worked well in this way.

Typically, some of the most successful network interactions were those that used a variety of modes of interaction: mentors and mentees would begin by meeting face-to-face and becoming engaged in conversation; questions on the online discussion board would then support beginning teachers further; and beginning teachers who required deeper interactions and support would then meet in person or have ongoing interaction with a mentor using some other form of communication.

4) *Network value*

For those beginning teachers who did participate regularly in the network in a sustained fashion, it was extremely helpful. One beginning teacher, Cherry, wrote to the researchers afterwards to express her gratitude for the project and stated that she would not have 'survived' without the support of the network. Initially, Cherry posed a question online and then started interacting with one of the mentors by phone and through meetings in the school holidays, developing a behaviour management plan together for her to implement.

> *Spoke to Madeleine last night and she was fantastic. She gave me some great advice for classroom management. …So far it has worked like magic – the children look around and tell each other "shh, we want to get the points". It has really made a difference! At last something works!* (Cherry, journal, August)

Another, a teacher librarian who did not have a colleague in the school working in the same area, built a close relationship with a mentor who was also a teacher librarian, and the mentor supported her in emails, meetings and visits to her school.

One of the beginning teachers who had not managed to get a permanent teaching job asked to stay in the network and became one of the regular participants, as she also found it extremely helpful as a casual teacher. Halfway through the year of the project, she was offered a position in a mentor's school on a part-time basis until the end of the year. In fact, early in the interactions, the mentors became aware that some of the beginning teachers did not have permanent positions and started notifying these teachers of available positions in their schools.

A typical evaluation of the project from those who participated regularly in the network was that it was:

Very useful. The teachers gave me some wonderful feedback and practical ideas. I feel a lot better about what I am doing and what I need to do.

And another comment on the value of the network:

Yes, I think it's great. You get a whole wealth of advice, and you also get to offer advice as well, and you just get to read some of the difficulties that other teachers are having so you don't feel all alone, so I think it's a great idea, and definitely great support. I feel less isolated. (Cherry, interview)

Where teachers did not have support in their schools, the network was very valuable:

Being the teacher librarian is certainly a challenge and one of the major issues I have found is the feeling of isolation, of being the only one in the school and having no one to ask "How would you do this?". This is one of the main attractions of [the conferencing tool] for me. (Jodie, online discussion)

Beginning teachers felt more able to discuss issues in the network than they did in some instances in their schools. Therefore, there were some honest questions posed and frank discussions that might not have taken place had the beginning teachers and mentors known each other prior to the project. Also, the opportunity for beginning teachers to proffer advice was created; this is less likely to occur in schools, due to the positions of beginning teachers and mentors in the hierarchy. Therefore, this study provided valuable opportunities for teachers to interact with different teachers at schools and in other contexts, and those who participated in the network, even if only irregularly, gained valuable support.

Conclusions

There were many aspects to the network described in this paper, and space does not permit justice to be done to all of them. I have only briefly touched upon the value of the network for the mentors, which is the subject of another paper. The teacher educators played an important role because they set up the network, facilitated the interactions, structured and moderated many online discussions, and sought expert advice from their colleagues to use in discussion forums on specific topics as needed.

I have focused the major discussion in this paper on the value of the network for the beginning teachers. In general, it appears that the network was of great value to those who needed mentoring and were not able to get support in their schools. However, a lack of time and a feeling of being overwhelmed prevented many beginning teachers from seeking support when needed, and prevented the network from realising its potential.

Participants valued the benefits of having different ways to interact. Having personal contact with each other at workshops helped to develop relationships. Working online was helpful to those who wished to gain support between workshops and for those who wanted to engage in a deeper induction process than the workshops could offer.

It appears that for some beginning teachers, a requirement to interact in such a network as part of the induction process would be beneficial, as it would help them develop insights into their teaching, share resources with others and enter the professional world of teaching.

In undertaking this project I have observed that, while online networks appear to offer opportunities for discussion and support that are flexible, asynchronous and convenient, in reality, school teachers seem to prefer more personal face-to-face interactions. The implications of this preference are that support networks may well have to take on a different format and not have an online component. However, these results are likely to dramatically change as computer-mediated conferencing tools become more accessible and familiar to teachers.

Recommendations

Due to the lack of easy access to online facilities, some of the beginning teachers were deprived of the opportunity to interact in the network at times and places that suited them. Consequently, I recommend that beginning teachers be provided with laptop computers and internet connections from home in their first year. If employing authorities were to invest in this, the consequent raising of retention rates might well make it cost-effective.

Secondly, beginning teachers need to be encouraged to interact in such networks. Those who were really struggling in their first year, but availed themselves of the support offered by the network, managed to develop confidence and become competent teachers. Not all teachers need to belong to such a network: some teachers do not experience difficulties and others have excellent support in their schools. But for those who are not so fortunate, belonging to an external support network would be beneficial, and the role of the school administration should be to strongly support such participation, perhaps with an inducement of a lighter teaching load so that teachers have time available to spend in the network.

Generally, the experiences and feelings of the beginning teachers indicate that they would appreciate lighter teaching loads in this early stage of their career.

They found themselves extraordinarily busy and often overwhelmed by all they had to do. They would benefit from having time to reflect on their practice and discuss it in a supportive network.

Finally, it is recommended that teaching networks of the sort described here be developed and offered to beginning and mentor teachers. A variety of ways of interacting should be offered, as different methods will suit different participants. A professional development network that targets beginning teachers is likely to help with their retention, as well as encourage reflection and growth for more experienced teachers.

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